

Time for a Fundamental Rethink of Australian Foreign Policy

By

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All countries have a choice as to whether or not to become involved in a war. The choice is dictated by the country's perception of the costs and benefits of involvement. Of the choices made for a country by reason of its geographical proximity, when they are attacked, or fear an attack sufficiently to take defensive action. It is comparatively rare for a country to involve itself in wars that pose little or no direct threat to that country's own safety.

Australia is a relatively rare example of a country that has willingly involved itself in wars waged by others, that pose little or no threat to the country itself. The first such involvement by Australia came early in its colonial history when Australian soldiers were sent to Crimea to fight on behalf of the British forces in the war against Russia from 1853 to 1856.

There was no conceivable Australian interest in that war fought by the British or behalf of a colonial escapade remote from the interests of the Australian people. That war was fought against Russia. This is one of the ironies of history that Australia's modern-day antipathy to Russia is based in part on Crimea returning voluntarily to Russian control after a brief period as part of Ukraine, thanks to the "gift" of Crimea to that country by the Soviet Union's Nikita Khrushchev in 1954.

Crimea has again become one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints following the overwhelming vote by the inhabitants to return to Russia in 2008 following the undemocratic coup against the Ukraine's elected leader in an American inspired action. The Ukraine, rather absurdly, seeks the return of Crimea to its control, something that has zero chance of eventuating.

Australia joined the first world war in 1914 with a similar lack of involvement in its origins, which were the battle for European supremacy between the Germans and the British. We now know that was a war long anticipated and planned for by the British, who saw the rising power of Germany as a threat to its Imperial ambitions. To this day, the most sacred war memorial in Australia is the ANZAC day commemoration, hundreds of whom died in Turkey, victims of a combination of British Imperial ambition and military stupidity.

There were no real Australian issues at stake in that war, fought thousands of kilometres away from the Australian mainland. At no stage was Australian territory under any threat from the Germans. Thousands of Australians were sacrificed in this exercise of British hubris.

There was more justification for Australian involvement in the Second World War, although the real nature of the threat came from Japan's Imperial ambitions rather than Germany. The latter displayed little or no interest in the southern hemisphere, content to leave all the fighting in this part of the world to their Japanese partners. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Australian troops and North Africa were rapidly withdrawn to help defend Australia and to fight the Japanese who posed a real threat.

Several Australian cities were bombed by the Japanese, and there were plans to evacuate the northern half of the country in the event of a Japanese invasion. The significance of the Second World War to the Australian psyche however, was the realisation that they could no longer rely on the British for any serious assistance to forestall a Japanese invasion.

Instead, in what was to become the defining feature of the subsequent era, Australia transferred its allegiance from the British to the Americans.

It was a fateful choice, and one whose consequences have dominated Australian foreign policy ever since. The first manifestation of this changed allegiance was Australian involvement in the Korean war. Although nominally a United Nations operation, in reality the Korean war was fought entirely to further United States ambitions. This began following the ejection of North Korean troops from south of the 39° of latitude, when, defiance of the role for the limited terms of the UNSC resolution (passed in the absence of the Russians and with the Taiwanese government representing China) the American led forces invaded the north.

We now know that the United States General in charge of the invasion, Douglas MacArthur, sought the permission of United States president Truman to use their then monopoly of nuclear weapons the newly victorious Communist government of China. It was the presence of United States troops on the Chinese-North Korean border, with an obvious hostile intent toward China, that persuaded the Chinese to enter the war.

The United States forces were rapidly driven back south of the 39th parallel with the war essentially stalemated until the armistice was signed in 1953. The Americans had used the intervening two years to exploit their air superiority to affectively turn the north into giant rubble. More than 3 million Koreans died during the onslaught, the vast bulk of them civilians.

Australia's military loyalty to the Americans was next demonstrated in the Vietnam war where again Australian troops were used to defend the indefensible, a corrupt South Vietnamese government who violated the terms of the armistice following the French colonialist defeat in 1954 by setting up a sham regime in the South. Australian troops first went to Vietnam in July 1962 and remained there, fighting on behalf of the United States, until 1972 when the Whitlam government withdrew them as one of its first acts in assuming power in November of that year.

The Americans never forgave the Whitlam government for that withdrawal and with their agent, then Governor General Sir John Kerr actively worked for the government overthrow, which they succeeded in achieving in November 1975. No Australian government since that date, irrespective of nominal party affiliation, has deviated from the United States military line. This unflinching support for United States aggression has seen Australian troops involved in at least three major wars since Vietnam, the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and Syria 2015.

The Labour Party has disapproved of the Afghanistan involvement but tellingly, they did nothing to terminate the commitment when they were in power from 2008 to 2014. They have been conspicuously quiet on that war, as indeed with Australia's other wars over the past 20 years. Australia has gone out of its way in the past 12 or so months to alienate China, which has resulted in the Chinese imposing trade restrictions, thus far valued at not less than \$20 billion. This has been accompanied by other restrictions, as for example on tourism and students that will have an even greater financial impact than the \$20 billion thus far.

In the week that this was being written, the new defence Minister Peter Dutton was talking openly about a possible war with China over the question of the island of Taiwan. Again, Australia is following the American position by, effect, treating Taiwan as a separate country, a concept that earlier generations were careful to avoid.

To openly broach the issue of a war with China over Taiwan reaches new levels of idiocy. The Chinese position has remained unchanged for all the time that Taiwan has been separated from the mainland. It is a reasonable assumption that they will look with particular disfavour at any gestures, however rhetorically, to treat Taiwan as a separate nation.

The Americans have made it clear that they regard Taiwan as a separate nation and military manoeuvres in the narrow waters between Taiwan and the mainland, together with vastly increased

arm sales in recent months, not to mention American rhetoric, have made it clear that they fully expect the war of words to assume a more deadly element.

In this the Americans would expect, and in all likelihood receive, Australian support. Dutton's recent words are an acknowledgement of this reality. Australia would not only be frozen out of its largest market, it risks being a military target as well. The United States military facility at Pine Gap would be an obvious target. The brutal reality is that Australia does not have the military capability to discourage, little alone defeat, a Chinese military attack.

It is doubtful if Australia's politicians have fully considered the effects that an actual war with China would produce. What passes for military analysis seems to believe that Australia will be safe from any military attack by its alliance with the Americans. It is a comfortable assumption that does not bear any resemblance to the likely reality.

Any attack on Australia will be part of a larger war. If China is involved it is a safe bet that they can rely on the support of the Russians. That latter country has clear military superiority over the Americans. One has only to just think of the traumatic effects on the American psyche of the events of 11 September 2001. That attack's effects will pale into complete insignificance compared to the results of the United States suffering a nuclear attack.

There are those who will argue that both Russia and China would in turn be the subject of a nuclear exchange. The result would be mutually assured destruction, for which the acronym MAD is singularly appropriate.

One would like to think that the effects of a nuclear war would be so disastrous that no sane politician would seriously contemplate it. The evidence of the past 75 years however, is that sanity and rational behaviour is not the dominant characteristic of the United States ruling classes.

Australia could play a role in helping to avert that disaster. To do so however would require a fundamental change in the political mindset. A part of that rethinking should involve Australia ridding itself of the illusory sense of security it receives by being the ever-loyal American lapdog.

It is difficult to imagine the current political class having the wit or the wisdom to create a different and sane foreign policy. A policy that would see Australia acting in a truly independent manner, free from the myths of its military Linus blanket encompassed in the current suicidal military alliances.

It would be unwise to bet on such an outcome.

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