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Submission

People's Inquiry into a Costs and Consequences of Australia's involvement in US led wars and the alliance

Preface

My organisation, a member of IPAN, supports a peaceful future for Australia through what it does - advancing inter-cultural understanding through short and long term international volunteering - not what it argues. For this reason my submission is based on my own experiences and reflects only my views, as an Australian of the Vietnam generation (just) but with links, personal, familial and occupational, with parts of the world beyond Australia.

(The) Australia(n) policy towards Indonesia 1964

As a fourteen year old I submitted an essay to a competition run by The Australian on Australia's relations with Indonesia, arguing that our future lay with reconciling to a restive, young and multi-faceted region, emerging tortuously from vasseldom and cultural or economic thrawl. We could naturally identify in the task of building an independent future out of the rests of great power politics laid bare by the war. We could share an aspiration to be able to determine our own affairs in peace without threatening or being threatened by our neighbours. The non-aligned movement placed some distance between emerging countries in the Indian Ocean periphery and colonial powers who had shaped, and would out of habit continue to shape the allegiances, identities and patterns of commerce in the region. It was a moment where we could throw our lot in with such aspirations, and throw off our settler legacy.

My essay was commended by the Editor. The Australian's outward curiosity did not last; neither did Indonesia's fragile embrace of non-alignment. Within a couple of years came first Konfrontasie then Suharto. Indonesia slid into the pattern of a kleptocratic authoritarian state forced on emerging countries in both hemispheres and north and south of the equator.

I lived for a time as a post graduate student first in Netherlands - where a long colonial past built on commercial imperative is remembered in literature. Mutatuli's Max Havelaar, like Mickiewicz's Pan Tadeusz, or Patrick White's Tree of Man an account of a nation refracted through foreign adventure or foreign dependence is the defining national literary work, stripped of patriotic dross; in the Netherlands consciousness and conscience of colonial legacies. Secondly in Belgium whose hosting of NATO, Ford and the European Commission hardly disguised social bitterness from linguistic division within the country; and a dark legacy of colonialism. Yet through these times, winds of change - in Africa and Central America, and Europe; the Middle East and Central Asia, in Poland itself and its southern neighbour.

Student House Ixelles 1976

I arrived in Brussels 12 months after the tanks of the North had rolled through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon. This event had trapped a cohort of young South Vietnamese,

who we were on friendly terms with, sent to Belgium and France for education by their wealthy parents . Others accepted offers of naturalisation; our friends held out for a return some day. We experienced with them the strangeness of meeting the first Northern arrivals on student exchange; and later the shock and their muted reaction as Vietnam dealt simultaneously with natural floods, a PRC invasion, the legacy of mixed race orphans and dealing with the consequences of (one-sided) ecocide alone. When the Vietnamese intervened to topple the murderous regime in Cambodia that was sending a flood of refugees over the border, we somehow understood looking through the eyes of our newly patriotic comrades.

Some conclusions

Independence and regional responsibility go together. The circumstances that had dragged us into Vietnam as (unwitting) agents of US foreign policy 15 years before now reversed. We could realise our situation free of our cultural-linguistic dependencies, and address the challenge of acting responsibly and commensurably in solidarity with our neighbours. How would Australians react, over the next twenty years, to floods, fires, invasions and the consequences of wars ? Would they confine our aspiration to the comforts of a mis-matched society loosely settled on an alien ground; but secured by strategic alliances and extractive interests? What indeed could we offer to the diverse polities sharing our region; its tensions and uneasy norms of cohabitation?.

The Drovers dog and ASEAN

The first act of Bill Hayden as Minister of Foreign Affairs after the 1983 Election was to tour the countries that bore the brunt of the American war in South East Asia, and were conspicuously abandoned after its end in 1975. Being there mattered.

From my vantage point this seemed entirely sensible: Australia's best interest lay in owning the recent history of the region; freeing itself from past entanglements and having clear eyes in its dealings. This was a bloc of countries, however removed in our consciences, that could rival the European Union in trading potential and could evolve own ways of building peace, tolerance and prosperity while respecting difference. This is an allegiance not built on values but on tolerance, honesty and intelligence, and on navigating a common future. Australia's good reputation has been built on this; not on our proxy status as a dependent in shifting and unstable great power manoeuvring. Nor as an over-weaponed guardian of vested interests masquerading as human [rights.or](#) shared interests

We can move freely among the spaces of our influence because on the whole we have acted pragmatically, transparently and decently; perhaps innocently and at times with true fellow feeling. Or this seemed to be the message from that tour, even if it arose from a quirk of Labor Party political history..

The John Howard legacy

Another twenty years has delivered more stumbling around; not knowing quite what we should be doing. And when it was expedient, backtracking to old tropes of military alliances and geopolitical messaging.

What seemed from my free-form observation as normal steps to a post-war place among nations, built on personal, collegial and familial connections via travel and migration and economic and intellectual exchange was overlooked, in the panicked moves to secure

economic interests and superannuated political ties: from Libya to the Middle East to Afghanistan to Timor and the Pacific.

Stopping the boats

We seemed unable to deal with unregulated flows of people across borders brought on by destabilising interventions where we were enthusiastic partners. We may have entered on a humanitarian pretext but from show case of the excellence of our military forces our presence morphed into yet another combat panel in our collective memory of loss through national service; ignoring the far greater losses and disruptions within the countries we were nominally saving (if only from themselves). These seems of a piece with the inhumane treatment of offshore asylum seekers.

Foreign Policy and The Future

The reflex to see the world while trailing behind an imperial civilising mission distorts our political rhetoric, and holds us back. It may take another Bill Hayden moment to step away with sufficient confidence that we can defend our independence, as the Vietnamese had had to do, with confidence and trust in our institutions and cultural resources, in the face of outside interests.

In elementary terms this means reciprocating goodwill, expecting probity, decency, courage and intelligence in our representatives; cheering success; admiring integrity, while condemning rapacity in commercial dealings; and encouraging young Australians to move confidently in this till now bewilderingly alien landscape that is the world we are sharing. .

In the Vietnam years and their aftermath Australian politicians were ignored or humiliated in their dealings with the US Government in Washington. Latterly we are best and closest friends; we share values; we allow exclusive and permanent basing of troops and listening stations. Our biggest companies are more than 50% owned by American pension funds. we are tied into long term contracts for military equipment. Why? It is not surprising that we have lost confidence in our foreign affairs dealings, and in the international community are dipping out of sight.

The policy world is shifting rapidly. This is a banality. Yet we seem incapable of acting, The world is moving out of and away from the patterns and frameworks of mid century oil-fuelled prosperity

What is Australia's interest?

New and inventive alliances can address these post-nationalist post-industrial policy challenges. We have gone down these paths in the past. The dead weight of investments in redundant military alliances is costing us imaginative space and holding back the transformations we require if we are to occupy an honourable place in the collectivity of nations; and as individual Australians responsibly in collective humanity within a biosphere, in jeopardy from the deceit, wilful ignorance and contrivance of the powerful, in what we have come complacently to think is progress..

11 April 2021