



## Background Sheet 5: Military and Defence

### *People's Inquiry: Exploring the Case for an Independent and Peaceful Australia*

*What are the costs and consequences of Australia's involvement in US-led wars and the US-alliance?*

#### An Independent Defence Policy

Australians consistently say that the alliance with the United States is important to Australia's security. They also say that the alliance makes it more likely Australia will be drawn into a war in Asia that would not be in Australia's interests. The public quite rightly expects to be protected, but believes the costs of a security guarantee can be significant. An independent defence policy must therefore be militarily credible if it is to be supported by public opinion. This inquiry welcomes credible proposals for an independent defence policy.

#### What does the ANZUS Treaty actually guarantee?

The ANZUS Treaty between the United States, Australia and New Zealand involves three countries separated by huge distances and large bodies of water, and who are a long way away from each other's potential adversaries. This is an oddity in international relations. Indeed, it is difficult to find another security treaty where the parties are so far apart

geographically.

Unlike NATO, where an armed attack against one or more signatories is "considered an attack against them all," in ANZUS, each signatory "recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes." This is, quite evidently, a much weaker formulation than in NATO.

ANZUS extends geographically to the United States' Pacific territories such as Guam and American Samoa, and "its armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific." It would cover an attack on a US ship in the South China Sea, a US aircraft in the Taiwan Strait, and wherever the U.S. fleet goes in the Pacific.

However, ANZUS doesn't cover the Indian Ocean, where Australia has interests. Therefore, an attack on an Australian ship in the Indian Ocean or in the Persian Gulf would not be within the formal scope of the treaty.

And yet, that is where Australian forces have frequently been deployed.

Unlike NATO, which establishes a NATO Council that meets regularly, discusses high-level strategy and has provisions for responding to threats, ANZUS establishes no consultative machinery and no provision to respond to threats. The ANZUS Treaty reflects the United States' preference for language that does not create binding commitments.

#### Nuclear Weapons and an Independent Defence Policy

The alliance involves more than the ANZUS Treaty. The 2016 Defence White Paper refers to United States "extended deterrence" and states that "Only the nuclear and conventional military capabilities of the United States can offer effective deterrence against the possibility of nuclear threats against Australia."



However, extended nuclear deterrence is an

Australian claim, not a US assurance. The US has assured South Korea of its commitment to use "the full range of military capabilities, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, conventional strike and missile defense capabilities." It has assured Japan of "the ironclad U.S. commitment" using "the full range of U.S. military capabilities, including nuclear and conventional." There is no such US assurance to Australia.

Meanwhile, Australia refrains from signing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which prohibits states from developing, possessing, or using nuclear weapons. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade states that the TPNW's prohibitions are "fundamentally inconsistent and incompatible with Australia's alliance relationship with the US." The "joint facilities" at Pine Gap and Northwest Cape host and support "some of the most sensitive critical strategic US capabilities. These include systems that relate to intelligence collection, ballistic missile early warning, submarine communications, nuclear detonation, detection and satellite-based communications." These bases make it impractical to restrict US activities in Australia to non-nuclear missions.

## Interoperability and Australian Defence Policy

Full inter-operability with the United States is a core feature of Australia's military procurement of submarines, aircraft and other equipment. This feature takes precedence over other goals such as self-reliance. The requirement for full inter-operability with the United States means that Australia's military planners have to acquire submarines that can do more than patrol the undersea areas proximate to Australia. These submarines must have the most sophisticated sensors and weapons, and the capacity for very long ranges and endurance.

They also have to operate in tropical waters closer to home, such as the Indo-Pacific, and especially the South China Sea, with its complex subsea terrain, varied salinity and marine biodiversity. They have to be compatible with the U.S. Navy's underwater surveillance system which tracks other countries' submarines at long distances. These requirements make Australia even more dependent on the United States Navy. The Royal Australian Navy buys directly from U.S. production lines. Its submariners are embedded in the U.S. torpedo and combat data system program.




Similarly, Australia's official review of its participation in the multibillion-dollar US Joint Strike Fighter project was just a public relation exercise, according to comments by Australia's defence minister. He advised the US Defence Secretary in secret talks that the Air Combat Capability Review was driven by domestic politics and was unlikely to produce any result other than acquisition of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, marketed by Lockheed Martin.

## Expeditionary wars

Australia's longest military commitment was the two-decade-long war in Afghanistan. Despite repeated public assurances to the contrary, the government knew the mission could not succeed but kept deploying troops there because they were necessary to demonstrate Australia's commitment to the US in that theatre of operations.

A critical question now is what to do if the U.S. goes to war against China. Such a question



has been discussed candidly behind closed doors. In 2006, then Opposition leader Kim Beazley told the US Ambassador that “Australia would have absolutely no alternative but to line up militarily beside the U.S. Otherwise the alliance would be effectively dead and buried, something that Australia could never afford to see happen.”

In 2016, the RAND Corporation published a report about the consequences of a war between the US and China. It concluded that “war between the two countries could be intense, last a year or more, have no winner, and inflict huge losses and costs on both sides.” The RAND study mentions Australia just twice, and assumes its support for the US.

A clash with China may be a turning point in Australian history. The prospect requires intensive debate in the Australian Parliament and the broader community. This inquiry welcomes proposals for an independent defence policy that can defend Australia and keep it secure without threatening its neighbours or preventing further progress in disarmament.

**Written by:**  
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