Past National Mobilisation Insights: Supply Chains, the People and Supporting Great Power Allies (Working paper)

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Executive Summary

- National mobilisation involves marshalling national resources to defend the nation and its interests. It purposefully shifts the boundary between a society's defence and civilian sectors in favour of the former.
- Examining Australia's earlier national mobilisations can usefully raise less apparent issues. Supply chain experiences during both World Wars suggests evaluating the optimum balance of future investment between merchant shipping, building naval warships and repairing ships. Mobilising the people during time of war requires taking a strategic approach as the failure of the second conscription referendum in 1917 highlights.
- Australia's support for great power allies differed sharply between the two World Wars. In World War One, Australia supported its great power ally by supplying armed forces; domestic industries were irrelevant. In World War Two, the situation reversed. Australia's domestic industries significantly supported its great power ally who suggested reducing Australia's armed forces so as to bolster domestic production.

Policy recommendations

- Australian defence strategies, and accordingly the ADF's force structure, need to be designed cognizant of national mobilisation possibilities. Such planning must consider the impacts of allies including: impairing Australia's ability to import from, and export to, the global market; creating a shortage in merchant shipping availability; and denying access to timely supply of offshore military equipment.
- The basing of US armed forces in Australia in peace or war will influence Australia's national mobilisation capabilities and capacities. Discussions need to begin on US needs of Australia's national support base to determine their nature, scale and feasibility and their impact on the ADF.

Mention national mobilisation and the mind instantly imagines smokestack factories and immense industrial complexes mass-producing tanks, aircraft and warships. There is some truth in such mental images but there is much more to national mobilisation as Australia's experiences in the first half of the twentieth century attest. These include supply chain troubles, a significant social mobilisation failure and variations in supporting great power allies. Considered broadly, our history offers many useful insights when thinking about national mobilisation today.

In military doctrines, national mobilisation is often described as marshalling national resources to defend the nation and its interests. It is a whole-of-society activity that purposefully shifts the boundary between the defence and the civilian sectors in a society in favour of the former. Crucially both sectors are interdependent, informing and shaping each other; Defence defends using the workforce, wealth and weaponry provided by the civilian sector in accord with the mutually agreed national defence strategy. Importantly, any national mobilisation will also try to access the very large global market place.

Mobilisation is not logistics, aptly described in Henry Eccles's seminal work as: 'the bridge between our national economy and the actual operations of our combat forces in the field'.[1] Logistics transports and distributes the products of mobilisation to the forces in the field. Logistics runs from the factory gate to the frontline whereas mobilisation is everything before the factory gate.

In national mobilisation timing is everything. If defence strategies envisage short sharp wars, national mobilisation must occur in peacetime. During the long Cold War when warplans envisaged Soviet mass nuclear attacks early in a crisis, national mobilisation was only possible or useful pre-war.

In contrast, if defence strategies plan on long conventional wars then national mobilisation during the war could be the key to winning. The balance of mobilisation can be more significant than the balance of power. Who can win the last battle becomes more important than who fires the first shots. Germany's defeat in both World Wars is an exemplar of this; brilliant military campaigns initially could not substitute for inadequate and late national mobilisation.

National mobilisation can appear a daunting and perhaps bewildering topic. However, the three areas discussed here – supply chains, social mobilisation and allies – can provide a feel for the issues involved. They can help policymakers appreciate the scope of the national mobilisation problem and its magnitude but also reassurance in that their predecessors have faced such issues before. Past success and failures can act as useful guideposts on the national mobilisation planning path.

Supply Chain and Shipping Predicaments

At the start of World War One, Australia was an integrated part of a globalised world. Some 40% of Australia's GDP was accounted for by its imports and exports, as it is now. Amongst imports impacted by the war were hospital drug supplies as many came from Germany. The United Kingdom (UK) with limited stocks prohibited exports of aspirin, antipyrin, chloral, veronal, urotropine, salvarsan, surgical dressings and bandages. In terms of exports, there were worries over Australia's food supply. Decisions were made that most staples would only go to the British Empire, to the chagrin of farmers denied more lucrative markets.

The most significant problem however was merchant shipping. British and neutral merchant shipping was quickly taken under UK control leaving little spare capacity for Australian exports or imports. Prime Minister Hughes realising the financial damage, pleaded with the UK and in exasperation bought fifteen tramp steamers. These returned to UK control when it bought Australia's wheat crop for the remainder of the war (The money was paid regardless of whether the UK sent shipping to collect the wheat or not. In the end it didn't, leaving the harvest to the vermin).

The underlying difficulty was that Australia was too distant. Steaming times to and from Australia were very long when compared against Canada. It was not just a shortage of ships but rather the number of voyages a ship could undertake in a certain time that was crucial. Merchant shipping to and from Australia remained severely limited for the whole war.

The balance of mobilisation can be more significant than the balance of power.

One of the flow-on impacts was that expanding local manufacturing proved difficult given the impossibility of importing any but the most urgently required machinery. The shipping problems were compounded by UK and US machinery manufacturers being fully committed to higher priority customers and markets. During World War One, machinery of any sort was practically unprocurable by Australia from overseas.

This was all at sharp variance with the strong pre-war expectations that Australia would be a main support base for the defence of Empire. In reality, in this role distance made Australia strategically irrelevant.

World War Two initially appeared a rerun although Australia was now industrialising and noticeably larger in population. To solve the merchant ship shortage this time round, Prime Minister Menzies's government decided to build nine 8-10,000 ton merchant ships in Australia. The orders for the ships were spread across the country to expedite production and create multiple suppliers but developing the numerous shipyards involved took time. Under separately negotiated contracts, the Government provided a small financial grant to each shipyard and then loaned the reminder required to improve them. Each ship was then built under cost-plus-fixed-fee contracts, with a fixed fee paid as a profit or management fee over and above the production cost.

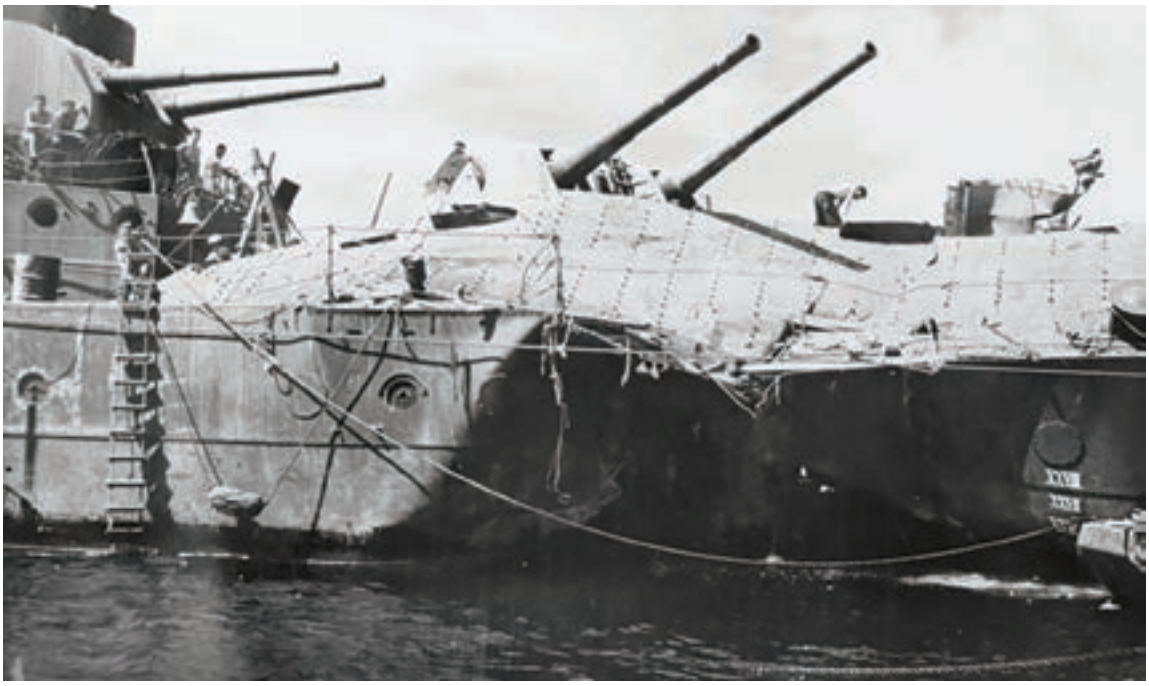
Ship repair speed became crucial.

While the capacity for hull construction proved comparatively easy to organize, marine engines presented problems. Such engines were not large and had been built in Australia before but that capability had faded away. The small residual expertise allowed only half the requirements of the shipbuilding programme to be met. New government investment was necessary to rebuild the requisite engine manufacturing capacity.

In late 1941, and under threat of Japanese invasion, merchant ship construction was suddenly overtaken by a greatly increased demand for repair and maintenance. National priorities shifted to first repairing naval vessels, second repairing merchant vessels, third new naval construction and then lastly new merchant ship construction. The situation became pressing as Japanese submarine attacks on Australian east coast shipping intensified.

Ship repair speed became crucial. A Controller of Repair was appointed under the Director of Shipbuilding to ensure ship repair work was prioritised, cognisant of the disruption to ship construction. The major repair deficiency was in skilled labour availability. About 1000 extra tradesmen were required, most of them in smaller ship repair firms. Problems also arose from the lack of adequate docking facilities for larger vessels and machine tool deficiencies.

In late 1942 a new shipbuilding demand emerged. The US armed forces started placing large orders under reciprocal aid for small watercraft of various types. By mid-1943 these orders amounted to some 5,700 craft with 1,000 more ordered by the Australian Army. Compared to large shipbuilding, small watercraft were a quite different undertaking, not requiring massive equipment, dry docks or large slipways and suitable for construction by small contractors. In the event, only some 2,400 were delivered. About 3000 Australian civilians operated the US Army's small watercraft in logistic roles in northern New Guinea's shallow waters and beyond.



The balance between investing in merchant shipping and warships may need evaluating.

Moving to today, any national mobilisation will need to be cope with and adjust to significant import and export restrictions. Allies have their needs too and may prioritise them. Stephan Frühling frets that in a future conflict, allied demands for guided weapons might see Australia miss out on resupply.[2] His argument can be extended across all Australian resource needs. Pre-war discussions with allies and friends, especially America, is needed to understand the scale of the problems and possible ways to address them.

External resources are only useful though if they can be accessed. Australia is expending considerable effort building warships able to defend the sea lines of communications (SLOC). World War One experiences raise questions over whether merchant shipping will be available to make use of such SLOCs even if they are safe. Great powers might again seize centralized control of allied and neutral shipping for the greater good, leaving Australia short. Might Australia be better placed strategically, if investments were made in domestic industries able to manufacture critical items instead of in the warships to defend the merchant ships bringing such items from overseas? Such a question is a difficult one but national mobilisation history suggests it is worth carefully analysing.

The question rests on the kind of war anticipated. World War One and the 1939-41 period saw wars conducted at great distance leaving Australia at the end-of-the-line and unimportant to great power allies as a supply base. In such circumstances, merchant shipping for Australia may become as important as naval combatants. The balance between investing in merchant shipping and warships may need evaluating.

On the other hand, if it's a close-in, knife-fight-in-a-telephone box scenario akin to 1942 then ship repair becomes the critical capability needed, not new ship construction. Getting warships back into the fight quickly could be operationally essential. In thinking from a national mobilisation viewpoint, less examined issues arise about where to best invest: merchant ships, building warships or ship repair.

A Great Social Mobilisation Failure

By 1917, World War One was going badly for Australians with no end in sight. In this time of general gloominess, Prime Minister Hughes decided to hold a second conscription referendum. Better considered than the first, the second plebiscite was necessitated by long-declining monthly voluntary enlistment rates that made sustaining the AIF Divisions in France difficult. To mobilise the people, the government's strategy sought legitimacy for its actions and crafted a strategic narrative.

With legitimacy, people will at least passively support government directions and accept demands made on them. Importantly they will not act against the government, instead generally 'policing' individuals to conform.

The government strategy was to deepen and then exploit the sharp identity divide in Australian society between loyalists and everyone else that had been created during the first conscription referendum debate. The proof of loyalty was to be pro-conscription. To strengthen the loyalist identity in comparison with other groups, attacks where made to weaken those sections of Australian society deemed outside the norm. Hughes declared these included: "the unworthy, the selfish, and anti-British,…reckless extremists, peace cranks, dis-loyalists, and pro-Germans."[3] This grouping was then extended to include Irish Catholic Australians, trade unionists and Queenslanders in general.

Irish Catholics were excluded being presumed to hold Republican-sympathies, trade unionists as they opposed conscription being worried about losing employment rights, while Queensland was considered 'ripe for revolution' given Premier Ryan's anti-conscription speeches and eggs being thrown at Hughes in Warwick. The later event famously led to the AFP as Hughes believed the Federal Government now needed a police force. Hughes also used the Censor to prevent publication of anti-conscription tracts while the Special Intelligence Bureau (a forerunner of ASIO) harassed anti-conscriptionists.

The Federal Government never developed a compelling argument that could appeal to all Australians. This deficiency was remarkable given the overwhelming majority held very pro-British Empire opinions. The real question for most was whether military recruitment should be compulsory or voluntary, not their loyalty to the Crown.

The government complemented its legitimacy claims with a strategic narrative. Such narratives provide an interpretive structure people can use to make sense of historical facts, current problems and emerging issues. They feature a consistent logic chain that appeals to both people's rational and emotional cognition. The government's strategic narrative held conscription was necessary as voluntary recruitment had failed, principally because of 'a systematic campaign of poisonous doctrines insidiously disseminated throughout the country'.[4]

The anti-conscription argument countered the strategic narrative directly and indirectly. Directly in arguing that official statistics indicated there were already sufficient recruits enlisted to sustain the AIF for another year, that America's entry into the war meant allied troop numbers were no longer an issue and that Australia had done more proportionately than other allied countries. Indirectly in arguing that Britain's proud liberal tradition privileged liberty and abhorred coercion; conscription was the way of continental despotism. Loyalty to British ideals demanded a 'no' vote.

The referendum was defeated with 54% voting against and so the AIF ended World War One as the conflict's only all-volunteer force. The government's social mobilisation strategy failed but left Australian society sharply divided on sectarian and labour movement lines. In the succeeding interwar years of large-scale economic turmoil this proved a bad foundation to have deliberately built.

Future national mobilisations will again need to call on the people for support. Unlike during World War One however, the marshalling of the Australian people may be contested not just from within but also from without. Foreign powers might now try to deliberately prevent national mobilisation by meddling in Australian society using digital technology. Australians are now closely linked to others around the globe exchanging words, data, images and videos at near-real time. Last century's distinctions between the domestic and the international have vanished.

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This shift to a more contested social environment reflects a revitalised appreciation of the importance of a nation's societies to the nation's ability to defend itself. The 'people' are now becoming reconceptualised as a centre of gravity that may be exploited by others to win future conflicts, potentially without any fighting at all. An adversary may now seek to mobilise Australians for their own purposes.

In future national mobilisations, Australian governments will need to actively build legitimacy and devise convincing strategic narratives. Prime Minster Howard could use the national authority his eminent position granted him to gain the people's support for the 2003 Iraq intervention. A future Prime Minster will operate in a much more ideationally contested space and need to work to gain social mobilisation. The Hughes' Government's failed conscription referendum campaign offers insights into what not to do.

Supporting Great and Powerful Allies

In 1915-16 considerable effort went into investigating gun and shell manufacturing. The UK was requested to help develop gun manufacture in Australia but lacked the spare capacity to assist. Shell production began but by then UK industry was in full-rate production and unnecessary. Behind these attempts lay a more fundamental problem. Wars beget innovation; gun and shell design were continually rapidly evolving. Australia was simply too distant to keep up with technical changes. By the time items manufactured in Australia reached the frontline they would be obsolescent or even unusable.

If Australians could not make munitions themselves however, they could work in the factories of those who did. The UK was particularly short of manpower with some arguing 1,000 Australian tradesmen were more valuable than another battalion of infantry. Under an organized Australian government program, some 6000 Australians eventually worked in UK defence industries.

In World War Two Australia took a very different tack to supporting its partners. In early 1942 the Government declared 'total mobilisation'; Darwin was bombed the next day. Australia's national mobilisation however was not to be solely for Australia. It also became a major supplier of foodstuffs, materials and manufactured products to support US forces. This was the less-remembered second half of the US Lend-Lease program: reciprocal aid. Countries given Lend-Lease equipment were expected to reciprocate, giving goods and services in return. The generosity of Lend-Lease was intended to be mutual and only agreed to by a dubious US Congress with that understanding. It is plausible a future US Congress may feel the same.

Australia's national mobilisation was not to be solely for Australia.

After Pearl Harbour elevated Australia's place in US strategic thinking, mutual aid between the US and Australia quickly grew. An effective and efficient division of labour developed that produced a high degree of supply complementarity. It made little military or economic sense for the US to ship to its forces in Australia those goods and services that could be produced and procured locally. By the end of 1942, Lend-Lease added about 7% to Australian domestic supply of goods and services, while reciprocal aid absorbed about 5% of Australian domestic production of goods and services.

There was a clear need to coordinate Australian and American logistics, production and resource management. The Allied Supply Council reported directly to Prime Minster Curtin and the Commander-in-Chief, US General MacArthur. It assessed Australian Lead-Lease requests against manufacturing items in Australia. In a similar vein, the Allied Works Council organised the extensive construction program underway in Australia for both nations' armed forces. This program involved the 65,000-strong Australian Civil Constructional Corps.

By mid-1943 it was apparent that reciprocal aid, combined with the increasing supply demands of Australia's armed forces, was significantly stretching what total mobilisation could deliver. Australia's over-commitment of manpower to the armed forces in the difficult year of 1942 was now preventing adequate production for US armed force requirements. A growing uneasiness developed that Australia might need to choose between ending the war as a fighting ally or as a general supplier of goods and services.

In late 1943, the War Cabinet decided 40,000 men would be released from the armed forces and munitions production for redirection towards food production and other priority requirements. Official War Historian, Paul Hasluck, considers the Cabinet's national mobilisation decision flawed because it never answered the key grand strategic question: "what can Australia best do to help win the war."[5]

The US argued Australia was the natural supply base for the Pacific region.

Hasluck's question remains pertinent to any future Australian national mobilisation, especially when in coalition with a great alliance partner. If like the UK in 1914-18, they seek soldiers then Australia's national mobilisation might focus on getting the most out of its workforce. Exporting workers now seems improbable, even if current Australian defence spending funds today's US arms production workers.

The mutual aid case suggests a different path for great power support. In 1943, the US argued Australia was the natural supply base for the Pacific region. Australian production capabilities were developed specifically to meet a wide range of US armed force's needs. With more manpower these capabilities could operate to full capacity. In the end, Australia resisted such entreaties, choosing a middle way that fully satisfied no one.

The issue arose again in August 1951. In the event of major war, the US expected Australia to feed one million US servicemen in the Pacific in addition to deployed Commonwealth forces, the UK and parts of Western Europe. The Menzies government equivocated but re-jigged national development and included such notions in the 1956 War Book, the most recent Australia has produced.

Such ideas have modern echoes. Stephan Frühling suggests encouraging the greater use of Australia by US forces as a main support base including shaping Australian defence industry for this role. Such a return to reciprocal aid may be problematic given Brendan Thomas-Noone's observations that the US defence export control regime seems unattracted to developing Australian defence industry's technical capabilities.[6]

Perhaps inadvertently, the US may already be shaping what type and scale of reciprocal aid Australia could provide in a future conflict. This could be gradually shifting Australia more towards the general goods and services supplier function than is sought. Moreover, such shaping might over time adversely impact the overall ability of the Australian national support base to sustain the ADF in both peace and war.

Conclusion

National mobilisation is a large and complicated issue that effects the whole of a country. Achieving perfection is improbable given there is never enough time, the adversary is always taking counter-responses, international circumstances are fluid and domestic society is forever dynamic.

The historical examples discussed speak of other times and relate to different circumstances. Even so, if earlier national mobilisations were troubled by supply chain dilemmas, social mobilisation and supporting great power allies, future ones may also. As in 1914, Australia is integrated into a globalised world; the need to gain active public support for military actions is ever present; and concern over alliance burden sharing appears enduring.

Australia's future national mobilisation needs are uncertain. The past can only suggests ways that national mobilisation might be undertaken, offering up numerous possibilities and options. For the nation's defence forces though there is more certainty: if another war is fought, national mobilisation to some degree will be necessary. This is a future that can't be avoided. There is no alternative.

Policy recommendations

- Australian defence strategies, and accordingly the ADF's force structure, need to be designed cognizant of national mobilisation possibilities. Such planning must consider the impacts of allies including: impairing Australia's ability to import from, and export to, the global market; creating a shortage in merchant shipping availability; and denying access to timely supply of offshore military equipment.
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Endnotes

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4 *Ibid*.
5 Hasluck, Paul. *The Government and the People, 1942-1945*, Australia In The War Of 1939-1945, Series Four: Civil, Vol II, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1970, p. 296
6 Thomas-Noone, Brendan. *Ebbing Opportunity: Australia And The US National Technology And Industrial Base*, Sydney: United States Study Centre, 2019, p. 13.