

Submission to the Defence White Paper 2013

Marrickville Peace Group

“The US re-balance to the Asia Pacific and Australia’s enhanced practical cooperation with the US pursuant to our 60 year old Alliance relationship.”

Submission

In November 2011 Prime Minister Gillard and US President Obama jointly announced that US Marines would be stationed in Darwin and that the US Air Force would make increased use of Australian facilities. In November 2012, expanded use of HMAS Stirling by US warships was announced. Thus, since the President announced the ‘Asia Pacific re-balance’ all US armed forces have gained greater access to Australia.

These are significant developments within the Australia US alliance. They are more than ‘enhanced practical cooperation’ as they change the strategic balance in our region. Significantly, US power is projected even further from its shores than it was beforehand.

The changes have been presented to the Australian public as strengthening the alliance (which may be true) and as increasing regional stability (which is questionable). They have been described as being in Australia’s best interests – but without spelling out exactly why.

Since colonization, Australia has displayed fear of invasion. This fear persists as an underlying influence and explains why Australia is so willing to seek protection from its enormously powerful ally. However, there are problems with this approach.

Firstly, Australia is not under any threat from any foreign power¹. Australia has no need for special protection and absolutely no need to seek it from the other side of the Pacific.

Secondly, the increased access to Australia for US forces, being an extension of US power projection towards China, may have a de-stabilising effect on our region and actually increase the likelihood of Australia being drawn into conflict.

Who benefits from these changes? Australia may gain a *sense* of security and greater access to US-made weaponry and expertise. However, the real benefits accrue to the US – to its Government from increased military influence and to its armaments industry, for which the re-balance represents a business opportunity.^{2 & 3}

These developments first came to attention in a statement made by the PM and the President together. There was very little public discussion of the US re-balance or of Australia’s role within it, beforehand. The press release issued from the White House states “*These joint initiatives, which will take place in Australian facilities, are part of an ongoing review of U.S. force posture in the Asia-Pacific region intended to pursue a more geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable military presence in this region.*”⁴ This betrays the fact that the Darwin deployment is more about US military advantage than it is about Australia’s defence. The fact that the new developments were announced jointly, suggests that decisions were not taken by Australia independently, meaning that the alliance is not one ‘between equals’.

The US is already the paramount military presence, with extraordinary influence, throughout the Pacific. It has significant bases in Guam, Okinawa (Japan) and the Philippines. All of these bases will be ‘enhanced’ in the re-balance. Even before the re-balance, the US was able to project its influence well beyond the borders of its own territory. It has done so continually since the end of WWII. By allowing easier access by US forces, Australia is effectively giving the US further strategic advantage.

The perceived need for the US to shift its military focus to the Pacific arose from the emergence of China as a major economic force in the Western Pacific. For reasons that have never been explained satisfactorily, China's economic success is taken to indicate an intention to expand its influence, militarily. Through the media, we have been informed about increasing Chinese expenditure on things military. The Australian public is led to believe that China represents some sort of military threat.⁵

The 're-balance' feeds on the notion of an increasingly powerful China threatening the US. The reality is different. Of the two countries the US is vastly the superior, both in terms of its ability to wage war and in the amount of money spent on the military. The US is not threatened militarily by China. It is possible that Chinese military spending may reach that of the US in about 25 years time⁶ – but even if the two countries then spend equivalent amounts on defence, that would not necessarily make China an enemy of the US (or us).

Despite this, the US appears intent on 'containing' China. With bases there for nearly 70 years, it has recently indicated that it believes Japan to have a better claim than China to the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, thereby indicating that it might side with Japan against China, should hostilities between those two countries break out.

A military strategist observing developments from the Chinese perspective would be justified in seeing the US re-balance as nothing short of military maneuvering, giving the US further strategic advantage that could indicate hostile intentions against China. US-controlled facilities within reach face China's coast in almost every direction. Australia simply marks the southernmost extent of a ring of US military influence around China. The perception of a hostile stance against it is bound to increase China's emphasis on military strength. Thus the re-balance, predicated on fear of a threatening China, could bring about just this scenario.

By its close association with the US, Australia is '*de facto*' adopting the same hostile stance towards China as the US. It seems that we have joined a 'gang' that is subtly challenging China. In reality, Australia has no grievance with China. It is our most important trading partner, on whom we are dependent both as a market for our exports and as the producer of most of our imported, manufactured goods. Australia can ill afford to become its enemy.⁷

These are reasons for Australia to maintain more distance from the US than it does at present. There are others:-

- Internationally, the US has a reputation for resolving international disputes through violence.
- The US has been implicated in torture; the unlawful 'rendition' of suspects (Hicks and Habib); unlawful attacks on civilians (in Iraq); killing of civilians in drone attacks on a country with which it is not at war (in Pakistan), and extra-judicial executions on foreign territory.
- In 2001 the US led Australia into a futile war in Afghanistan. In 2003 Australia joined the invasion of Iraq (as a loyal ally), when there was no valid, legal reason for it.
- The US has an appalling record for internal, gun-related violence.
- The US can be characterized as a country steeped in violence internally, that does not hesitate to use military means for ends other than its own self-defence. During the Vietnam war Dr Martin Luther King described the US Government as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world".⁸ Little has changed since.

Is it prudent for Australia to associate itself so closely with a nation with such a poor reputation? Why should we place such value on it?

'Inter-operability'

There is room for doubt about the value of inter-operability. It is a two-edged sword. Whilst it gives us access to the latest (US) weaponry and military systems, it also ties us to US systems and excludes us from alternatives. The outcome could well be a loss of Australia's military independence.

Conclusion

The word ‘pursuant’ in the heading is problematical. It suggests that the fact that the alliance has endured for 60 years has made it necessary or inevitable that ‘enhanced practical co-operation’ must occur. The long duration of the alliance is not a *reason* to ‘enhance’ it or preserve it without question.

‘Enhancement’ has come to mean providing greater access for all US armed forces to Australian territory. This has improved the strategic stance of the US and allowed it to become increasingly threatening towards China. By association, Australia has become part of that threat.

The US is a country with an international reputation for purveying violence.

As an independent country, under no threat from any other country and with strong trading links to China, what does Australia gain from ‘enhancing’ the US alliance?

Australia’s close alliance with the US jeopardises this country’s good international reputation.

MPG would favour much greater independence in the way Australia makes its military decisions. We sense that the alliance is leading Australia along an undesirable path – heading towards enmity with China. We fear that ‘inter-operability’ reduces Australia’s military independence. We dislike being associated with a ruthless and violent world power.

As one member has expressed it: “*In a domestic/marriage situation it is sometimes better for both parties if a relationship is terminated – especially if the parties can maintain an adult understanding towards one another. There is no value for either party in staying together simply because of habit, if the relationship has become dysfunctional.*” The same could be said to apply to relations between nations.

24 February 2013

Notes

¹ *Defence White Paper 2009*, 6.23

² Ross Gittings, ‘The four business gangs that run the US’, *SMH*, 31 December 2012

³ *South China Morning Post*, ‘US to bolster its Asia-Pacific ‘pivot’ with big increase in weapons sales’, 7 January 2013

⁴ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/16/prime-minister-gillard-and-president-obama-announce-force-posture-init-0>

⁵ For example, *Defence White Paper 2009*, 4.26

⁶ Peter Hartcher, ‘Defence is headed for its own crisis’, *SMH*, 29 January 2013

⁷ Hugh White, ‘The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power’, 2012

⁸ Dr Martin Luther King, ‘Beyond Vietnam: A Time To Break Silence’ (audio of full speech), 4 April 1967, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OC1Ru2p8OfU>