

Nick Deane

Australia – The Safe Continent.

Summary

- Australia is a safe place and is not threatened with attack.
- Fear of attack is deeply rooted in the Australian psyche and has led us to rely on great powers for defence.
- The only thing that might make Australia the subject of any possible attack is its involvement with the USA.
- Therefore, as a matter of military strategy, it is entirely counter-productive for Australia to be deeply entrenched within the military network centred on the USA.

Military Strategy basics.

In considering the strategic and military defence of any country, first considerations must include the geographical features that provide natural defences, and an assessment of any likely threats.

Australia is an island; its political borders are defined by water on every side. Because of this simple geographical fact, it is extremely safe from any serious attack or invasion – meaning an attack with the objective of over-running the country and subjugating its people. The likelihood of Australia ever being invaded again is vanishingly small.

For any such invasion or attack would require the attacker to cross a considerable expanse of water. The logistical difficulties of getting across water and maintaining supplies sufficient for conducting an invasion are, for all practical purposes, insurmountable. That the First Australians lived here, undisturbed, for 50,000 years is testament to this. The fact that the Japanese empire, at the height of its power, dismissed the idea of invading Australia out of hand, only emphasises the point¹. (Currently, this, same absence of land borders is providing Australia with 'defence' against the Covid19 pandemic.)

The wider the stretch of water to be crossed, the greater the logistical difficulties faced in any military operation. Despite many military threats, the English Channel has proved sufficiently wide to protect the British Isles from any invasion since 1066. Even the crossing of the River Rhine caused significant delay to the Allies' advance across Europe during WW2.

Any island is a good place to defend; a place capable of repelling attack. (The appreciation that their home bases were inherently safe from the attacks of other nations may have been a factor in the growth and strength of the empires of Britain and Japan, both being island nations. No-one could 'get at' them where it counted, which gave them the confidence to engage with others, militarily, elsewhere.)

Furthermore, Australia is not just any island. It is the largest island in the world. As such, it has abundant resources. It is a net exporter of food-stuffs (i.e. it produces more than enough for the domestic population). It has vast mineral resources. It has a growing, sophisticated, well-educated and resourceful population. And the entire continent is under the control of a single government. In the extremely unlikely event of an attack, the resources of the nation could and would be mobilised by the central government and the nation could be secured.

It is impossible to imagine any nation reckless enough to give passing thought, let alone serious consideration, to the idea of launching an attack on this continent. Taking into account the practical

difficulties of conveying and maintaining a military force sufficient to the task, and including the resourceful resistance that such an adventure would undoubtedly encounter, the very idea is absurd.

Objectively, Australia is one of the very safest places on Earth; one of the places least likely ever to have to endure invasion. However, rational consideration of this fundamental point has been neglected, or only given very slight attention, by those who have had responsibility for deciding Australia's defence strategy. If a proper and objective understanding of Australia's inherent safety was the starting-point for deciding its military stance, that stance should be quite distinct from the one that can be seen today.

The character of Australia's military stance

"And as we're professional puddin'-owners," said Bill, "we have to fight them on principle.." (The Magic Pudding. Norman Lindsay)

Like Bill Barnacle, it seems to be a matter of principle that Australia involves itself in fighting. Since WW2 Australians have fought in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq (twice) and Syria.

There are features common to each of these conflicts. In every case the country in which the action took place:-

- had no common border with Australia;
- was a considerable distance away from Australia;
- had not attacked Australia;
- posed no threat to Australia, and
- was probably incapable of attacking or even threatening Australia;

By no stretch of the imagination was Australia under any sort of military threat. So only through convoluted argument could Australia have been said to be acting in self-defence, in any valid sense of the word.

Incidentally, in these conflicts:-

- none have resulted in a clear 'victory';
- what might constitute victory has not been defined;
- agendas have been obscure (and characterised by falsehoods and lies);
- UN approval has often been absent, and
- there has been resultant, unnecessary loss of life.

There is one further, common feature. For in each of the engagements the major participant and proponent in the action has been the USA. Australia only became involved as a direct consequence of the involvement of the USA. Had the USA not engaged, Australia would not have.

Being a follower of the USA is the defining characteristic of Australia's military strategy. Indeed, voices from within what might be termed 'the Australian Defence Establishment' repeatedly emphasise the significance of the alliance between the USA and Australia. The alliance is described as the 'cornerstone' of Australia's defence. This is the establishment's 'received wisdom'.

This approach rests on the fear that the nation is not as safe as its geography tells us it in fact is. It rests on the belief that a powerful ally is needed to protect us from some (unspecified) threat. Australian leaders appear to view the alliance as some sort of guarantee of safety; even as some sort of insurance, for which Australia must continue to pay a regular premium – by joining conflicts chosen by the USA. Alternatively, this arrangement could be compared to a 'protection racket', under which Australia is threatened with repercussions, if it does not go along with the USA's lead.

Evidently, those in power in Australia therefore feel the need to keep the relationship with the USA as strong and close as possible. We hear expressions like “shoulder to shoulder” and “joined at the hip” and great emphasis is placed on the length of time that the relationship has endured (as if this is a sufficient reason for it to continue forever). With each passing AUSMIN conference the alliance is ‘enhanced’ in some way, bringing the armed forces of the two nations closer and closer to complete integration.

This strategy, of almost complete alignment with the USA, bears no discernable and direct relationship to Australia’s actual defensive needs. It does not take proper and objective account of Australia’s inherent safety. Successive Defence White Papers have given this aspect mere passing reference:-

- “Today Australia is one of the most physically secure countries in the world.” (2009)²
- “...a direct armed attack on Australia remains unlikely...” (2013)³ and
- “...there is no more than a remote prospect of a military attack by another country on Australian territory in the foreseeable future...” (2016)⁴.

There is a persistent failure to recognise the great, inherent, strategic strength granted Australia by its geography.

What might be behind this phenomenon? A tradition of fear is suggested.

A Tradition of Fear

From 1788 Britain established colonial outposts in Australia, firstly as a means for disposing of unwanted segments of society. At the time, these outposts were, indeed, small and vulnerable. During the period of this initial colonisation, Britain, the mother country, was constantly at war (mainly with its rival France) and the early settlement could conceivably have been over-run by the French. (“We came here and took over this place – ‘They’ could do the exactly same thing that we did...”). This being the situation, some fear was understandable, justifiable and appropriate.

The protection that the early colonisers felt the need for was provided by the mother country, whose power then expanded greatly through the 19th century. As this process went on, any actual threat to its colonies in Australia receded. However, it quite possibly served the commercial interests of the mother country to maintain the perception that its protection was available and needed – as this facilitated the transfer of wealth ‘back home’. It is arguable that fear that the colonies in Australia might come under attack, whether or not that was actually the case, served the interests of the British power elite.

Consequently, it is contended that fear of invasion became entrenched within the shared culture of the early colonies. This fear had its roots in the time when there was real vulnerability and it persisted, through simple, ‘social inertia’ – the tendency for cultural features to change only very slowly – and through being fostered by those in power at the time.

In the early 20th century, great power rivalry necessitated a boost in British troop numbers so, again, there was an interest in emphasising the threat to the empire – in this case the threat being posed by Germany. This resonated with the established fear within ‘British’ Australia – that it might come under attack. It resulted in Australia’s enthusiastically joining WW1. Australia feared an attack by some imagined, alien enemy and it also feared losing the protection of the mother country.

In the period between the wars (the time of the White Australia policy), the idea of ‘The Yellow Peril’ was popular. China’s population was known to be vastly greater than Australia’s and the fear was that Australia could easily be over-run. Fear of China replaced fear of Germany or Turkey and remained a feature of the era.

During the Second World War, it finally became clear that reliance on British protection was specious, making the fear of invasion more intense. Little wonder, then, that after Pearl Harbour, the idea that Japan might invade took hold.

Peter Stanley has suggested that this fear (despite the advice, from military officials, that no Japanese invasion was ever planned) might have been fanned because of its propaganda value; it helped mobilise the nation for the general war effort. But Stanley observes that "...the invasion myth has a life of its own"⁵. To this day, many Australians believe that a Japanese invasion was only narrowly averted and that America is to be thanked for this. The perception that the USA saved Australia still has currency. This perception, however, also relies on the persistence of the fear that the nation could conceivably have been invaded, ignoring the nation's inherent, natural safety.

For their part, American military strategists could see that Australia was a 'safe haven' from which they could launch counter-attacks on Japanese-held territory, so it was in their best interests to nurture the myth of Japanese invasion. Just as it had served British interests to do so, it served the USA's military interests (and, coincidentally, also its commercial interests) to maintain the idea that Australia was weak, vulnerable, in danger of attack - and therefore in need of protection.

Through 'social inertia', this notion of weakness and need is widespread and persistent. Fear is a significant feature of the current Australian psyche and runs counter to any objective assessment of the actual, military situation. The nation could be said to suffer from an 'inferiority complex'.

Australia is very safe and in no danger of attack. Indeed, with the growth in its population since colonial times and with technological improvements over that period (such as sophisticated internal communications systems), it is probably safer than it has ever been.

It is contended that the fear that underlies Australia's military position, having no objective basis, is irrational.

Today

Today, the USA feels its interests threatened by the rise of China. The USA is intolerant of any perceived threat to its presumed primacy and clearly now views China as a potential enemy⁶. It serves the interests of the USA's 'power elite' to sustain the idea that China is a malevolent force within Australia's immediate region (disregarding the actual distance between the two nations).

Great emphasis is placed on China's fortification of islands in the South China Sea, and the possible threat to international trade this could imply. This is a point of view that ignores the fact that most shipping routes between Australia and China (particularly those to Australia's Eastern seaboard) do not pass through the South China Sea, but go to the East of the Philippines. (Interestingly, a map illustrating this very point appears in the 2013 Defence White Paper⁷). Reports on this particular issue also ignore the defensive nature of China's actions. China has a definite and strong interest in keeping the SCS sea-lanes open to trade - whereas, in the event of any serious confrontation between China and the USA, it is the USA, not China, that would benefit from disrupting sea traffic in a blockade.

In this regard it is worth mentioning that reports of the fortification of natural outcrops in the South China Sea first began to appear in 2013 - more than a year after US President Obama's 2011 announcement of the USA's pivot to the Asia/Pacific.

It must also be noted that the idea of Australia being a 'supportive sanctuary' from which to launch military activity in SE Asia still has currency with American military intellectuals⁸. Hence, no doubt, the USA's enthusiasm for stationing troops in Darwin; its pleasure at the extension of the runway at Tindal (to accommodate large bombers), and the recent announcement of establishing fuel depots in an around Darwin⁹.

What is clear is that, based probably on its WW2 experience, America can see military advantage in having a toe-hold on Australian territory - and that this is facilitated by placing emphasis on the supposed 'threat' from China.

Despite protestations from Australia's current Prime Minister, that Australia is not choosing sides in a binary competition, this is precisely what is happening, if it has not already happened. According to Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments "Australia has already crossed this strategic Rubicon"¹⁰. John Mearsheimer (American academic and strategist) has uttered direct threats to Australia, if it does not side with America in its rivalry with China¹¹. The indications are that the Australian populace, and its leaders in particular, will continue to fear invasion; continue to believe that it needs American protection, and, consequently, continue to support the deepening and enhancement of the alliance with the USA.

The irony, as the late Malcolm Fraser pointed out, is that the only situation in which Australia might find itself in any danger is because of its alliance with the USA¹². If hostilities break out between the USA and China, as things stand, it is very clear that Australia will support the USA, at least by allowing its territory to be used for the USA's military purposes. With US marines routinely stationed in Darwin and with a significant USA-controlled intelligence facility in Pine Gap, Australia could not now avoid doing so. For this reason, and for this reason alone, Australia could sustain some sort of local attack (but still not a full invasion) for example, a missile attack on Pine Gap.

Conclusion

A failure to recognise Australia's inherent safety coupled with a persistent culture of fear of attack, that has its roots in the early days of the colony, have led Australia into an alliance with the USA that actually places the nation in greater danger than it need ever be. The alliance with the USA is counter-productive, in terms of Australia's security.

References

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