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Is an Independent Defence Policy Likely to be Achieved?

This submission suggests that, regardless of desirability, progress towards an independent defence policy is doubtful because Australians are unlikely to accept the associated collective financial and cultural costs.

The Inquiry *Background Sheet 5* reflects consistent public support for an Australian alliance strategy since before 1901, a view currently endorsed by both major parties. It would appear that throughout this time the Australian voting public have never so disapproved of the costs of servicing an alliance strategy as to contemplate ending it. It is significant that while survey data suggests that the majority of Australians opposed participating in the invasion of Iraq, the Howard government was subsequently re-elected despite having ignored that sentiment.

As the background sheet identifies, an independent defence policy must be militarily credible to be supported by public opinion. Military credibility against what purpose is the key question? Answers will likely range from an optimistic minimum required to deter actual invasion at one end of the scale, through the capacity to deter coercive behaviour against Australia's land and maritime territory, interests and dependent allies, all the way to a level of independent suasive power on the other. These answers will also be heavily influenced by ideology and world-view - in other words they will ultimately be political.

Fortunately, political realities may offer a resolution to what 'military credibility' might mean for our purposes. A proposal to withdraw from the alliance would presumably be politically opposed. The most powerful argument against withdrawing is the loss of what the United States currently provides Australia. This is not only the arguably uncertain but unquestionably massive military force that the United States might apply to defend Australia's interests. It also includes access to multi-domain military technologies and intelligence capabilities. More controversially, while the question of whether the US would use nuclear weapons to defend Australia cannot be resolved, currently an adversary must consider that it is at least a remote possibility. It would appear that a 'militarily credible' policy would be one that a political opponent could not easily portray as resulting in Australia being manifestly less able to defend itself or its key interests.

The challenge this poses is that at no time since 1901 has Australia planned to be entirely self-reliant. It has successfully managed with a very small defence force relative to the size of the continent and its waters precisely because it did not have to provide for defending alone against the most demanding and least likely threat scenarios, particularly invasion or blockade. Although there have been periods when the physical defence of Australia has been emphasised, neither the military capability to do so nor, more importantly, the military culture required, was ever developed. The ADF remains expeditionary in character. Whether or not an independent defence policy should be formally neutral or not is a separate issue, however the defence planning of armed and neutral nations is a useful guide.

The past suggests that under conditions of conflict, neutrality is only credible if backed by substantial military force and requisite attitudes. The contrast in outcomes between Belgium and the Netherlands on the one hand and Sweden and Switzerland on the other during WWII is clear. Observers should not underestimate the cultural component. Switzerland did not arrive at neutrality by peaceful consensus. It evolved from accommodating a tradition of mercenary service and the legacy of bitter civil wars. Territorial integrity in both world wars was at least partly sustained by the Swiss defiant determination to destroy all their infrastructure, abandon their wives and children and

go to the mountains intending to kill as many invaders as possible before they themselves died. This latter determination did not disappear in the Cold War, although the Swiss did build shelters for non-combatants in every house in the country. They did not remove the demolition explosives from the bridges into the country until 2014. Paradoxically, Switzerland is both peaceful and militaristic. Swedish attitudes are similar - and both appear very different from the archetypal relaxed, sports loving Australian.

A credible independent defence policy needs first to field the capability to not only make the cost of invasion prohibitive, but also deter blockade or coercive action towards Australia's offshore resources, territories and PNG. Invasion may be deterred by defensive systems and platforms, however the size of Navy required to confidently and independently defeat a blockade or eject a hostile fishing or oil exploration expedition is probably unachievable. It follows that a deterrent system, such as a submarine force able to sink an adversary's merchant fleet is a more cost-effective approach. Alternatively, and if it were prepared to yield maritime sovereignty, the country might restructure its economy and build stockpiles so that it could survive despite a blockade. However, in any event, the ADF would also need to replace key elements of the intelligence and communications systems that it currently shares with United States, including space-based platforms.

There is a variety of work that might be used as the basis for developing models of a future independent defence policy. David Martin's work advocating armed neutrality for Australia[i], Paul Dibb's ideas from the 1986 review under the paradigm of defence Australia[ii] and Ross Babbage's[iii] various works looking at strategic self-sufficiency are a good starting point. Albert Palazzo's work is particularly pertinent[iv]. Before too much effort is invested in this direction, we should reflect on the 'political' measure of credibility - Australia not being substantially less able to defend itself than it is within the alliance. While there might be huge debate about the details of what is required to meet this threshold, it seems clear that a substantial expansion of the ADF and defence industry will be required. Indeed, withdrawing from the US alliance in a time of increasing tension would likely demand urgent and large-scale change.

The criticism of or opposition towards the US alliance largely comes from what may be described as the progressive side of politics. Their views and the sentiment expressed on the website of 'independent and peaceful Australia' would appear to be at odds with the increased financial and social investment in implementing a self-reliant defence policy. Furthermore, the culture and mythology of the Australian military is expeditionary. During the 'Defence of Australia' period in the 1980s there was deep resentment within the Army towards a 'defensive role' that seemed inconsistent with aspiration and self-image. This attitude would likely re-emerge as professional, well-informed and probably publicly trusted opposition to leaving the alliance.

Is an independent Australian defence policy technically and militarily feasible? Yes: doubtless many credible models could be developed. Is an independent Australian defence policy, fielding a stronger ADF that is not open to highly unfavourable comparisons with the current alliance, politically and culturally feasible? This seems doubtful.

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[i] https://mapw.org.au/files/downloads/Armed-Neutrality_David-Martin.pdf
[ii] http://www.defence.gov.au/oscdf/se/publications/defreview/1986/Review-of-Australias-Defence-Capabilities-1986.pdf
[iii] https://kokodafoundation.wildapricot.org/Resources/Documents/KP15StrategicEdge.pdf ALSO https://kokodafoundation.wildapricot.org/page-1858573
[iv] http://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2018-12/cog_45.pdf