

Intelligence in a Rapidly Evolving Regional Security Environment

Major General (Retd) Maurie McNarn, AO

20 February 2019

The RUSI Queensland 2019 lecture program commenced with a thought-provoking examination of the strategic landscape and the role of intelligence in Australia's strategic calculus. Former director of the Defence Intelligence Organisation, Major General (Retd) Maurie McNarn AO, delivered a stimulating and insightful presentation to members and guests on the topic of *intelligence in a rapidly evolving regional security environment*.

General McNarn provided a master class in how strategic intelligence informs policy, shapes thinking, and supports decisions. He described how information and issues can be more susceptible to distortion at a national level. He explained in some detail the environment for intelligence operations, including the changing players, technology, and some of the challenges facing the intelligence community. General McNarn also addressed the important but sometimes fraught relationship between the intelligence apparatus and decision-makers, and some of the factors that might increase the chance of intelligence failures in the rapidly evolving security environment.

One of the key differences of the contemporary operating environment compared to earlier periods such as the Cold War, or even more recent Middle East conflict scenarios, is the enormous and growing amount of data that is available. As General McNarn reminded us "...the cold war presented a clearer, simpler demarcation of friends and enemies ... arguably the end of the Cold War created a more complex and rapidly evolving security environment ... with terrorism often the priority focus of politicians and the media, consequently motivating [intelligence] agencies to compete for funds and subsequent changes to laws and powers in that area...".

General McNarn described the significant expansion of the transnational nature of things, and the new reach and potential impact of modern threats. For example, events in Syria can reach back quickly to Australia and technological innovation is surging, leading to ever greater vulnerabilities and opportunities from an increasingly diverse and disparate array of threat sources.

Key insights from the presentation included details about the growth of asymmetric and unconventional forms of conflict. It was disturbing to learn that Australia's top universities experience thousands of (unsuccessful) cyber-attacks per day, not to mention the recent attack on the Australian Parliament's computer network. There is also an increasing displacement of violence into urban areas (and the domain of internal security and intelligence), accompanied by different economic, ethnic, religious and ideological drivers of this violence. For the intelligence and security services, the lines between domestic and international, between externally-

focussed defence and internally-focused protection of the nation's assets, will become increasingly blurred in the future operating environment.

This was a most enjoyable and stimulating event with members responding enthusiastically to the usually obscure world of intelligence and high-level policy- and decision-making. General McNarn's presentation held the audience's interest to the extent that the President had to intervene to halt question time. This presentation set a high bar for the remaining speakers this year.