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Queen Elizabeth I and the MRF-D.

Words spoken by Elizabeth I of England have relevance to contemporary events. On August 9th, 1588, as a Spanish Armada approached, she addressed troops gathered at Tilbury, near London. Her speech opened with the following words:- "We have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery..."<sup>1</sup>

Mao Tse Tung puts a similar idea more succinctly:- "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."<sup>2</sup>

In a famous essay, sociologist Max Weber argued that the state gives itself, alone, the right to use or authorize the use of physical force. This is widely regarded as a defining characteristic of the modern state. "... we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."<sup>3</sup>

These examples illustrate of a fundamental principle of government:- that it is essential to the ordered running and security of the State, that the government in power maintains monopoly control over all the violence that takes place within its sphere of governance. This is axiomatic. It defines the government's realm. It also explains why the civilian governments of democratic nations always insist that they exert legitimate authority over any and all military forces within their borders.

If Elizabeth I was concerned that an 'armed multitude' of her own countrymen could threaten her authority, how much more concerned might she have been about an armed multitude of foreigners? One might infer that she would have been utterly dismayed! For, by definition, such an armed multitude of foreigners, presumably answering to some foreign monarch, would have been completely beyond her control and thus a far greater potential threat.

Out of this basic principle, nations maintain their own, distinct military forces, separate from those of other nations. Not necessarily out of 'fear of treachery' is this principle maintained, even if treachery were one, possible, ultimate outcome. It is more a simple matter of prudence. The prudent government ensures that all military forces within its borders remain constantly under its command and does not permit any departure from this. In general, then, nations do not allow foreign forces on their territory, their presence either indicating open hostility or introducing unnecessary tension. So long as foreign forces are present, there is the possibility that they might (under orders from abroad) do something, whether slight or significant, that is contrary to the host nation's best interests. Prudence maintains the general principle of keeping foreign forces out.

There are, of course, exceptions to this generality. For example, alliances can be formed between nations. But even in such situations the armies of each nation remain under the command of their respective governments. In an emergency, one nation may call on the assistance of a second, allied country to protect it from a third. In this situation, foreign forces may, indeed, be present in a host country's territory – but usually on the understanding that they will return home once the emergency has passed.

On the other hand, foreign forces may be an 'occupying force', following colonisation or war between nations. For example the armed forces of Britain were present in India and Africa for many years. Following wars, the USA still has forces in Germany, Japan, South Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan (and elsewhere).

In contemporary Australia, though, we have a situation that stands entirely outside both the general principle and these exceptions.

For elusive reasons, that have never been clearly laid out, in 2011 Australia and the USA agreed to the routine stationing of US marines in Darwin. There was no public debate beforehand; there was no emergency (and is none, yet); no hostility; no conquest, and no colonisation. However, the basic principle of 'taking heed to how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes' was breached. Australia now has an established routine in which a multitude of 2,500 armed foreigners are stationed in the Northern Territory.

The Australian Federal government has foresaken one of the defining features of governing. It is now no longer in full control of all the armed forces within its borders. The US marines in Darwin (the Marine Rotational Force – Darwin, or MRF-D) take their orders from the Pentagon in Washington, USA, through the US Marine chain of command. The MRF-D is not under Australian control. There is no suggestion that this force may commit 'treachery' in the form of a direct threat to Australian sovereignty. It is not likely to attack any Australian installation, for example. However, there remains the possibility that it might, on orders from Washington, do something contrary to Australian interests. Their presence has the potential to damage Australia's reputation and could even place Australia's security under threat, directly or indirectly.

America's international reputation deteriorated during the presidency of Donald Trump. Through the presence of the MRF-D, which is so very indicative of the closeness of the military ties between the USA and Australia, Australia's international reputation has already suffered damage.

There are, however, far more serious aspects to be considered, for example the following, hypothetical scenario:-

It is now abundantly clear that the USA considers China as a potential enemy. Indeed, the possibility of actual conflict between the two nations appears to come closer as time progresses. There are several, possible flashpoints<sup>4</sup>.

In the event of open hostilities breaking out, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that the MRF-D might be ordered to, for example, engage in some attempt to dislodge Chinese forces from their fortified installations in the South China Sea. Whilst hypothetical, it is stressed that this is not beyond the realms of possibility. Whether such an event were to transpire or not, in the event of hostilities, there can be no doubt that China would also consider this a possibility, and it could well react in a militarily logical manner. China might take military action to prevent or forestall the engagement of the MRF-D.

Therefore, the presence of the MRF-D makes an attack upon it, on Australian territory, also a possibility. The ramifications of this scenario are, of course, huge.

What was negotiated between the two nations before the 2011 announcement has not been revealed. However, the USA is a nation with a reputation for belligerence. That it sees military advantage in positioning military assets on Australian territory is beyond doubt<sup>5</sup>. This makes it likely that Australia came under pressure to allow the MRF-D to be formed. For its part, Australia has a reputation for following the USA's lead in matters military and was probably quite willing to establish the MRF-D. The point to be made, however, is that the military/strategic benefits of the arrangement accrue to the USA. Beyond improving 'interoperability' (if that is in fact beneficial), there is no significant, strategic benefit to Australia.

The 'rotational' nature of the presence is of no consequence. There is a minor presence all the year round, in any case. Besides, should international developments dictate, there is little doubt that the marines' presence could quickly shift from rotational to permanent.

Having foreign forces, American forces in particular, based on Australian territory is anything but prudent. Through its failure to adopt the common prudence that governments have known since at

least 1588, it is placing Australia at some risk. It puts a chink in the nation's armour. The risk may not be immediate – but it is here, and it need not be with us at all. The presence of the MRF-D does not serve Australia's best interests. As the late Malcolm Fraser has told us, the USA is, indeed, a dangerous ally<sup>6</sup>.

1. Elizabeth 1. Tilbury Speech, 1588. Found at <https://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/queen-elizabeth-i-speech-troops-tilbury>

2. Mao Tse Tung. 'Problems of War and Strategy', 1938. Found at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch05.htm>

3. Max Weber. 'Politics as a Vocation', 1919. Found at <https://www2.southeastern.edu/Academics/Faculty/jbell/weber.pdf>

4. Brendan Taylor. 'The Four Flashpoints, how Asia goes to War', 2018.

5. For example:- Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) "Gateway to the Indo-Pacific", 2013. Viewed at <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/gateway-to-the-indo-pacific-australian-defense-strategy-and-the-future-of-t/publication/1>

6. Malcolm Fraser. 'Dangerous Allies', 2014.