

Independent and Peaceful Australia Network
People's Inquiry: Exploring the Costs and Consequences of the Australia-US Alliance

Submission on: The capacity of Australia to engage in conventional warfare.

1. My understanding is that the legal basis of any alliance between Australia and the US consists of the 1951 ANZUS Treaty. Other “anti-communist” organisations created at about the same time (SEATO, CENTO) have long been forgotten or superseded. Compared with the NATO Pact, ANZUS is an informal grouping which, in the event of an attack on one member, commits the others only to “consultations.” From 1984, following the NZ Government's declaration of a nuclear-free zone, the Treaty was essentially in limbo but it has since been implemented more or less as it was prior to that date. However, throughout, Australia has been steadily integrating its forces with those of the US Pacific region. Nobody has ever explained why this country's foreign policy continues to be driven by a 70 year old Treaty that was directed at a threat that no longer exists, if it ever did.

2. Since 1945, Australian military forces have been involved in hostile actions in Korea, Malayan Emergency, Malaysian Confrontation, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq. There have been additional peace-keeping or policing deployments but they are not relevant to this commentary. Prior to each of these actions, this country was not exposed to any conceivable threat by the opposing nations or forces in those conflicts. Essentially, these matters had nothing to do with us. Australian forces were committed by the governments of the day for no reason other than to satisfy their perception of how a loyal US ally would act. It would be fair to say that Australian forces made no perceptible contribution to the outcome in any of these actions, and the perception of Australia acting in good faith was not improved.

3. With few exceptions, Australian military procurement is directed at US arms manufacturers, while ADF units and personnel regularly exercise with and are embedded in US military forces and structures. The extent of this integration is not fully appreciated. For example, as far back as 1957, when the US implemented what it called a “pentomic” structure, Australia replied with its “pentropic” equivalent although the term quickly faded from view. The purpose of this close alignment appears to be to provide a ready-made, integrated military structure that the US can call on *ad lib*. Essentially, Australia appears to have placed itself in much the same the role as Israel, as an aircraft carrier located in a potentially hostile region, crewed by well-trained, eager forces able to function seamlessly with the US military, and with a proven record of acquitting US interests without demur. In terms of their demonstrated military significance, Australia's forays to remote regions such as the Middle East and Central Asia appear to be no more than training exercises for the military and opportunities for senior politicians to be invited to the White House. In terms of their impact on ADF personnel and their families, on the country's defence structure and on our international standing, the cost has never been calculated and probably cannot be.

4. With minimal publicity, the US has now withdrawn from its longest war, Afghanistan. In a commentary entitled “What a way to spend \$2trn,” *The Economist* (10.07.23, p32) opined:

It might at least be hoped that the lessons of this debacle will be learned. The main one is so obvious: an over-militarised foreign policy that embraces unrealistic objectives .. this appears

to be more of a feature of American foreign policy than a bug ... (the lesson is likely to) be forgotten especially quickly.

'Debacle' seems to be a very polite understatement. From the point of view of the average Afghani, catastrophe would be a more appropriate description. But as the victorious Taliban sweep down from the hills, it is appropriate to consider the views of Mr John Bolton, US Ambassador to the UN under the Bush Administration and National Security Adviser to former Pres. Trump, who was deeply involved in both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. In an [interview](#), July 16th, 2023, he said:

We weren't defeated ... we walked away from it ... You have to be defeated to lose a war. We've given up because we've lost patience. That's a sad commentary about the current administration, but it's not a defeat for the United States.

Whether Australia will learn any lessons from our involvement in Afghanistan remains to be seen but the omens are hardly encouraging.

5. Having "walked away" from the engagement that was so necessary to this country's survival that there was no need to put it to a vote in Parliament before the troops hurried off, Australia's taxpayers and parents might be excused for hoping for a break from our minor role in GWOT.¹ However, recent statements from senior members of the Government and, remarkably, of the Commonwealth Public Service, seem to indicate the lessons haven't yet been learned. On April 27th 2023, *The Australian* [reported](#) comments by Mr M Pezzullo, secretary of the Department of Home Affairs:

In a world of perpetual tension and dread, the drums of war beat – sometimes faintly and distantly, and at other times more loudly and ever closer ... Today, as free nations again hear the beating drums and watch worryingly the militarisation of issues that we had, until recent years, thought unlikely to be catalysts for war, let us continue to search unceasingly for the chance for peace while bracing again, yet again, for the curse of war.

Si vis pacem, para bellum. It was not clear why this matter concerned Home Affairs, but the Minister for Home Affairs, Ms K Andrews, forcefully approved Mr Pezzullo's message:

He is absolutely at liberty to prepare such a speech, a document, and to have that published ... The overarching message from government is that we need to be alert but not alarmed.

One would have thought that the expression "drums of war (beating) more loudly and ever closer" is indeed alarmist but it is clearly a matter of opinion, not of fact. And of whom are the drums warning? China, as the new Minister of Defence, Mr P Dutton, made clear when he commented that war with China over Taiwan "should not be discounted." *Independent Australia* [reported](#):

Others, like Senator Jim Molan, joined the chorus and it was recently revealed that Major-General Adam Findlay briefed special forces soldiers last year on the "high likelihood" of war. The Murdoch press quickly fell into line with cringe-inducing headlines like '*Let the war games begin*' and '*China arms for war as QUAD fights back*'.

In the same vein, a [survey](#) by the Australia Institute reported that 42% of their sample believed Australia is at risk of an attack by China. Perhaps this has something to do with the comments of a

¹ Global War On Terror, also known as Global War On Them.

former Defence Minister and now employee of major arms manufacturers, Mr C Pyne, who said that, over the past few years, the risk of a “[kinetic war](#)” with China within five to ten years has increased substantially.

Even without going so far back as Vietnam, which appears to be below the event horizon of the current generation of politicians, it would appear that the Iraqi and Afghan adventures have yielded no lessons for our policy makers. Let us therefore assume that, hypnotised by those beating drums, Australia allows itself to fall or, more typically, hurls itself, into conventional hostilities with China. What can we expect of the outcome?

6. First point: China is Australia's largest trade partner, accounting for some 40% of our annual trade. In the event of war, trade would cease immediately, meaning some very large companies such as BHP and Rio Tinto, as well as many thousands, even tens of thousands, of smaller companies would promptly be bankrupted. This does not touch on the many hundreds of thousands of workers and their families and, let us not forget, farmers, whose finances would be devastated, with no prospect of recovery unless and until China began buying our produce again. We have no firm idea how many people have property loans for their own homes or for investments but, since Chinese investors have helped sustain the bubble in property prices in this country, a sudden collapse in the housing market would be expected. The country would fall into major recession overnight, the value of the AUD would plummet and Australia's overseas loans, of about \$1.2trn largely secured against the housing industry, would be called in – by computers. Politicians and investors should note that in these types of matters, tender feelings for past military favours amount to naught. The assembled Wall St wolves, Zurich gnomes, City buccaneers and stray vulture funds circling overhead have tender feelings only for their pelf.

7. A conventional war is an exercise in two factors: the industrial and agricultural capacity to sustain hostilities for an indefinite period, and the human capacity to wield the weapons and drive the trucks the nation manufactures for them. Compared with China, we have neither capacity. Since the Government decided to close the car industry, this country does not manufacture engines or gearboxes, the essential parts of any vehicle. We have a sort of light shipbuilding industry, as long as we can source the engines and electronics overseas, and a yard that may one day produce a submarine every few years but, landing gear for commercial jets apart, nothing to produce aircraft. We could not build anything like aircraft or ship engines, let alone the radars, computers, radios and other equipment they need to change them from slow-moving targets to fighting machines. As for fuel, our refining capacity consists of four elderly refineries, all located on the coast where they can be picked off by cruise missiles launched from submarines loitering hundreds of kilometres offshore, and thus undetectable by the ADF. We certainly don't have sufficient anti-aircraft or anti-missile capacity to protect them.

The most damaging hole in our industrial armour is our inability to produce electronic components. Regardless of what anybody hopes, everything now runs on computer chips, almost all of which we import from north-east Asia, the very region we would hope to be blockading. This matters, not just in keeping aircraft in the air or telling them where they are, or providing phones and computers for troops in the field to receive orders and real time information on the enemy's activities, or let them call for air support, medical support or hot meals, but is crucial in another field: medicine.

Everything medical runs by computers these days; we simply don't have mercury thermometers or aneroid sphygmomanometers, they have all gone ². To make it worse, everything, runs on lithium batteries, which we don't produce. We do not manufacture medical diagnostic equipment such as X-ray machines or scanners of any sort, cardiographs, ultrasounds, endoscopes, blood analysers,

² It seems we no longer mine cinnabar, the ore for mercury.

anything. If we decided today that we should do so, the first items wouldn't come off the production line for ten years, and they would already be out of date. We don't produce surgical instruments or supplies of any sort, including suture materials or metal prostheses. We manufacture practically no drugs, no syringes and hardly any bandages. In short, the notion that this country could sustain a major force scattered over many millions of square kilometres of land and ocean, as well as supply its home population with essential medicines and services, and the aircraft, ships, trucks and communications infrastructure to deliver them, is squarely in the realm of fantasy.

China, on the other hand, is the equal of the world in many of these fields, if not world-beating. Everything indicates Australia will continue to fall further behind in this particular race so, if anybody in Canberra thinks we need a war with China, it needs to be started as soon as possible because the longer the delay, the greater the likelihood this country will be pulverised.

8. On the question of the human capacity to wage a major war against a serious national adversary, as distinct from chasing peasants through the hills, Australia is a non-starter. The ADF has about 85,000 regular and reserve troops, to guard a land/sea area of perhaps 12mln sq km. In Vietnam, the US had about four troops in rear support units for each frontline soldier, and since troops have to sleep and have some time stood down, that means each of our active military members would be personally responsible for watching 1,200 sq km. Granted the troops would be concentrated in certain places, such as ships and military bases, but that means only that they would be better targets for hypersonic Chinese missiles.

Our security rests in the difficulty the PLA would experience in deploying to the southern hemisphere but that is not reassuring: they wouldn't have to. This country could be brought to its knees in 24hrs by a very simple and relatively inexpensive ploy. If I can think of it, I am quite sure that the Chinese Ministry of Defence, which can draw on about 700,000 engineering graduates each year, can also do so.³ If they have initiated such a move, then there is nothing we can do about it anyway as we would have no choice but to surrender. If they haven't done anything, which I believe would be the case, then the plangent drums so audible in Canberra certainly are not beating in the Forbidden City.

To clarify, I don't believe the Chinese Government has made any such aggressive moves against this country; with the exception of Pine Gap, we simply aren't that important to them. They know they can buy anything they want from us, very much cheaper than starting a war. I expect they watched what happened to Japan with its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, then saw how, unencumbered by grandiose imperial ambitions, postwar Japan quickly became the second largest economy in the world. It is also most likely that they have watched the US sink itself into irremediable debt by the \$8.4 tln it has spent on wars this century, to no discernible benefit.

9. It was recently announced that, in response to a "poorer, more dangerous world" in which China's rise is a major factor, Australia would spend some \$270billion on "defence capabilities" over the next ten years⁴. A large part of this money will be spent on submarines and much of the rest on F-35 aircraft. What is this money meant to achieve? Of the submarines, which haven't yet been fully-designed and will be delivered over perhaps twenty years, the last in 2050, we are told that they would be useful in blockading potential enemies in the South China Sea. One presumes that means China. We need to consider this brave strategy in some detail. I don't know how long these vessels will be able to remain at sea; let's assume eight weeks per voyage. Sydney, where most will be based, is some 8,500km from Hainan Island. It will take them at least two weeks to get there and two back, leaving four weeks on station, followed by some weeks maintenance. Presumably, they would have to refuel somewhere, which means a supply vessel waiting in hostile seas. Allowing six

3 Compared with Australia's 16,000.

4 Spending \$270bln on weapons will contribute to making the world poorer and even more dangerous.

vessels delivered and crews fully trained by the end of Mr Pyne's ten year window ⁵, and assuming that nothing goes wrong with any of them, that would amount to 2.4 submarines at any one time trying to blockade 3,500,000 sq km of ocean, including half a dozen major entry points.

To counter this, PLA naval forces currently amount to some 500 vessels, including at least 66 nuclear and conventional submarines, as well as very extensive and capable satellite and drone surveillance and attack technologies. At present, China is building two or more submarines each year. Moreover, the PLA vessels would be operating in their own backyard with massive air support. Bearing in mind the fate of *Prince of Wales* and *Renown*, I don't believe any sensible commander would want to risk his crew or his vessel under such circumstances, especially given the pointlessness of the exercise: blockading our major trading partner.

However, having trumpeted the purpose of these ships for all to hear, we need to ask what the PLA will be doing over the next ten years, having been given such loud and clear warning of our intentions. We can be sure of one thing: they won't be sitting on their hands.

Of the F-35 fleet, and quite apart from its many failings that have been publicised (i.e. not including those that have been kept secret), the aircraft has a combat radius of 1,100km. Its potential role in hostilities with China, some 8,000km to the north, is not immediately apparent. For the rest of our very limited military hardware, assuming we could transport it to Asia undetected, there is nothing we could do. Our 62 tonne Abrams tanks are outnumbered 140 to one by the lighter and more manoeuvrable Chinese machines, and our other armoured vehicles by about 90 to one. But China produces its own tanks: in an emergency, they can run their factories around the clock, while we would have to wait for spare parts to arrive from the US.

However, the most glaring deficiency in our military "preparedness" revolves around our complete failure to build an indigenous drone industry. Israel, a country of 8 million people, is a world leader in this technology. Similarly, Turkey, a country that most Australians deride, has built its own industry and has proven its worth in combat. Fifteen years ago, if Australia had aligned itself with New Zealand and the great archipelagic states of SE Asia, Indonesia and Philippines, we could now have a first class, indigenous fleet of both surveillance and attack drones, such that we wouldn't need the submarines, *and* with the added bonus of creating goodwill with our neighbours. The cost of such a program would not have exceeded the cost of one submarine, not including its running costs over its lifetime. [Drones](#) are changing the face of warfare, both conventional and unconventional, but, because we were too busy spying on our neighbours, we have missed the boat.

10. It has been said that those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it, yet those who do study it are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it. Since Federation, neither Australia nor New Zealand have ever once needed to be involved in hostilities. War has never been forced on us. In each case, we have chosen to throw ourselves into far-distant wars that had nothing to do with us, possibly the only time in human history this has happened. Even the Pacific War was a matter of choice: if we had not wasted our forces in Europe and North Africa, we could have comfortably sat out the entire war. Japan had no plans to invade this country as it was aware it could not do so without stripping its forces from its main objective, China. With all our forces intact, we would have been too prickly and too far away for them to swallow, and we had no oilfields to interest them.

11. Another aphorism: "Poles weren't the only people who thought they could attack tanks with cavalry, but they were surely the only people who thought they could win" ⁶. The idea that we could somehow hope to prevail in a war with China is the stuff of delusion. So Australia goes to war with China. Let's assume the impossible comes to pass, and the Chinese surrender. What then?

⁵ A ludicrously optimistic scenario; the first isn't expected until the early 2030s.

⁶ Told to me by a Pole.

We're going to govern China? I don't think so. We can't even organise a response to long-predicted bushfires, and our reaction to the pandemic is among the worst in the OECD (we would have been far better to have invited the Chinese to manage it for us). But far more likely would be the arrival of a salvo of Chinese missiles on our major military bases, ending our resistance with an hour or two.

We can put that aside and reach for another scenario, that the US and China go to war and Australia rushes to join in. To anybody with even a faint grip on reality, I believe this is inconceivable. The risks that it would turn into a massive nuclear war approach 100%, and this nation would be devastated. We have already lived through one age of MAD, Mutually-Assured Destruction; we don't need a reprise.

12. Of the people steadily intoning “War with China is coming” to the drums they are furiously beating, one needs to ask: “Do these people know anything at all about China?” Do they know, for example, there are sixty Chinese for every Australian? That China's world-class industrial capacity is more than thirty times the size of ours and is racing ahead by the minute while ours declines steadily? China has its own space station and has landed a rover on Mars. But putting mere facts aside, what do they know of China's history? I suggest they know nothing. They appear to have no knowledge of China's two hundred years of humiliation, nor of the role Western countries played in that. China is a Great Power and will soon have the world's largest economy; Australia is a minnow. They don't care about our concerns, any more than we suffer angst over, say, Papua-New Guinea. Beside building its economy, China cares about two things in particular. The first is avoiding its historical fate of collapsing into warlordism, reinforced by their view of the implosion of the USSR. Second, they are determined that no foreigner will ever humiliate them again. When the US bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, the Chinese swallowed hard and looked away as they knew they were in no position to retaliate. However, that will not happen again. China's message to the world is very simple: We're here to stay. Treat us with respect. Above all, don't threaten us.

That is not unreasonable but the West ignores that message at our collective peril.

13. Some years ago, while visiting the US, former Prime Minister J Howard said:

The relationship we have with the United States is the most important we have with any single country. This is not only because of the strategic, economic, and diplomatic power of the United States. But of equal, if not more significance, are the values and aspirations we share.

Over the past four years, we have all seen the values and aspirations of the US on full display. What we see is vast corruption and criminality which starts at the top and seeps down. I do not see any points of contact between our political system and theirs: rising fascism, their money politics, their gridlocked Congress, voter suppression, police brutality, even their Supreme Court is totally politicised. Howard's statement was an embarrassment, an exercise in drooling sycophancy. I don't believe any of the hard men (and women) in the Washington establishment, such as Mr John Bolton, were taken in. They would have been crowing with delight at the ease with which they pulled another “ally” into line.

Australia seems to be drifting. Our politicians seem unable to take an objective look at the reality of the American political system, or at its steadily declining power. The simple fact is that the US can't abide the idea of having to share top place in the world. Their sense of national self-esteem is built on being “The Greatest.” No longer. Rather than deal constructively with the rising Asian power, the US is trying its old game plan of financial blackmail, threats, encirclement, and propaganda. All of these ploys are hidden under the trope of an “international rules-based order,” one written solely

by the US and subject to change or suspension without notice. The notion that Australia could in some way influence the course of the visceral American antagonism to the our major trading partner is fantasy, the sort of grandiose fantasy common in adolescents. The US does precisely what it likes; our interests are and always will be utterly irrelevant to their calculations.

Similarly, the desperate belief that we must tie ourselves to them because we are too ineffective to stand on our own feet, and that they will remember us in our hour of need, has no basis in fact. It is part of the fantasy that sees our country as in imminent danger of invasion. Albany in WA was settled in 1827 to keep the French out; they never came. The fort in Sydney Harbour was built at the time of the Crimean War to keep the Russians out. They didn't even know Sydney existed. Princess Royal forts in Albany, where I went to school, were built to keep the Germans at bay. They didn't come, either. The guns at East Point in Darwin Harbour were to keep the Japanese away. They flew overhead without even planning to stop, and the guns were eventually sold to them for scrap in 1955.⁷ The truth is that nobody has ever intended to invade this country. Why would they? Everybody knows we will sell whatever they want, of the highest quality and at bargain prices. It's immeasurably cheaper to buy than invade.

All this says that Australian politicians have always had a wildly exaggerated fear of hostility directed toward the country. In one word, they are paranoid. It seems our entire foreign policy is driven by a mix of paranoid and grandiose fantasists. Some politicians show both defects.

14. I believe that any person of reasonable intellect, reasonable education and reasonable common sense, acting in good faith, who takes a dispassionate look at Australia's position vis a vis the US, would see that the US is not a suitable role model for this country and we should actively distance ourselves from their sinking ship. A reasonable person would conclude that all talk about war with China is either a febrile concoction of a bunch of paranoid and grandiose fantasists who are insufficiently based in reality to have a larger plan, or a carefully-orchestrated plan to fool key decision-makers in this country, and the people who vote for them.

I believe the talk of war has nothing to do with China, that China is simply a convenient excuse that plays to traditional Australian fears of the "Yellow Peril."

I do not believe that Mr J Howard could have been ignorant of the almost cosmic levels of corruption that exist in the American military-industrial-Congressional-NSA/espionage-carceral complex. If he was genuinely ignorant, then he was *ipso facto* totally unfit for office, because I and many others knew at the time he made that statement (although, as we have since seen, it is much worse than any of us knew). This is not new, as Donald Horne commented nearly sixty years ago:

Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck. It lives on other people's ideas ... most of its leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise ... while ordinary Australians have many fine and some quite exceptional characteristics, the present elites in Australia are mostly second-rate. Many of the nation's affairs are conducted by racketeers of the mediocre who have risen to authority in a non-competitive community where they are protected in their adaptations of other people's ideas. At times, they almost seem to form a secret society to preserve the obsolescent or the amateurish.

The present generation of "racketeers of the mediocre" who are busily talking up war with China in the obsolete dream of a secure relationship with a Great Power are so far beyond "second rate... amateurish" as to be as menace to the country. What is the tune their "drums of war" are playing to? We can be sure of one thing: It has nothing to do with China, just as the last version had nothing to do with Islam, or the previous one with the equally unrealistic "monolithic international

⁷ A Darwin businessman bid £500 for them; shortly after, it was announced that they had been sold to a Japanese scrap dealer for £525. Much the same thing happened to the historical guns at Princess Royal Forts in Albany.

communism.” It is a program designed to lure this country into acting as forward base for the same American military-industrial-Congressional- NSA/espionage-carceral complex. Above all, we can be sure their program does not use our best interests as either the starting point or the goal. The US acts only in its own best interests.

The problem we face is that, in our many parliaments, our Big End of Town and all the other power centres, there are probably only a handful of people of reasonable intellect, reasonable education and reasonable common sense, who are acting in good faith in the interests of this nation. And I certainly believe this situation is going to get a lot worse before it gets better.