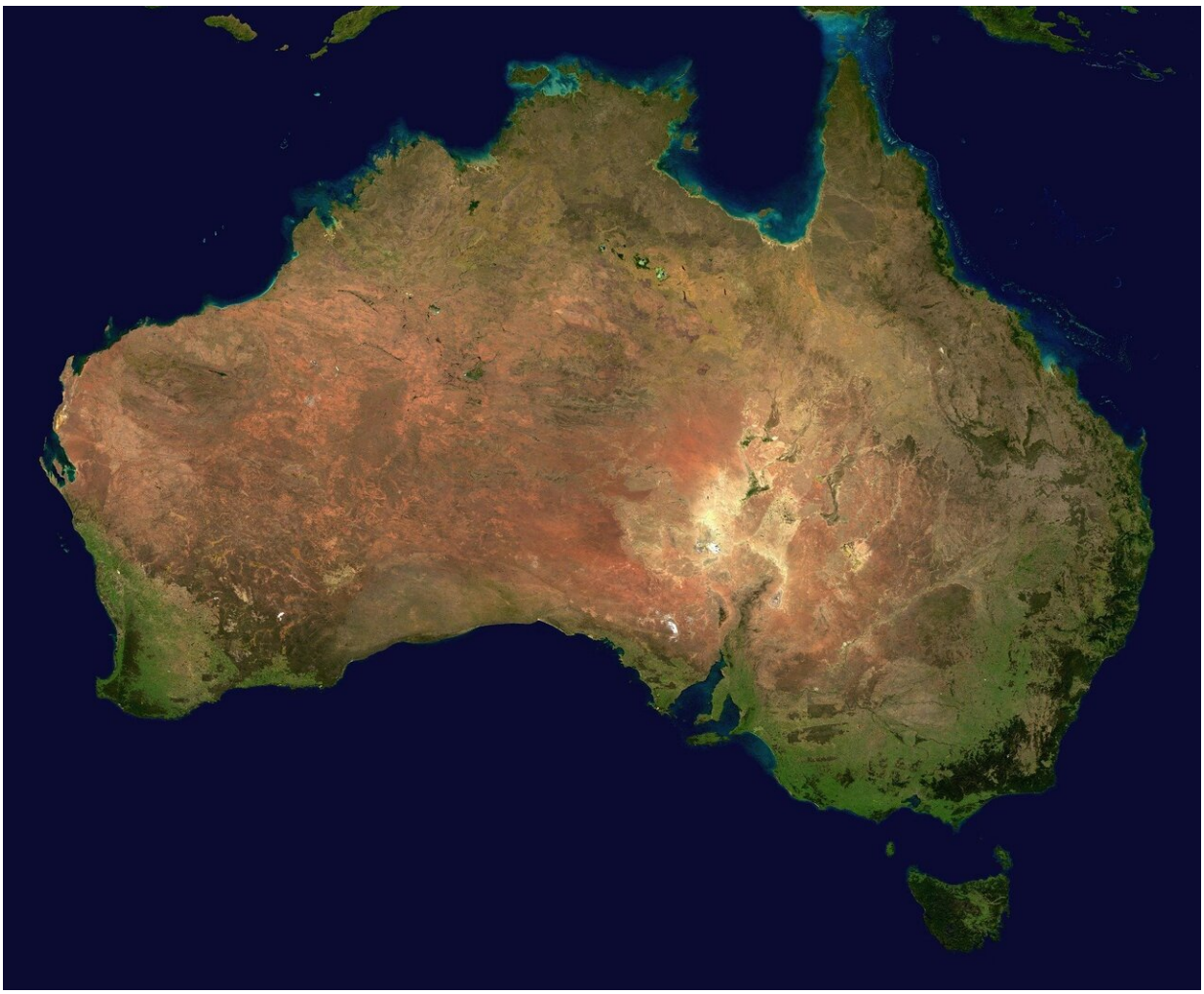
In Australia's first major intelligence review since COVID, here are 7 key priorities to be ready for the next pandemic

October 19 2023, by Patrick F Walsh and Ausma Bernot



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It may have gone unnoticed with the Voice to Parliament referendum and the disability royal commission report, but Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has also recently announced a major independent review of Australia's intelligence communities. It's the first since the COVID pandemic.

The 2024 Independent Intelligence Review will consider how well our intelligence agencies are prepared for emerging security challenges.

Though the terms of reference do not explicitly mention the pandemic, the response of our intelligence communities to the health crisis should be a major focus. The review will run alongside the government's much-anticipated COVID-19 inquiry, announced last month.

Both reviews will be vital to how Australia rethinks its intelligence services to meet the changing needs of national security in a post-COVID world.

The big changes since the last review

Reviews into Australia's intelligence community are rather routine. We've had them in 2004, 2011 and 2017.

The terms of reference for the new review focus largely on how well the intelligence community has implemented the 23 recommendations from 2017.

The chief recommendation was to create a new intelligence agency, the Office of National Intelligence (ONI). The agency, similar to the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, was founded in 2018. It reports directly to the prime minister.

ONI's mandate is to improve governance and capabilities across

Australia's nine other agencies that do intelligence work. (This includes the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service and Home Affairs, just to name a few.)

The 2024 review will specifically examine the agency's progress on this front, particularly during the pandemic. This was when the strength and co-ordination of our public health and national security systems were tested like never before.

Intelligence challenges during the pandemic

Nearly four years on from the start of the pandemic, there has been no independent review of the role the intelligence agencies played during the crisis.

This is concerning because there are many lessons to be learned from a once-in-a-lifetime health emergency. We have identified three key challenges the intelligence community faced:

- finding the cause of the pandemic
- providing our leaders with enough advance warning on the severity of the health emergency
- combating the large amounts of misinformation and disinformation that impeded the government's ability to communicate with the public.

But there are likely more. Such challenges underscore concerns about whether Australia's intelligence community is generally fit for purpose, given how rapidly the security environment has changed since 2017.

We need to assess how our intelligence agencies can improve their collection and assessment of information related to emerging health threats. And we need to know if our agencies have the right kind of

leadership and technological and health-related knowledge to be better prepared for the next health emergency.

At the height of the pandemic, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security noted the difficulties that six of the intelligence agencies faced in dealing with disinformation, misinformation, propaganda and the growing threats of extremism and espionage.

It also emphasized the national security implications that should compel the intelligence community to adapt quickly.

We have also written about how the pandemic demonstrated a need for the "Five Eyes" partners (Australia, Canada, the US, UK and New Zealand) to improve their intelligence collection methods and analysis of health security threats.

The government's COVID-19 inquiry will likely only address the public health shortcomings of the pandemic, not the national security implications of a future health emergency. This is why the intelligence review must make this a priority.

7 key points the review should not miss

In particular, the intelligence review needs to do seven things:

(1) Interview key ONI leaders and other heads of intelligence agencies to understand where their capabilities were tested and where there were gaps in their expertise and training during the pandemic.

(2) Interview the small group of intelligence analysts responsible for bio-defense and health security issues to determine their capability gaps. Our research shows this expertise in Australia and our Five Eyes partners is narrow and superficial.

(3) Recommend establishing a health security intelligence group in ONI to better co-ordinate the collection and analysis of both classified and open-source health-related intelligence.

(4) Recommend establishing a new committee in ONI to co-ordinate the sharing of information between public health officials and national security agencies.

(5) Recommend ONI commission an independent inquiry into intelligence workforce planning for future health security threats. This could consider recruitment, retention and attrition of those with health security expertise.

(6) Recommend ONI develop an expert group of scientists, government officials, private sector experts and academics with expertise on health security to advise the intelligence community.

(7) Recommend the government develop a national health security strategy similar to the national cyber security strategy. This would clearly articulate roles for all agencies in managing future health security threats. The UK's Biological Security Strategy 2023 might be a good model to follow.

It is vital we don't miss the opportunity to better prepare our intelligence communities for the next pandemic or bio-security emergency. We need to be ready for the future threats our country may face. It's no longer a question of if another health emergency will occur, but when.

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