



# COMMISSION FOR THE HUMAN FUTURE

**SUBMISSION TO**

## **JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS DEFENCE AND TRADE**

**Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,  
defence and trade**

**23 June 2020**



## **Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade**

### **Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs, defence and trade**

Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade  
PO Box 6021  
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### **Submission by The Commission for the Human Future**

#### **Introduction and Overview**

The Commission for the Human Future (CHF) is a body of researchers and concerned citizens that has been set up, with the assistance of the Australian National University, to:

- Alert humanity to the nature and scale of the combination of ten catastrophic risks that face our civilization
- Help to devise integrated global solutions to these risks
- Identify fresh opportunities that arise from solving the threats
- Encourage global dialogue about the risks, their solution and opportunities
- Serve as a knowledge hub for the solution of global catastrophic

We identify these risks as:

- Decline of key natural resources and an emerging global resource crisis, especially in water
- Collapse of ecosystems that support life, and the mass extinction of species
- Human population growth and demand, beyond the Earth's carrying capacity
- Global warming, sea level rise and changes in the Earth's climate affecting all human activity
- Universal pollution of the Earth system and all life by chemicals
- Rising food insecurity and failing nutritional quality
- Nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction
- Pandemics of new and untreatable disease
- Advent of powerful, uncontrolled new technologies
- National and global failure to understand and act preventively on these risks.

**These risks threaten the lives and wellbeing of Australian residents both directly and indirectly, and accordingly must be incorporated into any modern conception of national security.**

Directly, we have seen loss of life and financial and economic upheaval caused by bushfires, induced and intensified by the effects of climate change, and by the global **COVID19 pandemic**.

**Details of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs, defence and trade are discussed below.**

Indirectly, phenomena like global warming, sea level rise, environmental degradation, food insecurity and pandemic disease will cause local, regional or national loss of production and amenity such as to force movements of population, either within or between states, and give rise to civil disturbance, political instability, inter-state conflict and/or acts of terrorism, and will add to the global refugee population.

At the extreme, they intensify the risk of resort to use or the threat of use of nuclear weapons, if tensions escalate in circumstances in which impetuous leaders of relatively poor or weak states feel threatened and regard the capabilities of their conventional forces as having been compromised.

The human species' ability to cause mass harm to itself has been accelerating since the mid-twentieth century. Global trends in demographics, information, politics, warfare, climate, environmental damage and technology have culminated in an entirely new level of risk. The risks emerging now are varied, global, complex and catastrophic. They all relate to the way we humans organise ourselves.

This means that many existing systems which we take for granted – our economic system, our food system, our energy system, our production and waste systems, our governance systems, our community life and our relationship with the Earth's natural systems – must all undergo searching examination and reform.

Given systemic failure of governance around the world to anticipate and deal with these great risks, a decline in public trust and a disdain for truth in politics and some media, there is a need for sweeping political reform, including new ways to confront corruption by vested interests and the influence they exert over government. The world needs more effective democracy, not less. This involves greater agency for all people in their own governance, wider participation and a stronger role in determining their own future with a view to unifying humanity to deal with the common threats we all face.

The world needs to move away from conventional definitions of 'national security' and towards new concepts of global natural security and human security that embrace the safety and wellbeing of all Earth's citizens and the natural world that supports them.

A core feature of catastrophic risk is the significant amount of (often deliberate and well-funded) misinformation that contradicts the factual consensus on what is to be done. It is of the highest importance that we increase public understanding of the evidence for catastrophic risk and decrease the volume of misinformation and public deceit released by special interests and their followers. In that regard, governments and the media will need to confront the extent to which they have encouraged a disdain for science and for the advice of experts, and rectify their behaviour accordingly.

We would emphasise that our message is one of hope, not despair. Our aim in this submission is to assist with charting a course out of the current pandemic and into the better world we can envisage for all humanity and for our successors on this planet. We can turn things around and reduce all these threats if we act together, as humans on the Earth, if we are willing to change our behaviours and adapt to new circumstances and new opportunities. And we can discover fresh opportunities, more satisfying ways of life and fulfilment from overcoming our risks. For this it is essential that humanity develops a shared understanding of the nature and causes of the risks, that we devise integrated solutions – and that we take early action to defuse them. The longer the delay, the greater the penalty, both economic and in human lives.

It will be argued by some that Australia cannot do this alone, and that is correct. But active, confident and effective Australian diplomacy, of the kind that, for example, contributed to the establishment of the post-WW2 order in the 1940s, contributed (against US opposition) to the establishment of Exclusive Economic Zones under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and brought into being the [Madrid Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty](#), can make a very positive contribution to turning around global thinking on these issues.

In order for that diplomacy to be effective, however, we will need both to rectify our own domestic shortcomings and to invest in our diplomatic service.

We will also need to invest in the development of a new science - the science of human survival and wellbeing – and encourage the integration of ‘surviving and thriving’ into educational systems worldwide, so we raise a generation of young people who know how to do both, despite the troubled world they have inherited. It is essential that all human belief systems, political, religious, monetary and in terms of the narratives we tell ourselves, commit to a shared goal of surviving and thriving. We must recruit the best and brightest young people to build and lead this process. This demands the inclusion of far more voices outside the current centres of power: women, youth, First Peoples, minorities, the poor and physically isolated. The time for female leadership in all spheres is here, in this era where care and concern for future generations is essential - rather than warfare and conflict over dwindling resources. We will empower everyone, young and old, female and male, poor or affluent to play a part in building a safer, saner human future.

### **Commission's work to date**

On 28 March 2020 we convened a Roundtable of experts to consider these risks and to begin to identify the directions in which solutions might lie. That Roundtable concluded that practical solutions to all the main risks exist, and are capable of being adopted by humanity. More detailed solutions to each of the ten risks will be fleshed out at subsequent Roundtables.

The priority items we identified for urgent attention are:

- End climate change
- Ban and eliminate nuclear weapons
- Repair the global environment

- End food insecurity
- All-hazard risk assessment
- Lower human numbers
- Implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals
- Clean up the earth

The Commission recognises that the solutions discussed in its first report fall short of all that is needed to overcome the ten catastrophic risks. However, they represent a start in tackling our common threats together and, more importantly, they prove that solutions exist – and that they can offer a brighter, safer future. Importantly, they demonstrate that there are huge benefits and great opportunities, new industries, jobs and creative lives, to be found in changing the way we do things in favour of our survival. They show that facing great risks is not merely a question of overcoming our fears – but also of opening our eyes to the many opportunities and advantages which solving them creates.

The first of the Commission's specialised Roundtables, a Roundtable on Food Security, was held Saturday 30 May. Our overarching conclusion is that for a growing range of reasons, the world food supply is not sustainable. We have already seen clear evidence that it is starting to fracture – and we need to act now, before it falls apart. The reasons are many and deeply intertwined. They have to do not only with soil, water and climate but also with nutrition and its lack, with systems of governance and economics, with population growth and the progressive destruction done to the natural world, with fairness and inequity.

The Commission sees solving the food problem as integral to solving all ten catastrophic and existential risks that together constitute the greatest emergency humanity has ever faced in its time on Earth. If we can solve food, we can also make real progress in solving other threats, such as climate change, global poisoning, pandemic disease, wars, resource scarcity, overpopulation and species extinction:

- Food insecurity is closely interwoven with the 10 catastrophic risks with which the Commission is concerned (scarcity of key natural resources, collapse of ecosystems, overpopulation, global warming, nuclear conflict, global poisoning, uncontrolled technologies, food insecurity, failure to act, etc).
- Food insecurity is a prime impeller of societal upheaval, civil conflict and international wars. The protection of national borders enclosing food production resources constitutes the chief justification for defence spending. The world presently spends \$1.8 trillion a year on new weapons – but only \$70 billion a year on improving food and its production, an imbalance ratio of 25 to 1.
- Competition and disputes over increasingly scarce food, land and water resources in a shifting climate has the potential to ignite local, regional and global conflicts, including nuclear.
- Food failures, whether combined with conflict or not, have the potential to unleash mass refugee tsunamis out of afflicted regions, with domino-like destabilization of neighbouring lands, their governments and even whole continents. This was foreshadowed in the Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on Europe and West Asia.
- The combination of industrialised agriculture and an increasingly unstable climate is leading to rapid hyper-urbanization as hundreds of millions of rural people are

driven off their farms and into cities. This in turn can destabilise urban societies, cause governments to fall, with global economic repercussions.

- Food production today is a key contributor to an avalanche of human chemical emissions which are polluting the entire planet and affecting all life. It is a primary driver of climate change, loss of biodiversity and extinction. It is a major factor in the rise of pandemic disease, both infectious and noncommunicable. It is an underlying factor in about two thirds of human conflicts. It is a major user of disruptive new technologies, including biotechnology and nanotechnology, with unknown and unregulated consequences for humanity.

### **Strategic implications of COVID19: Overview**

The coronavirus (COVID-19) is the latest example of a disease pandemic that doctors and environmental health researchers have warned about for decades. There have been seven pandemics since the start of the 21st Century.

Pandemic diseases generally arise in the first place as a consequence of human overpopulation, destruction of forests and the wild world, increased trade in wild animals, farming practices, international transport and dense urban living conditions. All must be addressed to limit the risk.

This pandemic, in particular, highlights the devastating combination of an intertwined global economy, unpreparedness, belated action, social disconnection and hyper-individualism.

It also provides a striking example of the limitations of current evidence-based models to inform global decision making. These models underestimated the speed and impact of the pandemic, the relevance of local conditions and the lack of knowledge about the healthcare system's capacity to respond.

However, on the other hand, positive responses by people and governments also show that widespread, universal change in human behaviour is possible – at least in the case of an acute global health crisis. What we learn from this may also apply to the ten existential risks to humanity that are now unfolding.

The COVID-19 pandemic thus offers direct experience in how to deal with a catastrophic threat. After the storm, the global and societal landscape will have changed. We cannot resume business as usual and would be wise to prepare for sweeping change.

### **Implications for Australia's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade policy, particularly with respect to strategic alliances and regional security**

The outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic has been so disruptive that it has brought the international order to a tipping point from which there will be no "snap-back". Nor, in light of the issues identified by CHF as catastrophic risks, should we be seeking to recreate the world of December 2019; we must chart a new, sustainable, course.

Among the many changes that have taken place, our two major traditional allies, the United States and the United Kingdom, have handled the challenge with such spectacular

incompetence that as of 21 June they are not only first and third in total deaths, but have among the highest rates of cases per million population and deaths per million population.

As a result, their governments have lost standing at home, and those countries have lost standing in the global community. In addition, they have both commenced relaxing their public health measures, which means infection rates remain high. Among the consequences of this will be great difficulty in re-establishing movement of people between them and other countries.

In charting our foreign affairs, defence and trade policies it will be necessary to subject all of the assumptions on which current policies have been based to rigorous, unsentimental examination. This includes such foundations of Australian defence and foreign policy as the ANZUS Treaty, which since its signature in the 1950s has been oversold to the Australian public. ANZUS has never been a guarantee of Australia's security: it does no more than impose upon its members an obligation to consult about threats to each other's security in the Pacific Region, and to consider what action to take, in accordance with each country's constitutional processes.

Our future policy frameworks must also take into account that the US is proving to be an unreliable ally (e.g. disavowing its NATO obligations), an unreliable trading partner (e.g. slapping tariffs on goods not only from China but from Canada, Mexico and the EU, without regard to WTO rules) and an unreliable participant in multilateral institutions (e.g. walking away from the WTO and WHO, and very importantly walking away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program).

As part of our thinking about Australia's security, we have relied upon the US "nuclear umbrella" – and this has led us to be opposed to any measure, such as the Treaty on the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons, which might constrain US nuclear options. Having identified nuclear weapons as one of the ten catastrophic threats facing humankind, we take the position that we should be strenuously supporting moves to have them eliminated. And we need to ask the questions would the US actually use nuclear weapons on our behalf, and would we want them to?

This is not to say that ANZUS is not important – it is. But the Australian policies of the future must be based upon realistic analysis of what it means, and realistic expectations of what we can expect from the United States.

**Threats to the global rules-based order that emerged due to actions by nation states during the pandemic, and how such threats can be mitigated in the event of future crises**  
COVID19 has intensified rather than created threats to the global rules-based order. Trade multilateralism has been breaking down for many years, in favour of bilateral "free trade" agreements which undermine the "most favoured nation" principle which has served the world so well since World War II.

Very importantly, since the events of 11 September 2001, the US has shown an increasing proclivity to go its own way on the use, or threat of the use, of military force, without UN backing. The most spectacular example of this is the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the legacies of

which are being felt to this day. The US is very much given to imposing economic sanctions without UN backing. No one should be under any misapprehension about sanctions. They are not a peaceful act, they are an act of war. In pre-industrial times they were called “sieges” and everyone recognised them for what they were.

A clear example of threats to the order laid down in the Law of the Sea is the actions by China to claim territorial rights in the South China Sea which are in conflict with its obligations under the UN Convention to which it is party.

These threats can be mitigated via soundly based and well-argued multilateral and bilateral diplomacy. Future Australian diplomacy should be directed strenuously, and without fear or favour, to the restoration, strengthening and maintenance of the global rules-based order. Australia has a long history of honourable and effective middle-power diplomacy, of the kind which produced the results noted earlier in this Submission, and we must not underestimate our capacity to make a difference in the future.

### **The impact on human rights**

The work of the Commission is not directly related to human rights issues, but human rights issues have a fundamental bearing on the achievement of our goals:

- Populations living in poverty will perforce be more concerned with day to day survival than with the sustainability of what they do to survive. [According to the World Bank:](#)
  - In 2015 10% of the world's population lived on less than \$US1.90 per day, 23% on less than \$US3.20 and 42% on less than \$US5.50.
  - Due to the COVID-19 crisis as well as the oil price drop, the trend to reduction of poverty probably will reverse in 2020. The COVID-19 crisis will have a disproportionate impact on the poor, through job loss, loss of remittances, rising prices, and disruptions in services such as education and health care.
  - For the first time since 1998, poverty rates will go up as the global economy falls into recession and there is a sharp drop in GDP per capita. The ongoing crisis will erase almost all the progress made in the last five years.
  - The majority of the global poor live in rural areas and are poorly educated, employed in the agricultural sector, and under 18 years of age.
- Social cohesion is a vital element of societal resilience. Accordingly, both nationally and internationally Australian policy should be directed to all issues that contribute to exclusion, inequality and deprivation, including persecution of or discrimination against ethnic, religious or cultural minorities, corruption, or policies that lead to extreme inequality.

It is for these reasons that we have identified the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals as an urgent priority. As part of our contribution to the achievement of those goals we should reverse the long-term decline in our international aid program.

Domestically, Indigenous recognition and overcoming Indigenous disadvantage must be made an urgent priority.



**Supply chain integrity / assurance to critical enablers of Australian security (such as health, economic and transport systems, and defence)**

The sudden onset of the pandemic crisis demonstrated that for critically needed supplies, reliance cannot be placed upon international “just-in-time” delivery systems, and no doubt international trade patterns (and hence opportunities) will be modified by various of our trading partners’ consideration of what adjustments need to be made by way of commencing/increasing domestic production and/or establishing critical national stockpiles. We would urge that such an examination take place from the viewpoint of Australia’s future resilience, but equally would urge that such examination be conducted by independent policy analysts, with appropriate measures to ensure that it does not become the subject of lobbying or special pleading by influential economic actors.

Our key message is that systems and approaches that are not sustainable can provide neither supply chain integrity nor assurance. Accordingly, all of the ten catastrophic risks that we have identified must be addressed in framing future policy.

**What policy and practical measures would be required to form an ongoing effective national framework to ensure the resilience required to underpin Australia’s economic and strategic objectives**

The establishment of an effective national framework to ensure the required resilience must proceed from a correct technical definition of “resilience”, concerning which there is a well established body of literature. A useful definition of resilience is “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise so as to retain essentially the same functions, structure and feedbacks – to have the same identity”. Put another way, it is in this context the capacity of Australia’s social and economic processes to maintain their general structure and functions in the face of disturbance, even though they must adapt and change in various ways. It is the ability of our “system” as a whole to stay in its current regime and avoid being pushed over a threshold beyond which it is unable to return to its original identity.

It is important to emphasise that resilience is not about resisting change. Research on how social and ecological systems have responded to change in the past shows that resisting change is a recipe for a system to be overwhelmed by it and to lose its essential functions and identity.

Important aspects of the science of resilience include:

- In any system resilience is expressed at multiple scales, and the system cannot be understood or managed by focusing only at one scale of particular interest. In order to understand a system, it is necessary to consider at least the dynamics of the system at a scale above and the scale of the embedded systems below, and the interactions across this hierarchy of scales. For example:
  - As the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09 made clear, we cannot analyse the resilience of the Australian financial system without consideration of the global financial system in which it is embedded, and it is not possible to analyse the resilience of the global financial system without considering the resilience of the key subordinate elements that make it up, e.g. the US and UK financial systems

- We cannot analyse the resilience of the Australian economy, and hence its capacity to trade with the rest of the world, without considering the resilience of the Murray-Darling Basin system, the nation's electricity supplies, or the nation's transport systems
- Our current reliance on commodity exports is a function of policies that have encouraged the extractive industries to flourish (regardless of climate threats) while seeking to make expenditure savings on the national R&D and tertiary education sectors that could help us to become a more diversified, higher value-added economy, with more of its trade underpinned by intellectual property and know-how.
- Trying to enhance resilience at one scale can reduce it in others
- It is important to distinguish between resilience to a specific class of event (e.g. drought) and generalised resilience, and to frame national policy with both in mind
- Most importantly from the viewpoint of the catastrophic risks we have identified, the slowly changing variables are those that tend to catch us unawares. Obvious examples of this are climate change and the volume of microplastics in the world's oceans and river systems.

We recommend that all proposed policies emerging from this Inquiry be examined from the viewpoint of their impact on resilience at multiple scales.

The application of resilience thinking to our foreign affairs, defence and trade would indicate that:

- We would be wise to place much less reliance than we do for our defence on a single powerful ally that may or may not come to our aid when it comes to the point
- Similarly, we would be wise to seek to diversify both the composition and the destinations of our exports. Research and development aimed at taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the quest for the sustainable world we are seeking would greatly assist in that regard.

## **Related matters**

Implicit in much of what has been said above is the need to accelerate the phasing out of coal and gas and build up a strong renewable export sector (e.g. renewables-based hydrogen) and an export sector in which energy intensive exports are derived from renewable electricity. This would make a valuable contribution to emissions abatement. It would take advantage of important new commercial opportunities, making us more resilient by diversifying both the composition and destination of important components of our export base.

It will also make our diplomacy more effective by putting our climate change performance and outlook more in line with what the international community would expect of us.

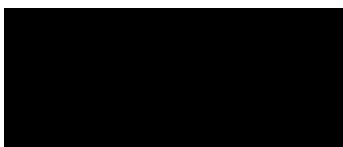
## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

1. Following COVID-19 Australia needs an expanded concept of national security which embraces not only traditional defence of Australian territory, counter-terrorism and

defence against espionage and subversion, but mitigation of the existential threats that threaten the very existence of mankind.

2. That expanded notion of national security must recognise that social inclusion, the protection of rights, the promotion of values and resilience – all of them supported by a strong economic base – are basic elements of security policy.
3. All public policy frameworks need to be viewed through the lenses of resilience and sustainability
  - This means that small government is not always good government, and that "effectiveness" is every bit as important as "efficiency"
  - Policies need to be founded on an understanding that society & the economy operate within, and are dependent upon, the environment.
4. Pursuant to the above:
  - There is a need to restore science and other technical knowledge and skills to their proper place as the foundation of evidence-based public policy
  - There is a need to restore public trust in Parliament as an institution in which serious matters are debated seriously by serious people and the views of non-Government MPs are heard and respected
  - There is a need to reskill a public service whose capacities have been seriously degraded by the outsourcing of so much of their traditional policy advisory and service delivery functions
  - Our future must be constructed on the basis that we are a society, not just an "economy" in which people are mere units of economic production and consumption, and recognise that the economy is meant to serve the people, not the other way around.

We would be happy for representatives of the Commission for the Human Future to attend a public hearing of the Committee at a mutually convenient time.



(Paul Barratt AO)  
Co Deputy Chair  
Commission for the Human Future  
23 June 2020