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**THOUGHTFULNESS IN DEFENCE:
AVOIDING PARTISANSHIP
ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB**

WEDNESDAY, 24 MAY 2017

*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which meet, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I also wish to acknowledge the appalling events in Manchester in the last 48 hours and offer my prayers and thoughts to the families of the victims.

In the last two decades global terrorism has changed the world in which we live. And much of the posture and efforts of our defence forces today are a response to that.

This horrendous event puts this all into stark relief.

“Armed service is a profession unlike any other.”

This time last week I was in the cockpit of a Hercules flying into Kabul. I was wearing body armour and a helmet during a tactical landing designed to protect the occupants of the aircraft against ground-fire.

It was clearly not the “*fasten your seatbelt and stow away your tray table*” descent we’re all familiar with arriving into Canberra for a sitting week.

Armed service is a profession unlike any other.

The jobs our people do are deadly serious: flying a plane, providing essential gear, researching a target, applying the law, making a decision to release a weapon which will defend an ally and kill the enemy. The stock in trade of war is life and death.

This work cannot be done without a dependable professionalism. There are no half competencies. The job you are trained and assigned to do must be done with excellence.

This standard exists because your comrades depend on it. For this is the ultimate collective endeavour. It is the military – not a company, nor a political party, nor a professional sporting club – where you will find the purest expression of team. Individual glory is utterly subjugated in the name of your platoon, your brigade, your nation.

And the symbol of this is our nation's uniform. Last year I had the opportunity to wear a version of that uniform. I was with the Navy as a participant in the Parliamentary Defence Exchange Program.

I'll happily admit putting on the uniform felt awkward. I felt unworthy. I knew it mattered to the defence personnel around me that I wear it, but in truth I also knew that I hadn't earned it

Those clothes are precious because those in active service, like the men and women I met in Afghanistan, don them in the ever-present knowledge they might never take them off.

We all come into the world naked, but it's only those who put on the uniform in active service who do so every day knowing there is a very real possibility they are the very garments which may adorn them when they leave.

The uniform is sacred. It seeks sacrifice. And with humour and grace, with a down to earth laconic air, our soldiers, sailors and aviators submit.

From men and women, many in their early twenties, this is a remarkable act. And it is humbling.

**“...[B]i-partisanship ... ought to be
a much desired objective”**

Australia's presence in the Middle East speaks to the traditional defence posture which has been articulated in successive defence white papers dating back to the eighties which in simple terms provides three roles for our armed forces: defence of Australia from direct attack; protecting our interests in the region; and contributing to global security more broadly.

The Government of Iraq asked for help in reclaiming its country. The United States asked for assistance in its efforts to defeat Daesh. Australia, along with a number of other countries, answered the call.

This posture is bi-partisan.

During the Vietnam conflict there was a broad difference between Labor and Coalition defence policy. Labor emphasised the defence of the Continent while the Liberals were more prepared to engage in conflicts further afield.

But globalisation has impacted national security as much as it has the economy. Just as products can now be purchased on the internet globally and transported all over

the world, so too can terrorism be exported from Mosul to Melbourne. And this has in effect removed any differences in strategic policy.

The need for Australia to be present in the Middle East is completely bi-partisan.

And bi-partisanship across the entire defence portfolio ought to be a much desired objective.

Of course this is not a blank cheque. Holding any Government to account on its administration of public affairs matters. And nor is it a guarantee that all substantive policy in the future will be the subject of consensus between the major parties. We should remember that Labor did take a different position to the Coalition on the engagement in Iraq in 2003.

But it is to say that there is no real inherent ideological difference between Labor and the Coalition on the question of defence. It is to observe that elections in Australia are unlikely to be won and lost on the finer points of defence policy. And given this, it would be in the interests of our defence forces; in the interests of developing a more sophisticated defence debate; and ultimately in our nation's interest if the major parties could rise above traditional partisan politics with defence.

To that end any mechanisms which promote bi-partisanship between the major parties are worth exploring and in office I would actively do so.

Don't get me wrong. I am a politician with all that implies. Partisan debates in areas where there are real ideological divides matter such as health, education and social services. And I am as interested in winning elections as anyone. So I certainly am willing to dive into the electoral politics of contest.

It's just that right now, and indeed for a long time now, defence is neither a place of natural partisan divide nor a place of electoral volatility.

Partisanship in the area of defence strikes me as indulgent and ultimately a little contrived. When my counterpart Christopher Pyne says, as he did in Parliament on Monday, that: "*This is a government that takes defence and defence industry seriously, unlike the joke on the other side*", it is so evidently not true. This is politics for politics sake. And it ought not be how we do business.

The strong temptation, in my profession and in the media, is always to judge politicians on our capacity to punch our opponents on the political nose. That doesn't work in areas like defence, foreign affairs and national security. The partisan difference is small. That means thoughtfulness is the only real basis by which one can judge the contributions we make.

And while the quality of deep thinkers in and around the defence space is so impressive and really stimulating for anyone doing a job like mine, I do believe that the current level of political thoughtfulness on defence policy has room to improve.

“... [O]ur Alliance with the United States”

Thinking about the role of defence, the capabilities we develop, and how our defence forces are postured and deployed, is in significant measure an assessment of the relationships our country maintains.

The most important of these is our Alliance with the United States.

It's not going to come as news to anyone in this room that I am a fierce advocate of the Alliance with the United States.

The election of Donald Trump, and particularly his comments during the campaign about the need for allies to pull their weight, has sparked a public discussion about the Alliance which we haven't seen for many years. While there was no point at which Donald Trump seemed to focus on Australia, the prospect of the US questioning its presence in Japan and South Korea went directly to our national interests.

The spotlight on the Alliance has been good. It has forced us to return to first principles and ask the question as to the contemporary relevance of the Alliance now and through this century. And in my view the answer to this question is that the Alliance is as relevant now as it has ever been irrespective of who is the President and who is the Prime Minister.

The Alliance began, and has been successful, because it is an Alliance between two countries with shared values. When we talk of shared values we start with democracy but a key value is also the rule of law.

We are both countries which have the rule of law within our own nations, but more significantly, we seek to extend respect for the rule of law to being a global order. So that when there is a controversy, when there is contest, it is not the amount of power brought to that controversy which determines the outcome, but rather the rule of law.

This is the creed we live by domestically, and it is also the creed Australia lives by internationally.

In 1989, Nauru took Australia to the International Court of Justice over the environmental legacy of the Australian administration of Nauru before independence. Now, if Nauru's only recourse had been based on power, well Nauru would have had no recourse at all. Ultimately, Australia agreed to a settlement favourable to Nauru. We did that because we believe in the rule of law whether it works for us or against us in any particular dispute.

What's critical about the rule of law is that it provides predictability. Predictability and stability in our region has provided for the economic growth of East Asia, our participation in that economic growth and the prosperity that we have derived from it. A rules-based, international, predictable order in East Asia has been absolutely central to Australia's prosperity and national interest. The United States and its alliances have underwritten this.

That said, the current dilemma is that we have an American President who sees it as a virtue that he is unpredictable. He wears it as a badge of honour.

He has also made decisions that we cannot support.

The President's Immigration Executive Order – an avowedly discriminatory order, based on religion – was an appalling piece of public policy which demanded criticism.

Donald Trump's initial tweets around the question of Taiwan were also concerning. Labor supports a One China policy with Beijing as its capital, and with all the diplomatic forms which exist today in respect of Taiwan. It makes no sense in terms of Australia's national interest to be disrupting this.

These decisions are a challenge for a person like me. In truth my instinct and reflex has always been to support the United States. But in this environment reflex and instinct are not enough.

With the support of the global rule of law and the predictability it provides as our test, there will be times when we need to be criticising the US. And that is OK. And it is entirely consistent with being in an alliance with the US.

This environment is forcing us to address every issue on its merits with a clear eyed view as to our national interest. I think this forced discipline of the times is a good thing.

Donald Trump is a president doing politics in a way that's never been done before – and he would not take that as a criticism. He radiates more heat than any predecessor, generates so much light it can be blinding. What that means is we need to consider his actions soberly: not reacting to speculation, and not reacting to the particular way he does politics, but instead taking the time to consider his actions themselves.

There are some who suggest the US election was not an outlier event, but was in fact a manifestation of a new isolationism within America. That argument says the citizens of an America with a shrinking share of global GDP are going to question why they still bear the burden of being the globe's police.

Now, that is a legitimate point of view. And one would be foolish not to consider it carefully. At the very least, it is a fair call on the part of the United States to have its allies pay their way.

The argument then goes that an American retreat from the world might start in our region – in East Asia – so we better be making friends not just with the likes of ASEAN, Japan, and Korea, but China as well.

Now this is, of course, absolutely true. We need to be making friends in our region. And we have been doing just that since the Second World War. It is fundamental to our national defence strategy and our national security framework that we have strong relationships within our region.

But to take it a step further – which some do – and suggest we ought to be behaving as if America has already gone makes no sense to me at all. I do not believe that an American retreat from East Asia is inevitable. It's not even a strong prospect. The activity of the US in East Asia over the last couple of months in respect of North Korea reminds us of that. But even if it were true, to me, that would be a reason to be greater advocates for the Alliance to the United States itself. We need to be convincing the US of the value of the Alliance and their interests in maintaining a presence in East Asia.

The benefit to both Australia and the United States of the Marines rotation in Darwin initiated by the Gillard Government is a good place to start.

There is no doubt that the more the US is engaged in our region, the stronger is the rule of law in the region. And so a key element of our national security, our defence policy, and our foreign policy has to be advocating to the United States for their strong continued presence in our region for as long as possible.

This year's AUSMIN will be one of the most important we've had.

**“...[O]ur basic disposition towards China
ought to be positive”**

Our Alliance with the US should never distract us from dealing with other countries in the region on our own terms and having bilateral relationships which exist on their own terms. This is particularly true of our relationship with China – a crucial relationship, and a positive relationship for Australia.

There are some who define the world in terms of the good guys and the bad guys. The world is obviously more complex than that. Even under this construct, China is far from being a bad guy. China is not the Soviet Union. China is responsible for the single, biggest raising out of poverty of humanity that the world has ever seen. They deserve credit for that. This is an achievement of enormous proportions.

Our economic relationship with China is crucial. As Trade Minister I visited Beijing to pursue the China Free Trade Agreement. I think it is fantastic that agreement is now in place.

But our relationship with China cannot start and stop with trade. Our relationship must be a deep one. We need to develop our political relationship – and, indeed, our defence relationship. Labor did this with recognition under Whitlam and the strategic partnership under Gillard.

During the Rudd and Gillard years Australia engaged in defence exercises with China and some of those exercises with China continue to this day. We should do more.

I firmly believe our basic disposition towards China ought to be positive – but just like our alliance with the US, it should be positive not on the basis of simple optimism, but with a clear eye to our national interest.

Most analysts believe that China aspires to being a regional power, and that Beijing likely considers that region to include Australia. That raises big questions about our national interest in this context.

But in considering this we have to be sensible and calm. China is on the way to becoming the largest economy on the planet and that is OK. The peaceful rise of China is in our national interest, and we should support it. China's aspiration to be a regional power is a legitimate aspiration.

The issue that should focus our thinking is the future of a predictable, global rules-based order.

Constructing artificial islands in breach of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea has to be a concern to Australia, like any contravention of international law should.

As we think about how we should react to that concern, we must have a laser focus on what our national interest is in the South China Sea.

Our national interest is not the sovereignty disputes between various countries of the South China Sea and China. Our interest is in the global rule of law, and the freedom of movement of commerce it supports given that, by some measures, 60% of Australia's trade traverses the South China Sea.

When Labor talks about the potential of freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, our clear position is that we support actions which are about supporting the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Our position on this has been consistent because our national interest has been consistent.

Now, I do have some criticism of the Government on this issue because they have sacrificed consistency for the sake of domestic politics. Given what is at stake with our national interest, such an approach to defence and foreign policy is simply hopeless.

The emerging new normal in the national security landscape is a world with China legitimately spreading its wings, and a US President who is happy to be unpredictable.

This dynamic is going to pose difficult decisions for Australian governments to make. In making these decisions our Government needs to demonstrate a thoughtful, a clear, a confident response of what Australia's national interests are. Australia needs to articulate that response, not as a licensee of anybody else, but on our own terms. And this must be done free of domestic partisan point scoring.

The US Alliance has never prevented us from doing this. America would not expect us to do anything less. The Alliance isn't a jealous one. It doesn't stop us making friends in our region. In fact, the United States expects us to be making friends in our region, because a benefit that we bring to the Alliance is the friendships that we have.

“Achieving a 2% of GDP spend

on defence is really important”

Equally, the US Alliance does not alleviate the need to spend on our own defence. Achieving a 2% of GDP spend on defence is really important – which is why it was a policy Labor took to the last election. It is a goal shared by Labor and a policy which forms part of the crucial bipartisanship I mentioned earlier.

“A future Shorten Labor Government would seek to energise the defence relationship with Indonesia”

Using our national interest to identify and remedy blind spots in our defence policy is a grand Labor tradition.

The Keating Government led the way with Indonesia, changing how we relate to one of our nearest neighbours, particularly with the Indonesian Australian Security Agreement. The importance of that relationship is now shared across the parliament.

That doesn't mean that all governments are created equal when it comes to growing that relationship. Despite this Government's position about wanting a foreign policy more based on Jakarta than Geneva, their management of the relationship with Indonesia has not been strong. A future Shorten Labor Government would seek to energise the defence relationship with Indonesia in the spirit of the Keating government.

And we would seek to do the same with India.

“[A] future Shorten Labor Government will evolve our relationship with the Pacific”

As Gough Whitlam evolved Australia's relationship with China, as the Keating Government evolved our relationship with Indonesia, I fervently hope a future Shorten Labor Government will evolve our relationship with the Pacific.

This is without question the single biggest blind spot in Australia's national security policy today.

I don't make that comment in a partisan way. The blind spot has applied across governments of all persuasions over the past decades.

I also don't want for a moment to suggest we are doing nothing in the Pacific. Australia's largest defence cooperation program is with PNG. We've got a strong history of working with the defence forces of Fiji and with Tonga. Indeed, Defence White Papers going back to 1987, and defence policies preceding that have identified the need for Australia to play a role in the Pacific. The Canberra Class vessel is a capability with huge utility in the Pacific both in terms of engaging in conflicts but also assisting in natural disasters. Australian supplied Pacific Patrol Boats are throughout the Pacific. We led the Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands. Our aid footprint is large in the Pacific as is our diplomatic footprint. We are there more than any other country and that matters for sure. I acknowledge all of that.

But none of this answers the questions of what is our vision for the Pacific, and our role within it? These are questions for which, as a country, we do not have answers.

How often do we talk and think about the Pacific, compared to how often we talk and think about the Middle East? There is no comparison.

And yet think about Papua New Guinea. Next year PNG will host APEC. This is a country with a population 50% bigger than New Zealand. It is a country that is immediately proximate to our own. There are people on each and every day, indeed on this day, in PNG who are commuting to and from work in Australia. We do not and should not have an exclusive relationship with PNG. There are other countries interested in a closer relationship with Port Moresby. If we take PNG for granted then PNG does have options.

This is a country which has had persistent problems with law and order; where small arms are rife; which has significant development challenges; and other significant challenges in its immediate future, like how the Bougainville Peace Agreement reaches its end.

And we also have history with PNG. Surely, it must matter that PNG is one of two countries on the planet which got its independence from Australia.

PNG is central to our national security and we ought to be thinking a lot more about it.

When we think about the region more broadly, how is it doing? The answers aren't happy ones. The Pacific performed the worst of any region in the world against the millennium development goals. There is no region on the globe where development is slower. If nothing changes, in the 2020s Africa's superior development growth will leave the Pacific the least developed part of the world. And I've seen slums in Bangladesh. I have seen refugee camps in Africa. But, the worst human circumstances I have witnessed are on the islet of Betio on the atoll of Tarawa in Kiribati.

This has something to do with us. This is a country within our sphere of influence. Indeed, the currency of Kiribati is the Australian dollar.

It is true the population of the Pacific is not large but it is a huge part the globe.

It is not our responsibility to impose our view of the future on the region – but most certainly it is our responsibility to have a view. And if the history of the Twentieth Century teaches us anything: which powers are active in the Pacific is a question which is directly relevant to our national security.

Now often I've heard it said that we've got to be a bit careful, that we have to tread a little softly in the Pacific. It's entirely true that we have to act with complete respect for the sovereignty of the Pacific island countries and the peoples of the Pacific.

The big risk, though, is that *'treading carefully'* becomes an excuse for demonstrating a lack of interest. In my experience, what the countries of the region really want from us is our interest and our attention. They want to know we're engaged, that we care. We ought to be able to demonstrate that.

At the end of the day this is a bigger issue than our role in the future of the Pacific. Whether we like it or not, what we do in the Pacific is our global calling card. Rightly, we are judged for good or ill, by how we act in the Pacific. In the context of our relationship with the United States, it is the one time we lead, the one time the US says to us *'You tell us what you want to do and we will follow you'*.

And so our actions here are not just about the Pacific. It's central to the most important bilateral relationship that we have.

Again, in my experience, the US often scratches its head about why it is we don't seek to lead. So does the rest of the world.

A considered, consistent strategy around the Pacific would demonstrate to the United States not only that we are a reliable and dependable partner, but that we can bring to bear an intellectual leadership in a part of the world where we are expected to do so. If encouraging America to remain a presence in East Asia is in our national interest, demonstrating Australian leadership in the Pacific is a fundamental element of it.

“[W]ho are we and what is it we want to do”

Our reticence to lead in the Pacific, our lack of certainty about whether or not to act in our own backyard, speaks to a bigger issue: who are we and what is it we want to do in the world.

In my First Speech nine years ago I said:

“Australia is the reluctant nation ... our path to independence has been drawn out and ambiguous. ... that road to independence has lacked any kind of national discussion ... which has left, at times, our national character somewhat unreconciled. ... Whether or not we can confidently assert an Australian brand into a globalised economy has everything to do with whether or not Australia will succeed in the global economy. But to do that we need to understand our own brand first.”

We are a New World country which never had an independence movement. This makes us unusual. It also means that a foundational discussion around identity has not properly occurred in Australia.

And increasingly I am finding in defence that this question underpins so much.

What role we play in the Pacific at its heart is about whether we see ourselves as a Pacific country. The way we project into East Asia has a lot to do with our sense of place in this part of the world, about whether or not we have a sense of identity as an East Asian nation. Properly committing to having an export based defence industry is

about jobs, but it's probably more about coming to terms with our identity as a country which wants to have such an industry.

And the very existence and size of our defence force lies in a sense of who we are and what we want to be. A sizeable defence force that plays its part in the world is a critical component of Australia being a nation that is taken seriously. That is presumably what we want to be. And that is a question of identity.

This brings me back to our posture in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are unlikely to be able to answer every call for help, but part of the reason we have a defence force the size we do is because we see ourselves as a country which answers that kind of call.

And if we had a consensus about our place in the world which was a constant touchstone for thinking about defence then we wouldn't have the puerile slanging matches about who cares more about defence. But much more significantly the importance of a robust defence budget would be assured.

The identity discussion is one we need to find a way to have. Politicians of all persuasions need to come together, on a non-partisan basis and try to think about this in a deep, historic and contemporary way. If we have the good fortune of forming government, Labor would like to promote this discussion.

Because we believe this is exactly the sort of thoughtful discussion which Australia needs to have about defence.

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