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FROM KOREA TO VIETNAM
Australian strategic policy after
the Korean War

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It has been commonplace to assert that the 1950s and 1960s were times when Australia became locked into the Cold War policies of the United States, leading to the costly, futile and divisive involvement in America's war in Vietnam. Let us subject that view to a closer examination.

To better understand the place of the Korean War and its aftermath in the history of Australian strategic policy, we should stand back a little to grasp the shape of the forest rather than of the individual trees. This reveals a recurring pattern. After a major turbulence in the world order, such as a world war, there is a period of vigorous strategic debate in Australia, as policy-makers seek to assess the shape of the emerging postwar world order and to develop broad policies that will place Australia to best advantage in that order. This generally involves a degree of tension between the two poles around which Australia's strategic thought has long revolved. One pole, the globalist approach, asserts that Australia is a large continent with a small population. Not only its geography but also its interests, values, ethnicity and identity dictate that it must remain closely associated with allies, especially those that Robert Menzies famously described as our 'great and powerful friends': Britain and the United

States.[1] The other pole, the regionalist approach, questions whether these distant allies have the capacity, or perhaps even the will, to support Australia's defence needs and asserts that excessive reliance on allies leads to involvement in other people's wars; it argues that Australia should take a more independent policy, concentrating on making friends and deterring potential enemies within its own region. The tension between these two approaches—the globalists who speak of alliance and the regionalists who speak of independence—has been evident since at least the mid-nineteenth century.

During the debate over the new world order, the government of the day usually seeks to develop a strategic posture that will reassure both the globalists and the regionalists, as far as possible, by demonstrating that Australia's alliances strengthen its regional relationships and vice versa. In a democracy, it is highly desirable that the new posture can be expressed in a simple and electorally appealing formula. Over the twentieth century, Australian governments generally succeeded in coming up with a posture and a formula that met these demands, a posture that lasted for roughly a generation. After this time, once there was any major war or transformation of the world order, the old strategic posture would be regarded as obsolete or discredited, and the search for a new one would begin. This cycle can be identified on four occasions, coinciding roughly with the four quarters of the twentieth century.

The process of resolving the global and regional imperatives usually leads to a strategic posture that takes, at its core, a triangular form. At one corner is Australia, at the second is Australia's major ally, or alliance structure, and at the third is what Australia's policy-makers perceive to be the most significant actual or potential threat, situated somewhere in the Asia-Pacific region. Today, for example, many strategic pundits are devoting their attention to the Australia–US–China triangle. It displays some remarkable similarities to, as well as some highly important contrasts with, the triangle formed by Australia, Britain and Japan that preoccupied Australian attention for the first four decades of the twentieth century. This approach has become the standard way in which Australians have thought about their strategic challenges.

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1   R. Menzies, 'Election speeches', 1949, Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1949-robert-menzies.

During the 1920s and 1930s Australia's strategic posture was known as the Singapore strategy: the concept that the development of a British naval base at Singapore would deter, and if necessary defeat, any southward thrust by the Japanese against British and Australian interests. This strategic approach was regional, in that it focused on the threat of Japanese expansionism in the Asia Pacific, and it was also an alliance policy, relying heavily on Britain's capacity and will to act in the region. Thus it was essentially triangular. The spectacular failure of this strategy, culminating in the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, was not only 'the worst disaster and greatest capitulation in British history', as Winston Churchill famously described it, but also a catastrophe for Australia's national strategic policy. For the next three and a half years Australia was heavily involved in what was, in fact, one world war, but one that has often been discussed almost as if it were two separate wars: the one fought in Europe alongside, and some would say for, Britain; and the other in the Pacific, allegedly more in Australia's immediate national interests, fighting alongside the United States against the empire of Japan.

After 1945, Australian strategic policy-makers entered a new period of debate as they sought to assess the nature of the strategic challenges in the postwar world order and the appropriate response for Australia. Once again, the central quandary was whether to take a global-alliance or a regional approach, or in some way to combine the two. Should Australia concentrate—as British civilian and military authorities urged—on the perceived threat of a third world war, in which the principal enemy would be the Soviet Union? If so, Australia would once again be expected to make its principal military contribution in the regions extending from the Middle East into southern Europe, covering North Africa as well as western and south-western Asia. Within this area were names that already resonated in Australian military history, including Gallipoli, Beersheba, Villers-Bretonneux, Tobruk, Greece, Crete and El Alamein. (Today we might add Iraq and even, to stretch but not break the boundaries, Afghanistan.) Alternatively, should Australia be more concerned by the numerous revolutions, rebellions and insurgencies in South-East Asia in the shadow of the 1949 victory of the Chinese Communist Party in China's civil war? While policy-makers debated these and related issues, there came a blunt reminder of the aphorism that life is what happens while we are making other plans, for a major war broke out quite unexpectedly in north-east Asia. Nevertheless, even as Australia and many other nations

were engaged in combat on the Korean Peninsula, decisions were being made that would shape Australia's strategy and its military commitments for the next generation.

The strategic posture of the third quarter of the twentieth century was often encapsulated in the phrase 'forward defence'. After the Vietnam War, this posture was for some decades discredited. What were the principal elements of forward defence, and how was it influenced by the experience of the Korean War?

The first point to note was the virtually exclusive focus on South-East Asia. Because we now tend to think of this period as the lead-up to the Vietnam War, this South-East Asian focus is often taken for granted, but it was by no means as automatic as it now appears. After extensive debate and discussions, especially with British authorities, Australian policy-makers took a clear and conscious decision to focus Australia's military and diplomatic commitments on South-East Asia rather than the Mediterranean and Middle East theatre. By the late 1940s there was great turmoil in South-East Asia, prompted by the complex interaction of two great historical processes of the twentieth century. On one hand, a worldwide Cold War was developing between the communist and anti-communist blocs. On the other hand, anti-colonial nationalist movements, seeking independence from the European empires, were proving far stronger than most in the West had expected. Trying to work out what was anti-colonial nationalism and what was communist expansionism became a major preoccupation for policy-makers and planners. The turmoil in South-East Asia began even before the outbreak of the Korean War, for 1948 saw a number of revolutions and insurgencies erupt across the region, reminiscent of Europe in 1848.

From this time onwards the dominant, almost exclusive focus of Australian strategy and diplomacy was on the successive crises in the area to Australia's north. This attention was not totally exclusive, for RAAF aircraft participated in the Berlin airlift of 1948–49 and two RAAF fighter squadrons were posted to Malta in 1952–54 to support British and NATO activities. But by far the dominant concerns for Australian policy-makers were the Indonesian revolution and its protracted aftermath; the dispute over the future of West New Guinea, which was not settled until the early 1960s; the Malayan Emergency, which lasted officially from 1948 to 1960 and which saw the first commitment overseas of Australian troops in peacetime; *Konfrontasi*, the Indonesian Confrontation of the new

federation of Malaysia in the early 1960s; and a succession of crises on mainland South-East Asia variously involving Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia and culminating in the Vietnam War, which dominated the world's attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Today, the terms *Malaya* and *Confrontation* (or 'Borneo') now figure alongside Vietnam on memorials and in Anzac Day commemorations, but even well-informed Australians have little idea of how deeply concerned Australians were, not only by these conflicts but also by other actual and potential conflicts in the region.

The second major element of forward defence involved the alliance corner of the strategic triangle. The Australian Government in the 1950s and 1960s, especially during the long prime ministership of Robert Menzies, was absolutely determined that its armed forces would be committed only in South-East Asia and that they would operate only in close collaboration with those 'great and powerful friends'. While it was a strongly regional policy, it was also strongly an alliance policy. Self-reliance was explicitly ruled out. In 1959 the government's senior military and civilian defence advisers urged the government to move towards at least a limited degree of self-reliance, largely in reaction to the unhelpful direction of US policy on West New Guinea. The cabinet firmly rejected any such notion, reasserting that Australian forces were to be designed to operate only in South-East Asia and only in close alliance with Britain and the United States, or preferably (as in Korea) both. The Korean experience of serving in a British Commonwealth force within a wider US-led coalition established a highly attractive model.

Robert Menzies's famous reference to 'great and powerful friends' was in the plural. Although historians have been trying to correct the record on this for more than 30 years, one still hears accounts that imply that Australia turned dramatically and totally from the United Kingdom to the United States as its primary strategic partner. Australian Labor Party supporters still like to point to Curtin's famous statement of December 1941: 'Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links and kinship with the United Kingdom.' For their part, Liberals point to Percy Spender's skill in achieving the Australia, New Zealand, America Security Treaty (ANZUS) 60 years ago as the turning-point in Australia's strategic policy. Both these accounts tend to overlook the fact that Australian governments in the 1950s and 1960s were dedicating their efforts to keeping both the British and the Americans engaged in South-East Asia. This was the central principle governing Australian diplomacy

and Australia's military commitments. The troops sent to Malaya in the 1950s fought alongside forces from Britain, New Zealand, Fiji and what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Their engagement in the Malayan Emergency was officially only their secondary role. Their primary role was as part of the Australian contribution to what was called the British Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve, intended to prepare for, and hopefully to deter, a major war with China or other communist forces. Similarly, the Australian commitment to Confrontation was fought entirely in a Commonwealth context, supporting Britain and Malaysia, with no US involvement.

This was consistent with Australia's willingness to provide testing grounds for British atomic weapons at Maralinga and elsewhere in the 1950s, amid talk of a new force in world politics: the 'fourth British Empire'.[2] Australians did not want the West to have to rely solely on the United States, even though it was far and away the most powerful nation in the world. Far better if Britain's strength and place at the top table of world powers could be restored, so that—all around the world, but especially in South-East Asia—Australia could call on support from two strong allies, not just one.

For a long time in the 1950s and early 1960s, leaders in British countries, which included Australia and New Zealand, liked to think that, while Washington had enormous power and dynamism, London had greater maturity and experience in handling international crises. For many years they recalled MacArthur's imprudent advance to the Yalu and that some leading Americans had flirted with the idea of using nuclear weapons during the Korean War and again at the time of the French defeat in Indochina in 1954. More than once during the Cold War crises of the 1950s, Australia joined Britain to urge caution on Washington in crises that might lead to a major war with China. In 1956 Prime Minister Menzies was highly critical of the policies of President Eisenhower, which undermined the Anglo-French and Israeli operation in the Suez crisis. But that crisis brought home to Menzies where the centre of international power now resided. In the following year he announced that Australian weapons platforms and systems would be standardised with those of the

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2   See W. Reynolds, *Australia's Bid for the Atomic Bomb*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2000.

United States, not those of Britain. The transfer of primary allegiance from Britain to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s was gradual, incremental and in many ways reluctant.

One manifestation of Australia's desire to maintain a strategic association with both the United Kingdom and the United States was the frequent emphasis, in statements of Australian foreign and defence policy in the late 1950s and early 1960s, on SEATO—the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, intended to be a regional equivalent to NATO—rather than on ANZUS. SEATO included Britain and the United States, as well as other powers within and outside the region, and offered the prospect that any Australian military operations in South-East Asia would be conducted under the leadership of a multinational coalition rather than unilateral US command. Although not often expressed publicly, Australian policy-makers held what we might call a MacArthur complex, which owed much to Korea in the 1950s. On the one hand, they were frightened that the United States would withdraw from a region that figured much more strongly in Australia's priorities than in those of the United States; on the other hand they were concerned that an all-powerful American commander might act in a way that was rash and unduly provocative towards such enemies as China. Australian governments also held great hopes that, through such structures as the SEATO Planning Office in Bangkok, they would gain access to the military plans of both London and Washington. So Australia kept reasserting the importance of SEATO, even as its numerous flaws made it increasingly implausible as a vehicle for diplomatic and military collaboration.

In the early 1960s, Australian policy-makers faced what they regarded as one of the most demanding challenges to their national security policies, as the political and military situations in both Indonesia and South Vietnam deteriorated rapidly. There were, to pursue the geometric metaphor, two strategic triangles that were far from congruent. Britain sought further support in Confrontation, describing Indonesia's President Sukarno as a Hitler-like expansionist dictator, while being extremely reluctant to become involved in supporting the United States in Vietnam. At the same time, the United States was urging Australia to apply only the minimum degree of force in Confrontation in order to avoid driving Sukarno further into the hands of the Chinese, while calling for Australia's support in what the United States saw as the crucial theatre of operations, Vietnam. Caught between these conflicting pressures from its two major allies, Australia developed a strategic policy that was, as the diplomats

liked to say, refined but not defined by alliance considerations. Now, those Australian diplomats with a sense of history like to look back on Australian policy during Confrontation as one of the golden periods of Australian diplomacy, an example of world's best practice in a complex international environment.[3]

Not until April 1965, with the commitment of the first battalion of combat troops to Vietnam, did Australia become substantially involved in a war other than in close association with Britain. Even that followed hard on the heels of the commitment, just three months earlier, of another battalion of infantry, as well as Special Air Service (SAS) troops, to support the British Commonwealth effort in Borneo. In 1965 and 1966, Australia had forces committed to both conflicts. We think of the controversial national service scheme under which conscripts served in Vietnam as having been introduced solely for that war; but at the time of its introduction, policy-makers had Indonesia at least as much in mind as Vietnam, and a handful of national servicemen did, in fact, serve in Borneo or New Guinea.

All this is to say that we should not assume that the point of the strategic triangle occupied by Australia's chief ally can be identified as easily as at other times before and since. This was a period in which Australia sought to have two great allies for as long as possible, ending only in the early 1970s when Britain began its withdrawal from east of Suez, leaving Australia with just one great power ally in the region. The side of the strategic triangle that represents Australia's relationship with its allies is a decidedly complex story.

The side of the strategic triangle that represents Australia's perception of its major strategic threat was also more complex than it might have seemed. Historians and commentators have often recalled the melodramatic advertisements used in 1960s elections, with menacing arrows thrusting southward from China, and concluded that Australia had an irrational and excessive fear of 'Red China', as the People's Republic of China (PRC), recognised diplomatically by Britain but not by Australia or the United States until the 1970s, was widely called. This, too, is an oversimplification. The perceived threat was that of militant, expansionist communism. For some years the Soviet Union was seen as the principal inspiration and

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3   See, for example, G. Woodard, 'Best practice in Australia's foreign policy: "Konfrontasi" (1963–66)', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 33, issue 1, 1998, pp. 85–99.

ideological driver of this threat; only later did China come to play this role. Policy-makers found it hard to understand the ramifications of the emerging Sino-Soviet split, as well as the extent to which either Moscow or Beijing was the force behind the numerous insurgencies and rebellions in South-East Asia. Some of these issues were highly contentious at the time, and to some extent remain so. There are still, for example, serious scholars who maintain that the hand of Moscow can be detected behind the simultaneous outbreak of insurgencies across the region in 1948.[4] Although there is general consensus that Australia, and other Western powers, greatly overestimated the extent to which Hanoi was acting as a proxy for the PRC, the role of the Soviet Union and China in the Vietnam War is still a matter of debate and continuing research.[5]

Many Australians in the 1960s were more concerned by the perceived threat from Sukarno's Indonesia than by developments on the South-East Asian mainland. There was a real fear, for example, that Sukarno might expand his Confrontation of Malaysia from the Borneo territories, not only westward to the Malayan Peninsula but also eastwards to New Guinea, where there was an almost indefensible land border between Indonesia's new acquisition of the western half of the island and the Australian-governed territories in the eastern half.

During the Korean War and for more than a decade afterwards, Australian policy-makers were struggling with some unusually complex strategic challenges. Normally accustomed to seeking assurance from one great ally, they were trying to deal with two. On the face of it, this should have been a source of strength, but the divergence of views and priorities between London and Washington made this more of a problem than a reassurance. At the other corner of the strategic triangle was the difficulty in clearly identifying the nature and origins of the threat. Were there one, two or numerous actual and potential challenges? To what extent were the insurgencies throughout South-East Asia dangerous manifestations of communist expansionism, driven by Moscow or Beijing or both? Were they essentially nationalist, anti-colonial rebellions to which Australians should show sympathy and support? Was Indonesia about to fall into

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4   This was the theme of a paper given by Professor Jonathan Haslam of Cambridge University at a conference in Singapore in April 2010.
5   Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2012. See also the introduction to Xiao-Bing Li and R. Peters, *Voices from the Korean War: Personal Stories of American, Korean and Chinese Soldiers*, University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, KY, 2004.

the hands of a communist party aligned closely with Beijing, or was it a potential ally in the anti-communist cause? These and related issues reached crisis point in the mid-1960s. Eventually, following a complex series of events in which timing was all-important, Confrontation ended in 1966, while the Vietnam commitment escalated until it dominated not only Australia's foreign policy and strategic thinking but also its domestic politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Just as the Singapore Strategy of the 1920s and 1930s came to a spectacular end with the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, so forward defence ended with the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. For years thereafter, forward defence, and anything that could rightly or wrongly be associated with it, was identified with an ignominious defeat and was discredited. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Australia entered another period of strategic debate, comparable with the late 1940s and 1950s. Eventually a new strategic posture was developed: again seeking to resolve the tensions between global and regional emphases; again seeking to identify and prepare for the major strategic challenge that could be foreseen; and again seeking to manage our alliance and regional relationships to meet that challenge. Another cycle in the formation of Australian strategic policy had begun.