

SUBMISSION

to

Exploring the Case for an Independent & Peaceful Australia

by

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SUMMARY

In response to IPAN's *A People's Enquiry* I submit that the political, economic and environmental strategic imperatives for Australia are for our government to pursue policies which enhance our independence of rhetoric and action in the multilateral context in which we, as a country, now find ourselves.

CONTEXT

The past five years have seen dramatic changes to the various aspects to the regional and international contexts facing Australia. These contexts include the political, economic, environmental and health.

On the political front, we face a world of increasing repolarisation between global major powers. The Cold War decades provided substantial evidence of the risks posed to humanity by the tension fostered by the then major power blocs – the Western alliance and the Soviet bloc. The Berlin Wall may have fallen but we still live with the legacy of that polarisation as evidenced by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and as reported on page 13 of the *Weekend Australian* of 7-8 August. In that report by Alan Dupont, National Security Editor, opened with this statement: 'There are worrying signs that the world is on the brink of a new nuclear arms race'. According to SIPRI the US nuclear weapons stockpile amounts to 5,550 and that of Russia to 6,255, with 1,326 shared between another seven countries (UK, France, Israel, DPRK, Pakistan, India and China). The substantial re-orientation of global polarisation away from the US-Russia axis to a US-China one, will undoubtedly see pressure for the US stockpile of such weapons to grow and to be matched by a significant increase in such weaponry in the Chinese stockpile.

On the economic front, rapid globalisation has seen dramatic shifts in the trade profile of major powers. In the May-June issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Gordon Hanson wrote that, between 2000 and 2011, US share of global manufacturing exports slumped from 14% to 8.6%, a figure which would have continued to deteriorate over the past decade. By contrast, over the period 1990 to 2015, China's share of such exports grew from 2.8% to 18.5%. Inadequate attention paid by governments in Western democracies to the domestic employment consequences of this dramatic shift has led to a surge of political reaction that has had particularly xenophobic overtones. Such xenophobia has seen many governments seek political safety in inflammatory rhetoric about the perceived pretensions of the 'other' side in the global economy.

On the environmental front, the issues of climate change and general pollution have received growing public attention. Just this past week, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported that the Earth's temperature will rise by 1.5°C by the mid-2030s, with devastating consequences globally but with disproportionate impact likely to be felt by the most marginal sections of the world's population. While in terms of general pollution, great ocean garbage patches (or gyres) have been observed in five locations in the world's oceans; concerning as they are in

current circumstances, more serious is the spectre of the oceans of the globe containing more plastic than fish biomass by 2050.

Finally, on the health front, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every nation on the planet and all but one continent. Official figures, considered underestimates, have identified more than 208 million cases since January 2020, and more than 4.3 million deaths (ref: www.worldometers.info). Tragic as these current figures are, the pandemic is a long way from completing its devastating cycle; but more seriously is the considered belief of epidemiologists around world that COVID-19 arose in a set of circumstances which could later give rise to a much more devastating Disease X.

OPTIONS FOR AUSTRALIA

Each of these contexts will require Australian governments of the future to respond. There are two contrasting options as to how those responses might be framed. The first is one premised on a strategic alliance with either of the two dominant superpowers; the second is one that seeks a national response not constrained by alliance but rather judiciously seeking to optimise effective actions to redress problems and minimise rather than aggravate international tensions. It is the contention of this submission that the latter approach is the most appropriate for Australia both for its own national interests but also for global well-being. What follows is argument in support of that contention.

A NATIONAL OPTION FREE OF THE CONSTRAINT OF ALLIANCE

At the outset, it is not only understood that Australia should seek good relations with major powers and that historic experience suggests that such relations might well be stronger with one power than another. Yet, the danger is that 'good relations' can morph into problematic obligations whose direct and collateral costs may far exceed the perceived benefits. The experience of strategic obligations which drew us into unfortunate international conflicts over the decades – VietNam, Iraq and Afghanistan – for example cost this country dearly without any significant net benefit that wasn't experienced by other western governments which chose not to follow such involvement.

On the political front, in his recent book *Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change*, Jared Diamond has written about Finland's deft and strategic management of their geographical location (next to the Soviet bloc) in the context of their political foundation (liberal democracy), a policy known as 'Finlandization' which was criticised by some in the West as being collaborationist and yet enabled Finland to preserve and prosper their democracy and general societal well-being. The task ahead for Australia in a world where there is growing tension between the West and China, is to carve out a space that retains our societal core values of democracy and equality, yet does so in a manner which would be sustainable in any number of future geo-political scenarios which might develop regionally and/or internationally.

On the economic front, apart from obvious need for our national governments to respond more sensitively to the frustrations of the domestic electorate which have paid a higher price for globalisation than the benefits they received, there is also a need for our government to be proactive in international discussions to promote fairer international trade structures. Australia's leadership of the so-called Cairns Group during the Uruguay Round of negotiations on agricultural trade under the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, provided a powerful precedent for how Australia might choose to play an international role regarding globalisation which is not beholden to any strategic obligations to either super-power.

On the environment front, the glacial progress in achieving some degree of international accord on the imperatives for action to mitigate the impacts of climate change and growing levels of pollution has largely been because the international debate has been dominated by a polarised narrative that has been inflamed by hyper-nationalism. Instead, what is needed is to remove the debate from such hyper-nationalism into the realm of altruistic self-interest where countries may feel comfortable to yield and trade-off in return for comparative moves by other countries. Walk-outs from international fora such as the Paris Accords (even if they are followed by Walk-back-ins) have not helped; constructive discussions behind the scenes have – and here Australia has the opportunity to perform beyond its comparative size.

Finally, on the health front, the well-being of the world's population requires that we move away from blame-gaming. COVID-19's progress has been enhanced by such activity, humanity's has not. We have been facing an international problem with this pandemic, not a multilateral one; thus Australia should seek to be part of an international response not a multilateral one. That response should have elements of prevention as much as containment; prevention requires broad access by all nations to adequate supplies of vaccine unfettered by bloc obligations that might tend to skew that access.

THE DISCOURSE PROCESS

Implicit in my contentions has been a style of discourse in promoting the option of international engagement that is, as stated above, 'not constrained by alliance but rather judiciously seeking to optimise effective actions to redress problems and minimise rather than aggravate international tensions'. The achievement of this option requires a commitment by our government to conciliatory and constructive discourse processes such as offered by the fora of the United Nations and its agencies in preference to binding bilateral arrangements. It is true that both international and bilateral processes are asymmetric inasmuch as the balance of power between Australia as an entity and the other partner (multinational or major power) does not lie in our favour; however, in the former all participants are to varying degrees in a similar position of relative disempowerment, while in the latter, our own weakness is complementary to the other's strength. Imperfect as the UN and its agencies have often been found to be, it is nevertheless the case that such international bodies have a better track record in problem resolution than that of bilateral obligations when acting in third party situations. Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter provides for an international responsibility to 'restore international peace and security' under Security Council direction; it also provides for 'uniting for peace' resolutions under direction of the General Assembly. This contrasts with bilateral obligations which have, in many recent instances, triggered engagement in international crises that have been inherently deeply flawed; as evidenced by the tragic events now unfolding in Afghanistan.

Australia would do much better therefore to play above its weight by using these international forces, such as it did in Interfet in Timor Leste, rather than through bilateral obligations such as in Iraq and Afghanistan.