

For whom and for what the alliance?

A few days after the election of the Whitlam Government on 2 December 1972, the Secretary of the Defence Department, the late Sir Arthur Tange, called me, a quite junior manager in the department, down to see him.

“You know about the bases [Pine Gap and Narrungar]?” he said. “Yes sir.” “You know the party [ALP] platform?” “Yes sir.” “I’ve just been with the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister and they accept that the bases remain on conditions. We have until the first sitting day of the parliament in February to get the bases through the platform. And thus we did: the grizzled terror-Secretary of Defence, who demanded that no defence force officer appear before him in uniform without the excuse of ceremonial duties, so that arguments could be solely on their merits; and myself, who had that year gone from foreign affairs in search of the national interest, the foreign affairs secretary spitting at me in private audience for seemingly leaving an elite priesthood. We commanded the most critical issue in Australian American relations, to the exclusion of Foreign Affairs. I am bound to silence for now on what transpired, and the archives seem unopened on this matter, I must leave them a note. The two months of negotiation had exciting moments. Suffice to say that we established principles of equal dealing in the alliance; in circumstances where under the terms of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty we could have no measure of control over nuclear weapons, we demanded a right to be consulted on strategic policy. I am not sure that in years to follow that right was exercised with energy rather than submission.

Early in 1973, the deputy secretary responsible for the operational side of the department called me in to ask me to express an opinion on a draft submission prepared by the Joint Services Staff of the department. This draft informed the minister that his predecessor had approved a US “Marine Demonstration” in northern Australia, at Shoalwater Bay and that all that the new minister (Whitlam’s Deputy Prime Minister Lance Barnard) had to do was approve the application of the Status of Forces Agreement to whatever the marines

afterwards came ashore in Brisbane and Sydney recreationally to demonstrate. My advice was that there had actually been an election and there was a new government deserving to examine the planned event afresh; I drafted a new submission, pointing out that it was inconsistent with new policy that such a unilateral event should take place, the spirit of the alliance called for joint activities — and that the Marine task force in question was normally located off the coast of Viet Nam in the Gulf of Tonkin, so there could be policy and public apprehensions about them coming ashore in Queensland.

I recommended that instead of this unilateral demonstration we should accept a joint exercise. My draft went around the convoluted traps of Defence largely unscathed, with the additional recommendation by the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee Admiral Smith, that the joint exercise should take place regularly and be labelled “Exercise Kangaroo” ... So many naval officers cursed me in later years on learning of my role in imposing this work on them.

I find it now ironic, that with a Labor Government and a Democrat president of the US elected on a wave of populist concern for reform, that we should, in another era, be moving towards a unilateral presence of US forces in northern Australia.

I hear that this will enhance the alliance. That it will reinforce the American guarantee to Australia under the ANZUS Treaty. This, as did some strategic judgements of the Rudd Government’s Defence White Paper, seems retrograde to me. It is, without doubt, offensive to Indonesia in particular and as the Indonesian Foreign Minister now astutely observes, it could set off rounds of provocation and counter-provocation.

I am at a loss to see the contingencies for which we need an additional security trigger like this. I grant that we are in the way of west-about US deployment to west Asia and the Middle East from the US, noting that in 1973 US strategic supply routes to the then war between Israel and Egypt had access eastward only via Portugal among NATO facilities and westward via Australia.

From all the language being used, the role of this new entanglement relates to strategically and geographically remote commitments... from which I had

thought Australia was reducing its involvement, concerned to focus on local regional priorities.

We can argue this back and forth, the TV screens tending to be occupied mainly by men in dark suits teaching or graduated from narrow focus schools of international security. I have long been conscious that Indonesian armed forces have for a thousand years been mainly concerned with order and integrity of the archipelago (which irritates us, in its execution, of course). Can you imagine what Australians' reactions would have been over the past 60 years had Indonesia embarked on some sacred post-colonial right of 'forward defence' such as we have pursued, with long range naval and capabilities and policy declarations like John Howard's, of willingness to attack anyone hostile in Indonesia without intergovernmental consultation; how cool these Indonesian doods are. While we labour still under beliefs of moral or racial or colonial superiority with negligible general knowledge of the region beyond its fleshpots.

When the US President refers to the undoubted fact that this new step will enable greater interoperability of our defence forces, what does this mean? Have we on our side for a moment looked at the defence budgetary torment and how it arises from our obsession with optimal interoperability with US forces? Why do we have such an absurdly expensive non-submarine? Because we had to have the American gear... but the American submarine fleet is nuclear powered, so we had to perform miracles to put the right gear into some kind of non-nuclear submarine. Miracles [a] are expensive and [b] don't generally work (unless say, you are making a landing in East Timor, that success filling our quota for miracles for quite some time).

Back then in 1973, I got my section staff to rummage through Defence and we assembled a book about 2cm thick, calling it "Treaties, Agreements and Arrangements of Defence Interest between Australia and the United States." Sold like hot cakes, especially in Foreign Affairs, where there was no knowledge of all these agreed activities. When I went to the Washington Embassy in 1976 as Counsellor with a foreign affairs brief to cover among many matters US defence policy, two thirds of our embassy's 300 staff were defence personnel, but there

was no coverage of the United States defence policy as that of a foreign country by them. Our services are driven and shaped by the desire to be entirely logistically and in all command and control and tactical systems interoperable with US forces. The anguish over finding a replacement fighter reflects that... and so on.

It will not be possible, of course, to make a break away from that need, without a shift in strategic vision. So little mention of the NZ in ANZUS this week, New Zealand having gone its own way in the 1980s. We are left with government mouthing the need to cut defence expenditure, to rein in expensive projects, to bring our strategic priorities closer to home... but we will be stuck in the same titanium trap without coming to terms with need for fundamental change.

I think it's still possible to be allied to the United States while slipping away to more appropriate force structure and systems capabilities with cost to interoperability. And that it is important to make the step away. I do not believe the US will at any time intervene in a military matter in support of Australia without its being in US interests (as the treaty says, anyway). Similarly, I do not believe that the US would fail to support Australia in some matter when its (American) interests were at stake. So please do not offend our ears by saying this notional hostage force of marines in Darwin enhances the US commitment. In any case, to what?

We are very much in a phase of institution building in Asia and the Pacific. These high level meetings currently taking place need strong support of institutional cooperation at all levels. I don't think bringing US forces to northern Australia helps: rather it encourages lack of institution building, standing off and encouraging the increased influence of the military in governments in China and Indonesia. The events leading to the Iraq war, begun in 2003 and unfinished, tragically mirrored those of 1914, when Europe lacked non-military strategies, options, willingness and means to resolve conflict. Why the hell can't we now learn from the hell of Iraq, where we took a poorly governed country and left it largely ungovernable. Stop thinking that high strategy means defence posture and activity, we should not have strategy led by war means. Instead put such

expenditure mental and financial into the building of links and institutions in the region, tasks of much greater importance. US Administrations have, when we have lifted our heads to speak out on such matters in the past, listened to us and acted wisely in consequence.

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