Review: The US Lobby and Australian Defence Policy by Vince Scappatura

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The quality of strategic debate in Australia often disappoints, especially when it comes to the most sensitive of contemporary subjects: Australia’s relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Canberra’s alliance with Washington, and the interplay between them. Books such as *Dangerous Allies* (Malcolm Fraser) and *Silent Invasion* (Clive Hamilton) advance important arguments, but they often gloss over contestable assumptions and assume convenient connections rather than establish them.

In *The US Lobby and Australian Defence Policy*, Vince Scappatura, a lecturer at Macquarie University, works to break these trends. In Part I of the book, he argues that an ‘Alliance Orthodoxy’ influences Australian thinking on alliance issues, then in Part II he argues that the US–Australia alliance now largely serves to support US domination of Asia. These chapters are well researched, clearly argued, and written in a lively and accessible manner, but they mainly cover well-trodden ground from a left-leaning perspective. The book’s more significant contribution is in Part III, where Scappatura sets out to explore the alliance orthodoxy in elite Australian opinion. The case study examined is the little-known Australian American Leadership Dialogue (hereafter: the Dialogue). Scappatura sets ambitious and difficult research questions: does the Dialogue work to maintain elite support for the alliance? If so, how, and with what result?

Scappatura argues that within Australia, there is a ‘loose network of elites and institutional relationships’ that dominate discussions of Australian strategy. This ‘pro-US security consensus’ operates through institutions such as the Dialogue, which ‘facilitates the socialisation of Australian elites into the alliance orthodoxy’. But identifying how this orthodoxy...
came about, and is sustained, is no easy task. Scappatura’s work on this delicate and difficult subject is more satisfying than many other treatments. Methodologically, the Dialogue is a difficult subject to research: Scappatura notes that his requests to interview organisational leaders, and survey Dialogue participants, were refused. However, he was able to interview 40 Dialogue participants, and these interviews provide a rich data-set for the argument he advances.

The Dialogue was founded by an Australian businessman, Phil Scanlan, who established it due to a concern that ‘diminishing personal bonds between the leaders of both nations would create a distance neither wanted, but may occur as each nation took the other for granted’. Dialogue events invite elite figures, as well as younger achievers of obvious ambition and future potential, to workshops and conferences emphasising the importance of the US–Australia relationship.

Scappatura argues that Dialogue events serve to reinforce an orthodoxy of thought on the alliance. He cites several former participants, one of whom believes that the Dialogue is intended to ‘ensure a deeper body of support [for the alliance] amongst informed and elite opinion’. This accords with Scanlan’s original intent, but it is possible that over time the Dialogue has taken on a more significant role, affixing Australian politicians with ‘an official stamp of approval as a person able to handle the US alliance’. One former participant noted that it was common to see ambitious politicians with leadership potential at Dialogue events: you might ‘see five future Prime Ministers sitting there’. Along this vein, Scappatura’s analysis of Mark Latham, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard’s attendance at the Dialogue is fascinating. For cunning politicians, the Dialogue might be an opportunity to signal their reliability to a US audience and also to be anointed as a capable alliance manager.

Scappatura does not exaggerate this argument—Washington is not picking Australian leaders—but attendance at the Dialogue encourages future leaders to think about the alliance in a particular way. One participant, journalist Peter Hartcher, noted that ‘radicals or opponents or critics probably don’t get invited to join. I haven’t noticed any turning up’. Several interviewees noted the mood of comity at Dialogue events and thought that this inhibited frank discussion. The re-

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5 Ibid., 118.
6 Ibid., 122.
7 Ibid., 127.
8 Ibid., 186.
9 Ibid., 184.
10 Ibid., 157.
result seems to be that Dialogue events focus not on substantive discussion but affirmation about the importance of the alliance, which is premised on the assumption that Australian and US interests will always converge.

This behaviour might be unproblematic if it is limited to Dialogue events: most alliances feature summits 'designed for the ritual incantation of unifying rhetoric'. But if this tendency bleeds over into policy, it could serve to dangerously limit Australian thinking. Hartcher reveals this risk in his assessment that the purpose of the Dialogue:

is not to have robust discussion and debate about whether we should have an alliance. It’s to have robust discussion and debate about how to make the alliance work better and work in the national interest.

This kind of sentiment aligns closely with the alliance orthodoxy described by Scappatura and epitomised in a report from the National Security College, which claims that Australia has ‘no realistic alternative’ to its alliance with the US. This kind of framing allows for the neat and reflexive characterisation of different perspectives on the alliance: either one is in favour of it—after all, there is ‘no realistic alternative’—or one is a ‘radical or opponent or critic’. Even if one believes that Australia has ‘no realistic alternative’ this pithy conclusion offers leaders no guidance on how to actually manage the alliance, especially on occasions when Australia’s interests diverge from those of the US. If Paul Dibb is correct—that anyone at the Dialogue who makes the ‘slightest criticism of the United States… [is] not invited again’—then these events seem more sermon than dialogue.

This raises the question of whether the Dialogue remains fit-for-purpose in a period of great power competition, when Australia’s choices within the alliance are going to grow more difficult. Scanlan’s decision to form the Dialogue was driven by his concern that each nation would take the other for granted, and drift apart, in the post-Cold War environment. But it is possible that because of Australia’s alliance orthodoxy—supported by mechanisms such as the Dialogue—this risk is intensifying. Australian leaders don’t know how to talk maturely about the alliance today: they continue to use outdated talking points emphasising shared values and mateship, even while areas of undeniable divergence become more obvious. Exam-

ples abound: Washington concertedlylobbies Australia to conduct Freedom
of Navigation operations, but we re-
peatedly decline; Canberra decides to
join China-led institutions, such as the
Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank,
despite US encouragement to abstain;
Australia elects not to endorse the nu-
merous hawkish speeches delivered
by Vice President Pence and Secre-
tary of State Pompeo.

In prematurely concluding that Aus-
tralia and the US will one day be
‘celebrating an even greater second
hundred years of mateship’, Australian leaders take for granted that the
alliance can persist, in good health,
despite these emerging differenc-
es.14 If these divergences grow then
we may look back and agree with
Hugh White’s assessment: that the
Dialogue is ‘bad for the alliance’ be-
cause it works to ‘conceal…rather
than identify and address’ alliance
disagreements.15 Perhaps it would be
beneficial for both the Dialogue, and
the broader US–Australia relationship,
if the ‘doubting Thomas’ types were
also invited. Decisions to deepen or
strengthen the alliance are, in any pe-
riod of great power competition, un-
likely to be costless. To defend such
decisions, Australian leaders will need
better justifications than soppy ap-
peals to mateship, sentimentality and
shared values.

Some readers will dismiss this book
because of its title, or the familiar
left-leaning critique in Parts I and II,
but either response would be a mis-
take. It is entirely possible to disagree
with some of Scappatura’s analy-
sis in the first two parts, agree with
the thrust of his argument about the
Dialogue, and also support the al-
liance. This book highlights a need
for Canberra’s elite—and interested
Australians generally—to think more
seriously about the alliance and be
better prepared to openly debate its
risks and benefits. Different perspec-
tives on the alliance should not be de-
nounced as radicalism or dismissed
without engagement. In the 1980s,
fierce debate over the role of the joint
facilities actually produced a strong-
er alliance, underpinned by informed
public support. But such crucial dis-
cussions can occur only if Australia’s
political leaders, and other influential
elites, abandon reflexive adherence
to the alliance orthodoxy. In identify-
ing and analysing this phenomenon,
Scappatura’s book is an important
contribution to better-informed dis-
cussions of Australian strategy.

14 Malcolm Turnbull, ‘Remarks at the National Governor’s Association, Washington DC’, Trans ID 41470,
transcript-41470.
15 Scappatura, The US Lobby, 159.