

THE AUSTRALIAN

Ukraine mission is OK but big defence decisions needed urgently

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12:00AM JULY 5, 2022 • 336 COMMENTS

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Anthony Albanese was right to go to Ukraine – right morally, strategically, symbolically, politically. But his main work on security lies at home. And that must start soon. Appointing former defence minister Stephen Smith to run the forthcoming force posture review would be a good beginning.

Australia is not a central player in Ukraine, but it's right to make a contribution. The Prime Minister's visit was rich in symbolism. Symbolism has its place in foreign affairs, even in geo-strategic conflict. It has moral purpose. Albanese is right to express moral revulsion at Russia's invasion, and solidarity with Ukraine.

Albanese's trip underlines the link between European and Asian security. If Asian democracies contribute to NATO security, it's more likely NATO will contribute to Asian security. NATO is the world's biggest, richest military alliance. The US alliance system in Asia, involving

Australia, Japan, South Korea, The Philippines and Thailand, plus countries that are not formal allies but that co-operate closely on security, is the main principle and guarantor of order in the Asian theatre.

But symbolism also has its risks. Australia's overwhelming focus is our own region and we mustn't be distracted from that.

The only military hardware we should donate to Ukraine is items we manufacture here and where we can increase the production run. It makes no sense for us to import kit from overseas, then donate it on to Ukraine.

There is no military useful equipment we have in sufficient quantities for our own needs in the event of any hostilities, though I would be happy to give away all our tanks and rid ourselves of the ludicrous expenditure, which will never have any relevance to our acute maritime challenge. Much better just to give Ukraine money.

Albanese will, rightly, soon travel to the South Pacific Forum. Criticism that he travels too much is misplaced. Most of the trips have been necessary – what would it say of an Australian PM who refused to attend a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue summit? All the trips have been useful.

Much more important than anything Albanese will do overseas are the decisions he and Defence Minister Richard Marles will make on actually acquiring military capabilities. The previous government, for all its rhetoric, was hopeless, as were the Labor governments that preceded it.

Labor has been in office only six weeks. But very soon it has to take big decisions on defence capability if we are not to lose another term to inaction in this critical area. Marles has told us we will know by next March which nuclear-powered submarine we will acquire under AUKUS, when we will get it and what we will do about the resulting capability gaps.

No one loves submarines more than I do, but even nuclear-powered submarines are not the be-all and end-all of deterrence. We already suffer pervasive capability gaps all over defence. We have neither lethality, survivability nor mass. We have nothing at all of an asymmetric

capability that would deter any potential aggressor in our maritime approaches.

There is, in fact, a colossal mess in defence to be sorted out and fixed up. There were two plausible approaches Marles could have taken. One was to sack everyone at the top to show that the old culture of endless delay, irrelevant spending, hopelessly mismanaged projects, nobody ever taking responsibility, useless capabilities soaking up billions of dollars, was no longer going to be the operating system for defence.

The other approach was to keep existing structures in place but bend them to the government's will. Albanese, Marles, Foreign Minister Penny Wong, former defence spokesman Brendan O'Connor and others in speeches and interviews have made it clear they understand the urgency of the situation.

Albanese and Marles have decided to keep the Defence leadership in place but task it with these urgent requirements. For this risky strategy to work, it is absolutely vital, of the first order of importance, that the government give clear, unambiguous, time-bound instructions to Defence.

One key to this will be getting the government's promised force posture review up and running, and making it report by next March, simultaneous with the submarine report. In opposition Labor pledged to have an independent chair of the review, or perhaps two people sharing that role. There is strong speculation the government may ask Smith to lead the review. That would be a good choice.

The government needs to get this moving quickly. It also needs to sort out what it wants from the review. Force posture normally refers to where defence assets are stationed. Every strategic analyst you can find knows we need more defence assets in the north. But Defence absolutely hates doing this and normally finds a way not to implement that kind of direction.

But the report should also embrace key features of force structure; that is, what capabilities, what weapons, do we most urgently want. We need to produce greatly increased deterrent firepower very quickly. The whole culture of Defence and its leadership is against this, so the government must drive it politically.

The last big defence report to have a long-lasting effect was that written by Paul Dibb in 1986. This report must chart the type of defence force we want, but probably should avoid the granularity of a traditional white paper. It will inevitably need to be serviced by an extensive Defence Department secretariat, but it must be led independently and externally or its chances of producing real change are next to zero.

In March, not long before the election, Albanese gave a seminal speech on national security outlining the approach Labor would take. He recognised how many defence projects were in trouble, over time, over budget, with capability of dubious relevance. The starting point of his thinking was how to add new firepower to existing defence platforms, as that would clearly be the quickest way to make a difference.

He specifically canvassed increased strike power, which presumably means missiles, as well as the possibility of building new air warfare destroyers, as well as putting much heavier weapons on the Arafura-class patrol vessels (which are the size of many navies' warships but bizarrely unarmed).

Albanese didn't promise those capabilities but said Labor would look at them closely and with a view to action. Defence is on the record as being opposed to all of them, as it is opposed to the obvious next step of an interim conventional submarine as a bridge to the nuclear-powered boats. The government should tell us, soon, how the initiatives Albanese outlined are now being considered and taken forward.

The government has started off very well in national security. It must soon hit the accelerator on producing defence capability or our poor benighted nation will continue to drift into extreme danger.

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