THE AUSTRALIAN-AMERICAN ALLIANCE

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This paper, here slightly abridged, was presented to a conference on "Australia, Vietnam and the Asian Revolution" held in Adelaide in March. The author is a graduate of the London School of Economics and holds a Ph.D. from the Australian National University. He is at present lecturer in international relations at Adelaide University.

IN THIS PAPER I propose to make a critical examination of the American alliance from an Australian perspective. In that context I shall be only peripherally concerned with that maze of social, economic and diplomatic developments which we term the Asian Revolution. But I would like to make two general observations on that subject which seem relevant to the present discussion.

First, there has grown in Australia a school of thought which holds that revolutions a la Vietnam can be expected in a large number of Asian, (and other underdeveloped) countries in the immediate future. I don't subscribe to this point of view. Revolutions are extremely difficult things to start and to prosecute; successful revolutions as opposed to palace coups, are exceedingly rare. Most Asian states are rapidly modernising and the power of the modern state to deal with embryonic insurgencies is considerable. In this sense, despite the claims of Peking, time is most likely on the side of the big battalions. The Vietnam insurgency has developed under favourable circumstances and yet has taken nearly three decades and a heavy toll on Vietnamese lives to reach its present stage of considerable strength. The uniqueness of the situation in Vietnam needs to be emphasised both to the romantic armchair revolutionaries, understandably elated by Tet and its aftermath, and to Government supporters, hopefully chastened by recent developments, both of whom have, from different standpoints, espoused the domino theory.

Secondly, I'm not sure that one should expect, or demand policy makers in Canberra to determine Australian policy towards a revolution by asking, 'Is it in the interests of the peasant masses of
state X? One would expect them to enquire 'Is it in Australia's interests?' On both these criteria I believe it to have been unwise for Australia to have participated in the Vietnam War. But in fact neither criterion provided the original impetus for involvement, for our masters in Canberra asked 'Can we resist American pressure to despatch a contingent of troops to fight alongside those of our ally and protector?' The location of the conflict was all but immaterial. The American alliance has been the cornerstone of Australian policy in Vietnam and much of Asia: that alliance requires a more rigorous evaluation than either the Government or most of the official spokesmen for the Opposition have been prepared to give it.

What is an alliance? An answer to this readily leads to confusion between what is and what ought to be. Palmerston, that unsentimental strategist of mid-nineteenth century British foreign policy, is reputed to have declared that 'Britain has no eternal friends, only eternal interests'. On this hard-headed view states should ally to pursue interests which they have in common: an alliance is a means to an end. To a great extent the American alliance has become an all-pervasive end of Australian foreign policy to which an alarming number of other objectives have been subordinated, if not sacrificed. This is not necessarily undesirable. Since Palmerston's day politics has become popularised and it has become necessary for Western Governments to create moral justifications for their external behaviour to make it palatable to those they represent. Alliances have ceased to be temporary, transitional arrangements for the pursuit of limited interests; they have become, to use the jargon, communities of peaceloving peoples dedicated to the pursuit of liberty. Most governments formulate these high-minded phrases with some cynicism: after all Greece is in NATO, that bastion of democracy, and the Philippines in SEATO, an organisation dedicated to the preservation of an ostensibly satisfactory status quo. Does Canberra operate with such cynicism? One feels not. It seems unlikely that on important matters of policy the Government regularly asks those vital political questions. 'What are Australia's interests?' 'How may they be secured most cheaply most effectively, and most certainly?'. To examine these issues it is necessary to cut through the ubiquitous, moralistic verbiage which the Government gives every indication of believing. Of course it wants peace in South east Asia, but it wants other things more and is prepared to fight for them; of course it wants stability, although it will tacitly applaud the occasional elimination of half a million Indonesians because some of them are communists; of course it wants regional security, whatever that may be. Too often the meaningless propaganda has become the substance of policy and provides a panacea, a simple
answer to difficult questions. That is the function of the American alliance.

The American alliance has been a major objective of mid-twentieth century Australian governments. Mooted before 1939 it became reality under the external pressures of the Pacific War. For the benefit of those inclined to think in terms of political obligations and debts it should be recalled that the U.S. fought because of Pearl Harbour, not to defend Australia. Following the defeat of Japan all the major political parties favoured an alliance with the US, which was formed by the Liberal Government in 1951 because the Americans, concerned at Mao’s victory and the Korean War, were then prepared to form such an alliance. It was not then the particular preserve of the Liberals for the ALP welcomed the ANZUS Treaty and supports it today. ANZUS committed the US to come to Australia’s assistance if she were attacked. In 1954 that fraudulent version of collective security, SEATO, was deemed to commit America to what Canberra euphemistically termed, ‘Australia’s forward defence perimeter’. At the time these seemed astute political moves: they cost Australia little and gave her a written guarantee, for what that was worth, of American protection. Since that time the price of that guarantee has progressively risen while its utility and the possibility of Australia’s invoking it have progressively declined.

The generation of Australian Liberal politicians that created the US alliance and during the 1950s formulated its working characteristics shared a number of basic assumptions about the world and Australia’s place in it. Menzies, Holt and Hasluck were the products of the age of Munich and the Japanese conquest of East Asia. From Munich they were inclined to draw the lesson that accommodation had no place in foreign policy planning; a few, precious few, delighted in their wise perception of Chamberlain’s supposed blunder; many more were determined not to be wrong again. Like Sir Anthony Eden and Menzies at Suez, they saw a Red Hitler under every Afro-Asian bed and, ignoring the relative strengths which destroyed the analogy, prepared to meet force with overwhelming force. Dissident tribesmen in Northeast Thailand became the Sudetenland Germans; North Vietnam becomes China’s puppet; Sukarno was the ‘petty Hitler of the Pacific’, or at least played Mao’s Mussolini.

From the Japanese thrust south other lessons were learned. It presented the prototype for Asian threats to Australia, a piecemeal conquest of Southeast Asia, a genuine toppling of dominoes. The lesson: to check the yellow hordes as far north as possible. That there were fewer Japanese than Commonwealth troops in
Malaya at the time of Singapore's surrender provided no answer to the 'How many human hordes make a flood?'

In the 1950s and 1960s Peking and the communist movements in Southeast Asia were accommodated to this perception. It was asserted that communism formed a monolithic, militant, atheist, aggressive and, worse, racially alien force, presided over by Stalinist Moscow and Asian Peking, intent on repeating Japan's thrust to Australia. Canberra appeared to be unaware that communism lost its vestiges of universalism in 1914 when the German Social-Democrats supported the Kaiser's War. For the following 50 years the press would assert communism's mythical unity. Mao came to power in China, and Ho in Vietnam, without, and to a great extent in spite of, Moscow's 'assistance'; Tito found Stalin's iron hand unbearable; the PKI's independence was beyond dispute. Except for those satellites established and maintained with some difficulty in Eastern Europe by the Red Army, the success of communist parties has been in inverse proportion to their degree of external control; they support a function of their self-sufficiency and adaption to local conditions. The Chinese communists are aware of this, for it was they, not the NLF, who provided the prototype for a war of national liberation. No more than Ho Chi Minh are they anybody's puppets. The edifice of the communist monolith of the 1950s would have collapsed under the briefest of analyses. But it was too useful domestically for the Liberal Government to contemplate such action. It became the all embracing image of the Near North. Aggression equalled communism and vice versa.

This threat obsession, compounded by a nationalism prone to elevate Australia's significance out of all proportion — one thinks of Dame Zara Holt's (now Mrs. Bate) assertion that the world looked to Australia for a lead — and manifested occasionally in a manner alarmingly similar to Afrikaner notions of an embattled culture, produced the mythology of the US alliance. The Americans with suitable Australian encouragement, as in SEATO and the Vietnam War, would provide a defence in depth against 'the southward thrust of militant Asian communism'. The situation worsened in the 1960s for Peking came to direct the more militant half of the former monolith. Lin Piao's statement in 1955 that Peking supports, indeed encourages, wars of national liberation was liberally misquoted, not least of all by Professor Scalapino on his periodic visits to keep America's junior partner properly informed, as evidence of Peking's aggressive intent. In fact what Mao's chief lieutenant stressed was that those revolutionary movements must be indigenous and that they should not depend on

external assistance. When the Chinese support war, they mean internal war against what they believe to be oppressive governments, not inter-state war. This is a far cry from the Japanese analogy and yet all but impossible to establish in the face of the neatly simplistic maps depicting red arrows coming from China. Not only do these appear in electioneering propaganda with the suggestion of a satisfactory formula, ‘Where would you draw the Line?’ but such maps are to be found in secondary school text books with the suggested topic for students’ essays, ‘Why does China present a threat to Australia?’ Perhaps the answer is that the Country Party fears Chinese encouragement of a putative movement demanding land redistribution in the Riverina.

Canberra has also consistently claimed that the US alliance gave it a voice in US policy making. Surprisingly, this claim was for long believed. Kennedy’s disavowal of Australian policy on West Irian and America’s changed Vietnam policy over the last year should have disabused even the most credulous Australians.

Successive Liberal Governments have propounded this image of the world with varying intensity as it suited the state of domestic politics. To quote no less an expert than Herman Goering, “the people can always be brought to do the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism”.

Menzies utilised this mythology with characteristic skill: the Communist Party dissolution bill; the Petrov affair, the purchase of the wonder plane, the F111 to support Liberal fortunes in the 1963 election. But if Menzies used the mythology he kept its price low. Until the end of his reign Australia spent almost the smallest proportion of her wealth on defence in the Western world. Under his successor, Mr. Holt, the enthusiasm with which Canberra stepped up the propaganda and increased the defence vote to counter the communist threat was alarming.

The latest encumbent of the Prime Minister’s seat is said to represent a “new nationalism” and to be rethinking Australian foreign policy. Whatever the image makers intend by this nonsense he is clearly a man of the US alliance despite his equivocal kite-flying about a continental defence policy. North West Cape Polaris communications station and the ill-disguised Pine Gap installation make this an inescapable fact.

Against this background one may draw up a political balance sheet for Australia’s relationship with the US. First, the benefits of the US alliance for Australia. It seems to be beyond question that an American commitment to defend Australia is worth having.
This was obtained in 1951. The questions which it raises are not so easily resolved: How useful is that commitment? What price should be paid to ensure that it is maintained? Of more questionable value to Australia is America's military presence in Southeast Asia involving as it does not only increasingly ineffectual support for pro-Western governments, but also the exacerbation of local conflicts, the intensification of anti-Western feeling and the widening of indigenous disputes to the degree where they involve the risk of wider wars. Does the fear of opposition to Bangkok in Northeast Thailand really justify the presence of enormous numbers of US servicemen and, ultimately, the risk of war with China and the worsening of US-Soviet relations? On any reasonable scale of values one would think not. Even if this US presence were deemed to be in Australia's interests, would the Americans stay there anyway? Does the presence of 10,000 Australian policemen in Southeast Asia affect American policy? If the Americans would stay there anyway why spend 5 per cent of the GNP encouraging them to do so?

Another alleged benefit of the US alliance is that the Americans provide technological know-how, skills and capital important for Australian development. No doubt, but would they provide it without the alliance? The American government has considerable difficulty controlling private enterprise. Despite the wreckage he has made of Franco-American relations De Gaulle has found it impossible to keep American capital out of France.

A stronger motive, if not benefit, is psychological. On the one hand the alliance provides a means for thrusting Australia into the mainstream of world politics, and of avoiding the neutrality which is regarded by many Australians as immoral, as Mr. Whitlam had made clear in his pamphlet, *Beyond Vietnam: Australia's Regional Responsibilities*. On the other hand the guarantee of American assistance, however modified and bought at whatever cost, provides some comfort to offset the lurking fear that the yellow hordes may, after all, sweep south.

Finally, for the government the alliance provides a convenient and heavy stick with which to beat the ALP. At a time when the Labor Party has exorcised itself of all other demons radicalism, socialism and proletarianism, there remain only two points on which it is vulnerable: that Arthur Calwell and the Victorian executive remain in its ranks; and that it does not unequivocally support 'All the Way with LBJ', or 'We'll go a-waltzing Matilda with you'.

If the US alliance does provide benefits one is then forced to ask what price Australia should pay for those benefits and, further,
what extra cost is worth paying in order to maintain the same benefits. In the 1950s Australia was receiving the same security guarantee without Vietnam, without large defence expenditure, without mass sycophantic behaviour; an occasional verbal declaration of support for Washington sufficed. Has the new level of sacrifice been justified? To judge by Bury’s assertion that the F111 is a good plane at any price one might justifiably conclude that the government does not use cost benefit analysis. One needs to enquire whether the benefits of the US alliance could be obtained at a lower cost and whether Australian participation in the Vietnam debacle was not only unwise but also, even within the Government’s frame of reference, unnecessary. What are then the costs of the US alliance? These may be considered in three areas, political, diplomatic and strategic.

Politically, the alliance facilitates US intervention in Australian domestic politics. Such intervention is part and parcel of the diplomatic behaviour of great powers. That even a Labor government would not seriously threaten US interests keeps her intervention at a minimal level. But when it has been possible, for a small effort, to increase the likelihood of the Liberals’ maintaining power, America has utilised the opportunity. Two manoeuvres spring to mind. During the campaigns before the 1963 federal election, which was expected to be a close run affair, defence matters, and particularly the deficiencies in Australia’s air strike force, received considerable publicity. Then Menzies Government bought the F111 on an open ended contract which eventually led to a 300 per cent increase in cost and a delay of 3 years in the promised delivery date. The government made the most extravagant and ill-founded claims for the new plane which were generally accepted in large measure due to the Americans’ silence on the matter. Further, the USAF flew to every capital city in Australia a number of B-47s, which the Government said Australia would be loaned at no cost until the F111 became available.

That was the last Australia saw of the B-47s. The effect of these manoeuvres on the 1963 election is impossible to determine; their purpose clear enough. The 1966 election led to a similar strategy: the visit to L.B.J., Holt’s sycophantic reception, the poetry, the speeches, were all designed to ensure that the US alliance could be more easily used to beat the less fawning Labor Party.

These developments can perhaps be overestimated. Australia is in large measure a democracy and external manipulation of its political structure is difficult. But the US alliance, carefully cultivated as the ultimate guarantee of Australian security, coupled with the relatively even distribution of support between govern-
ment and opposition, does facilitate US involvement at crucial moments and increase the efficacy of that involvement when it does occur.

In the diplomatic sphere the US alliance appears to be a less beneficial arrangement than the government would have us believe. First, while the US government has often been able to utilise Australian “loyalty” to avoid unilateral American action in Southeast Asia — Laos and Vietnam provide the best examples — Canberra has found that on crucial issues the support of the Americans has not been forthcoming. In the case of West Irian Australia’s unwise objective of maintaining the Dutch in the territory was torpedoed by US support for Indonesia; during confrontation Canberra found her ability to push the US towards a firmer policy on Sukarno was extremely limited, if not non-existent. Secondly, the claim that Canberra has a voice in US policy making has become patently fraudulent. Within days of Menzies’ publicly stated opposition to negotiations with Hanoi, Johnson offered to negotiate at any time, at any place. Johnson’s decision of 31 March 1968 to open serious negotiations clearly took Canberra by surprise.

Thirdly, the US alliance has led Australian politicians into the mistake of regarding Southeast Asia as a region essentially bipolar in its power configuration and thus analogous to divided Europe. The Philippines policy towards Sabah has tended to provide a corrective to this erroneous perception. The tangled skein of Southeast Asian politics does not represent a simplistic division between two competing power blocs.

Fourthly, the alliance enables Washington to provide Canberra with much of the information on which the latter bases its policy. Clearly, with its limited resources, Canberra is not in a position to make an independent analysis of every political development. The shortage, indeed, lack of Vietnamese linguists led Australia to rely on American assessments of the situation in Vietnam. This information could be tailored to suit American policy requirements; even if it were not, the inadequacies of Washington’s own information is today only too apparent2.

Finally the US alliance has led to policies not apparently in Australian interests. The Vietnam commitment is justified ultimately by the needs of the US alliance. But what cost is Canberra prepared to pay for that alliance? Almost any policy can

2 An examination of published material should have made this clear long since. The deficiencies in America’s information gathering process are depicted in David Halberstam’s: Making of a Quagmire, written in 1964. Arthur Schlesinger later publicised the US Cabinet’s ignorance in The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy.
be justified by reference to the improvement of the US guarantee. Does “me too-ism” really significantly increase the likelihood of US support for Australia in the event of an attack? And, even worse, does the US alliance increase the likelihood of such an attack materialising?

Which brings me to the third category of cost, strategic. I find it so beyond doubt that no Southeast Asian power, indeed no power, except America, is capable of invading Australia within the foreseeable future that the subject hardly seems worth raising.

The technological developments necessary, the amount of resources required, are beyond any conceivable adversary’s capabilities and even then the reward, an enormous army of occupation at enormous cost, would not nearly warrant the effort. A more serious, and less widely considered possibility has been thrown up by the imperatives of the US alliance. In 1963 the Australian Government reluctantly revealed that a communications centre was to be built by the Americans at North West Cape on the West Australian coast. As this base, now operational, is for communicating with American nuclear armed submarines targetted on Soviet central Asia, it placed Australia firmly in the central ‘balance of terror’ and, probably for the first time, exposed her to Russia’s nuclear strategy. Australia at least the base, became an important nuclear target. Over the last year or so it has become clear that the installation at Pine Gap, not far from Alice Springs, is for the purpose of tracking and possibly guiding, American missiles taking the southerly route to China in order to avoid overflying Soviet territory.

Australia has thus become integrally, and unnecessarily, involved in the Sino-US confrontation. The Government, apparently having learned the lesson of the furore which the 1963 revelations produced, has revealed next to nothing about the matter, and information on Pine Gap has, like that on the F111 and the Vietnam war been gleaned from less secretive American official sources. It became public knowledge in Australia only after Australian manufacturers leaked the story, having been awarded only $3 million in contracts of the total $200 million cost. The rest was fully imported.

The significance of these developments is threefold. First, they illustrate the fashion in which the government is prepared to escalate the cost of the US alliance with gay abandon, even to

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3 See M. Teichmann: *Aspects of Australia's Defence*, for a useful examination of this matter.

the extent of making Australia a primary nuclear target. Second, they have been justified, when they have been admitted, by reference to the mythology of the US alliance rather than by rigorous analysis of the costs involved and the benefits accruing. Third, they cast, like the F111 affair, like the whole Vietnam policy—like the V.I.P. aircraft, serious doubt on the credibility and veracity of the government’s assertions.

I am neither necessarily hostile to the Australian-American alliance nor absolutely opposed to Australian interventionist policies in Southeast Asia. I do not even expect our masters to adopt a ‘moral’ foreign policy, for not only would it be the only state to ever make such an effort but politics, particularly international politics, does not readily lend itself to such a posture. What one is entitled to expect is a more rigorous definition and analysis of Australian interests; a more credible public explanation of those interests and how they are made operational; an abandonment of secrecy in strategic matters, at least to the extent that the Americans have been prepared to go and the acceptance on the part of both government and community that politics does not stop at the coast, that foreign policy is a political issue and that to criticise it is not to be “disloyal”.

Interestingly Sir Alan Watt, generally a supporter of the Government’s foreign policy, makes similar proposals, from a different standpoint, in his Vietnam: An Australian Analysis.