ALTERNATIVE FOREIGN POLICY:
THE OPTION OF NON-ALIGNMENT

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The publication of the White Paper on Defence dispenses with the Soviet “threat” which dominated government foreign policy statements, or statements pertaining to foreign policy, made in the first months of the Fraser government. The projection of a threat, no matter how unreal, was used to condition public opinion and to assist the United States to upgrade its presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans in the aftermath of the Vietnam defeat. The recent and regular visits of a variety of ships from the US Navy, including nuclear ships, are part of the conditioning, designed to win acceptance of a strategy which includes a permanent US nuclear presence in this region. One further result is the continuing upgrading of the defence budget which adds to the distortions in the economy and further limits finance allocations for social welfare.

The White Paper tends to the view, expounded by the former Labor government, that no real threat to Australia can be perceived. Given that the Labor government suffered considerable criticism for this position, it was not unexpected that the shadow minister for defence, Hayden, pointed this out with a certain vindictive pleasure. However, it would be wrong and tragic if the labor movement now accepted that a bi-partisan policy on foreign affairs exists.

There is little doubt that Fraser speaks from the heart when he rants about the Soviet Union. There is no doubt that he is in sympathy with the US hawks, even though he may accept that the only guarantee in the much-vaunted US Alliance is that the US will probably come to the aid of Australia in the event of total war. It hardly needs pointing out that, in such circumstances, aid will, most likely, be immaterial.

Of far greater importance is the fact that the Fraser foreign policy and defence posture accepts the US regional strategy to contain national liberation movements and to restore, maintain, or extend, imperialist hegemony. It would be a sorry day indeed if the labor movement gave de facto recognition to a policy which rejects the growing influence of the movement of Non-aligned Nations while giving priority to maintaining the status quo in the ASEAN countries, particularly Indonesia.

It may be far-fetched to think of Indonesia as a potential military threat to Australia although it is a clear military threat in the
region. Underlining the Fraser policy is the concept that nothing must be allowed to threaten capitalist interests in the region. Indonesia’s aggression against East Timor is therefore condoned. In the future, attempts to gain control of the vast natural resources in Papua-New Guinea for the benefit of its peoples could be met with destabilisation efforts from Australia and Indonesia, separately or together. Social upheavals against the corrupt rulers of Indonesia or against tyrannical regimes in other parts of Asia could lead to interventions by Australia, with or without the United States. Another ally against the march of history could be Japan. This is not to say that the Labor Party would automatically refuse such involvement, as its ambivalence towards East Timor shows, but the Labor Party, or significant sections of it are a long way from endorsing the realities of the Fraser policy.

Those who seek an alternative foreign policy need to recognise that Australia has always been aligned and seldom independent. When Labor’s wartime Prime Minister sought an alliance with the United States he showed some independence from the traditional ties with England, and considerable realism in recognising that the actual threat then came from this region. Much later, when John Gorton was Prime Minister, he toyed with a policy of “Fortress Australia”, a form of armed neutrality then popular in Sweden, but in general, Australia has been in the US orbit, with less and less independence since World War II.

The Vietnam war, Australia’s involvement as part of the price of alignment and the sheer determination of the Vietnamese to win, despite the odds, led to some rethinking. The great popular movement against the war contributed to Labor’s victory in 1972. The Labor government distanced itself from the US hawks and projected a policy not far removed from the liberal wing of the US democrats. The distance covered wasn’t very far but seemed so when compared with the “cold war” stance of past and present Liberal governments. It did contribute to breaking down total acceptance of US hegemony but even the mild suggestion that Australia should share some control over the US bases in this country was met with sustained hysteria and was a factor in the dismissal of the Whitlam government. A more important aspect of the Whitlam years was the normalisation of relations with many countries, an acceptance of the need to contribute to relaxation of tension (detente) and contact with the Non-aligned Nations. Willesee, then foreign minister, was an observer at the Non-aligned Nations Foreign Ministers’ Conference in Peru. At the level of government, and in the mass movement for peace, more voices were raised in favor of nuclear-free zones and in opposition to US military bases in Australia.

These tentative steps were retraced after December 1975. The present government is unreservedly for bigger and better US bases and considers nuclear free zones “unrealistic”. Its vocal support for the US base at Diego Garcia precluded any invitation being issued to Australia to participate in the Conference of Heads of Government of the Non-aligned Nations held in Colombo last year. This isolation from, and hostility to, the movement of non-alignment came at the very time when several countries involved in military-political alliances had sought and been given a basis for formal co-operation in the movement. Unlike the present Australian Government, these countries are aware that the future lies in a world without blocs. The movement of non-alignment now involves a majority of countries with various social systems and levels of development but all respond to the need to overcome the bloc division of the world.

After World War II the United States became the military and political leader of the so-called “free world”. Beginning with the Truman Doctrine of 1947, United States policy has always been confrontation, rather than co-operation, between the great powers. As the cold war advanced, military pacts formalised all other relationships, NATO was followed by the Warsaw Pact and there seemed to be no middle ground. Most countries appeared to have little choice but to be on one side or the other. In time it seemed that there were only two voices powerful enough to take decisions on all crucial issues of international politics.

The balance of terror created by the military blocs has long been considered an important factor in preventing a third world
war fought with atomic weapons. In Europe the balance is such that the limits of power have been recognised in the Helsinki Final Document which has sanctioned such a state of balance. In other regions of the world, however, this is not the case and a general problem today is that the arms race continues although each side, long ago, achieved sufficient firepower for massive overkill.

This is due in part to the fact that all the big powers have a global strategy. Successful national liberation movements in various regions of the world upset the previously existing structure of international relations. The present concentration on the Asian-Pacific region follows the victories in Indo-China and raises particularly serious problems since all the great powers, and Japan, are present. There are other factors in the arms race, notably the proliferation of suppliers. France and China have stood outside some of the control arrangements entered into by the USA and the USSR. This followed the break between China and the USSR and the effort of France to distance herself from the USA. In the present situation there are many reasons to sell arms for profit, political influence, or both.

It has not been easy for small countries to break with the blocs. In general a huge price is extracted. Among the most influential non-aligned countries are Yugoslavia, Cuba and Vietnam, each of which, in quite different circumstances, had to pay heavily for their independence. In a very real sense the roots of non-alignment can be traced to the Soviet Union's break with Yugoslavia, although the actual movement developed and gained strength only when many countries, former colonies, won a measure of independence. Put simply, many of these countries did not want to face an 'either-or' situation. It was less than a choice if, in winning independence from imperialism, they had to exchange participation in one bloc for another. While no country can have total independence, many can, and do, refuse to ally themselves with one or other great power since the price of the alliance is usually a further limitation on independence.

There has been constant debate in the movement on what attitude to take to the great powers. In general terms there is recognition that a constructive dialogue is needed. It is accepted that the bloc division of the world is an historic phenomenon which won't be overcome by wishing it away. The blocs, and specifically the military pacts, will have to be dismantled together, but despite the growth of the movement's influence and the expressed desire by the Soviet Union to end the arms race, the blocs are as strong as ever. This is due in no small part to the fact that the United States continues to regard NATO as the best way to contain the USSR while the USSR assumes that many of her best interests are served by a form of detente where major negotiations are confined to the great powers.

A present danger is that one bloc can gain an advantage and upset the existing balance. The foolish and dangerous encouragement of the United States to upgrade its presence in the Indian Ocean, particularly at Diego Garcia, makes the Fraser government culpable in a new round of the arms race in this region.

Recognising such realities, the non-aligned nations always stress the need to overcome the bloc division of the world systematically. Despite obvious disagreements and levels of understanding between these nations they show considerable unity on this matter and their consistency is reflected in their views on how to halt the arms race and achieve disarmament. They campaign for a special session of the United Nations in 1977 which could consider precise disarmament measures. This is seen as the most appropriate way to hold a world disarmament conference and to ensure that disarmament negotiations become the property of all. This form also takes account of the fact that under other circumstances the presence of France and China might be in doubt.

Until now, disarmament negotiations have tended to be confined to the USA and the USSR. When they reach agreements these usually establish new and higher levels of arms, not disarmament. The United States has a strong economic, as well as political motive for this situation. The disarmament proposal of the Soviet Union for a ten per cent arms reduction across the board is not favored by all small nations which feel they have a right to a certain level of arms
protection for their hard-won independence. They claim, and rightly, that the major problem is contained in the arsenals of the great powers. In the event of war the potential targets involve everyone but, until now, control is confined to the big powers.

The fact that the non-aligned nations give a renewed emphasis to the United Nations and its role is a measure of how that organisation has changed and suggests that further changes will be made. Until recently, the UN was virtually controlled by the United States. The Soviet Union was consistently portrayed as “the dog in the manger”, using its veto to say “no” to all proposals. While the United States sought to project the rejected proposals as “reasonable” it is clear that the power of veto was a protection offered not only to the Soviet Union but to many other countries seeking to break free from imperialism. In the changing circumstances there is now a potential majority which can itself protect the interests of small nations and contribute to the establishment of a new system of international political and economic relations. In this sense, non-alignment is not a tactic or a loose alliance of nations which seek to be a third bloc. It is a response to deeply felt needs for independence which no bloc, even if there were an altruistic one, could guarantee. It prefigures a new stage of international relations when all countries will be non-aligned and independent.

Such a time is far distant but the point to see is the historic process which is under way. This may be more difficult for Australians than for many others if only because our sense of independence has been so often distorted into jingoism and because 200 years is not long in which to develop an identity. The left has certainly not come to terms with the powerful force of the idea that is involved in national identity.

There are tendencies which reject non-alignment by concentrating on its deficiencies. It is not difficult to score points. One can point to Indonesia’s role in East Timor, Syria’s role in Lebanon, or the various unseemly grabs for the former Spanish Sahara and the reactionary nature of not a few of the regimes of those involved, and dismiss the whole thing, but without trying to hide the differences existing within the movement, or its difficulties, it should be possible to see that this movement is a major
factor in a general strengthening of independence at the expense of imperialism and a rising struggle to end the arms race and overcome underdevelopment.

A crucial part of the movement is its demand for development, summed up in the term "New World Economic Order". The right to development and control over one's own natural resources is a call to reason in a world of great contrasts between rich and poor. In a situation where the United States faces an increasing scarcity of raw materials, a major factor in its military strategy, trade policies and the dominance of the multi-nationals, this demand takes on real political force. The oil crisis showed that not all the muscles are on the side of imperialism even though its strength is very great. It is worth noting, too, that Australia, as a major trader in raw materials and primary production has an objective interest in the fate of the New World Economic Order and that this is a basis for developing cooperation with the non-aligned movement.

Australia does not yet meet the criteria for membership in the non-aligned movement which are: (a) an independent policy in conformity with the principles of active and peaceful co-existence; (b) support for national liberation movements; (c) non-involvement in military pacts with great powers; and (d) no foreign military bases on its territory.

The present policy is for Australia to remain a part of the US bloc, trading the right to political and economic independence for some vaguely promised military security while helping in the development of mini-imperialist ambitions. The logic of this position is to encourage the hawks within the United States and at home. A variant of this is an anti-Soviet alliance involving such strange bedfellows for a reactionary government as China. This risky gamble, which Fraser has obviously considered, implies that security can be based on the continuing enmity between China and the Soviet Union. Australia could opt for armed neutrality although this is barely feasible in both a military and geographic sense.

While it is outside the scope of this article the development being sought is, in some cases, not an attempt to copy the existing industrial societies. This factor may be an influence in tackling the problem of over-development.

There is no point in considering that Australia would exchange its present bloc loyalty for alignment with the Soviet Union. Even those who support Soviet foreign policy and see it as always acting for peace do not suggest this. It is also possible that Australia will join an ASEAN style regional pact. The present ASEAN Pact acts as a back-stop for US imperialism in Asia although it also represents a certain limited trend away from total US patronage. For some of its members it is a slight advance on former positions but it would not represent anything new in Australia's relations and would be, correctly, judged as one more effort to prevent countries in the region from altering the status quo.

There could be development towards an Asian Security Treaty, a concept promoted by the Soviet Union in much the same sense as it promoted European security. There is no doubt that advances have been made in European security. This is due, in part, to the equal relations between the USSR and the US in Europe as well as to the independent initiatives of many European states. The same conditions do not apply in Asia. There is a vast inequality of power and little respect by the United States for the independence of Asian nations, large or small. In Europe, the post-war borders can be accepted but in Asia there is the continuing question of Taiwan, the US domination of South Korea and the unresolved territorial dispute between the USSR and Japan, to take a few examples. Additionally, security in Asia without the active participation of China is a myth yet China is most unlikely to participate in any long-term agreements while the dispute between her and the Soviet Union remains. For all these reasons, no matter how desirable it may appear, an Asian Security Pact is not a genuine option at this time.

Given that these are the present options, the development of an alternative foreign policy for Australia most involve a movement towards non-alignment. This requires at least some serious study of the nature of the movement, avoiding simplicity. It should be noted that many nations in the movement are very close to either the Soviet Union or China, some try to be friends with both, some are very close to France and some can barely be distinguished from members of the US bloc. Within the movement some seek
to change this situation, to make the notion of non-alignment explicitly anti-imperialist. Some seek to confine its role to a few principled questions such as overcoming the bloc division of the world; others want it to speak out on all burning disputes of the moment. Something of each concept exists. At the Colombo Conference there was no attempt to confine the movement, perhaps because it is difficult to categorise some countries, but primarily because it is recognised that the period of overcoming colonialism is drawing to an end, that there will be few more newly liberated states to ensure the growth of the movement, and that its future lies in expanding the commitment to non-alignment beyond the “third world”.

The non-aligned movement is not free from interventions, indeed there are numerous attempts to destabilise it and create tensions between its members. There are efforts to down-grade those of its policies which are assumed to be unfavorable to one or another great power or to unjustly equate non-alignment with neutrality. It has been accused of acting for the Soviet Union and, conversely, of not being sufficiently partisan or “class” oriented. In fact it is against all forms of domination and specifically against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism and racism.

A tendency towards non-alignment in Australia can, and will, pass through various stages including continued and growing support for anti-imperialist struggles, acceptance of responsibility to help overcome the results of colonialism and, more specifically, the devastation created by the war in Vietnam: partial measures for disarmament, including nuclear free zones, measures to protect the environment including development of a rational resources policy and the maintenance of the moratorium on uranium mining, actions against multinationals in the economy, dismantling US bases, developing trade, scientific and cultural exchanges with all countries. Some of these elements are already present in the policies of the Labor Party and ought to be strengthened.

Socialists recognise that foreign policy is never separate from internal policy. In the past, and perhaps in the future, “cold war” attitudes abroad go hand in hand with restrictions at home. The converse is also true. A self-managed, democratic socialist state would need a foreign policy based on independence, mutual respect, opposition to imperialism, support for movements of national liberation and non-alignment.

At this time, the challenge for socialists and other democratic forces in the peace movement and the labor movement is to strengthen the trends towards non-alignment by fighting concretely against imperialism and for genuine peaceful coexistence, for actual disarmament measures and in solidarity with liberation movements. Primarily this will require a concentration on this region although, naturally, there are causes which require support all over the globe, as is the case with solidarity for the Chilean resistance, and in those situations, such as the Middle East, where a major conflict could erupt. In such cases the Australian movement seeks to play its part but this does not prevent critics of “regionalism” from expressing the demand that the movement should take up with equal vigor the injustices in all parts of the world. A closer examination of the priorities of those expressing such concerns reveal a remarkable similarity with the foreign policy of particular great powers. Such criticism takes little account of the resources available to the movement or that it is natural that Angola should be particularly concerned with what is happening in Africa, that Cuba should give special attention to the struggle for independence in Puerto Rico and that Australians have a major obligation to the liberation forces in East Timor.

Moreover, the trend towards non-alignment will not reach its potential in Australia if those who seek an alternative foreign policy confine themselves to being solidarity supporters of others, or content themselves with generalised appeals for disarmament. The real struggle involves the foreign bases on our soil, the rape of our own resources and the mischief done in our name in what passes for Australian foreign policy. This should not mean indifference to others, or a distorted nationalism, but recognition that until large numbers of Australians feel deeply the injustices done to themselves by imperialism they will rarely act against the injustices done to others, or develop the necessary confidence and combativity win a new direction in Australian foreign policy.