Australia's Security Dilemma

A. D. McLennan

Australia has learned the lessons of history and chosen to defend its interests through alliance rather than jeopardise its independence through neutrality.

Australia has sought security through alliance since first settlement, which meant by association with the British Empire until 1942 and then the United States (US). This approach has not pleased all, though the grounds of objection have varied over time. Before 1914, there were fears that the British would use an Australian expeditionary force to curb Irish nationalism. In recent years, concern has focused on the risk of Australia fighting America's wars. The theme underlying such arguments is that alliances constrain independence. Against which, those who favour pursuing security through alliance emphasise Australia's limited resources for defence. Both are right.

Alliances and security

Surrounded by water and distant from the main centres of international tension, Australia is naturally secure though not invulnerable. Alien invasion is the greatest fear. But it does not represent the only threat to our independence and security. Australia would suffer if a hostile power gained dominant influence in its surrounds, even without occupying national territory. This was the most likely risk in 1942 when Japan aimed to cut Australia's links with the US so as to prevent America developing bases here for a counter-offensive. (Germany's U-boat offensive had similar designs on Britain.) Isolation in a hostile environment would cost Australia foreign policy independence and control of its trade, reinforced by threat of occupation—which might be unspoken.

No country is completely self-sufficient in defence, though the US would manage best in an emergency. Russia is now constrained by economic weakness, while China and North Korea have to import advanced military equipment. Australia is incapable of defence self-sufficiency because of the limits of productive capacity and population size, as well as the extent of its territory. In these circumstances, the idea of defence self-reliance is snake oil, feasible only by analysis that artificially minimises the threat—as New Zealand has done. But its ability to freeload on others for defence is not an option for Australia.

Lack of defence self-sufficiency does not oblige Australia to seek allies. The countries of Central and South America, for example, are not US allies although, under the Monroe Doctrine, American military power affords them security against attack from outside the Western Hemisphere—except in unusual circumstances such as obtained in the Falklands War, when the US was obliged to choose from competing interests, to Argentina's discomfort. Australia does not enjoy the same proximity to the United States, making alliance a more compelling option in meeting national defence needs.

Alliance with the US

An argument against the US alliance is that it serves America's purposes, not Australia's. This proposition invites the rejoinder that the alliance is voluntary—unlike (say) the Warsaw Pact—so its worth to Australia

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depends on what is agreed; and such alliances impose obligations on both sides, not just the smaller party.

Bearing out the second point was Vietnam-era criticism of Australia relying on ANZUS for security when America had so many commitments it could not honour them simultaneously. True indeed, if they were singular. But because they were interconnected, US commitments were serial in character, their complexity reflecting America's status as a global power, to which its alliance system is integral. So, failure to honour obligations under one would affect the worth of others.

Some critics of Australia's treaty with the US say that its commitment is inferior to that of the North Atlantic treaty. Comparing the text of the central articles underlines that the two treaties serve different purposes. The North Atlantic treaty was multilateral and aimed to deter Soviet aggression (or its threat) against Europe, which by definition would mostly involve military advance overland. ANZUS was directed to circumstances in the Pacific, where maritime power predominated, the treaty comprehending multiple threats that make it relevant beyond the Cold War.

The ANZUS treaty obliged the parties to act in response to threat, not just consult. But it does not specify how they should, leaving them free to take diplomatic or military action according to need. Those who complain that the treaty affords Australia a less-than-absolute guarantee of security are right but unrealistic, for no country would underwrite another's security without qualification. At a minimum, US preparedness to guarantee Australia's security depends on our behaving responsibly and on America's interests being engaged. Otherwise, the commitment would be politically indefensible in the United States. In fact, Australia's security relationship with the US makes self-help a condition of America's extending assistance. So the treaty is an adjunct to national defence effort, not a substitute.

The idea that the treaty counts only when invoked is misconceived. It works all the time and has done so since ANZUS was signed in 1951. The treaty's day-to-day utility includes the preferred access it affords Australia to US military equipment, training and technology, as well as cooperation in such sensitive areas as intelligence that gives Australia global security vision unavailable from national resources.

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Some contend that not knowing in advance whether Australia can depend on US support devalues the treaty. Of course, Australia is bound to wonder how far and in what circumstances it can rely on US support, although seeking to have American commitments spelt out in advance and in abstract would narrow their scope, not least because of the administration's need to involve the US Senate. But if Australia wonders, so would potential aggressors. Any state that planned to act in ways that threatened our security would have to calculate whether doing so would invite US backing for Australia, a formidable deterrent.

Such ambiguity increases Australia's latitude in defence planning and ability to contribute to collective security. Thus in the 1960s Australia agreed to America's siting command, control and intelligence facilities on its territory. While their presence invited Soviet nuclear targeting it also strengthened nuclear deterrence to the net benefit of our security and that of allies. Though distant from the source of threat, Australia's security depended on the global alliance system centred on the United States to contain the expansion of Soviet power. In isolation, Australia would have been more vulnerable to adverse pressure and so disposed to trim its behaviour. The more that US allies chose neutrality over alignment, the more likely would have been Soviet victory, with Australia finding itself alone in a hostile world, its independence circumscribed.

Some who agree with Australia's past support for deterrence of the USSR through the global alliance system may feel that it is not suitable or necessary post-Cold War. They may conclude that persisting with the alliance in new circumstances would willy nilly make America's enemies Australia's—Iraq for example—as well as America's allies Australia's too (Israel). Such critical evaluation of our security relationship with the US is to be expected and commended so long as it is open-minded. But often it is visceral when cool-headed cost/benefit analysis is needed. We should also bear in mind that Australia's freedom to reappraise the alliance extends equally to America.

An idea to put aside is linking the trade and security elements in Australia's relations with the US. Security is an absolute, not exchangeable for money. Without it there is no profit to be had. Both security and trade are

basic to national interests but with no necessary harmony between them. Efforts by Australia to link one with the other could jeopardise both.

The US alliance in an East Asian context

To conclude that Australia's security interests diminish in proportion to distance from the continental mainland is beguiling fallacy. It fails to look beyond the obvious weakness of Australia's neighbours to more distant areas where disruption in the equation of power would be most likely to affect our security and independence, if indirectly. An example from history illustrates the point. Australians greeted with apprehension the conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese naval agreement 100 years ago because it meant the Japanese Navy's assuming Royal Navy responsibilities in the Far East to allow British ships to return home to counter German naval competition in Europe. The agreement paved the way for the Russo-Japanese War that established Japan as a great power.

In 1914, the balance of power in Europe was critical to Australia's security which for quite unsentimental reasons depended on the British Empire, Australia being a colony of settlement. Besides, it was better for Australia to fight wars at a distance than on national territory. East Asia remains a focus of insecurity today, liquidation of the Cold War not having settled the strategic consequences there of World War II—unlike in Europe, where the major powers no longer threaten one another, remarkably so in light of their bloody history.

To conclude that Australia's security interests diminish in proportion to distance from the continental mainland is beguiling fantasy.

China, Japan, Russia and the United States have been the main powers in East Asia since 1905, though the equilibrium among them has changed. Now Russia is down and exposed to Chinese pressure, so weakened that President Putin has redirected its policy towards the US and the West. China's radical change in economic policy under Deng Xioaping, plus collapse of the Soviet threat, see its mood expansive and confident. The large reduction in Chinese forces deployed against Russia, the PLA's modernisation programme and the geographic thrust of China's policy towards coastal areas reflect a turnaround in the orientation of its goals and strategic policy. Japan continues to depend on US strategic protection as it has since World War II but in different circumstances. Over ten years of depressed activity have exposed weaknesses in Japan's economy. It is now taking some novel steps in foreign policy, both contributing to collective defence at a distance from the homeland and responding to North Korean manoeuvres. The two Koreas add to the rich brew of regional actors, as does Taiwan. At the same time, al-Qaeda's attacks on New York and Washington have charged up US security policy, which post-Cold War had became undirected and rather soft. Allies and enemies alike now fear American unilateralism, as they appreciate its unchallengeable power.

Though located a long way from East Asia, Australia is vulnerable to the repercussions of regional strategic competition, and has been since the Russo-Japanese War. More recent are the consequences of economic growth as South Korea, Taiwan and China follow Japan's example and seek to become fully-fledged industrial powers. Mostly good news in terms of Australia's economic interests, these changes complicate the outlook for security.

China is an emerging power, keen to redress past wrongs and find a place in the sun. While lacking the necessary clout to become a world power—and maybe the ambition—it is not hard to detect aspirations to regional hegemony in China's actions that conflict with US interest in seeking a benign balance of power in the Western Pacific. Finding the right equilibrium between the two won't be easy, and it may not be static. China's wish to preserve the option of taking Taiwan by force is worrying because doing so would challenge the security interests of the United States and regional states, along with our own. It is grounded in China's political life, where no claimant to power can afford to be soft on Taiwan. In Taiwan itself, the island's claim to a political future independent of the mainland is now the norm. So, Taiwan is unlikely to merge with the PRC voluntarily, though if it did so genuinely, China would not need to use or threaten force and so would avoid a dangerous precedent.

Japan's economic decline presents difficult choices. The coalition that has sustained support for foreign policy until now could fracture under the pressure for Japan either to do more in support of its own interests, and so upset the neighbourhood, or acquiesce in China's

rising power. War on or over the Korean peninsula cannot be ruled out and poses a risk with nuclear dimensions.

Australia would ignore these developments at its cost. We cannot assume that our security interests stop at Kota Bharu, limiting them conveniently to the range of national defence capabilities. We could well experience the consequences of adverse developments in East Asia in or through Southeast Asia, where the weakness of the indigenous states disposes them to bend with the wind. Power relativities negate any hope that the ASEAN Regional Forum could mediate security in East Asia. Even as a shield for the security interests of its members the forum is dubious. Among ASEAN states, tiny Singapore is the strongest reed. China quickly took advantage of the retreat of Russian and US power to assert claims in the South China Sea and has encountered little resistance. But China advancing its influence towards the straits connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans has invited Indian countermoves, the two countries being strategic rivals.

Australia can strengthen security in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia on the basis of its own resources but not much beyond. Further afield, alliance with the US helps to magnify Australia's influence, importantly so because the equation of power in East Asia is the kernel of our security. Critical too is the alliance's basis in maritime power, as is its cultural symmetry, for reasons that reflect Bismarck's observation about the significance of those who speak English.

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Ballistic missile defence is germane to Australia's interest in military cooperation with the United States as well as security in East Asia. The deployment of our forces in East Asia together with America's is thinkable—indeed, it occurred in the Korean War. Missile defence would help protect such deployments in future. It would also strengthen Japan's security against threat of attack from North Korea or China. The contention that missile defence is destabilising recycles old propaganda. Fuelled by fear of technological inferiority and the wish to hobble the US, the argument is advanced by those who formerly despised the idea of 'mutually assured destruction' on which it hinges.

Terrorism and weapons of mass destruction

Events in America on September 11 last year showed the effectiveness of thinking outside usual bounds to achieve devastating surprise, but also the weight of unintended consequences evident in the rapid destruction of the Taliban regime by the US acting in coordination with internal discontent in Afghanistan, and with some help from allies including Australia. Success in Afghanistan has not ended the threat but underlined to perpetrators the risk that resort to terrorism could invite retribution and punishment. Terrorism is not new. We neglect 19th-century anarchists at our peril. Bomb throwing softened up the Russian Empire for the Bolsheviks, while the archduke's assassination at Sarajevo precipitated (though it did not cause) World War I with all its terrible consequences. The murder highlighted the association of terrorism with war, as did the attacks on New York and Washington.

We need to be careful in assuming that the success of the terrorist attacks on the US signified a 'new paradigm' in international relations. It was not al-Qaeda's first attack on US assets or even the World Trade Center. Terrorism is synonymous with the Middle East's insoluble problems (for which the Bible still provides the best threat assessment). Contingencies below big bang level have become pretty much a norm of international relations since the end of the Cold War. Some have proved manageable, notably in the Balkans and Cambodia; or have failed to threaten wider international security, as in Africa. Others grip world attention, including Middle East-related events that touch both money and passion. What made September 11 uniquely important was the success and scale of the attack on the US homeland.

American expectations that its allies support it in removing Iraq's regime could become a test of the alliance. The US would like to do away with Saddam Hussein because of his hostility and determination to develop weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps credible threats of force will be sufficient, but Washington would be under pressure to make good on such threats if they are not heeded. The option of doing nothing, or going through the motions of UN Security Council diplomacy and returning ineffectual weapons inspectors is unappealing for those who are politically responsible for the defence of the United States. So are the political uncertainties for everyone that would attend destruction of the regime in Baghdad.

The prospect of attacking Iraq scares America's allies silly. But they also need to think of what could happen if nothing is done—and where Iran fits. The case for Iraq making available weapons of mass destruction to al-Qaeda for use against US targets is not strong because of the hostility between the two. But neither is the argument that US deterrence, which was sufficient to dissuade Iraq from using them in the Gulf War, will work again.

Although Iraq is outside the Asia Pacific area, Australia cannot claim geographic remoteness as reason to stay out, given past willingness to deploy forces for action in the Middle East and the use that the US would make of joint facilities on our territory in attacking Iraq. True, Australia's defence resources are limited and dispersing them has risks that need to be weighed. But husbanding them for the big bang, as some Defence officials have contended we should, ignores the need for capabilities to manage security threats at different levels, according to circumstances.

Because Australia requires US support for defence, it needs to take account of America's threat perceptions. And Australia would find it difficult to claim right of veto over US actions with which it disagreed without devaluing the alliance. So Iraq might present Australia with hard strategic choices. In facing them, we would need to think carefully about the cost of doing without the alliance, mindful that 'self-reliance' is a grand slogan for eschewing responsibility for serious national defence. ■

REVOLUTION OR MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

WHAT the United States should strive for in the Middle East is *not* tired normality—the sclerosis that led to September 11, the Palestinian quagmire, and an Iraq full of weapons of mass destruction. Insisting on adherence to the same old relationship [with the Saudi regime] is akin to supporting a tottering Soviet Gorbachev instead of an emerging Russian Yeltsin, or lamenting the bold new world ushered in by the fall of the Berlin wall—a radical upheaval that critics once said was too abrupt and perilous given the decades of dehumanising Soviet tyranny, the inexperience of East European dissidents, and the absence of a Westernised middle class. Wiser observers have long argued that where governments hate us most, the people tend to like us more, sensing that we at least oppose those who bring them misery.

Only by seeking to spark disequilibrium, if not outright chaos, do we stand a chance of ridding the world of the likes of bin Laden, Arafat, and Saddam Hussein. Just as a reconstituted Afghanistan eliminated the satanic Taliban and turned the region's worst regime into a government with real potential, so too a new Iraq might start the fall of dominoes in the Gulf that could wipe away the entire foul nest behind September 11.

From Victor Davis Hanson, 'Our Enemies, the Saudis', *Commentary* (July-August 2002).

SOME conservatives argue that it is time to create an American empire, where the United States dominates the entire globe and shapes it according to its own interests. Presumably, this ambitious strategy would keep great power rivals at bay as well as eliminate the terrorist threat.

This strategy of empire is unilateralist at its core. It aims to allow the United States to operate as freely as possible on the world stage, unconstrained by allies, multilateral institutions or international law. It also calls for a wide-ranging war on terrorism, which means targeting a broad array of terrorist organisations, host states and states seeking weapons of mass destruction.

The key instrument for winning this war is America's mighty military machine. Proponents of empire believe that if the United States makes clear its willingness to use force and then wins a few victories, other foes will either desist from active opposition or even jump on the American bandwagon. This tendency will be pronounced in the Islamic world, where there is said to be a profound respect for winners . . . For sure, there will be incorrigible states like Iraq that refuse to accept the new world order. The United States will invade them, topple their rulers, and transform them into friendly democracies. Such ambitious social engineering would not only eliminate Saddam Hussein, but would also convince the likes of Iran and North Korea that they had better dance to Uncle Sam's tune or be prepared to pay the piper.

There is only one thing wrong with this rosy vision of Pax Americana; it is not going to work . . .

From John J. Mearsheimer, 'Hearts and Minds',
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