

# WHITHER THE AUSTRALIA-US ALLIANCE?

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe speaks to international relations expert, Daniel Baldino

Since the end of the Cold War, the Australia-US alliance has never been as close as it is now, particularly after Australia joined the ‘war on terror’ and fought alongside the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq more than a decade ago. In a recent interview, **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** spoke to international relations expert **Dr Daniel Baldino**, author of *Spooked: The Truth About Intelligence in Australia* and head of the International Relations Programme at Notre Dame University, Fremantle. The wide-ranging conversation covered the historical evolution of the Australia-US alliance, the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in reviving the strategic ties, opportunities and drawbacks of the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS), the US view of Australia’s utility, the case for Australia to balance its relations with the United States, and the future of the alliance.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Tell us about the historical evolution of the US-Australia alliance from its early days to date.

**Daniel Baldino:** Since 1901, Australia has sought strong security outcomes by pursuing bilateral alliances—first with the United Kingdom (the mother country) and then the United States (the big brother)—and a defence relationship that ‘gets with the strength.’ This is a strong reflexive approach. Australia’s geography and strategic culture have played an enduring role in this instinct based on concerns about our population size, porous borders, and ongoing perceptions of broader regional threats and global instability.

The basic assumption is that Australia lacks the ability to independently protect itself. Soon after World War II, ANZUS was consolidated as the cornerstone of defence thinking, although the

treaty’s commitments were non-binding. Australia was primarily concerned about a restored Japan, while the United States was keen to contain global communism and wanted Australia as an ally. ANZUS was a security blanket for both countries.

The end of the Cold War and the ‘evil’ Soviet empire’ in the 1990s led some to argue that ANZUS was outdated, if not on the verge of collapse. But the tragedies of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Bali bombings brought about a renewed sense of kinship and purpose with the United States. The threat of terrorism elevated Australia’s military orientation with its traditional protector, and a fresh strategic depth was added to the alliance. At the same time, it can be argued that Australia’s national interests are not necessarily best met by relying more and more on US power. Nor should we assume that the United States will automatically come to Australia’s aid in a crisis.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Can you elaborate on the impact of the 9/11 attacks on rejuvenating the Australia-US alliance.

**Daniel Baldino:** The 9/11 attacks were like an electric shock to Australian defence planning. The understanding until then was that ANZUS was a US-led insurance policy for our own security. After 9/11, that role was upturned. Australia was expected to assume greater strategic burdens, including pre-emptive military adventures abroad.



**Dr Daniel Baldino** is the author of *Spooked: The Truth About Intelligence in Australia* and head of the International Relations Programme at Notre Dame University, Fremantle.

Interestingly, for symbolic rather than strategic reasons, then Prime Minister John Howard invoked the ANZUS treaty a few days after the attacks, highlighting shared values and history with the United States. It is clear that the special relationship played a key role in Australia's decision to join the US-led global 'war on terror.' Australia followed the United States into Afghanistan in 2001 to dismantle al Qaeda. In 2003, we joined the US invasion of Iraq ostensibly to remove WMDs. Of course, no such weapons were ever found because those weapons programs had been abandoned much earlier. Unfortunately, the invasion of Iraq triggered a strong anti-US backlash and has arguably been a strategic disaster.

Regardless, the United States became dissatisfied with past arrangements and more demanding on its allies. With terrorism being called a clear and present danger, US policymakers like Richard Armitage informed allies that they must be willing to embrace greater alliance burdens. He warned that nations could no longer afford to 'pick and choose' facets of US relations like from an 'a la carte menu.' Some even speculated that if Australia did not support the 'war on terror,' ANZUS could be dissolved like the US-New Zealand relationship was in the 1980s. I'm not sure whether Australia's decision to deploy forces in Afghanistan and Iraq was the straw that broke the backbone of ANZUS, but it is worth thinking about such alliance contests. What is the scope of traditional allies like Australia to pick and choose which US priorities and policies to support? Are we able to say 'no' to America? Under what circumstances can we say 'no' and what would be the consequences? Alternatively, to what extent are alliances nothing more than a flimsy marriage of convenience? In this sense, talk about a 'special relationship' can be very misleading.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** ANZUS is not without criticism in Australia, being labelled 'limited and imperfect' as far back as 1953. (See 'ANZUS pact criticism: Limited and imperfect,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (14 October 1953)) What are the benefits and drawbacks of ANZUS?

**Daniel Baldino:** ANZUS has real benefits as well as risks and disadvantages. Much of this discussion

is based on the interpretation of the ANZUS treaty itself—a loosely worded document to begin with. For instance, there is no automatic defence trigger, only a general promise to consult each other in the event of armed attack. Regardless, the United States remains our most important alliance partner. Benefits include logistics support, intelligence sharing, and purchasing weapons and related defence equipment (although criticism exists about the utility and cost of some of these weapons). At the same time, ANZUS does give pause to possible future aggressors.

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Alliances will always impose a range of political costs and penalties on their members. This is especially true in highly unequal bilateral alliances. The United States being a global power can create or feed into a syndrome of open dependency. On the one hand, Australia cannot necessarily defend itself alone—the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is not, and will never be, totally self-reliant. But it is also true that our national interests may not always be identical with those of the United States. So a vital element of an alliance management strategy is not to carelessly compromise our independence or think we cannot deviate from or reject US impulses.

The test is how to maintain a credible alliance posture with the United States while managing domestic budgetary pressures and adapting to new dynamics like the rise of China. ANZUS should not be seen merely as a static loyalty test. Australian-US national interests will not always perfectly align. Future scenarios could produce quite different or divergent national interests like climate change, missile defence, and the response to failed or failing states. Australia will most likely continue to view the United States as a central plank in its national security outlooks. But this does not mean we should not develop a more independent capacity in dealing with emerging security challenges through a policy framework that seeks greater room for

independence within the overall alliance context. This balance is also connected to our ‘juggling act’ approach to multilateral institutions. But a devoted ‘deputy sheriff’ instinct is unhelpful. We need to make tough decisions about allocating our priorities. This means preserving an alliance to deal with common problems through multilateral institutions and processes while retaining a strategic independence.

Another interesting policy dimension is the United States rethinking formal alliance arrangements as part of a ‘new realism.’

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** There is something of an automatic assumption that Australian interests will always align with those of its great ally. Has Australia been too uncritical in its following of US foreign policy? Have there been times when ANZUS has worked against Australia’s national interests?

**Daniel Baldino:** US strategic policy can often take an ambitious or contentious path, such as pre-emptive military strikes post 9/11. Australia has often failed to be a discerning ally. Successive Australian governments have displayed a dogged acquiescence to the US big brother role in the world. Australia’s logic, in part, has been reinforced by a psychological dependency on ‘great and powerful’ friends. But problems can occur when allies like Australia automatically assume that the realities of US operations are always going to be rational, effective or universally endorsed. This, in turn, raises a number of interesting questions about the relationship between the leader and follower in global foreign policy.

It is worth considering likely future tensions in the relationship, such as the rise of China and its rapid military build-up. Is America prepared to accommodate the rise of China? How should Australia respond to increased Sino-American competition? Do we have any ‘broker’ credibility to prevent the outbreak of hostilities? How much weight does Australia carry in the political corridors of Washington?

Indeed, ANZUS was strengthened after 9/11. But the sense of shared loyalty and accompanying cultural identity risks raising unrealistic or naïve expectations by being too casual about evolving geopolitical and geostrategic developments; taking things for granted; or presuming the ANZUS relationship will be ‘business-as-usual’ regardless of changing circumstances. Any alliance blueprint must be balanced with hard-headed assessments about Australia’s core national interests—and consider America’s record of using allies as instruments for its own purposes. The Bush White House in early 2001 is a good example of an asymmetrical relationship. President Bush did not have much time for international law, the United Nations, or multilateral cooperation. But all these areas are, for a middle power like Australia, ways of punching above our weight and promoting an image of a responsible international citizen.

Another interesting policy dimension is the United States rethinking formal alliance arrangements as part of a ‘new realism.’ The main game is about flexible coalitions rather than fixed alliances. In fact, until early to mid-2001, the United States was questioning the idea of ‘nation building,’ so much so that people were assuming some sort of reduction in long-standing US international commitments.

But 9/11 totally toppled that thinking. Suddenly, policymakers were talking about the burdens of US responsibility that included dealing with rogue states abroad: ‘The United States will flex its muscle on the global stage. It will not apologise for its more aggressive and abrasive global role.’ And Australia suddenly found itself facing the ultimatum, ‘You’re either with us or against us’ as part of a ‘coalition of the willing’—a somewhat expedient coalition with a limited shelf life.

We followed the United States into Afghanistan and Iraq. We expressed no reservations about strategic miscalculations, especially in Iraq. The Bush team did not focus as much on traditional alliances as on the advantages to the United States offered by ad hoc or floating coalitions. Donald Rumsfeld said, ‘The mission determines the coalition, and the coalition must not determine the mission.’

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Behind the platitudes and rhetoric of ‘warmth and kindness’ and ‘indispensible’ friendships, how does the US establishment view the ANZUS alliance?

**Daniel Baldino:** There has been a strong emphasis on US unilateralism or exceptionalism from the Bush and Obama administrations. This is a more demanding and self-centred approach to alliance politics that does not allow any more ‘free-riding’ by US allies. Australia should decide its own expectations about the US alliance by figuring out how America thinks about the world from a domestic point of view. After all, America has a long tradition of viewing strategic alliances with suspicion. In 1796, in his farewell address, George Washington warned against ‘entangling alliances.’

Further, talk about a shared history can underappreciate the considerable domestic pressures facing US policymakers and the White House. Given the global financial crisis, economic security is their core concern, rendering their domestic agenda at odds with obligations abroad. Even a general discussion leads to speculations about the free-riding tendencies of allies contributing to America’s economic mess. Australia, in contrast, tends to split between an LBJ ‘all the way’ mindset or a caricature of the United States. But a middle ground can exist wherein Australia becomes more independent within the alliance. Indeed, Australia’s ‘special’ relationship with the United States is no more special than the US relationship with the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan and so on.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Some critics claim that having such a strong public commitment to the US alliance gives the region the distinct impression that Australia uncritically follows US policy. Is it really possible to retain an independent position within ANZUS?

**Daniel Baldino:** Resolving intra-alliance frictions can be a complicated affair. But cultivating greater strategic independence is possible. Things do not need to be expressed in only black or white terms. A healthy alliance should be able to handle divergent outlooks and periodic disagreements.

As a start, maintaining historical traditions is not an end in itself. Australia should not be subservient or self-censor its dealings with the United States. Our sense of insecurity, often exaggerated, should not be at the expense fostering a more productive output of US power, including its approach to China or hotspots like the Middle East. The United States acting out as an expansive, assertive imperial power that ignores international rules or opinion is not in our national interests or theirs. Australia should also be wary of being taken for granted by the United States, like in the aftermath of 9/11. This can create a domestic backlash that undermines the relationship. And Australia should not be afraid to speak up and voice a more holistic line in the future. Consensus building is a two-way street.

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The other immediate challenge is to acknowledge, and work to displace, claims from some of our Asian neighbours that Australia is a US lackey, that we are a direct representative of American power in the region. A practice of unqualified endorsement of US foreign policy will generate varying degrees of diplomatic backlash. We must be aware of potential image problems in Asia. At the very least, we need to work to better align ANZUS commitments with close and productive relations with our Asia-Pacific neighbours. For instance, policy steps that indicate Australia might be part of a wider containment policy to manage China will not be unnoticed by our neighbours, including China itself, and will present ongoing diplomatic tensions. Failure to be a discriminating ally can not only lead to misunderstandings and image problems but short-sighted mismanagement can also have major implications on the acquisition of high-level capabilities and defence budget blowouts. A robust national strategy should determine our military structure, not vice versa.

Being a US ally does impose policy pressures and sometimes constrain Australia's strategic choices and options. But we do not have to create unnecessary self-inflicted wounds. A sycophantic commitment to the United States will avoid any critical judgments about possible limitations or difficulties regarding dependency and the management of asymmetric alliances. Too many efforts to demonstrate a 'special friendship' in the past have been counterproductive, almost always resulting in strategic and diplomatic trade-offs. Some of Australia's preoccupations have been based on the 'alliance security dilemma.' This idea highlights the challenges Australia might face in shaping its regional and global security approaches. The security dilemma is captured by either becoming unconditionally 'entrapped' in US military choke points or becoming fearful of being 'abandoned' by the United States as a result of not doing so.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** How do you see the alliance evolving in the future and how is it likely to affect Australia?

**Daniel Baldino:** Dependency can be reassuring. But successful security partnerships have always been a demanding project. We need to avoid policy feel-good measures that only really serve to placate the United States. We also need to accept that total defence self-reliance is unrealistic. Ultimately, Australia must make its own judgments about maintaining its own national interests. Passive bandwagoning will lead Australia into all types of troubles. Being proactive and clear-eyed to help shape US expectations, and emphasising that an alliance does not equate to mechanical assent, will help keep the political vision and domestic expectations regarding ANZUS grounded, realistic and constructive. Any future alliance management that resembles a one-sided coalition of convenience or Australia as a sort of uncritical US proxy must be avoided.

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