

Submission

Inquiry into the future of the US-Australian Defence Alliance

by International Volunteers for Peace, Incorporated

“Asia says no to NATO” is the title of an article by Kishore Mahbubani appearing in the June 25 issue of The Straits Times. It follows his book “*Has The West Lost It? and Has China Won?*” It provides a simple but eloquent argument for a counter course for our country to follow, free of geopolitical moralisms and relativisms, and of the oppressive myopic stasis in our foreign policy.

It is for all that tangential to the topic, making no direct reference to US - Australian relations; and hinging its arguments on maintaining a war footing for the duration of ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union and beyond, and locking in all countries in the western bloc to a belligerent pact, to be played out on and over neutral territory.

Mahbubani reduces the geopolitical narrative of the current generation of power brokers to a single juxtaposition:

just in the past 20 years, Western powers have dropped 326,000 bombs in the greater Middle East/North Africa region. This total amounts to an average of 46 bombs dropped per day over the past 20 years. By contrast, the total number of bombs dropped in inter-state conflicts in East Asia in the past 20 years is: ZERO!

He pleads for a counter alliance of those Pacific nations to condemn this means of resolving conflicts, citing the record of countries in our region - by no means peace loving or respectful of each others rights - able nevertheless to co-exist without disintegrating into the bombing wars that have marked NATO interventions, post break up of the Soviet Union.

Does Australia want to be trapped in a misbegotten freak of geography, with a pact drawn up on a destroyer in the middle of the Atlantic, designed to reduce the influence of the Soviet Union in Europe? Is there some advantage in being labelled ‘western’?

Can we turn our native talents, from offering the most admired infantry on battle grounds not of our choosing in proxy wars achieving little but the destruction of goodwill; to a nation proud of its ability to contribute proportionally to a common pacific future?. Do we build bridges over the Mekong, move easily among farmers and teachers, scientists and lawyers, doctors and technicians, emergency workers and sustainability experts of our region, sharing experience we all will need to strengthen the governance of our respective and joint polities?

As for Singapore, modern Australia is a product of empire. Outside our perimeter of influence we fight in empire wars still. We are vulnerable to being drawn into new ones so long as we cower from the heaving mass of humanity we perceive all around us and cling to a plastic culture that speaks our language and hides us from the fragility of a material civilisation. The pandemic and our treatment of asylum seekers shows our civility is thinner than we would think.

International voluntary service - building a secure (indo-)pacific future

International voluntary service (IVS) is alive and well throughout our region; it is not government sponsored or directed; it is not based on saving souls or rescuing the poor from their poverty, or creating customers for our products and our expertise. It is based on deepening the civility in all of us - on respecting our host who will have gone to some lengths to accommodate us; on getting along with strangers, if only for a short period; on doing what is asked where it is within our capability; in being prepared to learn and accept that our contribution is welcome but any satisfaction tempered by the insight that our efforts are a small event in the life of communities whose situation may be locked into larger realities.

From this exercise in civility though there are seeds that can make a difference: short-term workcamps bring together people with opposing world views in contested places. They are places where the possibility of peaceful co-existence can be tossed around, not as a doctrine but in the pragmatics of everyday experience..

IVS began a century ago, with the founding of SCI*, and has been building this window of possibility ever since; it has changed the lives of participants - even though there is no such promise in the contract. It can allow us to ask where the bombs originate even as we can see the damage they have rendered on the ground - not just to buildings and infrastructure, but to lives and social institutions, contributing to years of anger and distress, and damage to forests, and waterways, fields and orchards, livelihoods and natural ecosystems..

Through IVS many ordinary Australians have enriched their experiences of the wider world, established lasting connections with people and places culturally far removed from these shores. Some will have been inspired to deepen their commitments to one or the other of the big causes of our time; for others it will be just one of the sign posts in a full life. The last thing an ivs experience is is a conscious moral statement. Working and living with other people on a common task and for a clearly stated purpose - perhaps no grander than repairing a drain, or animating a group of disabled children, or as waste patrol for a music festival - gives time to reflect on everyday values in our lives as passive citizens within a familiar cultural sphere.

What it supplies is an antidote to the bi-polarism and cultural hierarchies of a politics of fear. IVS is an experience of active citizenship that can lessen the fear of the future beyond our shores; can build a secure sense of self based on confidence in being in the world, that will be essential if Australia is one day to join its pacific neighbours, forswear military belligerence, work in solidarity on common problems and look each other in the eye and across the table on matters of conflict without losing from sight our, or their, humanity.

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Reference: <https://mahbubani.net/asia-say-no-to-nato-the-straits-times/>

- Service Civil International was founded in the aftermath of the first world war, bringing volunteer workers from both sides together in the task of rebuilding ruined villages in the neighbourhood of Verdun. Presently there are 41 affiliated branches initiating peace actions across lines of conflict - in the Middle east or Ukraine, the Balkans; and the subcontinent -; or responding to natural disasters and reconciliation post conflict in Asia and the Pacific. Its model has been taken up by newer networks of organisations in Africa north, east and south-east Asia and Indonesia. The broad spectrum of IVS organisations are represented in the Coordinating Committee of International Voluntary Service, affiliated with Unesco. SCI continues to play a leading role in CCIVS, while

recognising the vitality of the network growth, and sharing facilities with these organisations. All are run for and by volunteers on participatory principles.

Addendum

IVP is a branch (full member) in the SCI network, 100 years old last year. It supports opportunities for voluntary service across borders where that service is towards community run and centred projects. It identifies, as does SCI throughout its history, with the peace movement. Its perspective is at the scale of the individual taking time - typically 2-3 weeks, but down to weekend, and incorporating medium term (up to 6 months) and longer term placements - to work for a community on a defined task.

The workcamp comprises volunteers from abroad responding to a placement notice circulated globally, a leader from the host country branch (or in their absence a leader from among the group of volunteers) who liaises with the host community representative on behalf of the group, and is the link to the local SCI branch sponsoring or coordinating the camp.

The arrangements are entirely flexible but within the overall principles of building peace on the ground and supporting cultural exchange while having regard to volunteer welfare and respect for local arrangements, and open to volunteer and host participation and discussion around all aspects of the experience.

Hand in hand with Camps that IVP has organised are IVP's partnerships with communities that last well beyond one camp. For travelling Australians looking for meaningful engagement en route, IVP offers a portal to camps run in other branches of SCI, or by organisations in partner IVS networks.

The nature of work on an IVS camp is broad; typically not peacemaking as such but by virtue of timing and theme will offer participants insight into lives and motivations of others, sharing with strangers often basic conditions that apply locally, and confronted with entirely fresh outlook on life.

IVP's role - its modest resources directed to - is in opening ordinary people to themselves and their potential to change, and to the world beyond their borders - whether political, cultural or geographical - to the reality of conflict and injustice or simply circumstantial need experienced in communities abroad, to act on - not simply talk about - peaceful futures.

In reality volunteers have a spectrum of motivations, only a minor proportion would be purely altruistic; not every experience will be life changing - the offer does not guarantee much beyond having board and lodging assured for duration.

As an organisation we have built up long term commitments to communities providing volunteers as required. Through these partnerships we have worked in a variety of settings, in a number of roles, typically behind a movement or community isolated from mainstream sources of support.

We are conscious of strengths and vulnerability of citizen actions. If finding common ground across cultural, historical, social and political difference is a commonplace at this level it too can become the norm for Australia in its relations within its region and among the community of West Pacific and Indian Ocean nations, without recourse to obsolete defence umbrellas.

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