

An Office of National Security: Making it happen
by Anthony Bergin and Mark Thomson

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Prior to the election, Labor promised two innovations in national security. First, a Department of Homeland Security bringing together agencies responsible for border security, counter-terrorism and emergency response and, second, a new position of National Security Advisor. We now know two things: the Homeland Security agency concept has been shelved, subject to a review reporting mid next year, and it's confirmed that the National Security Advisor isn't a Ministerial position.

Assuming the National Security Advisor promise is still on the table, what might one look like? In some ways it's easier to say what it won't (or at least shouldn't) look like. It wouldn't make sense to supplant the role of the Prime Minister's Department in coordinating advice on international and domestic security matters. Nor would anything be gained by slicing off the domestic security and/or the international security components from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and rebadging them—unless the goal was purely cosmetic. In fact, this looks like what's occurred initially with the Homeland Security Department proposal; the former Department of Justice and Customs has been renamed the Department of Home Affairs.

By elimination, this leaves creating something to augment the existing arrangements: something that will add value without overly disrupting the present framework. It follows that an Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA) should be small and, critically, able to offer something different from the character of advice flowing from agencies such as Defence, Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's own Department.

Moreover, ONSA shouldn't be part of an existing Department; else they will simply echo the view of their minister. Instead, it needs to be an independent Office that can form its own views and, to an extent, set its own objectives.

ONSA should therefore be an independent entity, reporting directly to the Prime Minister and budgeted through the Prime Minister and Cabinet—much like the Office of National Assessments. And the organisation should be lean: staff it with 15-20 of the best and brightest individuals in the country drawn from the bureaucracy, military, business, science and universities. As necessary, ONSA would second specialists from other agencies to deal with

specific issues.

There would be much for an Office of the National Security Advisor to do. Its core role would be to develop an overarching national response to the long-term strategic issues that we face. This would include examining the relative risk posed by disparate threats like terrorism, energy security, climate change and the evolving geopolitical landscape. Many security challenges now transcend traditional boundaries and blend domestic and international issues; ONSA would bridge the gaps that existing departmental responsibilities miss.

The prime goal for ONSA in its first six months would be to set out a coherent approach to Australia's national security by developing a National Security Strategy. This would then serve as a precursor to subsequent Defence and counter terrorism white papers promised during the campaign. Naturally, it would also provide independent advice on matters going to the National Security Committee of Cabinet, the government's highest decision-making body on national security.

Finally, ONSA would fill a critical gap in present arrangements by standing ready to coordinate support to the government in an international crisis. As things stand, when a crisis arises—as in East Timor in 1999—an ad hoc committee is thrown together. In the event of a crisis, the National Security Advisor would chair the officials-level crisis committee and be responsible for leading briefings to Cabinet's National Security Committee. In preparation, ONSA would need to develop and maintain the necessary communication infrastructure to ensure that the government was properly served with accurate information in a crisis.

This is a big agenda, and its success would depend critically on the individual chosen to be the government's National Security Advisor. That person would require not just exceptional strategic and bureaucratic skills, but would need to have the complete confidence of the Prime Minister.

Unless such a person can be found, it's tempting to suggest that the whole idea should be abandoned. But given the value that an Office of the National Security Advisor would deliver the country, it is worth looking hard.

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