The perspective of Australian foreign policy held by the present Federal Government was tersely spelled out recently for world consumption by Sir Robert Menzies: “Australia will in the next 20 years become more involved in international affairs, especially in Asia. She will, until somebody discovers a magical peace formula, need to sustain large and growing defence commitments.” (1) (Emphasis added.)

The statement, which on careful reading may be seen to indicate increasing militarisation for an INDEFINITE period ahead, should be considered alongside another masterpiece of succinctness— that of External Affairs Minister P. M. Hasluck in August, 1964: “There is no current alternative to using force as necessary to check the southward thrust of militant Asian Communism.” (2)

Elaborating his survey of foreign policy perspective, Menzies also said: “Governments will come and go . . . but the broad principles of national policy may be expected to survive.” (3)

Since early 1964, there has developed in Australia an unprecedented public debate on foreign policy which, by common consent, has deeply divided the nation.

Is this cleavage in public opinion concerned only with method and detail of application of otherwise acceptable broad policies? How, in fact, does the present government see these broad principles in the field of foreign (including defence) policy, with reference to Asia and the Pacific?

Mr. Hasluck, as Minister, described the “two consistent strands in Australian policy towards Asia” as:—

• The search for means of maintaining security “both by alliances and by arrangements for regional cooperation”, and
Consistent willingness to "assist in raising standards of living to help Asian countries to help themselves." (4)

The practical application of these high-sounding "strands" by the Menzies and Holt Governments has included: military involvement in the Korean War, garrisoning of Australian forces in Malaya, and more recently in Thailand and North Borneo, participation in the South East Asia Treaty Organisation, combat involvement in the Vietnam war under U.S. command and increasingly based on a combination of regular army and conscript soldiers, orientation of military procurement towards the USA and of military organisation towards US forms, sustained refusal to "recognise" China and this year the upgrading of diplomatic recognition of the Chiang regime on Taiwan.

All of these steps fall under the heading of "search for security". Examination of almost any government document on foreign policy in recent years reveals that the two most important aspects of the government’s policy for "security" are: (1) Active opposition to what is called the "Chinese Communist threat". (2) The military alliance with the USA.

These lines of policy have been vociferously and almost unconditionally supported by non-government political forces such as those associated with the Democratic Labor Party and its inspirer B. A. Santamaria.

The Government's concepts have been opposed consistently by, among others, the Communist Party (which has advocated an independent Australian foreign policy for peace and friendship (5) and, to an increasing extent from 1964, by the national leadership of the Australian Labor Party.

Direct opposition to the Vietnam war as "an unjust war" and a declaration of intention that a Labor government would immediately begin steps to withdraw Australian troops (6), are ALP policies that have amounted to head-on collision with US policy on Vietnam.

It is, however, of great significance to the Australian labor movement that the basic essentials of the Government's policy continue to be supported by an important right-wing section of the Australian Labor Party.

This was shown clearly at this year’s conference of the New South Wales branch of the ALP, long the main centre of rightwing leadership in that party.
Since Mr. Oliver made reference to the Curtin (wartime) Government as authority for his policy (7 & 8), it appears that the ALP rightwing too believes that the "broad policies are unchanging." The facts, however, do not bear this out.

The real flowering of recognisably Australian foreign policy concepts came in the 'thirties, in the aftermath of the 1926 Imperial Conference (which agreed on Dominion autonomy in foreign affairs) and the 1931 Statute of Westminster (giving Dominion Parliaments full legal independence of the British Government).

In this period, which was also marked by consciousness of Australia's growing potential as a manufacturing country, the principal themes of foreign policy discussion included: the problem of seeing the Asian and Pacific region in sharp focus as required by Australia's own needs (particularly in trade) as distinct from the secondary consideration it had always received from Britain; the problem of national security, with special reference to the recognisable threat from aggressive Japanese imperialism; the importance of China to Australia.

In 1937 at the Imperial Conference Australia's Tory Prime Minister Lyons advocated a Pact of non-aggression by the countries of the Pacific, "a regional understanding . . . conceived in the spirit and principles of the League." Japan opposed it as a means of preserving the status quo, the USA said there were enough pacts already, and the Soviet Union's newspaper Izvestia (21/5/37) commented:

"Such a pact would coincide with the interests of all Pacific countries. Collective security in the Pacific would play a tremendous and possibly a decisive role in ensuring European peace and would be a powerful factor in preventing the terrible slaughter the fascist aggressors are preparing."

But it was the war itself that crystallised Australian thinking on foreign policy. The early-war Menzies Government, carrying hangovers of Nazi sympathies born of anti-communism and typified by the action in July 1940 of actively supporting the closing of the Burma Road into China (at the demand of Japan), was followed by a Labor Government.

Those in the labor movement interested in elevating the "American alliance" plank of foreign policy have made much of Labor Prime Minister Curtin's "pro-American" statement
in December, 1941 (see note 8). There is, however, a good deal of evidence that if this statement, made in the heat of the moment after Japan attacked, really represented the Government's thinking at the time, it was quickly modified.

Professor K. H. Bailey (Melbourne University), writing in 1943 and noting that there had always been forces in the Labor movement asserting a "vigorously independent Australian nationalism", said that Curtin had subsequently explained that his 1941 statement "did not mean that Australia regarded itself as anything but an integral part of the British Empire." (9)

According to Bailey, the idea that Australian defence in 1943 rested wholly on American-Australian cooperation was an "exaggeration", since in that year British material aid was "probably not less than Lend-Lease" from the USA.

But the clearest formulation of the first comprehensive foreign policy of Australia came in this period from the External Affairs Minister, Dr. H. V. Evatt. Evatt, even in the darkest days of the Pacific war, was not concerned only with the problems of wartime relations.

In late 1941, Evatt was urging on Churchill the importance of a closer political and military agreement with the USSR that would embrace contingencies in the Pacific. After Japan attacked, Evatt adopted, for the first time, the procedure of an independent Australian declaration of war, as distinct from announcing (as Menzies had done) that there was a state of war as a legal effect of a British declaration.

The Labor Government's view, as expounded by Evatt, was firstly that there must be an all embracing system of security and also "Australia's own security", and secondly that "peace and stability in the Pacific in the post-war period can be achieved only by building a way of life in the Pacific in which the varied nations and peoples can live together in peace and prosperity... plans which take into account the legitimate aspirations of the peoples." (10)

Evatt developed this theme through to the end of the war, insisting that the Atlantic Charter could and must apply literally to the Pacific, with its main points—no territorial aggrandisement, no territorial changes not freely desired by the people concerned, respect of the right of all nations to choose their own form of government, and security for all nations from aggression and want after the disarming of the aggressor.
It is important to recall that Evatt and other members of the Curtin Government, were not merely ALP leaders but also reflected the will of a united popular movement in Australia backing the anti-fascist war, with the trade union movement and the Communist Party playing roles of publicly recognised importance.

And when Evatt said “the opportunities for expansion of our industries in the areas I have mentioned and in Asia will be almost limitless”, he was voicing the latent ambitions of sections of Australian capitalism. But this does not alter the fact that the whole spirit and tone of this policy towards other Pacific territories stood in marked contrast to what is happening today.

Speaking of the duty to promote self-government in the territories, Evatt said challengingly “the post-war order cannot be for the sole benefit of one power or group of powers... what we have to do is to develop a greater feeling of understanding, friendship and comradeship with each other and all nations.”

Evatt saw the USA as a very important factor in the Pacific of the future, but it was only one factor. The future, he said, would also depend on three other closely related factors: (a) a just peace in relation to Japan and its firm implementation; (b) establishment of a Pacific security zone within the context of the Declaration of General Security of the Moscow Conference (to set up an international organisation based on the equality of all peace-loving states, large and small—i.e. the United Nations); and (c) the positive policy towards the rights and well-being of all peoples in the region.

The Australia-New Zealand Agreement of January 21, 1944, the first foreign affairs agreement between the two countries, made two very significant points:—

- Wartime construction and use of bases did not, of itself, afford any basis whatsoever for territorial claims after hostilities were concluded.

- There must be no change in control or sovereignty of any islands in the Pacific (whether or not they were formerly Japanese) without the concurrence of Australia and New Zealand in a general Pacific settlement.

Having in mind that at this stage of the war the USA was already straddling a big part of the Pacific islands with bases,
there can be no doubt at all that this agreement, along with many other Australian statements, was in part a warning to the USA that it must not assume the right to dispose of the Pacific in its own way.

Although Evatt, summing up the parliamentary debate (14) denied that the Agreement was aimed against the USA (the present deputy Prime Minister J. McEwen was one who had complained of this) Evatt made no bones about the fact that something was afoot... "It would be outrageous if Australia and New Zealand were not consulted..." (15)

In the same speech, he made it clear that the Australian Government regarded the Australia-New Zealand security zone as lying south of the equator, while the US strategic zone of interest should be to the north of the line.

This position was firmly retained later when the Australian Government, acting through Evatt, rejected US efforts to get Manus Island as a permanent naval base.

In the same 1944 parliamentary speech, Evatt expressed eloquently another theme which is implicit in all aspects of the Australian foreign policy of the period: "Australia has emerged from a prolonged period of national adolescence... the people of Australia have developed their own point of view and a mind of their own... we owe it to ourselves and to other countries to express it clearly and firmly... a positive Australianism." He explained it meant not jingoism, isolationism or imperialism, but a recognition of certain needs and interests, security, and development.

There is a profound difference between such statements and the following summary of Australian-American relations under Menzies: "My little country and your great country will be together through thick and thin." (16)

Harold Holt went even further with his "We're all the way with LBJ." (17) C. T. Oliver's speech to the Labor Party contains some of the same essence.

Dealing with China, Evatt's broad view was that "the future development of the people of China will no longer be obstructed by restrictions on their self-respect and their right of self-government..." (18)

In sum, the significant principles underlying the Labor Government's foreign policy of the wartime and immediate
post-war period appear to be: support for the world (UN) system of security against aggression and within that, a Pacific system and regional systems including one in the southwest Pacific, south of the equator, centred on Australia and New Zealand; military forces for self-defence; collaboration with Britain, the USA and others but on Australian terms; opposition to the return of the old colonialism in the region.

What has happened to these concepts?

So far as the ALP is concerned, much of the policy still stands on paper, although the references to the "cooperation with the United States in the areas of the South Pacific and Indian Oceans" are in such general terms that they are successfully used by rightwingers, in effect, to justify unlimited military "cooperation" with today's US forces anywhere in Asia.

These rightwingers turn the former policy on its head to go close to supporting the "broad principles" of the Government's policy, and "go slow" on such vital issues as opposing the Vietnam war.

The Menzies and Holt governments have completely distorted the basis of the earlier policies.

Concerning the United Nations, Hasluck in 1965, revealed a marked cooling off by the Government: "The General Assembly is not able to function as the great forum of the world . . . At the present time the General Assembly and indeed the Security Council cannot be relied upon as a significant and effective means of keeping the peace of the world." (19)

Concerning "security", the Menzies Government abandoned the concept of "Australia's own defence" and embarked, in subordination to the USA and Britain, on a series of military expeditions ranging from Korea to Malaysia.

But even this is not all. Early in 1966, possibly during the Humphrey-Harriman visit to Canberra, Australia collected a new political responsibility—to pressurise European powers into joining in the Vietnam war. Thus, Hasluck in New York (20) said: "China's armed expansion against its neighbours—in South-East Asia, in southern Asia or on its western borders—is a threat to the security, for example, of Europe . . . this does not seem to be sufficiently appreciated by all the
European countries.” He further recounted his ginger-up. Europe efforts on his return. (21)

As to the “Chinese communist drive south”, the Menzies-Holt regime has always stuck to general terms. This is hardly surprising, since there are no troops of the Chinese People’s Republic outside her borders, not even on the offshore islands still occupied by Chiang’s US-protected garrisons.

But the behaviour of Britain is instructive. Britain has never treated the south-east Asian situation (e.g. in Malaya, Singapore and Borneo) as anything other than local “subversion”. Big reinforcements in 1963-64 were occasioned only by the Indonesian “confrontation” policy. In 1966, Britain announced that the end of “confrontation” would mean massive withdrawal of British forces from the SE Asian region. Where then is the southward Chinese drive?

Additionally, any claim that the Vietnam war is justified by INDIRECT Chinese pressure on Hanoi has been greatly weakened in 1965-66 when it has been generally conceded that the massive aid for the (North) Vietnamese Democratic Republic and the southern NLF has come from the Soviet Union rather than China, and further that Hanoi has been following an independent political line including solidarity with the Soviet Union. Logically, the Holt Government could be expected to speak of a “southward Soviet drive”. But in fact, the issue of Soviet aid to Vietnam—greater than China’s could have been, is discreetly ignored by the Holt Government.

It follows that the Government’s present policy is really based on something other than “China’s drive south”, despite the official statements.

A clue to this may be found in another Hasluck statement March 23, ’65): “The participation of countries outside Asia in its affairs is essential firstly to give to the smaller countries of Asia security against the aggression that is arising within Asia itself and secondly to bring the financial, technological and social and economic assistance that is needed for the development of Asian resources.”

In short, Asia must be protected from itself (its unfinished anti-feudalist anti-imperialist revolutionary movements); and Australia is among those who aim to invest there.
It must be concluded that Sir Robert's "unchanging" broad principles have been interpreted in a fundamentally different way since the time of the Labor Government, and in a way dangerous to Australia.

This distortion of conclusions that were reached in the very different time of the anti-fascist wartime alliance is being compounded by the extreme rightwing in today's ALP in a way that cannot be allowed to pass unchallenged in the labor movement as a whole.


(2) P. M. Hasluck, House of Representatives, 11/8/64.


(5) The Communist Party summed up its extensive and detailed foreign policy demands in 1945 in the words "a foreign policy that will help strengthen international collaboration for peace and the expansion of world trade, and that aims at close friendship with our Pacific neighbors." (CPA 14th National Congress resolution, August, 1945.)

At that time, the Communists placed reliance on the Big Three collaboration that had already at the Crimea Conference mapped out lines of post-war cooperation; by 1948 the Communist Party had reassessed the position: "... the Anglo-American imperialists ... have set their course towards the domination and enslavement of the world." (CPA 15th National Congress, May, 1948.)

(6) e.g. A. A. Calwell, ALP Federal Leader, speech at Mosman, 21/6/66.

(7) "Right or wrong the United States is committed to the defence of South Vietnam and Australia is supporting that commitment." (C. T. Oliver, Presidential Address to ALP Conference (NSW), 11/6/66.)

The NSW President (Mr. C. Oliver) chose to lay great stress on the American alliance in his endorsed presidential address and the conference adopted proposals in the same tone.

(8) Oliver quoted Prime Minister John Curtin's controversial statement of 27/12/41: "Without inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America free of any pangs as to our traditional links of kinship with the United Kingdom." He used Curtin as authority for the concept of "fighting them away from Australia's shores".

(9) "Australia and The Pacific", prepared by Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1943, for American study (Princeton University Press, 1944).

(10) Speech to Overseas Press Club, New York, 28/4/43.

(11) Address at Hurstville, NSW, 4/8/43.

(12) Address to San Francisco Institute of Pacific Relations, 6/12/45.

(13) Ibid.

(14) Evatt, House of Representatives, 30/3/44.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Menzies' address to America-Australia Association, New York, 29/6/64.

(17) Holt, speech at White House, 29/6/66, following announcement of first US bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong.

(18) Evatt, House of Representatives, 3/9/42.

(19) Hasluck, House of Representatives, 23/6/65.
