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» Content
Centre

» Article » Opinion » Time To Talk: Australian Resilience And Preparedness In The New World Disorder

Time to talk: Australian resilience and preparedness in the new world disorder

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The 2025 Sir James Plimsoll Lecture delivered at the University of Tasmania on 22 May 2025 by Professor Rory Medcalf AM FAIIA, Head, ANU National Security College.

Thank you Professor Farrelly for that generous introduction.

I join you in acknowledging country.

I acknowledge the Tasmanian Aboriginal People, the traditional and ongoing custodians of Lutruwita, Tasmania.

I pay respect to elders, past, present, emerging.

A recognition of its own history ...

... without fear and in totality ...

is a basic condition for a nation that is reconciled, cohesive and ready for the future.

My thanks to our hosts this evening, the University of Tasmania, the Australian Institute of International Affairs and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The Plimsoll Lecture has become a significant event each year to promote new thinking about Australia in the world, and I am honoured to deliver it.

I'm mindful there have been more distinguished speakers, many of them, since this address was inaugurated in 2007.

I am especially pleased to refer to last year's speech by the Foreign Minister, Senator The Hon Penny Wong.

That was a forthright articulation of the government's humanitarian policy and regional statecraft.

And from a minister who combines respectful engagement across our Indo-Pacific region with a core commitment to the interests, values and identity of today's Australia.

I also recall the prescient analysis of the state of the world two years earlier by a friend, mentor and colleague, Dr Heather Smith.

Advancing the national interest should be a team effort, and I hope my remarks are taken as building upon theirs.

Heather Smith's call for a genuine strategy that brings together the economic and security elements of our national interests is an idea whose time is now overdue.

And her observations on the global 'polycrisis' hold distressingly true – even more so with every new reverberation of Trump shock ...

... where, as American thinker Adam Garfinkle has ruefully noted, these days there is one certainty about US external policy.

Uncertainty.

My own contribution this evening will be to share some thoughts on how Australia needs to make itself more prepared, resilient and self-aware.

In doing so, I will announce the launch of a new initiative from my organisation, the ANU National Security College, to provide a resource for our leaders and representatives, in governments and parliaments, in understanding what Australians actually think about their security.

And to mark out the communication gaps that need bridging if we are to stand a chance of being a nation ready and able to cope in the new world disorder.

In a world where we are seeing self-sabotage in our ally yet where the assertiveness of authoritarian powers does not relent.

Where there is genuine risk of conflict or crisis affecting our interests.

Where the boundaries between security and economics, the international and the domestic, people and technology, fact and falsehood, are breaking down.

And where we may not be sure what shock will arrive next – only that it will.

A national security conversation focused on fear is neither welcome nor effective. The challenge is to navigate between complacency on one side and fear on the other.

In between, the approach should be one of national confidence. Of security as a state of mind that reduces anxieties by engaging confidently with risk.

And lest anything I say this evening sound fatalistic, let's not forget our nation has weathered geopolitical tempests before, as Sir James Plimsoll knew only too well.

It is a privilege to reflect on his legacy – a life of service - and to acknowledge those of his family here with us this evening.

Sir James was a giant of our nation's mid-20th century diplomacy.

His was a time when Australia was adapting quickly to the ways of power and influence to shape its future, in a global system being made anew after total war.

We readily remember him as a foreign service leader, and Secretary of the Department of External Affairs in the second half of that turbulent decade the 1960s.

And as an extraordinary ambassador – prosecuting Australian interests across many of the most critical diplomatic posts, including some usually seen as a political preserve.

The United States. The United Kingdom.

But also Japan, India, Belgium and the European community precursor to the EU, the United Nations.

He lived and helped forge an early diversification of our foreign relations: foreshadowing precisely what we should be doing right now to hedge against the vicissitudes of America First.

The big bilaterals in Asia that have stakes in a secure, reliable Australia.

The underestimated economic, strategic and technology potential of Europe – the place where our political values are most aligned, and where by the way there are

now models of resilience and preparedness, such as Finland and Sweden, worth our closest study.

A multilateral system where we need to do all we can to shore up those now-endangered notions of rules and the sovereign equality of nations.

Sir James was also our man in Cold War Moscow, in what was then the USSR. He knew how to speak with potential adversaries as well as friends: another habit we need to cultivate today if we are serious about try to prevent conflict through diplomacy as well as deter it through military force.

But Plimsoll applied remarkable energies and talents for his country in other ways too.

His story is a reminder that Australia is at its most effective when our people, like our policies, are creatively whole-of-government, even whole-of-nation, in their outlook.

Volunteering for the military in the Second World War.

Service with the unique Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs.

This was the ultimate think and do tank, a wartime greenhouse for intellectuals to lead in disruptive policy thinking, and nation building.

Indeed, I suspect that the national mission of my own university, The Australian National University, was one of the brave ideas incubated there.

And the Directorate drove engagement with our Pacific neighbours, especially Papua New Guinea.

That then led James Plimsoll, Jim Plim, to carry forward what we would now rather blandly call capacity building, with the Australian School of Pacific Administration – developing new generations of teachers and administrators to help the Pacific make its own future.

I will here indulge in claiming a modest degree of separation, or connection, in which a small but memorable part of my childhood was spent visiting the decrepit wooden buildings at Sydney's Middle Head where Sir James once trod.

For my own father, who recently passed away, was an educator with that school's successor organisation, the International Training Institute, and along with my late mother devoted much of his life to education in PNG.

I don't need to remind an audience at a university how foolish it would be for our nation to let education slip as a priority.

This is both education for our own intergenerational national interest strategy – building the skills and adaptability of Australians, including our national security workforce ...

... and education as a singular contribution – and a great advantage – in exerting positive influence in our region.

Indeed, if we could imagine new money for foreign policy right now, we should direct it towards a radical uplift in education of Southeast Asia's emerging elites here in Australia. Among other things, this would help remind our universities of their own role in our nation's statecraft.

If we don't do it, China will.

And since we can't do it all ourselves, why not consider an education alliance with competitors in this space – Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Europe, Japan. Leaving space for the United States as it regathers its wits.

But back to Sir James. His example of whole-of-nation service went even wider still.

An economist with the Bank of New South Wales.

An influential civilian mission with the UN inside war-torn Korea.

And, at the end, vice-regal service to our Federation, as Governor of this state.

In total, his life and vocation speak to themes recapitulating in the new global dissonance – issues alive in the 2020s.

Profound questions of peace, war, reconstruction and order.

Of how Australia must make its way in an unforgiving world.

Of the breadth of partnerships our nation should cultivate, in our region and globally.

Of the practical work that must underpin statecraft.

And of why strategy and policy need to connect with the people of Australia – about which I will have much more to say in a few moments.

What all these subjects have in common is the scale of their horizons.

James Plimsoll recognised that to secure Australia's future in the world, we needed to be fully engaged with it.

... involved in humankind

... recognising that no nation is an island, no island is an island – even, when it comes to it, an island off an island.

Every nation a part of the main.

Now, strategy can be an over-used word in government – it means more than just a new document or an articulation of hope – but there was an unquestionably strategic cast to Sir James' worldview.

What are our interests?

What are the challenges we face?

What are our capabilities?

What can we do with what we have?

How can we generate more from a situation than a first glance – complacent, superficial, blinkered, perhaps fearful – might suggest?

Which brings to me to the heart of my own message this evening.

As Australia confronts the stark geopolitical realities of our time – wide horizons all right, but horizons crowded with the black swans of risk and surprise – we need a new national mindset.

A mindset that recognises we cannot magically hide from the woes of the world. Geography is not the barrier it used to be.

A mindset that recognises that preparing for shocks is an essential part of deterring them – and of withstanding them if they occur.

Our nation needs a contemporary strategic mindset, informed by risk, resilience and responsibility.

At about this point in a lecture like this, it's normal to remind the audience of the risks facing our nation ...

... with a slightly fresh recital of a list of perils and maybe a sad search for synonyms of words like climate, China and conflict, or terrorism, turmoil and Trump.

The problem is that these days the list can sound so familiar, the audience can be forgiven for treating it as background noise – as if naming our problems will ritualistically make them go away.

Or as if, deep down, we don't think there's much we can do except hope that we can hang on to the good things about life in Australia – and yes life here in beautiful Tasmania – for as long as possible.

Because, despite all the problems and insecurity our society faces, with apologies to all who are doing it tough, and for all the understandable reasons why the last election saw a search for safety in the government we know ...

... these are still relatively good times for many in Australia. But what's next?

Few of these issues seemed front of mind in the election campaign just passed.

Yet Australia, as for other democracies around the world, hazards are accumulating.

Strategic threats—involving the use of armed force and other dimensions of state power for coercion and leverage—are overlapping with transnational risks.

Global connectedness and disruptive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence are eroding those boundaries I've mentioned, between international and domestic issues, between economics and security, even between people and technology.

For Australia, the risk register is long.

It includes the impacts of climate change, intense natural disasters, pandemics, China's military weight and its willingness to use economic coercion and foreign interference.

There's foreign interference from others too. There's terrorism, extremism, disinformation, conspiracy theories and distrust in democratic institutions, the impact of Middle East conflict or indeed other conflicts on social cohesion. It's unlikely we've seen the last of war between India and Pakistan.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues to profoundly shake global order, with North Koreans as cannon fodder in Europe and China as the enabler of Russia's war economy.

Crude, horrible and bewildering for us, in Moscow the idea of military conquest and war as the whole point of a regime is now a thing again.

And now casting a shadow over all else are uncertainties about US policy.

Those Washington-centric concerns are not just about trade. At least Europe now knows where it stands in Trump world, and how it must look to its own security. We may be surprised at how much Europeans, or at least some European nations, get their act together. Already there are parts of Europe much more resilient than we are.

On this side of the world, we are still waiting for a definitive signal of American policy in the Indo-Pacific, on balancing Chinese power and engaging allies.

War or brink-of-war crises in Australia's Indo-Pacific region, for instance across the Taiwan Strait or in the South China Sea—are highly plausible possibilities.

These would have devastating economic, humanitarian and societal consequences for us, even if Australia was somehow not a direct belligerent. We would feel it immediately in supply chains, in daily life, and the fabric of our society—however the conflict were to play out.

Enough. You get the point.

There's a world of risk that our election campaign politely obscured.

But we can no longer afford to move cautiously or quietly as a nation in building preparedness against strategic shocks.

In my view, a re-elected government, secure in its mandate and confident with the levers of statecraft, has the opportunity for a frank conversation with the public about the challenges we face.

A whole-of-nation approach to resilience would fit well with the idea of progressive patriotism. This provides an Australian logic for social and economic policy, but there's no reason it cannot apply to security and resilience too.

After all, the very concept of national security in the 20th century – as the state working with citizens to provide freedom from fear and totalitarian threat - evolved from the social security - freedom from want – of the Franklin Roosevelt administration.

There is practical and creative work to be done in defining an authentically Australian approach to the problem of security in the 21st century.

With a Labor majority government, extraordinary realignments underway across our politics, and a world in crisis, it is hard to imagine a time when a leadership will be better placed to begin pursuing community trust towards a more unified effort at national resilience and security.

I am not here to venture every specific recommendation on how a more inclusive national interest strategy would work in the service of making the nation prepared and resilient against the shocks to come.

The roles and responsibilities of states and territories, of industry, of civil society, of unions, communities, individuals, indeed of parliamentarians: all of this would need deep engagement and debate.

But the starting point is a national conversation.

Now to be fair we have come some way in transparency and the willingness of government leaders to let the people know what our officials get up to in our name, and why.

And in fact Plimsoll played his part.

Let us stray for a moment back into the rarefied bureaucratic atmosphere of Canberra in the 1960s, where I suspect the typical external affairs officer did not see it as his job – and in those days it was *his* – to have much to do with regular Australians.

Plimsoll changed that.

To quote Allan Watts' 1967 history of Australian Foreign Policy, with its deliciously dated turn of phrase:

An encouraging feature of the current official scene has been growing evidence, particularly since the appointment of Sir James Plimsoll as Secretary, Department of External Affairs ... of an increasing realisation by that Department of its 'public relations' responsibilities ...

... there now appears to be a stronger trend for senior officers ... to participate to some extent in non-official conferences and seminar discussion groups. This is a valuable development because, while officials do not and would not be expected to reveal State secrets, the information available to them makes it possible for them to influence views of others which are not soundly based.

We may laugh a little, including at this archaic certainty that surely the special wisdom of a well-chosen foreign service officer would sway any argument with those whose views were 'not soundly based'.

But the bottom line is that Jim Plim was an early mover in recognising the need for our officials to engage directly with the people. As we would say these days, he was risk tolerant.

And I am not entirely sure that the openness of our policy conversations has progressed all that far in the six decades since – at least not when it comes to national security.

So, in our own small way, I'm pleased to announce this evening that the ANU National Security College will contribute to the conversation the nation has to have.

This week in Tasmania we have commenced a major initiative of Community Consultations, a chance to help illuminate what Australians actually think when they think about national security.

And I have to say that Tasmanians have responded admirably, with ideas and concerns and a spirit of candour and resilience.

Throughout 2025 our consultation teams will visit each state and territory – covering major cities, plus a range of regional centres, rural areas and remote communities.

We will convene meetings and seek written submissions, building on a reputable body of survey data by the Social Research Centre.

This first-of-its kind study will inform a published report in late 2025, intended as a resource for governments, parliaments, and communities. This will also inform the future work of the college through national security education, dialogue, research, contestability, and public awareness.

And it will lead to a major conference in early 2026 where we will promote the findings and convene voices to advance the national conversation further and help connect it with policymakers.

It is a genuine chance for Australians beyond Canberra to have their say.

Tonight we are publishing an Issues Paper to promote the conversation, and calling for submissions between now and the end of August.

Your engagement in our consultations can make a difference, helping prepare the nation for the challenges of today and tomorrow.

In a complex and uncertain world, security risks are many. They can threaten life and freedoms, but also wellbeing, prosperity, sovereignty, social cohesion, institutions and the environment. Governments recognise national security as a vital responsibility. Yet what security means, and what to do about it, is rarely straightforward.

In our consultations, we want to learn what security means to you. We are also interested in finding out what matters most to you when you think about the nation's future – and frankly, whether these priorities do or don't connect with security at all.

Identifying how people and communities think about their own roles or responsibilities will help ensure our nation is prepared for shocks, and that it can withstand them when they occur.

It's a long way from Jim Plim's early endeavours with that freethinking national security brains trust in the huts on Middle Head, but I'd like to think he'd approve.

Thank you.

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Why we need a nationwide conversation on national security

The Head of NSC, Professor Rory Medcalf AM, presented the 2025 Sir James Plimsoll Lecture in Hobart on 22 May.

#preparedness #resilience #national security policy



Thinking about our national security

This Issues Paper is a conversation starter, to help you think about what you may choose to tell us during the consultation process. Your views matter.

#Community consultations #preparedness #resilience #Securing our Future



ANU National Security College launches Australia-wide consultations on attitudes to security

In a first-of-its-kind study, NSC will undertake nationwide consultations to understand Australian attitudes to security.

#Community consultations



Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian National University acknowledges, celebrates and pays our respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people of the Canberra region and to all First Nations Australians on whose traditional lands we meet and work, and whose cultures are among the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

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