

The USA –China stand-off and Australia's role

A speech given to the Sydney Peace and Justice Coalition 10 April 2013 by Dr Sue Wareham, Vice-President, Medical Association for Prevention of War

Thanks for the invitation to be here and address this very important topic, and for SPJC's helping to bring this issue to the fore. I'd also like to congratulate Prof White for his work in urging a less antagonistic relationship between the US and China. I should say at the outset that I am not an expert on China, but I think a lot of us who are not experts know enough to be concerned at recent developments in our region and the lack of debate that has surrounded them

It's important for a number of reasons, and I'm going to mention just three:

1. Stand-offs can lead to war. We might think war between the USA and China is unthinkable because it could be on such a monumental scale it seems impossible but it's helpful to recall how rapidly and easily things can develop from a situation of rivalry to one of outright war by looking back 99 years to an assassination in Sarajevo. I'm not suggesting that tensions between the US and China are on a knife-edge currently, but very worrying trends have already started in our region. A trigger for a war between the US and China could occur in relation to a number of regional disputes, such as Taiwan, or the strategic shipping lanes in the South China Sea, or a clash between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, and others.
2. A stand-off, especially involving two competing military powers, diverts our attention and resources from the other issues of the day that require cooperation, many of the outstanding ones of course being environmental - climate change, and the rapid degradation of the environment on which Chinese, Americans, Australians and everyone else depends. Climate change is now widely recognised as an issue that even military forces need to take seriously, and effective action on this and other issues is much less likely in a hostile political environment.
3. 3rd point, related to both of these, is the fact that a war between China and the USA could be a nuclear war in which Australia is likely to be targeted. While our attention is diverted from cooperation to confrontation, it is also diverted from the other great threat to human survival, nuclear weapons, and the need to get rid of them.

There are a number of other reasons this issue is important, but that'll do for starters.

Australian signals about our relationship with China have been mixed, and these mixed messages were very evident in our last defence white paper, in 2009. The white paper had thinly veiled and inconsistent references to China as a possible threat to Australia.

The DWP also gave seemingly inconsistent messages about our level of security generally. It said that

*"Australia is one of the most physically secure countries in the world"
by virtue of our geostrategic location, [it will remain] a secure country over the period to 2030."*

However, despite our absence of significant military threats, the white paper stated that the future is uncertain and therefore we need to significantly increase our military spending every year up to 2030 with major new acquisitions. Although those recommended increases are not necessarily eventuating, the white paper has certainly alarmed our neighbours.

One of the most worrying statements in the white paper was that our strategy should not necessarily be purely defensive but that *"...we will need to be prepared to undertake proactive combat operationsas far from Australia as possible"*. What are our neighbours to make of that? It sounds remarkably like aggressive military action. We await the next defence white paper which is being prepared currently.

So what is happening on the ground in Australia as a sign of our closer military ties with the US?

In November 2011 President Obama addressed the Australian parliament about his new pivot to Asia, and he and PM Gillard then announced steps that would significantly deepen the military relationship between the two countries, including the following:

- As from 2012, for the first time ever, there are US troops stationed permanently on Australian soil – up to 2,500 US Marines in Darwin.
- In the centre of Australia, there is the continuing growth of the capacity of the Pine Gap facility, a critical satellite communications facility. Pine Gap is deeply involved in US war fighting strategies and in intelligence gathering. It is also involved in the severely destabilising missile defence systems, which are of great concern to China.
- In Western Australia, North West Cape has again become an important US facility for tracking enemy satellites to be neutralised in the event of war in space.
- Also in WA, there is a recommendation for the basing of a US navy aircraft carrier task force at HMAS Stirling base, although Defence Minister Smith has rejected this recommendation
- In the Indian Ocean there is a plan to use the Cocos Islands as a possible base for spy drones and aircraft. The use of drones is particularly worrying, as they perpetuate killings that are completely outside the law – not a good precedent if we want a future based on international law.

Elsewhere in the region, US plans include

- Shifting most of its navy ships to the Pacific;
- using the huge bases at Subic Bay and Clark Air Base in the Philippines again (they were expelled from them in 1992);
- use of the Cam Ranh Bay facility in Vietnam; and
- using basing facilities in Singapore

It seems that our ally, having failed in its two recent wars and left a vast trail of death, destruction and human misery, is now moving on. The country seems to have no sense of remorse over what it has done, or, even more importantly, no sense of the power of good it could do if it put into practice the noble principles it espouses. These are not meant to be cynical comments. In fact, one of the roles a good friend such as Australia could play is to pull our ally back from its delusions of omnipotence. In the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq we could have urged a different course of action, but instead we played the role of an accomplice in an act of aggression, and that act significantly reduced US status and influence globally, A true friend to the US would have seen this coming, as millions of people around the world and very many governments - including US allies such as Canada - did, and urged restraint. Uncritical support is not the same as friendship.

Former PM Malcolm Fraser made a submission to the government's white paper on Australia in the Asian Century, from which I will read the following (bear in mind that Fraser was Defence Minister at the height of the Vietnam War):

“America is nearing the withdrawal stages of the third failed war in Asia and South Asia. Despite claims to the contrary, Vietnam was a failure and a massive waste....3 wars on Asia and South Asia. 3 failures.”

Fraser is one of the many Australians who have called for an Inquiry into how Australia became involved in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, so that we can learn the errors that were made and how we can prevent Australia again going to war on the decision of a leader, without even our parliament being consulted. Last year he launched the Campaign for an Iraq War Inquiry. This remains one of the most outstanding needs if we are to prevent Australia again being drawn into wars that undermine our own and everyone else's security.

These measures should not be seen in isolation from other developments here in Australia, and especially the growing focus on our history as a nation that fights wars and the notion that we are threatened. Also in November 2011 PM Gillard proposed yet another military commemorative day, Feb 19 as Bombing of Darwin Day. As we approach the Gallipoli centenary, the emphasis on war as defining who we are as Australians will become even stronger.

But there are positive developments too, especially in the last few days, as we see PM Gillard starting to develop closer ties with the Chinese leadership. With trade being a major focus, a possible outcome of this is more Australian coal going to China, not on balance a positive thing. However the prospect of cooperation with disaster and humanitarian relief is good, as is the proposal for greater military to military dialogue and annual ministerial dialogue. A test of the latter however might be the degree to which Australia can extricate itself from US policy and find an independent voice in these dialogues.

The dialogue will also test Australia's commitment to human rights, as it was reported that British PM David Cameron had high level exchanges with China cut when he agreed to meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

I'm going to look now at the military treaty that binds our two countries, the 1952 ANZUS Treaty, because it is often claimed, or at least implied, that the Treaty compels us to join in when the US decides to go to war. John Howard invoked the Treaty when Australia joined the invasion of Afghanistan. So we should be quite clear about what ANZUS says. It starts:

The parties to this treaty, reaffirming their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all Governments, and desiring to strengthen the fabric of peace in the Pacific Area,

Article 1..... undertake, as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, to settle any international disputes in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered and to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations.

And what is the purpose of the United Nations, as set out in its Charter? "To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war..."

The Treaty repeatedly emphasises "*the responsibility of the United Nations for the maintenance of international peace and security.*"

It is legitimate to ask therefore whether the military developments between the US and Australia are actually consistent with our ANZUS obligation to settle international disputes by peaceful means; they look much more like preparations to settle disputes by war.

The military developments that we are seeing are taking place with virtually no public input, despite their far-reaching consequences and despite the fact the plenty of concern is being expressed. One of those who have been very critical is former prime minister Malcolm Fraser. He says that a policy of containment will lead to "*grave and serious difficulties*" and that the permanent presence of troops here is a mistake and potentially disastrous. He also reports a view expressed to him by Chinese officials that Australia is becoming increasingly incapable of thinking independently from our ally.

Fraser reminds us that in 1956 when a Chinese invasion of Taiwan was feared, PM Menzies told President Eisenhower that if the US went to war with China over Taiwan, Australia would not be part of it. There was some independence of thought that we have lost.

Many others of course have expressed serious concerns about America's increasing focus on a military containment of China. Michael Klare, professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, says that the new steps announced, including those in Australia "are certain to arouse alarm in Beijing and strengthen the hand of those in the ruling circle (especially in the Chinese military leadership) who favour a more active militarized response to US incursions". The result, he says, is that "we may be sowing the seeds of a new Cold War in Asia". One of the critical factors, Klare says, is that nearly every tanker bringing oil to China travels across the South China Sea, over which the Obama administration is seeking greater control.¹

Concern has of course been expressed by civil society in Australia also, and one sign of this has been the formation of the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network, IPAN, which advocates an independent foreign policy for Australia. IPAN states "*We are convinced that these developments are not in Australia's best interests. They have the potential to sour existing good relations with our neighbours and even to embroil us in further warfare on behalf of a foreign power.*"

There's one particular aspect of what's happening that I'm going to say more about, and that is the issue of nuclear weapons and nuclear war because it is one of the overwhelming risks that the Australian

government refuses to seriously address . The US and China are both nuclear armed, and Australia is an integral part of the US nuclear war machine.

China has about 200 to 300 nuclear weapons and the US approx. 8,000. Unlike the US, China has a no first use policy with its nuclear weapons although whether this would hold true in practice in all situations is of course a different matter.

Australia is deeply implicated in US nuclear weapons policies. We shelter under the nuclear umbrella, which is said to protect us. Australian governments give unquestioning support to extended nuclear deterrence. The 2009 Defence White Paper made only cursory references to nuclear weapons and deterrence, as if deterrence is a self-evident truth that requires no serious examination. Even if deterrence did work, there has never been a public US assurance of such nuclear protection for Australia.

In February 2009 our then Ambassador in Washington Dennis Richardson gave a presentation to a Congressional Commission on US Strategic Posture. The points he made included the following:

- urged the US to make more explicit its willingness to use nuclear weapons in our defence,
- without our ally's nuclear umbrella, Australia might develop nuclear weapons

Australia's support for the US nuclear posture is bolstered by hosting US intelligence and military facilities vital to US nuclear war operations. The Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap in Central Australia is a key part of US systems of missile early warning, missile defence and nuclear targeting. The Australian government has acknowledged that Pine Gap would be a high priority target in a major war between the US and China.

Despite these overwhelming consequences, Australians have never been asked whether we want to be "defended" by weapons of mass destruction.

When Greens Senator Scott Ludlam asked the government about Australia's risk of nuclear attack, and how we would cope in such an event, the answers he received from the minister representing the Minister for Defence on 6 February this year, stated in part that "The government does not intend to speculate on hypothetical scenarios", when that is exactly what the government had done with the 2009 DWP speculating on the development of a hostile environment for which we needed to rearm ourselves. There is nothing speculative about Australia being a nuclear target.

Nuclear deterrence is a flawed concept for a number of reasons, and the US missile defence program highlights just one of them. If deterrence works, then who needs a missile shield, because the missiles won't be fired anyway; a nuclear strike will be deterred. What we see in practice however is the opposite - the US continuing to develop its missile defences, and China making more nuclear missiles to overcome its shield that might or might not work.

Over recent years there has been growing civil society pressure for a NWC, a treaty to ban these worst of all weapons. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons has grown rapidly since its launch in Australia in 2007. A number of progressive governments, including the Norwegian, Mexican and others are very proactive in working to highlight what these weapons actually do to people and to cities.

There's one other aspect of Australia's approach to nuclear weapons that I'll mention, and that is uranium sales. Australia now sells uranium to China, as we do to other nuclear weapons states that refuse to fulfill their NPT article 6 obligation to disarm. The China National Nuclear Corporation controls all fissile material for both civilian and military purposes, and safeguards apply at hardly any of China's many nuclear facilities. There is no way we can know whether our uranium is ending up in Chinese nuclear weapons.

Now I'm going to come to make some final points and conclusions and suggestions

1. War between the US and China would represent the ultimate failure of diplomacy, and a catastrophe for all sides. There would be no real winners. It must be avoided.
2. Militarisation of our region increases tensions and suspicions. This is already happening. What might seem benign to Australian policymakers is not necessarily perceived in that way by our neighbours.
3. Australia needs far greater emphasis on diplomacy and less on militarism. The Department of Foreign Affairs has been progressively starved of funds compared to our defence department
4. Australians deserve to know who we are arming ourselves against. If China is not the enemy, then who is?
5. Our ANZUS commitments oblige us to resolve disputes by peaceful means, with the UN, not the US, being the ultimate authority
6. Australia must develop a voice that is independent of our ally's, for a number of reasons:
 - Australian interests and US interests are not always the same
 - Friends urge restraint and caution when it is called for; they do not simply act as an obedient servant
 - Australia's relationships with our neighbours will be diminished if we are seen as just a mouthpiece for a great power.
7. We must learn from past errors. This is a tough one, as we don't seem to be able to. That is why an inquiry into the Iraq War is so important.
8. The next point relates to the growing pressure on finite resources and the likelihood of further armed conflicts to secure them unless we start to do things differently. The Senkaku islands, over which tensions are brewing, are reported to be home to oil and gas fields. Far greater and faster implementation of renewable energies by all nations is needed to not only slow down the pace of global warming but also to reduce tensions as fossil fuel reserves dwindle, as they will.
9. Nuclear weapons must be abolished. We survived the Cold War including the Cuban Missile Crisis without them being used again, but that luck won't last forever. Plenty of governments are serious about achieving this goal, and Australia has everything to gain by joining them. This is not a hypothetical issue for us; we are targeted, and any nuclear weapons attack, whether by China on Australia or any other scenario, will be an unmitigated humanitarian catastrophe to which there can be no meaningful relief effort. The climate impacts of nuclear weapons use are another whole issue in themselves.

At the very least Australia should declare a nuclear weapons free defence policy, and achieve what NZ managed to do nearly 30 years ago.
10. All these issues deserve and need public debate and scrutiny, and public input into government decision making processes. Analysis of issues such as the threats we actually face, their probability, the risks entailed and how we can best mitigate them deserve far better analysis than they received in, for example, the 2009 defence white paper.

I'm going to finish with some words from Malcolm Fraser again, because this paragraph summarises well, the best approach Australia could take towards our relationships towards both the US and China: He says "*The only way peace and security can be achieved throughout this region is through a concert of nations where all the relevant countries have a seat at the table, where the great powers, especially America and China, are treated with respect but neither one seeks to assert or claim dominance over the other. That outcome will not be achieved by Australia compliantly going along with whatever the United States wants.*"

ⁱ Tomdispatch. M Klare A new cold war in Asia? Dec 6, 2011