

From: Hannah Middleton
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Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to the Defence Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into the benefits and risks of a Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement, as a basis of planning for, and funding of, Australian Defence capability.

Submission by: Dr Hannah Middleton on behalf of the Australian Anti-Bases Campaign Coalition

The need for a Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement (BADA) is promoted as a solution to problems including frequent blowouts in money and time of major defence projects and industry requirements for investment planning,

There is a clear need for major improvement in improved accountability and democratisation of governance in this field. Defence procurements are highly technical and usually secretive. There have been frequent reviews of these processes, all of which have found endemic mismanagement and have recommended greater accountability.

There is a history in defence of poor planning and poor budgeting practices, mismanagement, poor contract management, poor project administration, buck-passing, and careless decision-making.

In addition, a 2010 McKinsey report found Australia's military spending was among the least efficient in the world. The consultancy compared the amount of money we spend with the amount of equipment we procure. In a list of 33 major countries, we tied with the United States for worst at getting value for our defence dollar.

There has been *de facto* bi-partisanship on defence issues between the two major parties in Parliament for many years but this has not resolved these major problems.

Formalising the bi-partisanship through a BADA will therefore not change this situation, especially since only assertions and no evidence are presented that the problems of defence planning and budgeting could be solved by such an approach.

Parliament

The current bi-partisanship restricts proper democratic consideration of Australia's strategic and defence challenges and possible responses in Parliament and elsewhere.

Parliament has never fully debated, let alone analysed in depth, the costs and outcomes of decisions for Australia to go to war in Middle East countries. Nor has there been any discussion of the human and financial costs of these wars. Yet these questions are vital for the development of effective and efficient defence policies in the future.

The lack of parliamentary debate and scrutiny of defence matters undermines democratic accountability and oversight and increases the risk of mistakes being repeated

Bi-partisanship effectively excludes other positions or forces within Parliament. Yet these forces represent many in our community and their silencing is deeply undemocratic. It also means opportunities to consider new ideas and challenges to current thinking and policies are effectively repressed.

Community

Australia's defence bi-partisanship creates lower public unity and support. With defence issues rarely debated in Parliament, media coverage of these topics is restricted and the opportunity for public debate is reduced. Public discussion of Defence matters is also constrained by a lack of information.

In effect there is no public democratic debate about policy issues and choices. As a result there is a growing divide between the community and government. One clear example is the community opposition to Australia's military involvement in Afghanistan which developed despite strong bi-partisan agreement in support of the military deployment between the Coalition and Labor in Parliament.

Community input into defence white papers has been a farce. Military experts, academics and commercial producers are invited to private consultations but community organisations and individuals are offered public meetings. Their spokespeople are severely restricted in the time they may speak and have often faced contempt from panels and chairs

There is a clear need for wider public involvement in discussion and decision-making, and greater transparency in the provision of information. There is no evidence that a BADA could or would contribute to this.

We are in accord with Professor Tanter, in his submission to this inquiry, when he points out to the "*deep-rooted Defence attitude of disdain towards community consultation and diversity of involvement in policy development, and a determination to maintain a highly limited circle of acceptable policy consultation. This practice, which is both offensive and inimical to the spirit and practice of democratic accountability, does not suggest that a BADA arrangement, which inherently limits diversity in policy debate and democratic accountability, would improve matters in this regard.*"

This disdain for the community is illustrated by the RAAF approach to the

international UK-Based watch dog on air strikes over Syria. Air Watch complained that the RAAF refused to provide information on strikes and the co-ordinates of strikes more so than any other coalition force in the conflict. The RAAF not only has disdain for the community at home but has carried this over to the international community. This is shocking state of affairs.

The terms of reference for the Defence Sub-Committee of the Senate Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry contain a number of assumptions which are of concern. It is likely that a further reason for opposing the introduction of a BADA is that it would entrench these assumptions.

Defence and security

The inquiry's terms of reference deal almost exclusively with military aspects of Defence but security is multi-dimensional.

The over-emphasis in casting the military as Australia's guarantee of "security" has not engendered a true culture of national security.

Resources committed to military defence mean less money for developing strong social cohesion and stability within the nation through employment programs and the health, education and housing needs of Australians and our neighbours.

A feature of military expenditure is its opportunity costs, that is, the opportunities which are foregone for alternative consumption and investment.

The World Bank says high military spending contributes to fiscal and debt crises, complicates stabilisation and adjustment, and negatively affects economic growth and development.

Military expenditure reduces public and private investment, diverts funds and personnel from civilian research and development and increases the current account deficit. It tends to retard the rate of economic growth. It also creates far less employment than the same funding invested in civilian areas of production.

Australia's security can be enhanced by attention to social, political and humanitarian issues which affect the people of this country as well as in neighbouring states.

However, such a change in priorities is unlikely given the current nature of bi-partisan defence planning and current thinking is even less likely to be challenged or changed if a BADA is introduced.

Relationship with USA

The current bi-partisanship of the two major parties takes Australian defence integration with the United States as axiomatic. There is no debate if this is really in Australia's best interests.

Any debate is restricted by adherence to the current bi-partisanship on defence matters and this restriction on democratic debate will be strengthened if bi-partisanship becomes enshrined in a formal agreement.

We cannot afford a continued cold war paradigm which defines regional engagement as interoperability with the United States in potential high intensity

conflicts, especially when US influence in our region is clearly waning. A BADA would undermine the debate necessary to respond to the current new and challenging situation.

An open, rational reassessment of our security priorities could lead to a number of conclusions which may be at odds with current bi-partisan intention of increasing defence spending. However, they could contribute to an independent policy which would make a major contribution to Australia's security. These could include such things as:

- using more defensive and less costly systems as opposed to the long-range, aggressive capabilities currently in use;
- committing Australia to possess enough military force to defend our territory but not to threaten the territory of other states;
- working to develop transparency and confidence building in the region and to restrict a regional arms race;

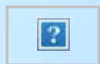
Such policies – and others -- will never be adequately debated, if at all, if the current bi-partisanship is codified into a formal agreement. Matters of defence will be set in concrete and decisions will not be open to challenges and to healthy debate

It is our view that a Bi-lateral Agreement on Defence Policies should not be implemented.

Dr Hannah Middleton

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