

Can Australia strengthen national interests by greater foreign policy independence?

Address to the MSoG Series on Wicked Problems 23 July 2019

John Langmore

I. What are Australia's National Interests?

The term 'the national interests' is often used by foreign policy makers to justify their arguments. The term is less commonly explained. Those who do this assume that Australia's national interests are in maintaining a close alliance with America, so as keep us safe. This is sometimes asserted so strongly that anyone who questions the American alliance is regarded as unpatriotic.

Since the end of the Cold War criticism of these assumptions has been growing. Now, when the times are turbulent and the Trump Administration has adopted policies which seem contrary to not only the interests of all the rest of the world but also of American itself, it is especially necessary to re-examine them.

Defining and clarifying national interests is not a simple task. Australia is composed of groups with widely different perceptions of their interests. Many factors are involved. Foreign policy makers have a complex task, to strike a balance between widely different views about which policies should have highest priority.

The *Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* discusses the difficulty of deciding

'between domestic demands and international imperatives, between principle and pragmatism, between idealistic values and material interests, between what is expedient and what it is the right thing to do, between the national constituency and the international community, and between the immediate, medium and long terms.' (OHMD, 2013, 21).

Senator Penny Wong, Labor's Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, spoke particularly clearly about the concept of national interests in a speech to the Lowy Institute in July 2017. She said that

A clear articulation of our national interests provides purpose and direction to the conduct of foreign policy. ... Despite the challenge of consolidating the many and often competing issues ... it is the task of governments to identify which interests are core to our foreign policy. There are inevitably trade-offs to be made between the many 'interests' that the community legitimately identifies as important.

Senator Wong suggested that the four core interests that underpin the framing and delivery of foreign policy are:

- First, 'The **security** of the nation and its people:
- Second 'The **economic prosperity** of the nation and its people, enabled by frameworks that will allow Australia to take advantage of international economic opportunities.

- Third, 'A **stable, cooperative strategic system** in our region anchored in the rule of law; and
- Fourth, '**constructive internationalism** supporting the continued development of an international rules-based order.'

Security, economic prosperity, a stable, cooperative strategic system and constructive internationalism leading to a rules-based international order. They sound like a framework of interests which most people could agree are centrally important. But what is security?

Security is more than a strategic concept, far more than protection from invasion. In the lives of most people security has social, economic, and environmental dimensions. In democracies political parties give high priority to policies which will enable them to be elected.

Security certainly includes defence and counter-terrorism, but also all that contributes to wellbeing such as employment opportunities, adequate incomes, good quality education and health services, housing, space for recreation and contact with nature and so on.

The 2019 Lowy Institute Poll reports that 81% of people want more spent on health services and 74% want more for education, but only 31% want more for defence. The Lowy author comments that defence is not a high budget priority for Australians.

Commitment to security must give a top priority to peace, to settlement of conflicts by peaceful means whenever possible. Without peace, focusing on strengthening human and environmental wellbeing will be diverted to fighting wars. As well, all of us need to live in as peaceful situations as possible, if we are going to have peace in our own lives.

Maximising the chances of peace requires international commitment to the rule of law, to justice, and to dramatically reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preventing loss of biodiversity. To achieve each of these we are partly dependent on other countries.

II. Seeking Sustainable Peace: Diplomacy, Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding

How can Australia contribute to achieving sustainable peace? Certainly not by continuing as we have during the last two decades, when Australia has been almost continuously engaged in fighting violent battles. Since 9/11 Australia has obediently cooperated with the United States in invading Afghanistan and Iraq – the latter without the Security Council's agreement – and later in supporting US actions in Iraq and Syria against Islamic State.

Since 2011 there has been a renewed international upsurge in the number of wars and casualties and in the extent of displacement and physical destruction. This led UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to advocate making conflict prevention central to international policy and to urge Member States to prioritise conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts within their foreign policies.

Is it possible for a country like Australia to choose to adopt such priorities? Australia does have the capacity to recognise that peace is preferable to war, and also to choose to consciously and honourably adopt policies which would contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding?

One contribution towards such an enhancement of Australia's foreign policy has been Department of Foreign Affairs' sponsorship of a survey by researchers at this University whom I have led of the experiences of Australian diplomats in conflict situations. The project aims to

advance pragmatic, evidence-based proposals for improving conflict prevention and peacebuilding capacity. Over 120 serving diplomats, and a few others were interviewed. Their experiences and comments provide an authoritative basis for recommendations.

Political commitment to conflict prevention and peacebuilding is vital to Australian safety, security and the common good. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has principal political responsibility for articulating, planning and implementing international peace processes and in leading departmental attention to them.

The report draws attention to the low political priority given to Australian diplomacy during the last quarter century. *The proportion of total Commonwealth spending allocated to diplomacy has fallen from 0.38% in 1995-96 to 0.22% in 2018-19.* That is, **the proportion of Commonwealth funding used for diplomacy has declined during the last quarter century by 42%.**

Yet active diplomacy is the principal means available to every country for avoiding violent conflict. If you want to avoid violence and to attempt to resolve a conflict you have to talk about it. That is the principal purpose of foreign policy. Yet the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs has been starved of funds – at the same time as Australian military expenditure has been doubling and spending on spying and surveillance has multiplied about fourfold.

This has caused excessively tight constraints on diplomatic staffing and functions. There is a strong case for enhancing analytical and contingency planning within the Department over the full range of foreign policy issues. Strengthening diplomatic capacity is essential for improving vitality in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. That is the cost-effective way of minimising international violence. As well, far more women should be employed on peacemaking, and training programs must be strengthened greatly.

Strengthening the diplomatic service would also enable extension of Australia's international representation, increasing participation in maintenance of bilateral and multilateral relations and the international rule of law, and enhancement of Australia's effectiveness as a humanitarian and cooperative global citizen.

External reviews such as those by the Lowy Institute in 2011 and the Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade in 2012 have concluded that Australia's diplomatic service is so inadequately funded and staffed that it cannot be fully effective.

Australia has had valuable experience of effective engagement in peacebuilding in Cambodia, Bougainville and Solomon Islands for example. These engagements showed that effectiveness was enhanced by 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-region' frameworks; and that interventions in conflict and instability must prioritise diplomatic engagement and seek political solutions. This conclusion contradicts the preoccupation with increasing militarisation and securitisation.

A central question is whether improvements in Australian diplomatic capacity would contribute to reducing conflict and tension between say China and Australia?

III. Relating to China

Everyone knows that China is the principal destination of Australian exports and the largest source of imports and that Australia has a highly favourable balance of trade with China. China's investment in Australia is tiny but growing fast, as is Australia's investment in China. China is also the largest country of origin of tourists to Australia each year. Yet some

Australians and many Americans are fearful of China. It is essential that Australia aims to understand China and its priorities.

China's military expenditure was US \$250 billion in 2018, an 83% increase since 2009, though only a 5% increase during the last year. This growth is roughly linked with its economic growth. However, this still leaves the US, with military spending of US \$650 billion, with a military budget 2.6 times larger than that of China. The Peoples' Liberation Army is being reduced in size but modernized and reorganized into regional blocks in the same way as has the US military. (*The Economist*, 29 June 19).

But whether this increases China's military effectiveness remains to be seen. **China hasn't fought a war during the last four decades.** Let me say that again: China, the potential aggressor about which Hugh White writes, has not fought in a war since 1979, and that was about border issues with Viet Nam; whereas the US has been continually fighting wars for decades, most of which it started.

China and America are powerful economic and technical competitors and the intensity of their competition is growing. A trade war between America and China began decades ago but is intensifying because of Trump's high-handed, wide-ranging introduction of high tariffs on US imports from China to which China has retaliated in kind. The two giants' tariffs are doing great damage to each other and some to the rest of the world. They are also competing over digital activity, electronics and lunar exploration for example.

We must try and understand China's goals and motives and the forces driving them. In part, China is trying to erase the consequences of a century and a half of disorder, exploitation, invasion and sometimes defeat by European, American and Japanese imperialists. It is recuperative that memories of those humiliations are gradually being overwhelmed by China's unprecedentedly dramatic economic growth.

That accumulating economic power will steadily grow and entrench China's political power in the Asian region and increase its strength in global forums. Yet 'China's maritime expansion [for example] reflects a curious mix of ambition and paranoia about being contained'. (*The Economist*, 6 July 19) China's maritime rise is based partly on insecurity, as was America's to the Soviet's nuclear weapons in Cuba. That doesn't excuse the unjustified arming of rocks in the South China Sea. But it does suggest the need for guarantees for all about safe passage for all shipping.

Within the multilateral norms of political and diplomatic discourse, such evolutionary global change is essential. The inevitable tensions along the way must be clearly articulated and addressed through sophisticated negotiation and bargaining. Yet even now compromises are happening. Trump has already relaxed the prohibitions on Huawei by permitting American companies to once again sell them equipment: and despite conflict over trade, financial interdependence between the two countries is still growing strongly.

Many forums already exist within which such dialogue can be undertaken. Provided all parties are willing to recognize each other's concerns, often it will be possible to negotiate agreements, including by setting new rules to reflect new situations.

Australia's interests will be served by strengthening the attentiveness and effectiveness of existing global and regional institutions and treaties, such as the UN Security Council, the G20 and extended ASEAN meetings and encouraging the formation of new ones when they are needed. Annual bilateral meetings at head of government level are essential

and similar meetings between ministers for all relevant areas of policy are important for working constructively with China.

These formal institutional arrangements give Australia many opportunities to clearly, and firmly articulate its foreign policy values. As Senator Wong says, these include 'defending and promoting democracy, free speech, the rule of law, and protection of rights, including freedom from intimidation'. (Speech to Lowy Institute, 12 October 2018)

Australians must develop and maintain not only close official communication with China but also stronger business, professional, academic and social dialogue.

However, tensions between China and the US are rising. *The Economist* editorialises that: "America complains that China is cheating its way to the top by stealing technology, by muscling into the South China Sea and ... is becoming a threat to global peace. China is caught between dreams of regaining its rightful place in Asia and the fear that tired, jealous America will block its rise because it cannot accept its own decline'. (18 May 19) How can Australia play a role in keeping China and America in effective communication with each other?

First, though, we must discuss our relationship with the US.

IV. The American Alliance

'Australia has an addiction to going to war with its US alliance partner,' (Tanter, 2015) Whenever the US is contemplating military action, Australian Prime Ministers swiftly indicate willingness to cooperate. When Trump was threatening military action against North Korea, Turnbull said that 'There is no light between us and the US over North Korea'. When Trump was threatening Iran with annihilation Morrison said that Australia would be willing to offer military assistance to the US.

There is only one military monster in the world now, and that is the US. America has started far more wars than any other country since 1945. Under Bush Jr and Trump, US military spending has been expanded, so that despite the cuts under Obama, it reached US\$ 650 billion in 2018, 36% of the global total. **US defence spending is now almost 60% of the US discretionary budget; everything else is accommodated in the remaining two fifths.** (NYRB, 18 July 19, p23). In one figure that tells you America's political priorities.

At present, the US withdraws from the Iran nuclear deal, and the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty; and the growing military spending and arms transfers are stimulating wider conflicts. The US is proposing a new Space Force, and an expanded program of ballistic missile 'defence'. So, the US under Trump is actively challenging components of the global order, as it did when the neo-conservatives were running US strategy under George Bush Jr.

Australia has become an acolyte of American power. The foundational agreement, the ANZUS treaty of 1951, is only a commitment to consult. It isn't a guarantee of American support if Australia was ever threatened. Despite the efforts of several Australian governments, the US has never given Australia a written commitment of military support.

Yet despite these weak American commitments, Australia has allowed itself to be drawn deeply into the American networks. This is most clearly illustrated by Australian participation in the aggressive and illegal American and British invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Now Australian entanglement with the US is exemplified by the highly sophisticated global US communications systems through Pine Gap, North West Cape and Kojerena in Western Australia.

Pine Gap and North West Cape 'are now operationally closely involved with – and indeed for the most part critical for – US nuclear-war targeting, US-Japanese missile defense, US drone and special forces extra-judicial counter-terrorism killings, the rapidly growing US capacity for space warfare, and direct support for ground and air operations in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria ...' (Tanter, 2018)

This may sound exaggerated, but it is not. Pine Gap's primary roll is 'its massive signals intelligence capabilities in space and on the ground, listening to a vast range of radio signals, cell phones, and radars over more than half the world from the west of Africa to the mid-Pacific.'

As well 2,500 US marines are deployed in Darwin and US Air Force fighters, refuelling tankers, B-52 and B-2 bombers are based in the Northern Territory. Tanter writes that 'The clear US intention is to develop the Darwin hub into a combined contribution to US-led regional rapid deployment capability for East and Southeast Asia.' (Tanter, 2018)

V. Australian Foreign Policy Now

Where does this leave Australia?

It is frequently said that the principal basis for collaboration between Australia and the US are our shared values. It is true that both Australia and the US aspire to be democracies, but both are flawed. It is true that there is greater political freedom in the US and Australia than in authoritarian China or Russia, but is that sufficient reason to justify joining in military aggression?

So what should we do? There are many reasons which suggest that if Australians want to be secure they are more likely to be successful if we seek peaceful conflict resolution rather than participating in unjustified wars. Australian's wellbeing will be enhanced by aiming to be constructive global citizens and contribute to survival, international harmony and the rule of law, to economic flourishing, and to justice.

A change in the orientation of Australian foreign policy is essential. I will describe three principal reasons.

First and foremost is that American and Australian perceptions of their national interests are strikingly different. Americans have commonly thought it was self-evident that they would lead the rest of the world into freedom and democracy. They have a tradition of believing that they are different - exceptional – and that international rules do not apply to them because of their special role as a global leader, and their good intentions. Such assumptions lie behind their frequent disregard for international law and norms, despite their influence in the elaboration of international law.

In strong contrast, Australia, like many smaller countries, recognises that its safety is most secure when all countries conform with international law and norms. America's frequent cavalier disregard for international rules makes it a quite unsuitable and unreliable partner with which to align.

Second, American foreign policy making is commonly dysfunctional. There are innumerable examples, but two will do: the advisability and rationale for the illegal invasion of

Iraq, which were never agreed between the President's office, the Pentagon and the State Department; and the White House under Trump which Britain's Ambassador to Washington described in cables which were leaked recently as 'dysfunctional, clumsy and inept' and with an occupant who is 'radiating insecurity'.

A third profoundly destructive feature of American foreign policy has been its habitual aggressive, militaristic response to international conflict. Conflict prevention and peacebuilding receive minimal systematic attention from US agencies. Occasionally a Secretary of State like John Kerry, who as experienced the horrors of war, have been notable for their efforts to negotiate reconciliation, but this has been far from the norm. The endlessly repeated tendency is to 'send in the troops', and to try and draw in allies such as Australia to strengthen the appearance of political support.

This preference for military engagement is powerfully determined by the dominance of the Pentagon. With the high level of military and intelligence funding, and financial starvation of State Department diplomacy, some administrations have effectively transferred foreign policy making to the Pentagon. Foreign policy leaders from George Kennan to Hilary Clinton have expressed opposition to this excessive dominance of military power, but it continues, unconstrained, distorting relations with both allies and enemies and entrenching the global horrors of war.

These factors suggest that Australia's national interests require a far clearer, independent identification of our interests, and a far stronger commitment to strategies for achieving them. This requires Australia to grow up, to cease to be the adolescent product of an excessively long colonial style dependency, and to become an independent, responsible, international participant.

Recognition that Australians want security above all, leads to recognition of the importance of balance in use of foreign policy instruments so that diplomacy has a central place amongst defence, aid and surveillance.

This requires strengthening Australia's diplomatic capacity, to rigorous identification of the causes of conflict and of possibilities for compromise, and political determination to seek ways of implementing those. Such analysis requires a much more sophisticated assessment of national motivation than Hugh White's simplistic images of power-maximising giants.

Steps like these would strengthen Australia's diplomatic capacity when negotiating with the US. It would also strengthen the arguments of the large body of international relations experts within the US who also prefer peaceful means of resolving conflict and who support the international rule of law.

An immediate aspect of such a stance is that Australia must firmly resist pressure to concur with misguided, aggressive and destructive US policies. All Australian political parties are doing so in relation to trade and tariffs, and the sun hasn't stopped rising, but this clarity and firmness must be extended.

Strengthening alliances with like-minded countries which continue to be committed to maintaining the international legal system is vital. The most obvious means for doing this is to strengthen support for collaboration through the UN. We are fortunate that the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is a particularly sophisticated political leader who is strongly committed to such goals as conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Such strengthening of diplomatic capacity could be readily funded by reduction in the number of submarines or joint strike fighters which are being ordered. You may not remember

that the numbers were first suggested in the final couple of pages in Rudd's 2009 Defence White Paper. The numbers were stated without a comprehensively reasoned rationale. Some commentators thought they were bright ideas chosen to ensure that Labor could not be criticised by the Coalition parties for being weak on defence.

Australia is now so tightly locked into US-led international communication networks, the five eyes intelligence network and the American military presence that disentanglement would be a huge and time-consuming task. The implications of that possibility must be rigorously evaluated, and a decision made after thorough assessment. Now the essential requirement is a commitment by Australian governments to seek to maximise national security through independent diagnostic rigour and prescription.

Conclusion

To conclude: the preference of Australians for security is pervasive. Ever closer integration with a militaristic ally may provide some protection, but it also adds greatly to the risks.

Militarisation is risky because other countries are stimulated to act similarly. We are living in another dangerous time. Australia is currently joining in the Trump-led rearmament race. Yet the pathway to security is hindered by more weapons. The way to security is through peaceful conflict resolution, and that is promoted by the development of a neighbourly fabric of constant dialogue that includes those who are regarded as threats.

This would be helped by more professional diplomats who are trained in conflict analysis and experienced in designing and implementing reconciliation strategies. We are fortunate that such possibilities are available. If adopted, expanded, supported and implemented, this would generate firmer grounds for a realistic hope of a more peaceful, just and secure world.