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A Climate Security Priority: Australia's Need for Balanced Domestic Disaster Infrastructure

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SYNOPSIS

As disasters continue to increase and intensify owing to climate change, militaries are increasingly mobilised for domestic response – as has been the case in Australia since the 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires. As the Australian Defence Force prepares to step away from domestic disaster relief, the need for a more robust civilian disaster infrastructure is being acknowledged in policy circles, and plans for beefing up the civilian infrastructure are, in fact, slowly taking shape. Australia's experience is likely to be instructive for other states that rely on their militaries for disaster response.

COMMENTARY

In 2023 alone, militaries around the world were [deployed to respond to over 150 disasters](#) – the vast majority of deployments being on home ground. While it is common for militaries to be involved in providing foreign assistance and delivering aid, it is perhaps less common for militaries outside of regions such as Southeast Asia to participate directly in domestic disaster response.

However, this practice seems to have become more widespread post-COVID-19, particularly in the face of the [growing frequency and intensity of disasters caused by climate change](#). After all, the expertise that militaries possess in logistics support, transport, communication and specialised equipment, coupled with their ability to mobilise quickly, has made them an attractive prospect for emergencies when civilian capabilities are overwhelmed.

On the other hand, this growing dependence on the military to function as part of the domestic disaster response has highlighted the tensions arising from using the military to engage on two fronts. In particular, concerns have been raised regarding potential hindrances to the military's ability to carry out its primary objective of defending the state. This is particularly evident in countries such as Australia, which are looking to nip this practice in the bud before it becomes the norm.

Australian Military Participation in Disaster Response

While the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has been called upon to [respond to disasters in the past](#) – both domestically and as part of overseas humanitarian operations – there has been a recent increase in the number of domestic crises they have had to respond to.

The 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires was a turning point. With civilian services overwhelmed, the size and scale of the response operation squarely placed the ADF in the public eye, leading to an [increased willingness](#) on the government's part to deploy the force domestically, including as part of the COVID-19 response, which further cemented this new role. However, as this dependence increased, [concerns were raised](#) regarding the consequences of the military playing a bigger role in domestic disaster relief, in particular, the potential impacts on military readiness.



The 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires was a turning point which marked the Australian government's increased willingness to deploy the Australian Defence Force (ADF) for domestic disaster relief. However, militaries being increasingly mobilised for domestic response raises concerns about the potential impact on military readiness. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

According to an Australian [Department of Defence submission](#) for an [ongoing inquiry into Australia's disaster resilience](#), more than 35,100 ADF personnel have been part of domestic relief operations since 2019. This number is more than half the permanent ADF workforce of approximately 62,000 – a proportion that is unsustainable in the long run.

Military readiness is also likely to be affected by an inability to conduct training for combat missions. When the personnel of the HMAS *Stalwart* were deployed to support the 2022 flood relief efforts, the introduction of a new class of ships into the navy was

delayed, which in turn delayed training for the crew. Such incidents can add up over the long term, affecting military readiness in terms of equipment and personnel and therefore potentially hindering the ability of the military to carry out its core function of defending Australia.

Slowly but Surely: A Work in Progress?

In recognition of the need to de-emphasise disaster relief in the duties of the military, the government accepted one of the recommendations of the [2023 Defence Strategic Review](#). Not only does this shift highlight the move back towards using the military in “extreme emergencies” as a “force of last resort”, but also the need to improve national disaster preparedness, response, recovery and resilience for the long term.

Moreover, the [independent review of national natural disaster governance](#), which was commissioned to consider the establishment of a national disaster advisory body, points to a potential expansion of Australia’s civilian disaster management capacity. This in turn could build upon other federal infrastructure, including the [National Emergency Management Agency](#) established in September 2022.

On the other hand, it is important to note that while it may be ideal for the military to be able to immediately step back from domestic disaster relief, in reality, it is likely to retain that role at least in the short term. After all, simply removing the military from the equation without having in place adequate civilian infrastructure will only increase Australia’s climate risk.

Easing the Burden on the Military

One option could be to further engage with veteran-led organisations such as Disaster Relief Australia and integrate them into Australia’s overall disaster management structure. In an apparent acknowledgement of the feasibility of this option, in 2023, the Albanese government allocated [AUD\\$38.3 million in funds to Disaster Relief Australia](#), which was [recently deployed in Queensland](#) to assist with the clean-up following flood damage. Considering the experience that veteran-led groups have had with the military, they could act as a bridge between civilian disaster response and the military.

Other suggestions have included [reservists taking on a bigger role](#) in the response to domestic disasters and developing a [voluntary national and community service scheme](#) with specialised expertise and training, as seen in Singapore. Such steps would reduce the pressure on permanent ADF personnel until civilian capacity has been built to adequate levels.

Striking a balance between the reality of increasing involvement in domestic disaster response as a result of climate change and the military’s traditional role as defenders of the nation, particularly in an increasingly tense geopolitical landscape, is likely to continue to challenge Australian policymakers. Given that building a more substantial civilian disaster management infrastructure will take time – time that is unlikely to be disaster-free – the need for military involvement in domestic disaster relief will continue in the short term.

Importantly, striking such a balance is a challenge that also needs to be considered by other countries in the region beyond Australia, most of which are likely facing a similar conundrum. Even in countries where there is greater acceptance of the military's role in domestic disaster response, there is a need to simultaneously face intensifying disasters and rising geopolitical tensions. This is likely to lead to an increasing recognition of the strain on the military from fighting on two fronts and, therefore, the need for balance in their disaster management infrastructure.

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