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# Achievability of self-reliance within an alliance framework defence policy

Major K. F. Amponin, USAF

*No state has friends, only interests.*

Richelieu<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

1. The relationship between Australia and the United States (US) goes back more than 50 years. But as Stephen Walt argues, ‘the primary purpose of most alliances is to combine the members’ capabilities in a way that furthers their respective interests and that there is nothing sacred about an existing alliance, no matter how successful or long-lived it has been’.<sup>2</sup>

2. The alliance with the US is a key element to Australia’s security strategy in pursuing its interests and objectives. According to the Defence 2000 White Paper:

We believe that, if Australia were attacked, the United States would provide substantial help, including with armed force. We would seek and welcome such help. But we will not depend on it to the extent of assuming that US combat forces would be provided to make up for any deficiencies in our capabilities to defend our territory. A healthy alliance should not be a relationship of dependency, but of mutual help.<sup>3</sup>

3. Since the end of the Cold War and particularly since 9/11, there has been considerable angst within the Australian public regarding the perceived obligations, costs and risks associated with hanging one’s hat with the Americans. This perception is also fuelled by the fear America will be too distracted with other obligations around the globe to pay any attention to Australia when it may need to invoke military support. Critics of the self-reliance within an alliance framework policy therefore argue that this 30-year-old strategy is flawed, and that the risks associated with maintaining such a policy reduces Australia’s ability to best meet its own national security objectives.

## Aim

4. The aim of this defence paper is to assess the pros and cons of the policy of self-reliance within an alliance framework to determine if this is an achievable objective or is it a fundamental and impractical contradiction, which will reduce Australia’s ability to best meet its national security objectives.

## Methodology

5. This debate is structured as an issue analysis defence paper, objectively presenting the arguments of each case, and finally analysing the two sides. The first case argues that the alliance (with the US) will reduce Australia’s ability to best meet its national security objectives. The second case examines the self-reliance within an alliance framework strategy as an achievable and necessary policy. To ensure clarity, the definition of self-reliance and a review of Australia and the United States’ security objectives will be outlined.

## BACKGROUND/DEFINITIONS

### What is self-reliance within an alliance framework?

6. The US–Australia alliance was signed on 1 September 1951. The Australian Government at the time construed verbiage within the alliance as a guarantee of United States defence of Australia. This guarantee is interpreted from Articles III and IV of the treaty:

ARTICLE III: The Parties will consult together whenever in the opinion of any of them the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened in the Pacific.

ARTICLE IV: Each Party recognises that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.<sup>4</sup>

7. However, the Guam Doctrine<sup>5</sup> of 1969 caused ‘opening shock’ to Australia’s security system, highlighting to Australia that although both countries have many common interests, they were all not identical.<sup>6</sup> The alliance was therefore a backstop as opposed to a guarantee, and Australia would have to prepare to help itself. Thus, several years later, Australia published a White Paper spelling out the self-reliance within an alliance framework policy.<sup>7</sup>

### Comparing Australia and the United States’ security objectives

8. Australia and the US have many common security objectives. As highlighted in article IV of the treaty above, an armed attack in the Pacific area on either the US or Australia would be dangerous to the security of both nations causing each to act.<sup>8</sup> Fifty years later the same thread of ‘a partnership in engagement within the Pacific region’ runs through the security strategies of both countries.<sup>9</sup> Clearly articulated in *Defence 2000*, Australia’s security objectives include:

- Ensure defence of Australia and its direct approaches;
- Foster the security of our immediate neighbourhood;
- Promote stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia;
- Support strategic stability in the wider Asia Pacific region; and
- Support global security.<sup>10</sup>

9. However, *Defence 2000* goes on to explain how Australia works with other countries primarily the US, to achieve its strategic objectives. Australia believes this collective approach is possible because its strategic interests are compatible with other countries. Furthermore, Australia must take this approach for, as readily admitted, ‘we do not have the power or reach to protect many of our interests on our own’.<sup>11</sup>

10. The United States’ national security strategy was updated in December 2002. The following are three of the top four strategic security objectives, and show the compatibility of the US and Australian objectives.

- Strengthen alliances to defeat global terrorism and work to prevent attacks against us and our friends;
- Work with others to defuse regional conflicts; and
- Prevent our enemies from threatening us, our allies, and our friends, with weapons of mass destruction.<sup>12</sup>

11. Reinforced in *Defence Update 2003*, Australia stands firm on its view of continued shared values and interests with the US and the joint benefits of the alliance.<sup>13</sup> Although one cannot assume the strategic objectives and interests of both nations will always be the same, the documented national strategies of both countries clearly reinforce one another showing a fundamental relationship.

### Case A: Scrap the Alliance

12. Despite this linkage, some critics of the Australian Government's self-reliance policy believe it is a fundamental and impractical contradiction, which will reduce Australia's ability to best meet its national security objectives. The main theme through these criticisms revolves around the significant costs and risks which accompany an alliance with the US.

13. Primarily, the Australian public generally perceives its government *unquestioningly* follows the US's lead out of obligation for this alliance even when it is not within Australia's interests. This is a particularly sensitive topic when the Australian populace believes it gets dragged into wars to help fight for America's interests. For example, although Australia initially encouraged the US to become involved in Vietnam, once the US build up occurred, Australia felt obliged to increase its investment.<sup>14</sup> Currently, President Bush's finger pointing of Iran on the 'axis of evil' puts Australia in an uncomfortable position. Supporting the US's doctrine could pose serious economic costs for Australia who is competing with the European Union for the growing markets of oil-wealthy Iran.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Prime Minister Howard lauded the Bush declaration, believing he was demonstrating loyalty to a 'great and powerful friend'.<sup>16</sup>

14. Secondly, being the US's 'deputy sheriff' puts Australia in an entangling alliance, making it vulnerable to new or additional threats or losing credibility among its Southeast Asian regional neighbours.<sup>17</sup> During the Cold War, this threat constituted being a target of intercontinental ballistic missiles by the Soviet Union. Now, the threat is in the form of international terrorism. Furthermore, Australia's deployment of approximately 2,000 troops in support of planned US-led coalition operations against the Iraq regime is unpopular with its Southeast Asian neighbours.

15. Finally, after years of political and military support for the US, Australians are apprehensive the Americans may be too engaged in other distractions around the globe to come to Australia's aid when needed.<sup>18</sup> The US currently has almost 200,000 troops deployed to the Middle East. It also has troops deployed to Afghanistan. However, since 1990, the US military strength has drawn down by over 30 per cent.<sup>19</sup> Conducting more deployments with less people signals to US allies that its plate is full. Australians are rightfully wondering if they can depend on US support if Indonesia begins to collapse, causing instability within Southeast Asia, or worse, if the US will have enough forces if North Korea starts to flex its muscle.

16. Due to the costly and risky baggage the US–Australian alliance carries, opponents of the self-reliance policy see the alliance with the US an impractical contradiction, hampering Australia's ability to meet its own national security objectives. The reality however, as admitted in defence White Papers since 1976, is Australia just doesn't have the population size and accompanying economy to support a military force capable of defending its enormous landmass on its own. Hence, the policy of self-reliance within an alliance framework was developed.<sup>20</sup>

### Case B: Keep the Alliance

17. The basis of the self-reliance policy began with the 1976 White Paper, stating 'Australia receives many advantages from its relationship with the US to include intelligence, defence technology, and

military training opportunities and networks. Nevertheless, Australia should be seen as a nation that takes defence matters seriously and should not rely on the US'.<sup>21</sup> Current advocates of this policy not only believe it's achievable, but necessary. Although they acknowledge the additional costs and risks associated with being 'friends' with the US, the benefits of the alliance not only outweigh these costs and risks for Australia but also benefits the Southeast Asian region. Three reasons for maintaining a strong alliance are outlined below.

18. Primarily, almost 30 years after the policy was developed, the US alliance still provides Australia with critical military benefits that it just cannot duplicate domestically, such as, 'unique intelligence, sophisticated weaponry, technology and equipment, logistics, training and operational experience, defence research and technical cooperation.'<sup>22</sup> Since the 1960s, the 'US maintained in Australia more than a dozen installations concerned with military communications, navigation, satellite tracking and control, and various forms of intelligence collection to include nuclear detonation seismic stations and US Ocean Surveillance Information System (OSIS) facilities'.<sup>23</sup> Australia is the only other country (besides the UK) which enjoys intelligence access at this level.<sup>24</sup> These military benefits are a significant contribution to Australia's own national security which in turn impacts the stability of the Southeast Asia Pacific region.

19. Secondly, keeping the US engaged in the Asia Pacific region also keeps costs and risks down for Australia and other regional players. Despite the end of the Cold War, several unresolved security problems remain in the region, specifically on the Korean Peninsula and in the South China Sea. As the sole superpower, permanent US military presence in South Korea and Japan serve as a stabilising influence.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, American warships steaming to the waters surrounding Taiwan during the 1996 China-Taiwan confrontation not only eased the minds of its regional neighbours but also demonstrated America's commitment and resolve to Asia-Pacific security.<sup>26</sup>

20. Finally, Australia has the perception the US may become too overcommitted around the globe to come to Australia's aid when it is truly needed. This assumption is untested, but arguably unfounded. The self-reliance policy was a result of the Guam Doctrine that states the US will be a shield only if a country is threatened by a nuclear power. Since this time, no nuclear power has threatened Australia. However, the Guam Doctrine further states the US shall provide military and economic assistance when requested, if appropriate, in cases involving other types of aggression. The US has demonstrated its resolve to do this even when it was not within their vital interests to do so; East Timor being a recent example.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Costs and risks versus benefits**

21. Both sides of the debate on the achievability of the self-reliance within an alliance framework policy were argued. The true heart of the debate is whether or not the alliance with the US is worth the costs and risks. These costs and risks are summarised below:

- Vulnerability to threats which might otherwise pay no attention to Australia (Soviet Union during the Cold War, terrorism in the post-Cold War era);
- Perception Australia acts outside its own interests in order to earn brownie points with the US;
- Perception the US won't come to Australia's assistance when truly needed.

On the other hand, hanging your hat with the US also has various benefits. Those include:

- Critical military benefits such as access to sensitive intelligence assets and preferential access to US defence technology, logistics, and training;
- US engagement in Southeast Asia brings stability to the region; Australia is a key player in keeping the US involved; and
- Contributions of military and economic assistance in aggressive situations, even when not directly threatened.

22. After weighing and measuring the evidence of both sides, the jury concludes the benefits definitely outweigh the costs and risks. This is primarily because the benefits of the alliance are based on over 50 years worth of demonstrated acts and events. The costs and risks of an alliance with the US however, are based on perception and speculation.<sup>27</sup>

23. The perception Australia *unquestioningly* follows the US's lead out of obligation for this alliance, even when it is outside Australia's interests, is unfounded. With respect to its geography, the containment of communism in Vietnam was more in Australia's interest than the US. Additionally, Australia encouraged US involvement in Vietnam in the first place because it felt US involvement would strengthen America's strategic and military commitment to the region.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Australia 'formally recognized North Vietnam, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China, and was the only democratic country to legally endorse the incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union'.<sup>29</sup> These actions were definitely outside the US lead.

24. With regard to not coming to Australia's assistance when needed, even though East Timor was not in America's vital or even important interests, the US still provided military support. On 8 September 1999, US Secretary of Defense Cohen stated:

the United States cannot be and should not be viewed as the policeman of the world. We act where it's in our national interest to act... But we have to be selective where we commit our forces, and under the circumstances, this is not an area that we're prepared to commit our forces to.<sup>30</sup>

However, one week later, US President Clinton agreed to contribute 'in a limited, but essential, way—including communications and logistical aid, intelligence, air lift of personnel and materiel, and coordination of the humanitarian response'.<sup>31</sup> During this timeframe, the US was not only still committed to military operations in the Middle East, but was also actively engaged in NATO operations in Kosovo.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the US responded in September 1999 with the III Marine Expeditionary Force, air and sealift assets, intelligence communications assets and civil affairs support.<sup>33</sup> Between April 2001 and May 2002, 34 US ships participated in various medical support and nation-building efforts.<sup>34</sup> There is no dispute that Australia dedicated the bulk of military forces to this UN effort. However, in this situation, it was in Australia's interest to make this commitment; not so with the United States.

### **Sovereignty, size and security**

25. In order to be regarded as a sovereign nation, a country ought to have a demonstrable and credible capability for preserving its sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> Hence Australia must maintain some degree of self-reliance merely to preserve its credibility as a sovereign nation. But Australia's geo-strategic position in the world is unique, making unique security arrangements necessary. Mainly due to its small population size and remoteness from historical cultural ties, Australia has always relied on great and powerful friends for its security. From its settlement until WW II, its security ties were with Great Britain; after WW II, until the present, Australia bonded with the US.

26. Australia's large landmass, low population, and export-reliant economy leave it fundamentally no choice but to rely on allies for assistance. Australia's self-reliance policy is not only achievable since it's been doing it since the policy's inception almost 30 years ago, but necessary. As East Timor showed, Australia may have professionally trained forces but it does not have the airlift, sealift and in some cases rudimentary hardware necessary to carry out missions it strongly feels are in its national interest.<sup>36</sup>

### **Conclusion**

27. In a precarious position, Australia has wisely been able to utilise its alliance relationships to help relieve the burden it knows it cannot meet on its own. This arrangement, as well as the US–Australia alliance works because generally, the US and Australia share similar national interests and objectives. Although they don't always match, there is enough respect between the two countries and flexibility within the alliance that each country can still pursue its security objectives.

28. This paper assessed Australia's policy of self-reliance within an alliance framework to determine if it's an achievable objective or if it is a fundamental and impractical contradiction which will reduce Australia's ability to best meet its national security objectives. Analysis of both sides of the argument (as well as consensus from successive governments since the policy's inception) indicates the benefits decisively outweigh the costs and risks.<sup>37</sup>

## Endnotes

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2. D Ball, 2001, 'The US–Australian Alliance', *US Allies in a Changing World*, Frank Cass Publishers, London, p. 250.
3. Department of Defence 2000, *Defence 2000–Our Future Defence Force*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, p. 36.
4. Ball, op. cit., p. 251.
5. Specifically, the Guam Doctrine states a) the US will keep all its treaty commitments; b) the US shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with the US or a nation whose survival the US considers vital to its security and the security of the region as a whole, and c) in cases involving other types of aggression, the US shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested as appropriate. But the US shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defence.
6. A Kanavou, 1997, Princeton University, New Jersey, viewed 7 March 2003, <<http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~jpia/1997/chap6.html>>.
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8. *ibid.*
9. P Reith, 30 June 2001, *The US–Australian Alliance in an East Asian Context*, address to the ANZUS Conference at the University of Sydney, viewed 6 March 2002, <<http://australianpolitics.com.au.foreign/anzus/01-06-30reith.shtml>>.
10. Department of Defence 2000, op. cit., pp. 30–31.
11. *ibid.*, p. 33.
12. US Department of State December 2002, US Department of State, Washington D.C., *US National Security Strategy: A New Era*, viewed 5 March 2003, <<http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itps/1202/ijpe/pj7-4overview.htm>>.
13. Department of Defence 2003, *Defence Update 2003*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, p. 9.
14. Beazley, op. cit.
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21. G Cheeseman, 1991, 'From Forward Defence to Self-Reliance: Changes and Continuities in Australian Defence Policy 1965–90', p. 434, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 26, p. 434.
22. Beazley, op. cit.
23. Ball, op. cit., pp. 255, 257.
24. Beazley, op. cit.
25. R Woolcott, 1996, 'A Mature Alliance', *The Weekend Australian*, 3 August, p. 22.
26. I McLachlan, 1996, 'Australian Defence Policy After the Year 2000,' *Defender*, Winter, p. 7.

27. The exception to this however, is the threat of terrorism. Although al Qaeda's fatwah in February 1998 stated it was all Muslims' duty to kill Americans and their allies, bin Ladin also declared jihad against all pluralist liberal societies, therefore making terrorism a global trend. Australia was also singled out by bin Ladin in 1999 in relation to its involvement in East Timor. Arguably, Australia's standing as a potential target is not necessarily because it sides with the US, but because its entire culture, indeed that of every Western culture, does not conform with the al Qaeda world view.
28. Beazley, op. cit.
29. P Chalk, 2001, *Australian Foreign and Defense Policy in the wake of the 1999/2000 East Timor Intervention*, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, viewed 7 March 2003, <<http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1409/MR1409.ch1.pdf>> p. 9.
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