Should the US Alliance Remain a Cornerstone of Australia’s Foreign Policy?¹

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The nineteenth century British Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston’s dictum that his country had ‘permanent interests, but not permanent allies,’ is, perhaps, a succinct description of the purpose of all foreign policy making.² Australia’s formal alliance with the USA has lasted more than sixty years since the 1951 ANZUS Treaty, and while no one knows how long it will continue to endure, it is in Australia’s foreseeable interests to maintain the alliance as a pillar of Australian foreign policy. Since Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War, the value of the centrality of the US alliance in Australian foreign policy has spawned an ongoing debate in this country. Australia’s decision to join the US-led coalition strikes against Islamic extremists in Iraq and Syria has again raised questions about the nature and utility of the US alliance. There are three compelling reasons why the alliance should remain a cornerstone of Australia’s foreign policy: the benefits that Australia has garnered from the alliance, the nature and scope of the Australian-US relationship and the problematic nature of any alternatives.

Since the Australia-US alliance was formalised in 1951, the relationship between Australia and the USA has evolved to encompass strong security, economic and educational links

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between the two nations. Any analysis of the nature of the US alliance must look beyond the security and military aspects, and consider the broader dimensions of the relationship. Focusing solely on the military aspect of the alliance offers a rather narrow and distorted perspective of the nature of the relationship. ANZUS represents the security links between Australia and the USA, but it does not explain the totality of the relationship as it has evolved since 1951. Australia and the USA have a shared history dating back to the 1790s, which was soon after the formation of the USA and the establishment of the British colony of New South Wales. Irrespective of ongoing global uncertainties and changing power balances, the history and nature of the Australian-US relationship strongly suggests that the alliance will continue to evolve and strengthen, as it has since 1951.³

³ From 1945, the Truman Administration repeatedly rebuffed Australian attempts to secure a formal security arrangement with the Americans. ANZUS ultimately came to fruition because, in response to a series of events which altered the geopolitical and strategic situation in the Pacific, the USA decided to sign a formal security treaty with Australia and New Zealand. The Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb and the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949; the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 and Australian participation in the UN/US effort in Korea; the Communist Chinese entry in the Korean War in November 1950; the American determination to secure a moderate Japanese Peace Treaty, and Truman, Dulles and Spender made ANZUS possible. It was not quite a quid pro quo, but rather, a cautious USA, having resisted a series of Australian overtures requesting a security treaty since 1945, which now entered into such an alliance with Australia and New Zealand. Aside from ANZUS, the USA also signed security treaties with Japan, the Philippines and South Korea, what Dulles called the ‘hub and spokes’ alliance system, whereby the USA entered into a series of defensive alliances to contain communism in the Pacific. I have examined the origins of ANZUS in more detail in my PhD thesis, ‘Forging an Alliance: The Significance of the US-Australian Engagement in Korea, 1947-53’, see Chapter 3: ‘Architect of ANZUS: John Foster Dulles and the American Origins and Making of the Treaty’, forthcoming; Victor Cha,
The clear benefits that Australia has derived from its relationship with the USA offer powerful incentives for maintaining the American alliance as a cornerstone of Australia’s foreign policy. Despite the debate over the extent to which the US alliance has guaranteed Australia’s security, the history of the Australian-US relationship since ANZUS suggests that Australia has gained significant advantages from the alliance. The security shield provided by the US alliance has given Australia the flexibility to free up resources that might otherwise have been spent on defence. The close cooperation between the Australian and US military has given Australia access to first-class military technology, making the Australian Defence Force one of the most modern in the world. Intelligence sharing between the two nations has given Australia access to information it would otherwise be denied. Diplomatically, the alliance has given Australia access to the highest levels of government and policy making in Washington D.C. This began with the personal friendship between the two architects of ANZUS, Australia’s Percy Spender and America’s John Foster Dulles, and has continued in regular forums such as the ANZUS Council, the Australian US Ministerial (AUSMIN) annual talks and the Australian-American Leadership Dialogue - all of which have allowed Australian and US representatives to meet and discuss relevant issues, make personal connections and build friendships.

The nature and scope of the Australian-US relationship also suggest that the US alliance ought to remain a cornerstone of

Australian foreign policy. Perhaps the biggest misconception, perpetuated by critics of the alliance, is that Australia has no option but to accede to US requests. Yet, the ANZUS Treaty does not require Australia to act according to US wishes. The US alliance has not impeded Australia’s sovereign capacity to make its own foreign policy choices. Australian participation in the Vietnam War is cited by critics as the prime example of subservience to the USA, yet Australia offered to support the USA in Vietnam before the Americans requested aid. Similarly, Australia was not obliged to participate in the 1990-91 war against Iraq, and it was Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, who decided to invoke ANZUS after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the USA. Australia willingly sent forces to Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Likewise, Australia has decided to join the US-led coalition strikes against Islamic extremists in Iraq and Syria.

Whatever the merits, or otherwise, of these foreign policy ventures, the ANZUS Treaty did not compel or obligate Australia to undertake any of these actions. Australia has diplomatic relations with Iran, North Korea and Cuba, whereas the USA does not. Australia and the USA have not, and will not, agree on everything, and there have been, and will be, tensions within the alliance. However, the Australia-US alliance has evolved into a remarkably close relationship that is characterised by a deep level of trust, information sharing and access between Australian and US officials. Since the signing of the ANZUS Treaty, Australian policy makers have never contemplated a real alternative to the US

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alliance as a cornerstone of Australian foreign policy, as no relationship that Australia has with any nation is as closely intertwined, and substantial, as its alliance with the USA.

Critics of the alliance focus on the military aspect of ANZUS and the wars that Australia has fought alongside the USA.\textsuperscript{5} It is a legitimate debate, but it must consider the choices that Australia has willingly made. The US alliance is much broader than the military and security aspects, and has very strong economic and educational dimensions. Economic ties were formalised by the signing of the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA) in 2004. Educational links, notably the Australian-American Fulbright Program, have facilitated many exchanges between Australian and American scholars and their host institutions.\textsuperscript{6} The strong educational connections between Australia and America are also reflected by the sizeable number of Australian educators and students working and studying in the USA, and their American counterparts doing likewise in Australia. The security, economic and educational dimensions of the Australian-US relationship reflect the expansion and evolution of the alliance since the signing of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951 during the formative and uncertain years of the Cold War.

\textsuperscript{5} Malcolm Fraser, \emph{Dangerous Allies}, Melbourne, Melbourne: University Press, 2014. Fraser argues that Australia should discard its reliance on the ANZUS Treaty because it is no longer in Australia’s interests to be so closely allied to the USA. Fraser’s analysis is thought provoking, but weak on some of the historical aspects of the US alliance.

\textsuperscript{6} Alice Garner and Diane Kirkby, ““Never a Machine for Propaganda”? The Australian-American Fulbright Program and Australia’s Cold War”, \emph{Australian Historical Studies}, vol. 44, no. 1, 2013, pp.117-133. Garner and Kirkby’s study is an illuminating analysis of the origins of the Australian-American Fulbright Program.
The problematic nature of any alternative options for Australia also suggests that the US alliance should remain a cornerstone of Australian foreign policy. There is no other great power with whom Australia could forge a relationship similar to the alliance that it enjoys with the USA. Despite the current debate about American decline, the USA will remain a global superpower for the foreseeable future. Although China may be America’s most prominent strategic rival, and its economy will likely surpass the USA’s as the largest, but not necessarily the strongest or most diverse in the world, China does not have the global reach of the USA, politically, economically and militarily. Domestically, China is much weaker than the USA. Despite its obvious problems, the USA has an enduring, open and free political environment, as well as strong, independent educational and research institutions. Fermenting and disseminating ideas and inventions is a central pillar of the American creed. Although China is a great power, it lacks all of these elements, leaving it at a disadvantage when compared with the USA.

The choice, some argue, that Australia may have to make between the USA and China, is a false choice. Australia will continue to engage with both nations politically, strategically, economically and educationally. A military conflict between the USA and China is very unlikely as both powers are fully cognisant of the catastrophic consequences of such an event. However, the possibility of miscalculation or overreach by one or both powers cannot be discounted. In the event of conflict between the USA and China, Australia would unequivocally side with the USA. Such a strategic decision would reflect the parallel histories, and related foundations and values, of Australia and the USA.

Irrespective of the closeness of Australia’s relationships with other nations, the US alliance should, and will likely, remain
the bedrock of Australian foreign policy. The shape, nature and evolution of the US alliance reflect the shared histories, foundations, values and common language of both nations. There are key differences between the USA and Australia, and between Americans and Australians, but there are important similarities, too. The strong affinity between the two nations can be attributed to their origins as offspring of the British Empire; they are both settler and multicultural societies, and they have federal systems of government with strong democratic traditions. These related foundations make Australia and the USA natural if not ‘permanent allies’.

Since 1945, Australia has adopted an internationalist foreign policy as illustrated by its record and reputation as a constructive and active member of the United Nations. The primacy of the US alliance, as a cornerstone of Australian foreign policy, has not hindered Australian efforts to pursue its ‘permanent interests’. The benefits that Australia has derived from the US alliance, the nature and scope of the Australian-US relationship and the problematic nature of any alternatives, are three compelling reasons why the alliance is expected to remain as a central pillar of Australian foreign policy for the foreseeable future.

7 Australia, Canada and the USA are the only nations that can claim this parallel history and societal characteristics.
About the Author

Daniel Fazio is a PhD Candidate in American Studies at Flinders University. His thesis analyses the significance of the US-Australian Korean engagement from 1947-53 in the forging of the relationship and formal alliance between the two nations. His interests include the history of US and Australian foreign policy, US-Australian relations and the Korean War.