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The Australia/United States Relationship (or how to live with the Gorilla)

One of the most enduring myths Australians are wedded to is the belief that Australia can't be defended without the support of a 'great and powerful' friend. Most Australians still think that if Japan had won the battle of the Coral Sea or had defeated the Australian troops on the Kokoda trail, the occupation of Port Moresby would have been the precursor to the invasion of Australia. It wasn't. Japanese naval records revealed after the war that Japan had no intentions of occupying Australia – they calculated that it would require 12 divisions, one more than was used in its conquests to that point in Asia. Japan had to control its southern flank in the Pacific before it could attack American interests in the north and score sufficient victories to force the US to seek a negotiated peace favourable to Japan.

Nevertheless, Australia remained fearful of the potential long-term Japanese threat and when the US decided in 1951 to sign a peace treaty with Japan and make it a western bulwark in the cold war, the ANZUS Treaty was the price the Menzies government extracted for Australia's signature and active cooperation. It wasn't much of a price. The parties agreed to 'consult' in the event of a threat against any of them.

It was plain what the Treaty meant in the 1960s. The US took Indonesia's side on the issue of the incorporation of West Irian into Indonesia and refused to support Australia (and the UK and New Zealand) over the Indonesian confrontation with Malaysia. In 1975 US President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger visited Jakarta a few days before Indonesia launched its invasion of East Timor and would have been informed of President Soeharto's intentions. It was quite clear, when push came to shove, the US placed a higher value on its strategic relationship with Indonesia than Australia during the cold war because Indonesian cooperation was vital to allow the free movement of US nuclear submarines between the Indian and Pacific oceans through the Sunda and Lombok Straits.

Australia saw no problem about allowing the ANZUS Treaty to evolve into a nuclear alliance by allowing US communications bases to operate on Australian soil while New Zealand, which didn't want US nuclear ships visiting NZ ports, was punished by the US and effectively expelled from ANZUS without any protest from Australia.

There was a brief window of opportunity for Australia to develop a more independent defence posture in keeping with its status as a nation state and its strategic environment which was opened up by the US in 1969 and spelled out by President Nixon in the wake of the impending US withdrawal from Vietnam. Known as the Guam Doctrine, it said that, in future, countries in the Asian region would be primarily responsible for their own defence unless they were threatened by a great power (meaning the USSR).

The Australian response was the beginnings of a debate about a self-reliant defence policy which culminated in 1986 with the Dibb report. It made three obvious points: one, that any serious military threats to Australia would have to come through the Indonesian archipelago; two, the prime purpose of the Australian defence forces was the defence of Australia and Australia's force structure should reflect this objective and three, the ANZUS agreement didn't offer much except where US interests coincided with Australian interests. Dibb said 'there are no guarantees inherent in it. It is realistic to assume that the parties will continue to approach each situation in accordance with their own national interest'.

Australia had begun its own long march towards self-reliance. The force structure and equipment purchases began reflect the needs of Australian defence, not how well it would operate as an expeditionary force slotted into a US force structure. The long march was derailed by Prime Minister Howard three days after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the New York twin towers and the Pentagon in Washington when he invoked (during his visit to Washington) the ANZUS treaty (in consultation with the US) to justify Australian military support for the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan and later the invasion of Iraq.

With general public approval, Howard put Australia firmly back into the status of deputy sheriff, where Australian interests became once more completely subordinated to US interests. Why? The answer has to be that that ingrained into the psyche of the Australian people is the false belief that Australia cannot defend itself against latent enemies who want Australia's riches and only hold off because they fear Australia's 'great and powerful friend'.

In fact the opposite is the case. While Australia plays the role of the deputy sheriff, America's enemies become Australia's enemies at the expense of Australia's long-term interests in the region. At the same time, as Australia's force structure is corrupted by slavish attachment to America's global ambitions by, for instance, the expenditure of \$600 million on US Abrahams tanks which can only operate effectively in the plains of Europe and the Korean Peninsular or the desserts of the Middle East. This is a costly diversion of men and material from the defence of Australia.

Potentially, the decision by the Howard government to support the US National Missile Defence (NMD) program is far more irresponsible than the decision by the Menzies government to allow the US to build the first of its communications bases at North West Cape in WA. It was designed to communicate with Polaris submarines on station in the Persian Gulf with their missiles aimed at Southern USSR. At least this facility could be justified in terms of playing a role in maintaining the nuclear balance which relied on the certainty of massive retaliation deterring any nuclear power mad enough to think it could win a nuclear war with a surprise first nuclear strike.

President Bush, like President Reagan before him, is prepared to spend a trillion dollars on building a National Missile Defence system to provide the US with a shield behind which the US can safely launch a nuclear attack. The system has not been fully tested. Most scientists who understand the issues, don't believe the system can be ever made to work. Nuclear strategists believe it will set off a nuclear arms race starting with China, and

leading to a chain reaction with India and Pakistan. Even if NMD worked against missile attack, it would be useless against low flying cruise missiles launched against the US by submarines close in shore or from guerrillas smuggling nuclear devices in suitcases. Cynics believe the Bush Administration doesn't believe the system will work either, and that the program is simply a way of rewarding the leaders of the military defence complex who finance the Bush presidential campaigns.

Even if it does work, NMD is not designed to defend Australia. Any US communications bases in Australia operating as part of NMD will become a potential target. The announcement on 4th December that Australia would participate in NMD was clearly time to embarrass the new leader of the ALP. The announcement came at the same time Latham as new ALP leader visited the US Ambassador, Thomas Schieffer, to mend fences following his earlier disparaging statements about President Bush. The Defence Minister, Robert Hill, wasn't able to say what the most appropriate participation would be, there was no financial commitment on the part of the government, he did not envisage ground based missile defence systems on Australian territory, but claimed it would be in Australia's strategic interests and provide maximum opportunity for Australian industry.

The government announcement of its formal participation in NMD, drew immediate approval from the US and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer called on Latham to support the government decision. Behind the scenes, government sources called the attention of press gallery journalists to a speech made by Latham in March which excoriated the government for its supine attitude to the US.

This is the part of the speech that the government hoped voters would find off-putting: 'the Defence update is a remarkably simplistic document that even goes as far as endorsing the 'son of star wars' – that is NMD. Incredibly, this is not to protect Australian cities and territories; rather, it recognises that, under this government, wherever the US army goes across the globe, the ADF will automatically follow'.

And where is the US about to go? According to the *National Security Strategy*, the US objective is to maintain its military dominance, with the right to preemptive military strike against any country it regards as a threat or potential threat. The US has refused to rule out a first nuclear strike against non-nuclear nations. The NMD is designed ultimately to give the US the 'ownership' of space and 'full spectrum dominance' of the world.

Is the price of government a promise to follow the US down this dangerous track? Apparently Latham hasn't made up his mind. At his press conference after the meeting with the US ambassador he used the US and Australian flags as a backdrop (and blamed one of his staff for the presence of the US flag) and said he would seek detailed briefings from the government before responding to the government's decision to participate in NMD.

Irrespective of how Howard's decision to participate in NMD plays in Australia, it is not going down well overseas. A few days after Downer's challenge to Latham, Downer was criticised by his Indonesian counterpart, Hassan Wirajuda, in a joint press conference. After pointing out that if a missile aimed in Australia's direction was successfully

destroyed, the nuclear debris would be likely to fall on Indonesian territory, he said the program would undermine regional security and spark an arms race. Wirajuda said: 'we have been working very hard, including with Australia and other partners, within the ASEAN Regional Forum process. The NMD program is not compatible with what we are doing. It is not helpful'.

If Indonesians and most of the rest of the region can see what is at stake, it surely can't be beyond the wit of an articulate leader of the opposition to make the issue of WMD an election issue which is a plus for the ALP.

The other considerations are that the strategic policies of the Bush Administration are not necessarily the policies that will be followed by future administrations. The world is not a safer place because the US under Bush feels powerful enough to abandon the strategic doctrine of deterrence in favour of the threat of pre-emptive strike. This applies to America too and there are plenty of US citizens who strongly disagree with the Bush doctrine.

The US occupation of Iraq is turning into a quagmire (see *Dissent* No 13, Summer 2003/2004). The US Army which is highly trained and superbly equipped for offensive operations is not trained or psychologically equipped for occupation duties and US public opinion is becoming restive about the mounting occupation casualties. Bush could still be a one term president like George Senior unless government is quickly handed over to a genuinely independent Iraqi government (which means the US will lose its strategic objective of controlling Iraq's oil reserves) or the occupation forces are successful in reducing US casualties.

The US can only continue with its imperial ambition, involving the expenditure of 4 per cent of GDP on defence while running the largest trading and budget deficits in the industrialised world, while the dollar is maintained as the dominant reserve currency, accounting for 70 per cent of global currency reserves even though it accounts for only 12 per cent of world exports and 19 per cent of world imports.

The dollar is fiat currency (it is backed by nothing except itself) which means that while world oil sales are denominated in US dollars, the US can pay for its huge oil consumption by the Federal Reserve printing more greenbacks. If the oil producing countries demand payment in euros (which has appreciated 44 per cent against the US dollar over the last two years) then the US will have to earn foreign currency from exports and cutting back imports like other countries. This would require higher taxes and cuts in defence spending which would put paid to Bush's imperial ambitions and expose the stupidity of the Coalition's defence policy which, like its refugee policy, seems driven totally by consideration of domestic political advantage irrespective of the consequences for the long term security of Australia.