



June 2008

Why the American alliance should *not* be the holy grail of Australian foreign policy

Dennis Phillips, The University of Sydney

Nothing in Australian politics basks in a warmer, bipartisan glow than the Australian-American alliance (ANZUS). For more than a half century now—and 67 years after a Labor Prime Minister famously declared, ‘Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom’ (Curtin 1941)—the American alliance remains the absolute bedrock of the nation’s foreign policy.

It matters not which political party commands a majority in the Australian parliament or whether Australia is led by the ‘man of steel’ (John Howard, 1996–2007), or by ‘My name is Kevin and I’m here to help’ (Kevin Rudd, 2007–), Australia’s loyalty to ANZUS is paramount and unquestioned. As Alan Renouf, former Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, noted long ago, the American alliance has entrenched itself as ‘the equivalent of the Bible in foreign relations’ (Renouf 1979, p. 115). Historian Peter Edwards put it somewhat less dramatically when he explained, ‘The Australian-American alliance is far more than just another bilateral relationship. ... It has become a political institution in its own right, comparable with a political party or the monarchy’ (Edwards 2005, p. 2).

The role of the American alliance has long been so pivotal that *any* serious criticism of it is viewed as mischievous, even potentially dangerous. Critics are usually dismissed as either naïve or malevolent. It is almost as if the whole national security edifice could collapse if anyone dares chip away at the foundation stone.

THE 'CONSENSUS' VIEW

Recently, Michael Fullilove, one of Australia's most respected strategic thinkers, has argued that 'left-wing critics' have more reason than most to join the mainstream in *support* of the American alliance. Not only does our partnership with America, he says, afford Australia many tangible advantages but, more importantly, 'it also deserves the support of progressives who value international institutions, believe in human rights and champion Australian activism in foreign policy' (Fullilove 2006).

The 'many advantages' to which Fullilove refers cover an impressive spectrum: an expectation that Australia will be protected from any strategic threat, 'interactions with US military forces and their technologies', intelligence sharing that 'helps Australian leaders make sense of the world' and 'access to, and sometimes the ability to influence, the sole superpower and thereby contribute to global security'. In short, even 'progressive' critics of the American alliance should temper their carping and acknowledge the great value of the 'privileged access afforded by the alliance' that enables Australia to both benefit from that alliance and 'affect US policy on issues that matter to us' (Fullilove 2006; 2007).



Two key points need to be made about Fullilove's argument, which is, of course, shared by many leading experts on Australian foreign policy. Firstly, foreign policy is not interpreted by a single template. It is necessarily

received on two broad levels that may differ dramatically. One is at the elite level where a handful of hopefully well-informed and thoughtful individuals, privy to classified intelligence material, actually formulate, implement and interpret national security policy. The other is the public level where members of the general public—some well informed and others less so—receive the information and react to what the elites say and do (excluding secret or ‘covert’ action which, by definition, is hidden from public view). ‘Public opinion’ may, on occasion, influence elite policy formulation (as, for example, when a nation’s participation in war loses public support), but most of the important and well-informed action occurs at the elite level.

Since the vast majority of Australians do not enjoy the privileged access of those who actually formulate the nation’s foreign policy, it is important to ask just how, even in a democracy such as ours, public points-of-view have any real influence at all. It is not sufficient to say that we elect a government every three years and entrust it with the sole responsibility of ‘running the country’. Surely the Australian public has a continuing interest in national security matters because, among many other reasons, it is citizen security that is ultimately at stake and it is taxpayer money that provides the defence and foreign service budgets. When it comes to the Australian-American alliance, our most important bilateral relationship, every Australian has ample reason to be concerned about its current status and future prospects.

Unfortunately, virtually nothing Australians encounter in their formal education informs them very deeply or prepares them to think critically about the American alliance. With the exception of a few specialised university courses, Australian students who study any American history at all are more likely to encounter black slavery, the United States and the First World War, or perhaps the Cold War, than they are fundamental principles of American (or Australian) foreign policy. For most Australian students, and the general public, foreign policy remains a mystery—

fragmented, impressionistic, informed primarily by prejudice and emotion. Needless to say, the situation is even worse in the United States where Australia remains almost totally invisible, about as relevant to most Americans as Bolivia or Botswana is to most Australians.

Despite widespread criticism of certain aspects of America's global role (particularly during the presidential tenure of George W. Bush), public opinion poll data over the years shows consistent, majority Australian support for the American alliance. The 'National Opinion Survey: Australian Attitudes Toward the US', conducted in late 2007 by Prof. Murray Goot for the US Studies Centre at The University of Sydney, revealed that 79 percent of Australians interviewed felt the American alliance was either 'very important' or 'fairly important'. But 48 percent also believed that Australia needs to act more vigorously in its own interests, independently of the United States (US Studies Centre 2007).

It would appear that public opinion on Australia's ultimate security is based on two main considerations: (a) a widespread skepticism among Australians that the 'self-reliance' bit in Australia's security motto of 'self-reliance in an alliance context' actually means anything, and (b) an assumption that the advantages of ANZUS membership are worth the disadvantage of Australia being seen as 'too close' to Washington. Critically, this latter assumption is based almost entirely on information about alliance advantages supplied to the public by the foreign policy elite. In effect, informed proponents of the alliance are implicitly asking the public to accept elite reassurances that very significant, even vital, advantages accrue to Australia as a consequence of its 'special relationship' to the United States.



It would be easier to embrace the claim that American

generosity with, for example, its hard-won intelligence information has been of real value to Australia if we knew of a few examples where intelligence shared by the United States has proven to be of vital importance to this country. Or, when it comes to our ‘special influence’ with the United States, in what specific ways—when, where, how and to what effect—has Australia been able to influence (change?) American foreign policy on major issues affecting us?

History tells us something about advice to ‘trust elites’ when it comes to privileged information. No doubt that trust is both necessary and justified in some circumstances. But I am also reminded of recent ‘intelligence’ about weapons of mass destruction in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. And I well recall Lyndon Johnson’s repeated statement during the Vietnam War that if his critics knew as much about the situation on the ground in Indochina as he did, then they would, in effect, shut up. For alleged national security reasons, he could not, of course, tell us what he knew. Years later, when we got a much clearer idea of what he *did* know at the time, we concluded that, far from shutting up, we had ample reason to protest even louder (McMaster 1998).

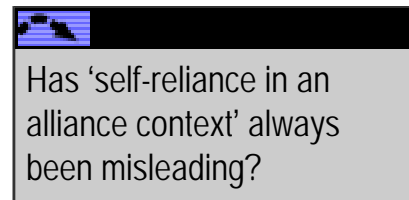
The other premise in Fullilove’s argument that disturbs me is its either/or premise on the American alliance. He points out, quite accurately, that ‘generally, left-wing critics stop short of advocating its junking altogether’. He then concludes that ‘usually the alliance’s opponents are too timid to follow their arguments through to their logical conclusion’ which would mean either abandoning the alliance or ‘something that doesn’t sound like an alliance at all but the kind of polite, arm’s length relationship’ of two countries without much in common (Fullilove 2006; 2007).

THE IMPORTANCE OF ROBUST DEBATE

At the risk of sounding timid, I would argue that the ‘junking’ of ANZUS is by no means the ‘logical conclusion’ of thoughtful and informed criticism of the alliance. Although I doubt Fullilove intended it that way, the

suggestion that to criticise is the first step on a slippery slope to outright abolition comes across as a straw argument aimed at sidelining concerned criticism as ‘timid’, illogical or dangerous. Is it the case that a genuinely healthy, ‘all-in’ debate over the advantages and disadvantages of the American alliance would so erode public confidence in the alliance that debate is to be discouraged whenever possible?

Reinforcing the contemporary argument for the alliance, Alan Ryan has pointed out that, in the war on terrorism, fundamentalist fanatics do not distinguish



one Western democracy from another. They simply want us all dead. Consequently, ‘the countries being targeted need to co-operate closely if they are to defeat the common threat’ (Ryan 2004). Ryan is correct and his argument obviously strengthens the case for ANZUS. But Ryan goes on to say that while Australia must develop ‘flexible, realistic capabilities within the limits of an extremely limited defence budget’, it also should abandon its pretensions to self-reliance in the defence of one tenth of the globe’s surface. Realistically, that [‘self-reliance’] strategic objective never made any sense’ (Ryan 2004, p. 24) Is that *if*? Has ‘self-reliance in an alliance context’ always been misleading?

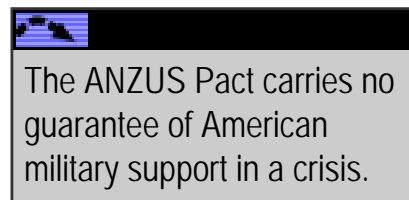
Furthermore, notwithstanding elite reassurances about the vitality of ANZUS and the strength of our ‘special relationship’ with the United States, the alliance is not without potential problems. Ironically, some of the most serious of these problems stem more from internal alliance dynamics than from any clear, external threat. For example, it is at least arguable that Australia currently faces an alliance dilemma arising from the extent to which the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has grown dependent on US military technology and supply. As two informed researchers, Gary Brown and Laura Rayner, put it in a Parliamentary Library report:

For all the talk of ‘self-reliance in an alliance framework’... the ADF is critically dependent on US supply and support for the conduct of all operations except those at the lowest level and of short duration. ... Put another way, it is almost literally true that Australia cannot go to war without the consent and support of the United States (2001, p. 28).

Allied to this argument is the question of whether or not Australia is receiving ‘value for money’ in its defence procurement. In 2007 Australia spent about A\$22 billion on defence. But there have been so many ‘big defence equipment scandals’ that, as one of America’s most reliable customers of military hardware, we can legitimately ask if we are getting value for money in our military procurement deals with the US (Stewart 2008; Behm 2008).

Another, related concern is the extent to which the American alliance may be pricing itself out of existence. As the world’s sole ‘hyperpower’, America’s remarkable global superiority in terms of military power is due in large measure to US leadership in what has been called the ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA). This refers to a complex combination of advanced information, communication and weapons technologies that enable a military force to greatly multiply its battlefield effectiveness. The problem with RMA is that it is ‘massively expensive and in point of fact the only country which can afford to “go all the way with RMA” is the United States itself’ (Brown & Rayner 2001, p. 21; see also Ball, 2001).

To cite but one example of RMA cost escalation, the American F-14 Tomcat jet fighter, which served the US Navy reliably from 1972–2006 cost US\$38 million per plane (in 1998 dollars). Depending on whose estimates one reads, the projected cost of the new, F-35 joint strike fighter



(itself about half the cost of the alternative choice, the F-22 Raptor) is \$80 million per plane and rising (Walters 2008; Stewart 2007). Furthermore, as Brown and Rayner have noted: The alliance relationship does not involve 'friendship' discounts or similar financial concessions from the United States for Australian purchases of defence equipment: we pay the going rate, in US dollars, for what we acquire (2001, p. 22).

The current, projected cost of 100 new F-35s the RAAF intends to buy from 2013 is \$16 billion, easily Australia's largest-ever defence purchase.

If value for money and just being able to afford to stay compatible with the Americans are not adequate grounds for encouraging active debate on the utility, balance and benefits of the alliance, even more serious potential problems emerge if Australia and the US encounter an issue where their vital interests diverge. It is not difficult to imagine any number of potential differences, both economic and strategic, where the US might be tempted to 'remind' Australia that the ANZUS Pact carries no literal guarantee of American military support in the event of a crisis.

Until recently, the most frequently cited example of a possible strategic difference between the United States and Australia involves potential conflict between America and China over Taiwan. Optimists like to believe that Australia could use its friendship and 'middle-power influence' with China, and especially with the United States, to facilitate a peaceful resolution of any such Sino-American dispute. It is at least arguable that, in the event of a serious crisis, Australia would once again discover just how limited that influence really is.

It is also possible that a more subtle divergence between Washington and Canberra might emerge as a result of rapidly growing economic (and other) ties with China that prompt Australia to 'lean' more in the direction of its giant

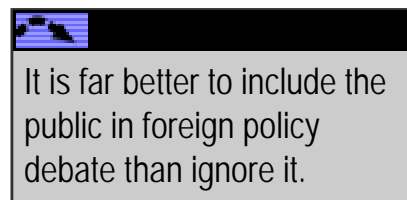
Asian neighbour. In 2007 China surpassed Japan and the United States to become Australia's largest trading partner (Uren 2007). With China poised to become a major global power in the 21st century, Beijing has already proven to be quite adept at the application of 'soft power' to gain influence or leverage wherever it believes its interests are involved. Contrasting leadership styles, Peter Hartcher noted that when George W. Bush visited Australia for the APEC summit in September 2007, he hurled 'thunderbolts' and spoke of war. China's Hu Jintao, here at the same time, visited mining sites in Western Australia, 'signed a deal to buy LNG from Australia in a contract worth up to \$35 billion', agreed to elevate Australia/China contact 'to include an annual strategic dialogue' and then offered 'two prized pandas to Adelaide Zoo' (Hartcher 2007). Never mind that China's 'soft smile' might hide dragon's teeth, the Australian public observes the difference and noticeably warms to the 'emerging superpower'.

TRUSTING THE PUBLIC

One could elaborate further on potential problems with the American alliance. However, the point here is not that the alliance is useless, or even dangerously asymmetrical. It is to argue that, for decades now, the Australian-American alliance has been elevated to such a point that anyone who dares ask serious questions about it is dismissed as 'left-wing', naïve and wrong-headed.

Yet the most obvious fault of the Australian-American alliance is that for more than 50 years it has restricted, even muted, serious public debate on Australian foreign

policy alternatives. What *are* our vital national security goals and options independent of our alliance relationship with the United States? What happens if the United States takes an isolationist turn and tires of underwriting the security of a prosperous nation like Australia? Where is the bold,



It is far better to include the public in foreign policy debate than ignore it.

invigorating public debate that focuses, not just on fringe issues and minor concerns, but rather on vital interests and objectives that will see Australia advance as a truly independent and innovative nation? Where do our interests lie and what are our policy alternatives with regard to near-future global problems like the militarisation of space, climate manipulation, cyber crime, resource depletion, regional failed states, etcetera?

Three years ago Peter Edwards called for the establishment of new groups and organisations aimed at promoting discussion on the Australian-American relationship ‘in all its aspects’. To help cultivate robust, informed public opinion, he suggested ‘an annual review of the “State of the Alliance” that would discuss and debate the past, current and future challenges faced by the alliance’. He also recommended a policy of enhanced transparency whereby Australian governments share with the public ‘as much as is diplomatically possible’ about the evolving nature of the alliance (Edwards 2005, pp. 57–59). In April 2008 the ‘Australia 2020 Summit’ also recommended ‘a state of the Australian-US Alliance report every three years’ and establishment of separate centres or institutes to study Australia’s bilateral relationship with the United States, Japan, China and India (Australia 2020 Report 2008). It remains to be seen if anything significant will come from these suggestions.

In 2001, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the ANZUS Pact, the then Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared that ‘50 years from now, Australians and Americans will be celebrating the alliance’s centenary with as much flair and enthusiasm as they are today’. If Downer’s prediction is accurate, will we in 50 years time still be outsourcing our national security to the United States? If Downer’s statement is inaccurate, to what extent are we prepared for change? Surely, if given the opportunity through community consultation meetings and national issues forums, an ‘included’ Australian public can contribute fresh ideas and innovative thinking about the

nation's present and future foreign policies (Carson 2008). We will not have a 'national nervous breakdown' if we inform and include typical Australians on vital alliance prospects. If we face perilous national security problems, then far better to include the public than ignore it. And one obvious benefit of this new transparency is that, when significant change does occur, the whole nation will be prepared to meet it and deal with it calmly and successfully.

REFERENCES

Australia 2020 Summit Initial Report, 2008 Online: Available: http://www.australia2020.gov.au/docs/2020_summit_initial_report.pdf [2008, Jun 23].

Ball, D. July 2001, 'The strategic essence', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 55.2, pp. 235–248.

Behm, A. 2008, 'Defence lacks solutions', *The Australian*, 11 March.

Brown, G. & Rayner, L. 2001, 'Upside, downside: ANZUS after fifty years', Current Issue Brief No. 2, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra [Online], Available: <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/CIB/2001-02/02cib03.pdf> [2008, Jun 23].

Carson, L. 2008, 'Creating democratic surplus through citizens' assemblies', *Journal of Public Deliberation* 4.1, Article 5. [Online], Available: <http://services.bepress.com/jpd/vol4/iss1/art5> [2008, Jun 23].

Curtin, J. 1941, 'The task ahead', *Melbourne Herald*, 27 December.

Downer, A. 2001, Australia's alliance with the United States: Maintaining the 'Fabric of Peace', speech at the Conference on Australia-United States Alliance and East Asian Security, The University of Sydney, 29 June [Online], Available:

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2001/010629_fa_us_alliance.html [2008, Jun 23].

Edwards, P. 2005, *Permanent Friends? Historical Reflections on the Australian-American Alliance*, Lowy Institute, Sydney.

Edwards, P. 2005, 'US alliance in regular need of assessment', *The Australian*, 29 December.

Fullilove, M. 2006, 'Left has cause to cherish US alliance', *The Australian*, 9 November.

Fullilove, M. 2007, Still looking to America: Labor and the US alliance, Lecture at John Curtin University [Online]: Available: <http://john.curtin.edu.au/events/speeches/fullilove.html> [2008, Jun 23].

Hartcher, P. 2007, 'Rudd offers a cheeky lesson in soft power', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September [Online]: Available: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/rudd-offers-a-cheeky-lesson-in-soft-power/2007/09/06/1188783413112.html> [2008, Jun 23].

McMaster, H. 1998, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led To Vietnam*, Harper, New York.

Renouf, A. 1979, *The Frightened Country*, Macmillan, Melbourne.

United States Studies Centre, 2007, National Opinion Survey: Australian attitudes toward the US [Online], Available: <http://sydney.edu.au/us-studies/events/nationalsurvey.shtml> [2008, Jun 23].

Ryan, A., 2004, 'The tiger and the terrier: making the most of the US alliance', *Quadrant*, (Jan-Feb), pp. 18–25.

Stewart, C. 2007, 'F-35 slowly wins a corridor war', *The*

Weekend Australian, Defence Special Report, 26–27 May.

Stewart, C. 2008, 'Billion dollar blowouts', *The Australian*, 30 January.

Uren, D. 2007, 'China emerges as our biggest trading partner', *The Australian*, 5 May.

Walters, P. 2008, 'Joint strike fighter RAAF's choice', *The Australian*, 6 March.

Dr. Dennis Phillips teaches US Foreign Policy at the United States Studies Centre, The University of Sydney.

ISSN 1832-1526

Australian Review of Public Affairs

© 2000–2008 [The University of Sydney](http://www.theuniversityofsydney.edu.au)