Why be Strong:
The Swiss & Australian Responses to Fear

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The *Centre of Gravity* series

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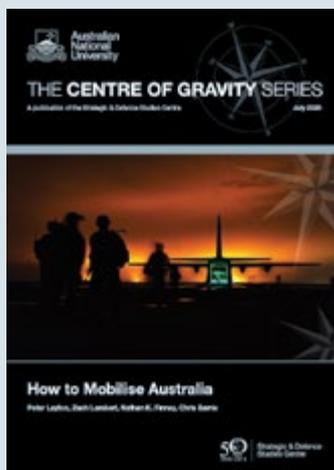
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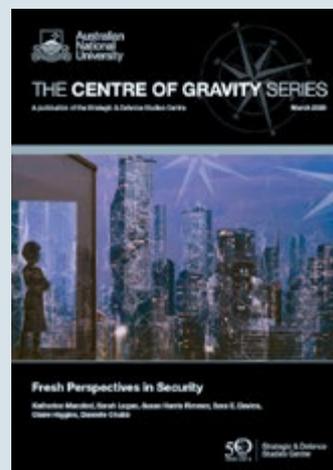
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Introduction

In a response to acute stress, an individual's fight or flight response is triggered. A sudden release of hormones activates the sympathetic nervous system, causing an increase in heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate. The pupils dilate and many people experience trembling. The body is primed to respond to the perception of danger. It is an automatic reaction that activates to help an individual survive a threat.

What works for the individual does not necessarily work for the collective, however. There is no equivalent societal response to the perception of danger, and human communities do not have an automatic fight or flight response. Instead, a society reacts to the perception of danger through the drafting of security policies and the allocation of resources to military forces. Thucydides recognised this in his identification of fear as one of the three causes of war, the other two being honour and interest. Michael Howard, in his seminal essay 'The Causes of War' echoes Thucydides. He writes, 'the causes of war remain rooted … in perceptions by statesmen of the growth of hostile power and the fears for the restriction, if not the extinction, of their own.'[1]

Defence thinkers routinely identify Australia as one of the safest countries in the world. The 2019 Global Peace Index ranked Australia 13th of 163. Australia's lack of danger is in part the function of favourable geography; it does not have any land neighbours. It is also a function of its distance from traditional global trouble spots such as the Middle East. However, we live in interesting times, and Australia's future is likely to be more dangerous and troubling than its past has been. China's growing military power may bring about the end of the global order from which Australia has benefited. New technologies are effectively making the world smaller; distance is immaterial for cyber and social media attacks, while missiles can strike with remarkable precision at immense distances. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we should not trivialise the adverse effects that climate change will have on the region. The potential for climate change affected states to collapse and spur mass migration within and across the near region will pose a serious threat for many countries. In combination, these factors mean that fear is likely to play a much greater role in the determination of Australia's security policy than it has in the recent past.

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Fear is a powerful inducement to action. For a state, the consequences of not acting on the perception of a threat are significant and may include the loss of sovereignty. To date, Australians have met their fears by maintaining a close relationship with a great power protector. Australians have in a very real sense offset military weakness by sharing the responsibility for national defence with someone else. By contrast, Switzerland, a country that sits in a part of the world that traditionally has been far more dangerous than Australia's, takes a different approach. Instead of weakness and dependence, Switzerland has prioritised strength and independence. It aims to dissuade potential adversaries by imposing a high price on military adventurism. In a period of growing risk and increasing threat from inter-state rivalry, the proliferation of long-range strike capabilities, and the prospect of widespread climate change-induced instability and state collapse, has the time come for Australia to reassess how it responds to fear?

The Swiss Response to Fear

Switzerland's security policy of armed neutrality dates to 1291 when the representatives of three cantons signed the Treaty of Everlasting Alliance. The alliance was a mutual defence pact in which the members bound themselves to aid each other in case any were attacked. The cantons described their motivation as 'the troubled circumstances of this time.'[2] The Swiss met fear by forging an instrument of defence. At the time the primary threat to the cantons was the Hapsburg Holy Roman Empire, whom they had good reason to fear. On 15 November 1315 at Morgarten, a smaller force of Swiss militia crushed a larger invading Hapsburg army. Over the next decades, other cantons joined the alliance as the Swiss continued to beat back attacks.

The second cornerstone of Swiss security policy is its profession of neutrality. While an implicit part of the Swiss system from the 13th Century, this profession did not receive international status until 1648 when Europe's main powers recognised Switzerland's independence and permanent neutrality. The Congress of Vienna reiterated this standing following the defeat of Napoleon. In 1848, the Swiss inscribed neutrality in their Federal Constitution.

Swiss neutrality does not rest on the good will of Switzerland's neighbours, however. As a former member of the Swiss Federal Council explains, 'The primary objective of a strictly defensive army must be dissuasion. Should this not succeed, the Swiss Army would have to defend our country and our people by destroying an aggressor who has invaded Swiss territory.' He continues, 'the desire for peace … does not prevent our army from being ready at all times to do the work which, if all else failed, might become vital: the military defence of our nation.'[3]

Written nearly five centuries ago, Niccolò Machiavelli's words still resonate: 'the Swiss are strongly armed and completely free.'[4] With a population of less than nine million Switzerland generates more combat capability than Australia's nearly 25 million. Today they have about five times as many main battle tanks as Australia and many more 155mm guns, all self-propelled. At present Switzerland's Army numbers approximately 170,000 and while nearly all are militia, they are well trained, fully equipped and combat ready.[5] Russian behaviour under Vladimir Putin is driving a re-examination and additional investment is likely. By contrast, despite Australia's more complex security context, the Australian Army would not find it easy to put a full strength combat brigade into the field and sustain it for a prolonged time — the Swiss can put several.

Since the Congress of Vienna, the Swiss have managed to protect their territory and avoid being drawn into any of Europe's wars. Even during the Second World War when surrounded by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, Switzerland remained neutral. After France's conquest in 1940, the commander of the Swiss Army, General Henri Guisan, ordered his officers to prepare for total resistance. He explained to them that 'we are at a turning point in our history. The survival of Switzerland is at stake.'[6] The Swiss mobilised 600,000 soldiers. If the field army was defeated then the nation was to continue resistance by waging a guerrilla war. As a nation, the Swiss message to the Nazis was a unified one; they were capable of long-term resistance and inflicting heavy losses on any aggressor. It was a policy of dissuasion.[7]

Throughout the Cold War, at even higher levels of commitment and expenditure, Switzerland continued its policy of dissuasion in order to convince an aggressor that the cost of invading was greater than any potential gain. The army was modernised, the air force expanded, and plans made for an assumed Soviet-led attack. The Swiss built gun emplacements into mountains or hid them inside fake buildings, wired bridges and tunnels for demolition, designed roads to

serve as runways, and carved command and communication centres into solid rock. The government also committed itself to providing shelter for every citizen in case of nuclear attack. They hollowed out mountains, converted tunnels into massive fall-out shelters, and thick concrete walled and roofed basements became part of the nation's building code. The citizenry accepted the expense as the price of independence. The nation knew that 'a country with no civil protection attracts war or blackmail as easily as a militarily weak country.'[8]

In the post-Cold War era, Switzerland's defence expenditure slackened but the nation's security principles remain unchanged. Switzerland continues to aspire to be a porcupine: completely harmless unless attacked. The point of this strength is more than just having the ability to remain neutral and avoid other people's war. Neutrality is a means to an end, namely the safeguarding of Swiss independence. By having the strength to remain neutral, the Swiss people retain the option to do what they wish. They define themselves; the Swiss do not have to accept someone else's conditions. The goal of neutrality, and the reason for its continued broad support by the Swiss public, is 'the preservation of peace together with independence.'[9]

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The Australian Response to Fear

Australians have experienced security related fear, some of it episodic, some enduring, although at lower levels of risk than the Swiss. We fear conquest by another power whose goal is to secure the rich resources of the vast but underpopulated Australian continent. Throughout the 19th Century, the fear of attack took the form of a series of invasion scares, principally from Russia although France, Spain, the United States and China also featured. Federation in 1901 did not assuage this insecurity. From the start, Australia's political leaders believed that the new country's population was insufficient to secure the continent's wealth. Over the first decades of the 20th Century the fear of attack intensified, and following its victory over Russia in 1905, Japan came to dominate Australian security concerns. After the Second World War, the perceived threat was the spread of communism across South East Asia and the prospect that it might reach Australia.

The prime method of countering the threat of invasion, whether real or imagined, became the maintenance of a long-term security relationship with a great power partner supported by episodic investment in self-reliance. At various times the colonial governments mounted guns at strategic points, invested in warships, and sponsored rifle and sporting clubs. After Federation, the Government approved a number of military conscription or selective service schemes — although none lasted for very long — and continued to upgrade coastal defences. It also raised the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). It was not until well after the Second World War that military investment gained a degree of steadiness, but even then, there have been sharp changes in the direction of defence spending.

The nation's commitment to self-reliance, while important, was always the secondary and lesser means by which the Government provided for the nation's security. The great power protector has always been the principal plan. As distant colonies of an empire, this was only natural. Once Britain could no longer provide for the nation's security, however, Australia found a new backer — the United States. This remains the case today, and the most recent Defence White Paper is unequivocal on the issue. The alliance with the United States is at the 'core of Australia's security and defence planning,' and the nation's 'security is underpinned by the ANZUS Treaty'.[10]

The contrast between the Australian and the Swiss response to fear is significant. The Swiss have held fast to a policy of armed neutrality for centuries, and have willingly borne the necessary expense. While a Swiss recruit is technically conscripted, the term does not quite fit. Military service is founded on the collective free will of the people, which is virtually the opposite of conscription. The Swiss may be neutral but they are not pacifists and they invest heavily in protecting their independence by themselves. By contrast, Australian interest in security waxes and wanes as perceived threats come and go, while the country holds steady to a policy of dependence on another to safeguard its sovereignty. For Australia, there is a second-order effect that Switzerland has avoided. To store up goodwill as a supporter of international security, Australia participates as a junior partner in wars overseas, even ones at great distance from its region.

Becoming a Porcupine

At this point in works of this nature it is usual for the author to take a stand on whether Australia should maintain a security policy founded on dependence or advocate for one based on independence. Such arguments are couched in terms of the nation leaving its adolescence and finally coming of age. This author did so himself in an earlier *Centre of Gravity Paper*. However, As Andrew Carr has rightly pointed out, this approach, while a common one, never goes beyond offering an either/or choice, and such commentators fail to define a realistic policy for independence if dependence is abandoned.[11] I will try to avoid this fate by advancing a different idea, one focused on a policy of dissuasion, much as the Swiss do. I accept that it is important for Australia to retain some of the advantages of dependence, particularly the intelligence benefits of being a part of the five eyes community, and it is also desirable to avoid the economic hardships that complete independence would impose. Moreover, Australia would need to achieve this other course while still securing the nation's sovereignty in what is expected to be an increasing perilous and disruptive age. I believe that in order to walk this middle path, Australians can learn from the Swiss and in doing so embrace Switzerland's policy of dissuasion as Australia's future national security philosophy.

Switzerland invests in military strength not because it harbours any aggressive desires, but because it seeks to remain sovereign and allow its people to prosper. The Swiss have been successful in both objectives; they have security and enjoy an enviable life-style. Being a relatively small land-locked country surrounded by other states made it fairly simple relatively for Switzerland to define its security policy of dissuasion, a policy about which Australia knew. Soon after Federation the Australia Government dispatched military officers to Switzerland to examine its defence arrangements. However, adopting the Swiss model was always a long-shot. Australia's strong ties to Britain favoured a defence policy that accepted dependence, while the technology available at the time was not optimised for operating in a maritime geography across multiple domains and at the vast ranges of the Indo-Pacific, or at least not at a cost the nation was prepared to pay. Today's technology, however, is no longer an impediment. The arrival of long-range precision strike, distant sensors, and global and ubiquitous communications now makes the Swiss security policy of dissuasion a technologically and economically viable choice for Australia.

Australia is a late starter in considering an anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) system as the foundation of its defence, but that need not doom its efforts. For the Army, Program Land 8113-1 (Long Range Fires) promises a fleet of mobile land-based missiles that can strike targets at ranges that are greatly in excess of what is currently possible. Combined with the missiles borne by the RAN's warships and ordnance carried by the Royal Australian Air Force's aircraft, the Australian Defence Force can establish an

overlapping defensive zone reaching outwards for several thousand kilometres from the nation's shores. To these kinetic strikes should be added the greater potential for information warfare to influence an adversary in an interconnected and networked world.

To meet the challenge of an increasingly dominant defence, some militaries are trying to adapt. The US Army, for example, is investing an incredible amount of resources in developing an entirely new method of warfare whose express purpose is to penetrate an adversary's killing zone. The goal is to replace the current warfighting concept, Land-Air Battle, with a new one that it calls Multi-Domain Operations. The US Marine Corps is similarly trying to reinvent itself. Australia does not have the resources to keep pace with its ally and will gradually be left behind. Fortunately, Australia need not go down such a path because if it was to adopt dissuasion as its security principle it would become a defensive power — like Switzerland — and its military objective would not be to manoeuvre but rather to interdict an adversary's ability to manoeuvre. This is not only a more easily achieved objective than penetration but one that the thread of logic underlying the new and coming technologies supports. In an age where the power of the defence is in the ascendant, it is wise to embrace the stronger aspect of war.

There is another factor that underscores Australia need to focus its future security policy on dissuasion. Australia cannot win a war against a regional or global power. Victory, in a traditional sense of the word, for example the end of the Second World War, is no longer possible. Australia cannot dictate terms. Instead, Australia's political objective in war should be to maintain its sovereignty — that is what victory is for Australia. Technology, wealth creation and population trends across the region are all running against Australia. If these trends continue, Australia is likely to be the weaker power in a future war in our region. Therefore, the ADF must reframe its perception of war from the perspective of the weak. A2AD offers an offset to Australia's weakness in other areas by raising a rival's cost of aggression to a level it would consider unprofitable. Like Switzerland, Australia must be strong enough to dissuade but weak enough not to threaten. This does not mandate the annulment of the Alliance with the United States, nor an abandonment of engagement in world affairs. In fact, providing a secure homeland in the Indo-Pacific might appeal to the United States, much as it did in the Second World War.

Shifting to a policy of dissuasion will not come without complications for the Australian Defence Force (ADF). There will be myriad technical issues to resolve, most importantly linking the sensor, target and fire components into a decision cycle of only one or two seconds in length. This will be difficult to achieve and will take time, but it can be done. The ADF's coming to grips with the changes required in institutional culture and organisation in order to make A2AD work will be even more challenging. Examining a few of these issues will have to suffice for now.

At present, each service dominates a domain: the sea belongs to the RAN, the air to the Royal Australian Air Force, and the land to the Army. As Australia builds its A2AD system the opportunity for one service to operate in another's domains will increase. For example, the Army's land based missile will be able to interdict an adversary's maritime operations at an immense range. Information warfare will similarly not be bound by domains, as cyber and social media attacks can be launched against myriad targets simultaneously. Elsewhere, I have committed the heresy of suggesting that in the future, domains of war will not even matter. Others have argued that the only domain in the future will be the human.[12] The point to recognise is that the long-standing organisational principal of domains will come under review with a flow-on effect on how the military allocates resources.

For the Australian Army a significant change in its culture will be necessary. At present, the ethos of the Army and its image in the public's mind are both based on the light infantry. It is members of the infantry who epitomise what it means to be a Digger; this has been the case since the nation's founding, and especially since Gallipoli. However, with an A2AD defence policy it will be the gunner who will come to the fore and dominate the force both spiritually and culturally. The rise of the precision distant strike will mandate a reordering of the Army's hierarchy and require the infantry to cede its present position. There is no doubt that in a future war the infantry will still play a pivotal role, but it will no longer be the arm of decision — that will be the artillery. There will also be a need for more gunners, and for a force that expects only minimal increases in its establishment, this means the Army will have to harvest positions from other areas. This is always a painful process that generates much resistance, but the old will need to give way to the future if Australia's strategic military goals are to be achieved.

Conclusion

Fear is a rational response to danger. It is also a motivator that at the state level encourages a nation to think about its security and implement policies to safeguard its sovereignty. Unfortunately, a state's strategic environment is not static. It cannot be done once and be done forever. All too frequently, the foundation of a state's security changes necessitating a reassessment and redesign of how a nation protects itself. In fact, the relative stability that Australia has enjoyed since the end of the Second World War is historically unusual. This stability is now at risk as a more dangerous and disruptive world beckons, the result of the weakening of global order, technological advances and the onset of climate change. Australia's strategic environment is likely to become more threatening as the forces of disruption take hold. It is, therefore, time to revisit Australia's existing security practice of dependence to determine if something else, such as dissuasion, offers a better way to maintain sovereignty.

Switzerland exists in a more dangerous part of the world than Australia, and has prospered despite the risks it has faced throughout its existence. This is because the Swiss have opted to use strength to create dissuasion. Any aggressor knows that to attack Switzerland would be like tackling a porcupine, an animal whose spines can inflict a level of pain that exceeds the rewards of conquest. Since colonial times, Australia has responded to its own fears by seeking an enduring security relationship with great power partners. This has been a wise policy that has allowed Australia to preserve its sovereignty at an acceptable cost. However, as the threat environment changes, it is timely to ask if dependence still offers the same degree of security that it once did. It is right to question if there is a better option. The Swiss model suggests that dissuasion is a valid defence response to fear in the right circumstances. The rise of the defence as the stronger side of war, and the ability of states to connect a variety of technologies into a powerful A2AD system offers Australia an opportunity to enact a different policy than the one it has chosen hitherto. By becoming strong enough to dissuade potential aggressors, Australia may be better placed to secure its sovereignty in the coming age of disruption.

Endnotes

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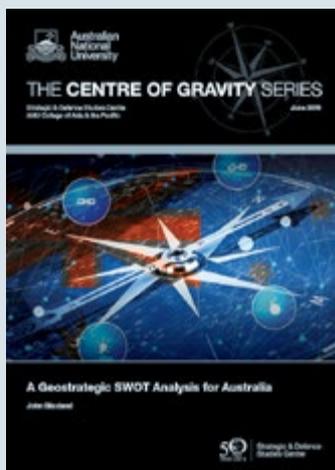
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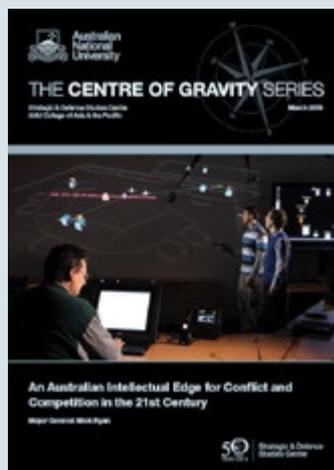
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