
Dependent self-reliance: Defending Australia within an alliance framework

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The ANZUS alliance gives Australia the technological edge we need to enable less than one per-cent of the Earth's population to guard twelve per-cent of its surface. Without that help, Australia cannot sustain a self-reliant defence posture. In this fundamental way, our alliance is literally essential to our self-reliance.

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Introduction

1. Can Australia defend itself without ANZUS? At 53, the treaty aligning the security interests of Australia and the United States remains as strong as ever. Surviving the 1970s push for self-reliance, and the 1980s crisis that saw New Zealand effectively removed from the ANZUS umbrella, the agreement is one of the longest lasting treaties of modern times.² Nonetheless, successive defence policies since the early eighties have declared Australia's wish for 'self-reliance'—a strategy labelled contradictory by many analysts. The aim of this paper is to evaluate current Defence policy and prove that self-reliance is not only possible within an alliance framework, but is critical to achieving Australia's national interest.

2. The paper will summarise Australia's primary national interests and alliance commitments and interpret the concepts of self-reliance. The arguments for and against an alignment policy will be examined, primarily using the ANZUS Treaty as a case study. Finally, the paper will illustrate how a strong alliance is vital to the achievement of Australia's national interest.

Australia's national interests and the meaning of self-reliance

3. The latest Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) foreign policy White Paper summarises the national interest as 'maintaining the security and prosperity of Australia and Australians'.³ In order to achieve this over-arching aim, it stipulates maintenance of a sound reputation in the global arena, promoting the concepts of fair, open trade and political freedom. DFAT stress international engagement as being at the heart of advancing our interests. The White Paper describes the security and prosperity of our neighbours as a vital component in achieving this aim.

4. Australia's alliance commitments and defence agreements reflect this need. The multilateral Five Power Defence Agreement with Malaysia and Singapore,⁴ and the Australia–Papua New Guinea Defence Agreement, are indicative of Australia's commitment to regional security. While recognising the importance of regional engagement, and the implicit requirement for varying levels of formalised security agreements, the strengthening of the relationship with the United States receives specific mention. Viewed as a national interest in its own right, the relationship with our most powerful ally is fundamental in achieving our broader national interests.

5. Within this framework of international engagement, both the DFAT and Defence White Papers stress the importance of Australia maintaining adherence to our national interest. As in the

preceding two White Papers, *Defence 2000* identifies that Australia must maintain a self-reliant defence capability. Since becoming declaratory policy in 1987, successive governments have refined the term 'self-reliance' in order to remove ambiguity and explain its role in Australian defence policy. Commencing with Beazley's clarifying statement on the relationship between ANZUS and our defence posture,⁵ self-reliance has been defined as 'the ability to defend Australia without relying on the combat forces of other countries'.⁶ Though used by some (e.g. Brown,⁷ Phillips⁸) as a platform for cancellation of the ANZUS Treaty, the policy stresses that self-reliance is not 'going it alone', but rather having the ability to operate independently when necessary, and with partners when required. More importantly, it stresses the critical nature of the alliance with the United States in realising the ability to do this. Why is the alliance so important to achieving our defence priorities (including self-reliance), and what aspects of the alliance might stand in the way of our greater national interests?

ALLIANCE COMMITMENTS—THE PROS AND CONS

6. As the most formal, enduring, and controversial of Australia's defence commitments, ANZUS provides an exceptional case study to illustrate the positive and negative aspects of an alliance commitment in the Australian paradigm. 'Upside, Downside: ANZUS: After Fifty Years' is the brief prepared for the Australian Parliament on the 50th anniversary of the alliance. Gary Brown, long time opponent of ANZUS, and Laura Rayner of DFAT's Defence and Trade Group co-authored the brief, which openly encompasses opposing views of strategic commentators on the alliance over the last two decades.⁹ The paper illustrates the advantages available to a moderate power such as Australia by aligning with a predominant power, countered by the risks and costs—both real and perceived.

Pros

7. The *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations* defines an alliance as 'a formal agreement between two or more actors (usually states) to collaborate together on perceived mutual security issues'.¹⁰ In its purist sense, a security alliance is a means of demonstrating to potential aggressors a common purpose to the defence of each other's respective sovereignty. For Australia, this translates to an increased sense of security within the Asia-Pacific region, able to project its influence further and wider than its size would otherwise warrant—including to senior levels in the US military and government.¹¹ Alliance partners exercising and operating jointly develops interoperability with known and trusted partners, while simultaneously maintaining interest in the region by all alliance partners. The ANZUS Treaty promotes continued and robust United States engagement in the South West Pacific and Southeast Asian region. A potential reduction in commitment to Southeast Asia by the United States could have detrimental effects on the security balance. Anti-US rhetoric aside, Asian countries remain concerned about the threat of diminishing US commitment or a military presence.¹²

8. A key aspect of an alliance is often burden sharing. For a moderate power, this relationship often allows access to research, hardware and intelligence not available within national resources. Though the gap is closing,¹³ Australia maintains a technological superiority in the region largely resulting from the US alliance. The availability of foreign military hardware, both within and outside the alliance, allows Australia to procure modern equipment with an economy of scale not available to our limited market.¹⁴ It has also allowed Australian industry to develop niche defence capabilities and enter the globalised export market. This includes sub-contracts in large international projects such as the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). Equally, membership of the alliance allows Australia to use available technology to make meaningful contributions back into the alliance, notably in the field of intelligence. While 90 per cent of intelligence information available to Australia is of alliance origin, Australia maintains responsibility for the bulk of common intelligence in our region.

Cons

9. Effective alliances are symbiotic relationships by nature. While states will maintain their own national interests, it is impossible to consider that an ally will support Australia's interests without receiving due consideration in kind. Ultimately, this sharing of ideas, technology, hardware, intelligence and operational burden is grossly in Australia's favour. It is hardly surprising that the comparative advantage Australia holds over most of the world's 'moderate' powers courtesy of our powerful ally comes at a cost—and some risk.

10. A considerable risk for the modest state power is that it may become dependent on its powerful ally for irreplaceable supplies, without which the credibility of its military forces can be called into question.¹⁵ While the presence of a revolution in military affairs is the subject of another debate, the rapid increase in military technology is self-evident. Only the United States is truly capable of fully realising the benefits of this technology. The ever-increasing cost of keeping up with military technologies has the potential to price modestly resourced states out of the 'powerful ally' market, or face interoperability issues. The cost of interoperability is critical to Australian defence considerations in the coming decade, particularly as a desire to remain close to the United States may distort force structure and equipment decisions.¹⁶ In addition to economic costs, alignment carries potential political costs domestically and in the international community. As a US ally, Australia risks being automatically typecast in the international community, with regional governments and commentators characterising Australian initiatives as the actions of an American surrogate.¹⁷

11. An alliance that burden-shares defence materiel requirements, or in which lesser powers look to greater powers for critical supplies, risks leaving the state without the means to meet its national interest. Australia's dependence on the foreign market for materiel and resupply limits Australian Defence Force (ADF) sustainment of high-intensity operations without guaranteed materiel and logistic assistance.¹⁸ This is potentially the greatest obstacle to self-reliance. This could enable our allies, particularly the US, to dictate the terms on which Australia conducts military operations, or apply pressure for involvement in conflict outside our national interest. In the worst case, the powerful ally may attempt to dictate important aspects of national policy.¹⁹

12. No alliance is a security guarantee, as overwhelmingly illustrated by Great Britain's regional failure in 1941–42. If pressured militarily, as Britain was in World War II, through diplomatic means, or economically (as Australia would be by China for intervening in the Taiwan Straits), allies may withhold some or all support. Though an alliance provides substantial grounds for confidence of support, it would be foolhardy to base any defence policy around the armed intervention of an ally. The ANZUS Treaty and subsidiary papers do not provide Australia with any guarantees of assistance.²⁰ The signatories agree only to 'consult and act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes'.²¹ Since instituting the Guam Doctrine in 1969, the United States has expected allies to 'make meaningful contributions to their own security'. Moreover, the risk remains that any nation essential to Australia's security could withhold support at a critical point in time.

13. Finally, despite DFAT claims that the alliance relationship has given Australia excellent *access* to the highest levels of the US administration, there is little indication that this access translates into effective *influence*.²² This fact is demonstrated by the US 'with us or against us' statement vis-à-vis the War on Terror, suggesting that while Washington may be prepared to listen to allies, it is unlikely to budge on key issues.

14. Having summarised the arguments for and against a policy of alignment, the reader should note that neither advantages nor drawbacks are absolute. The alliance remains untested as an ultimate guarantor of Australian security, yet features in significant aspects of Australian strategic policy.

SELF-RELIANCE AND THE ALLIANCE IN STRATEGIC DEFENCE POLICY

15. The attention given to the ANZUS Treaty in the DFAT White Paper recognises that the alliance does more than provide an expectation of United States military commitment to our defence. It reflects the vital role the alliance plays in realising Australia's national interests. From a defence and security viewpoint, these interests are defined in five strategic aims spanning a self-reliant defence of the nation through to Australia's commitment to global security.²³

Strategic Aims

16. Unquestionably, the highest priority is the *primary defence of Australia and its air-sea approaches* (DoA). A role that our allies—and more importantly the Australian people—expect the ADF to be capable of as an independent force, it remains the declared principal force structure determinant. Inherent within this ability is reliance on access to strategic intelligence sources not possible under our own limited resources, and materiel unable to be produced in Australia with any degree of economic viability. While there are some grounds to accept anti-ANZUS commentators' suggestions that alignment with the United States increases the threat to Australia's security, this was probably truer during the Cold War nuclear standoff than it is today. Australia remains a target of new security threats today more because of its prosperity and values of freedom than through alignment.²⁴ The opportunity-costs associated with fully meeting a (non-aligned) Australia's need for defence materiel and intelligence would have a negative effect on broader social programs and will not be acceptable to the Australian population. Through the alliance, Australia remains capable of defending our territory against credible threats.

17. Beyond the task of DoA, Australian military action takes on increased levels of cooperation with foreign powers. As defence priorities move further into the regional and global environment, success in achieving these tasks become more dependent on forging strong security relationships through formal treaties or ad hoc arrangements (coalitions). The balanced force structure and capability for relatively independent low to mid level conventional operations allows the second 'level' of strategic aim; support to the *security of the immediate environment*,²⁵ *cooperative security in Southeast Asia* and *contributing to security in Asia-Pacific Region*. With access to highly capable intelligence sources, and the ability to call on enhanced capabilities such as strategic lift, medical or communications support from partners, Australia is able to take a leading role in the region. In a broader sense, the feeling of security provided by an alliance allows the nation to commit forces to such activities with reduced concern for security of Australian sovereignty.

18. At the ultimate level of international military engagement, it is extremely unlikely in modern times for a democratic nation to undertake action in isolation. Whether as a multilateral coalition, under the auspices of the United Nations, or within more structured partnerships like NATO or ANZUS, coalitions often offer credibility to the cause.²⁶ They also allow contribution from nations not capable of undertaking independent action. Australia's lowest priority strategic aim is conversely the most divisive—*contributing to international coalitions operating beyond the immediate environment, where these support wider interests and objectives*. This is attuned to the highest levels of foreign policy, where self-reliance takes a back seat to interoperability. While it has been suggested that Australian 'self-reliance shortfalls' were evident as late as the 1991 Gulf War,²⁷ this is mitigated by the ability to deploy other force elements to support our interests in the conflict. Furthermore, shortfalls such as these continue to be addressed (with the support of our allies) as part of the broader defence acquisition strategy—driven predominantly by DoA requirements, where the threat level is vastly different.

Alliance management

19. We can now see the important relationship between the trilogy of national strategic interests, self-reliance and alliances, but what about the importance of national versus partner interests? The potential risk of allowing the desire to ‘please or appease’ partners at the expense of national interest has previously been identified. In the Australian example, the primacy of self-reliant national defence based on access to alliance materiel and intelligence has the potential to exacerbate this conflict. Inclusion of ‘furthering the US Alliance’ in our foreign policy is recognition of the importance that the United States plays in Australia achieving its long-term goals. Inherent within this is the requirement for ‘alliance management’, particularly to maintain open dialogue on Australia’s position on specific issues. Australia has in the past gone against a Washington trend,²⁸ and has stated a preparedness to do so in the future.²⁹

20. An audit of Australian military action would show a reasonably constant adherence to foreign policy and national interest of the day. From support to Malaysia during the anti-communist/forward defence era, through to UN-sanctioned intervention in East Timor or halting illegal immigration in the north reflects strong adherence to the primacy of the Australian national interest. However, the importance of alliance management cannot be overlooked as the 21st century security situation continues to unfold, particularly in the War on Terror.

Conclusion

21. Cheeseman stated that we are self-reliant ‘only within the context of our broader alliance relationships’.³⁰ The aim of this paper was to prove that self-reliance is possible within an alliance framework, and critical to achieving Australia’s national interest. The ability to defend Australia without relying on the combat forces of other countries has been the declaratory policy since 1984, now largely reflected in our force structure. However, self-reliance is not an absolute goal.³¹ Membership of alliances allows Australia to access intelligence, research and development, and restricted materiel, and enhances commitment to goals common to Australia and our partners. Australia’s relationship with the US ‘seriously complicates the planning of any potential adversary’.³² These advantages outweigh the risks and costs associated with alignment. The strategic goals for Australian security, as a subset of our national interests, benefit significantly throughout the spectrum of engagement. Arguably, the alliance framework provides the most significant gain at opposite ends of that spectrum—supporting the defence of Australia, and providing a mechanism for Australian involvement in coalition operations. In achieving self-reliance and national objectives, the alliance framework is complementary, not contradictory.

Endnotes

1. K. Beazley, The Hon., *Australia and the Asia Pacific Region: A Strategy of Self-Reliance and Alliance*, address to the Washington Centre of the Asia Society, 30 Jun 1988, p.14 (cited Cheeseman).
2. The North Atlantic Treaty, signed in 1949, predates ANZUS by two years.
3. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2003, *Advancing The National Interest*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. vii.
4. Plus Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.
5. Opening quote.
6. Department of Defence 2000, *Defence Review 2000—Our Future Defence Force*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. 46.
7. G. Brown, 1989, *Breaking the American Alliance: An Independent National Security Policy for Australia*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra.
8. D. Phillips, 1988, *Ambivalent Allies: Myth and Reality in the Australian–American Relationship*, Penguin Books, Melbourne.
9. The paper accurately reflects the individual works of authoritative commentators such as Ball, Cheeseman, Bell, Dibb, as well as official policy, and will be used as the predominant source to illustrate the pros and cons of Australian–US alignment.
10. G. Evans and J. Newnham, 1999, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, Penguin, New York.
11. G. Brown and L. Rayney, 2001, *Upside, Downside: ANZUS: After Fifty Years*, Parliamentary Library 2001, Parliament of Australia, viewed 1 Apr 2004 <<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/CIB/2001-02/02cib03.htm>>.
12. D. Ball, 2001, ‘The US–Australian Alliance’, B. Rubin and T. Keaney, (ed.), *US Allies in a Changing World*, Frank Cass and Co. Ltd, London, p. 264–9.
13. e.g. Singapore’s modernisation program has closed this gap significantly in recent years.
14. e.g. Joint Strike Fighter (JSF).
15. G. Brown and L. Rayney, 2001, loc. cit.
16. *ibid.*
17. *ibid.*
18. D. Tramoundanis, 1993, *Defence Self-Reliance and the Sustainment of Operations*, Air Power Studies Centre, Canberra, p. 5.
19. G. Brown and L. Rayney 2001, loc. cit.
20. Following President Bush’s recent announcement, only Taiwan has a US ‘guarantee’ of assistance.
21. Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, *Security Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America [ANZUS]*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
22. G. Brown and L. Rayney, 2001, loc. cit.
23. Department of Defence 2000, loc. cit. p. 30–2.
24. e.g. terrorism, economic attack, illegal immigration.
25. Includes ‘lower’ security threats including evacuations, natural disasters and peacekeeping.
26. e.g. ‘Coalition of the Willing’ in Iraq—2003.
27. Australian combat aircraft were deemed incapable of operating in the high ground based air defence threat environment due to a lack of EW self-protection capability.
28. e.g. Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, SDI, Farm Bill (US farmers subsidies).

29. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2003, loc. cit. p. 86.
30. G. Cheeseman, 1993, *The Search for Self Reliance—Australian Defence Since Vietnam*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, p. 174.
31. J.A. Camilleri, 1987, *ANZUS: Australia's Predicament in the Nuclear Age*, MacMillan, Melbourne p. 170.
32. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 1997, *In the National Interest—Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra p. 58.

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