

Australian Defence Force refocus of resources will leave a gap in response and recovery

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The Defence Strategic Review 2023¹ identified that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) must focus on its core responsibility, warfighting, if it is to be ready for any future conflict. Where does this leave Australia’s states and territories when it comes to the unique capabilities and scale that the ADF offers at the time of a major disaster?

In early 2023, the Department of Defence released the strategic review, which, among other things, highlighted that ‘Defence is not structured or appropriately equipped to act as a domestic disaster recovery agency concurrently with its core function, in any sustainable way’.²

Over many decades, the Department of Defence has contributed to supporting the emergency and disaster response by states and territories as well as recovery activities. These have included the evacuation of Darwin’s population following Cyclone Tracy in 1974 to the New South Wales fires and floods in 2019 and 2022. The 2009 Defence White Paper³ states that disaster response tasks are among the highest priorities of the ADF.

So, what has changed in the last decade since the 2009 Defence White Paper?

The warning time in which the ADF might be engaged in conflict has shortened significantly. Thus, the urgency to meet an escalated military threat with a fulsome capability and warfighting skills has increased significantly. In short, the ADF must focus on its primary role of defending Australia from armed threats.

The outlook for emergency resources in the years ahead

There is no doubt that Australia may be exposed to severe natural high-risk events in the coming decade. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements includes statements identifying:

*...a drying trend across much of the southern half of Australia, particularly in the south west and particularly in the winter months.*⁴

*Observed changes that are being influenced by background climate trends include increased frequency of heatwaves and record high temperatures, longer fire seasons with more extreme fire danger days, increase in marine heatwaves, and reduced annual average rainfall in some regions.*⁵

As the likelihood and magnitude of emergencies and disasters increases, Australia’s combined and available national resources for major response and recovery (ADF and state and territory resources) is on the decrease.

Australian Defence Force support during response and recovery phases

The ADF can considerably bolster state and territory response and recovery activities during a major event. This can be broadly summed up into 2 types of support; capability and scale.

Capability

The range of war fighting and support capabilities of the ADF has utility in the short-term response phase and the longer-term recovery phase. These capabilities are operated by highly skilled personnel and are not readily accessible in the general



An Army aircrewman is thanked by residents as they arrive at RAAF Base Amberley, near Brisbane.
Image: Department of Defence

community or industry sector. Such capabilities include examples like heavy-lift helicopters and aircraft, smaller helicopters able to operate in very low-visibility flying conditions and vessels that can move stores across beaches. All have a war fighting role and are constantly in training to maintain skills for a range of military options that the Australian Government may call on. It's effectively an insurance policy that covers many eventualities, but once committed, take considerable time to regenerate.

An example of this unique capability that cannot be matched in the commercial or emergency services sector is the use of Army Aviation MRH90 helicopters, which were used during the South East Queensland floods in February 2022. Here, 13 residents were rescued during very low visibility weather from rooftops and vehicles.⁶ Other examples include ADF heavy-lift aircraft used in Western Australia during floods in the Kimberly in January 2023.⁷

Scale

The ADF provides a readily accessible, low-skilled manual labour force option for the Australian Government to support recovery phase activities. On 7 February 2009, the day following the Black Saturday fires, the ADF had established a Joint Task Force to mobilise personnel to support emergency services agencies. Within 48 hours, 450 personnel were deployed around Victoria. At one point during the operation, up to 800 ADF personnel, mainly from the 4th Brigade Army Reserve⁸, were assisting in clean-up tasks.

We have seen this scale of deployments replicated during the floods in New South Wales in 2022, where 'more than 4,000 ADF personnel and assets deployed rapidly from across the country to help the communities of northern New South Wales'.⁹

How emergency services fill the capability and scale gap left by ADF

The Australian Government's greatest responsibility is to the safety and security of people in Australia and Australians overseas. Thus, to suggest that the ADF will no longer provide its capability and scale during a major response and recovery event may be erroneous. However, with competing challenges of meeting preparedness requirements for conflict, a responsibility which cannot be divested by the ADF, supporting the states and territories for what might be foreseeable and increasing disaster events will be a challenge. The 'insurance policy' that ADF resources provides is being stretched.

As the ADF mobilises to meet threats of conflict, the states and territories must also mobilise to meet emerging preparedness and response activities for their high-risk threats. One way to reduce these is by becoming better resilient to these events, not only in the physical infrastructure, but also from a community cohesiveness perspective. While most states and territories are engaged in building this resilience, it is questionable as to whether this will address the potential absence of ADF support at the time of a major event.

Capability

Achieving the response and recovery capability that the ADF has previously provided at the time of a major disaster event is arguably a funding problem. There is a cost to maintaining a heavy-lift aircraft capability as there is a cost for maintaining helicopters that can operate to rescue citizens in low-visibility events. In many cases, these costs are prohibitive to a state and territory jurisdiction. However, we are seeing these capabilities emerging in emergency services organisations to conduct day-to-day activities. For example, the growing proliferation of rescue helicopters. Arguably, as states and territories acquire these capabilities for their day-to-day operations and their skills and equipment evolve, these might outstrip the ADF capability in its ability to operate in the localised response phase of a major event. Also, as state and territory capabilities develop, they are better connected and coordinated into the response systems such as a single statewide, computer-aided dispatch system. This provides better coordination outside the day-to-day events.

While some of these unique capabilities are beyond the budget of most state and territory governments, there may be an argument for a national and shared capability separate from the ADF. The aerial firefighting capability is a reasonable model for this shared resource, albeit still principally funded by the states and territories.

Scale

Not a disaster goes by where the cry of ‘Where’s the Army?’ does not go out. Achieving scale to respond to these events by the community is a cultural problem. While much has been written about the reasons for the declining rate of volunteerism in Australia (from 23% in 2001 to 14.3% in 2020¹⁰) much has also been written about ways to increase emergency services volunteerism where skills, commitment and participation in high-risk activities are prevalent. Most would argue that this cannot be resolved by remuneration alone. Leadership, belonging and community connection are keys to retaining and expanding emergency service volunteers.¹¹ Unlike solutions of the capability gap problem, responses within communities must be localised and from the community.

Conclusion

As we move ahead, states and territories could respond in 3 ways to the ADF’s potential absence from major disaster responses. States and territories could build resilience so as to reduce the effects on communities of disaster events, thus decreasing the need for response capability and recovery scale. States and territories could continue to improve and integrate unique response capabilities into the day-to-day operations of their emergency services organisations while considering a national shared response capability. States and territories could work to reverse the degradation of volunteerism to provide local community-scale labour force ready for recovery following a major disaster event.

The next decade is likely to see the Australian Government challenged with balancing the security needs of the country with the safety needs brought on by disaster events. It is time to understand the gaps and to act.

Endnotes

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