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Robert O'Neill and Australian Security Policy

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I have known Bob O'Neill for over 40 years and, as is well known, he is a highly distinguished scholar both nationally and internationally. He is also a man of many parts, as a former army officer, official war historian, the Head of SDSC for almost 12 years, the Director of the highly prestigious International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, and Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford. This is truly a stellar career that very few Australian academics have been able to match, and much of this book will examine his academic achievements. My contribution will be to focus on his interest in the broader issues of Australia's national security policy and, in particular, our cooperative endeavours in seeking to understand the policies of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the roles of China and Japan in regional security policy in the 1970s, and his early work on Australian defence policy and how it assisted my own endeavours in coming to grips with working for the Minister for Defence Kim Beazley in the late 1980s. I will also address the challenges I faced as head of SDSC for almost 13 years, from 1991 to 2004, and how much I owed to the strong basis he had established for its intellectual reputation, both in Australia and internationally. However, the most important part of this chapter is to record the huge debt I owe to Bob O'Neill for supporting and publishing my controversial views on the Soviet Union.

Intelligence and National Security Issues

I first met Bob O'Neill in the mid-1970s when I was a newly minted Head of the National Assessments Staff, which prepared draft intelligence assessments for the consideration of the National Intelligence Committee. It was a considerable challenge for me, because my previous career had been primarily as an economist dealing with Australia's overseas trade, analysing Soviet agriculture, and writing a book whilst at ANU in the late 1960s with the obscure title, *Siberia and the Pacific: A Study of Economic Development and Trade Prospects*.¹ The world of strategy, military capabilities, and technical issues to do with the central nuclear balance between the US and the USSR were completely foreign to me. It was a very steep learning curve at the age of 34, and I owe a great deal to the guidance and generous mentoring Bob gave me. His background in the Australian Army in the Vietnam War, the fact that he was writing the official history of the Korean War, and his headship of SDSC gave me unique insights into the arcane world (or so it then seemed) of strategic and defence studies. He was able to direct me to others at ANU, such as Harry Rigby, Geoffrey Jukes, and Bob Miller, who were deeply knowledgeable about the USSR's political leadership, military capabilities, and economy, as well as scholars such as Amin Saikal, who was invaluable to me when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 — a country I knew absolutely nothing about.

Through Bob O'Neill, I also got to know Hedley Bull, Tom Millar, J. D. B. Miller and Des Ball. They were a formidable intellectual asset for me to consult as I struggled with formulating multidisciplinary and long-range intelligence national assessments. It is hard to imagine a more fortuitous and helpful set of individuals who were so prominent not only in strategic studies but also international relations practice.

I was also extremely fortunate because Bob — unlike many scholars — clearly understood that intelligence analysis is quite different from academic work. Intelligence analysis as a profession does not afford the time to focus on international relations theory and footnoting sources; rather, it must conform to national intelligence priorities, be relevant

1 Dobb, Paul (1972) *Siberia and the Pacific: A Study of Economic Development and Trade Prospects*, New York: Praeger.

to policy, and is rarely the product of an individual as distinct from a team. I was able to share these different approaches intellectually with Bob, and obtain guidance about how to present them in formal intelligence committee meetings — which, for example, rejected my attempts to introduce ideas such as Robert Jervis's 'perceptions and misperceptions in international relations' in my analysis of foreign countries.

In return, I was able to offer Bob some modest assistance regarding the problems of an academic research unit working in the sensitive area of defence policy. SDSC's relations with the Department of Defence bureaucracy and its suspicious attitude toward academics needed to be handled with great diplomacy, which Bob had no problem demonstrating. On several occasions, there were particular issues to do with Des Ball and the focus of his research on the highly sensitive issue of the purpose and operations of the joint US–Australia facility at Pine Gap. Extremely few Australian intelligence or defence policy officers were briefed on the highly classified compartment dealing with Pine Gap. (I retained that clearance for 30 years, including 13 years as professor at ANU.) I was O'Neill's closest contact in the Department of Defence in the 1970s and early 1980s. We kept in close touch during those years, and Bob says I gave him valuable guidance on how to handle problems when they arose — such as the formidable Secretary of the Department of Defence, Sir Arthur Tange, bearing down on SDSC over Des Ball's Pine Gap revelations. I was also able to introduce Bob to people I worked with in the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO), including its Director and Chairman of the National Intelligence Committee, Gordon Jockel, and Bob Mathams, the Director of Scientific and Technical Intelligence who, with the CIA's Carl Duckett, chose the site for Pine Gap. Mathams was the resident technical and scientific expert regarding the role of the joint facilities in monitoring the USSR's strategic nuclear capabilities and evidence about whether it was conforming to strategic nuclear arms control agreements. The other key person that I facilitated contact with for Bob was the Deputy Secretary for Defence, Bill Pritchett, who became Secretary in 1979 after Tange retired. These were all people who essentially wanted to be helpful to SDSC, but sometimes faced difficulties because of SDSC's need to address salient, and therefore sensitive, issues in public comment.

The Soviet Union, China, and Japan

I had a particular interest in the Soviet Union and China, but for different reasons: I was the resident defence intelligence expert on the Soviet Union, which in the 1970s was seen as posing a fundamental military challenge to America. Our intelligence interest was in China's growing opposition to the USSR and its opening up of relations with the US and Australia. Sir Arthur Tange instructed me to go to Moscow in 1976 and hold detailed discussions with the USSR about their naval operations in the Indian Ocean, which were of particular concern to the then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. In 1978, Tange also agreed to an invitation by the Chinese Embassy, and I was the first Australian senior defence intelligence officer to visit China. I was invited to inspect the Chinese submarine building yards in Shanghai and go on board a Chinese Romeo class submarine.

I was able to assist Bob in developing his knowledge of these important countries. Bob made a few visits to Moscow in the 1970s, and I was able to give him a list of very valuable contacts in the think tanks and the foreign ministry. From that experience, he was able to invite some well-suited specialists to Canberra, especially those from Soviet think tanks specialising in our region. I also helped Bob to open up a workable and sensible relationship with key people in the Soviet Embassy in Canberra, including the Deputy Chief of Mission Yuri Pavlov and the Counsellor Igor Saprykin. These were both highly intelligent and active Soviet diplomats who enjoyed a vast array of contacts in Canberra and ASIO had concerns about their real intelligence functions. Pavlov and Saprykin were accomplished public speakers and were quite comfortable participating in vigorous ANU public conferences about such subjects as nuclear arms control, Soviet naval activities in the Indian Ocean, and the US–USSR strategic relationship. I tried to do my bit for SDSC as a discreet participant in opening up a less hostile relationship with the Soviet diplomats in Canberra. Bob has told me that I made a big difference indirectly to the expertise of SDSC's output and understanding of the USSR, even while I was in the Department of Defence.

I was also able to assist Bob in developing relations with government departments and research institutes in China. When he first visited China, shortly after my 1978 visit, I was able to give him a long

list of contacts across the defence and foreign ministries and think tanks, from which he was able to make contacts which he tells me were still useful to him 20 years later. He says they were especially valuable when he was at the IISS, trying to broaden its outreach with Asia, which had not traditionally been a key interest of the institute, which was heavily focused on Europe and North America. Bob has told me that as he was travelling around in China on that first visit, he became used to hearing my name spoken in discussion groups that he attended. Certainly, Bob had my strong support in visiting China, because we were keenly interested in developing a relationship and opening up Beijing to a more transparent exchange of views on strategic and military matters.

Bob and I were also interested in the issue of developing our strategic relationships with Japan. The first Japanese official to attend the IISS was the Foreign Ministry's experienced Asianist Yukio Sato who later organised — with Bob's strong support — the first IISS Annual Conference in Asia in 1986 in the Japanese city of Kyoto. It was a resounding success due to Bob's imaginative management. Later, in 1990 when I was Deputy Secretary for Defence, Sato and I held Japan's first strategic bilateral discussions with any country other than the US. Sato went on to be Japan's Ambassador in Canberra in the mid-1990s, and I maintained a close relationship with him. The IISS established progressively deeper relationships with Japan and was responsible for nurturing an entire generation of Japanese strategic thinkers.

Managing the IISS

Bob O'Neill was the Director of the IISS from 1982 to 1987, and these were crucial years in the formulation of my own career, which would not have occurred without his generous support. When I was in intelligence during the 1970s, I began to formulate ideas about the USSR that I knew would become controversial. Toeing the party line on the Soviet Union in Canberra was *de rigueur* and there was an unspoken requirement to conform, which was a reflection of the belief that the views of the US intelligence community should not be challenged. As already mentioned, in 1976 Sir Arthur Tange sent me to Moscow, stating that he wanted an Australian — not a US or UK — point of view. I stopped at London on my way to Moscow and talked

in detail with the Cabinet Office Assessments Staff, which I found to be much more nuanced than the CIA. By 1979, an idea was beginning to formulate in my mind that the Soviet Union had real weaknesses and problems, and I began to think of it as the incomplete superpower. I discussed this with O'Neill, who suggested that I join him at ANU, which I did in 1981. This involved resigning from my position in defence, and I left with the warning of the then Secretary for Defence, Bill Pritchett, ringing in my ears: 'You'll be working down the corridor from that Desmond Ball and we'll be watching you, Dibb.'

I worked in the Department of International Relations in 1982 and then transferred to the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. By this time, Bob had gone to run the IISS in London. He quickly arranged for me to agree to write a book about the USSR for the institute, which became *The Soviet Union: The Incomplete Superpower*.² Bob strongly encouraged me in the writing task over the next three years and I made several visits to Moscow and Washington. The book was published in 1986 by the IISS, reprinted in 1987, and a second edition in 1988. In America, it was published by the University of Illinois Press. It caused quite a stir, particularly in the United States, and most especially in the American intelligence community. In 1987, I had returned to defence and was Director of the JIO. In that role, I had a meeting in Washington with Robert Gates, who was then Deputy Director of the CIA. I well remember him giving me a little lecture about how the agency disagreed with my book and that the CIA's view was that 'the USSR was poised to outstrip the US in military power'.

I well understood that, without Bob O'Neill's continuing encouragement, my book would never have been published, and I owe him an enormous debt for having stuck his neck out on such a controversial subject. This was especially the case in those days when the institute very much relied on its transatlantic connections with America. I strongly believe to this day that, without Bob's support for this project, it may never have seen the light of day. Most academics these days have no idea of the harsh pressure that existed in the 1980s to conform to the US official views about the Soviet threat. All this was deeply seared into my mind when I was called over to the office of the new Secretary for Defence, Sir William Cole, who told me that

2 Dibb, Paul (1986) *The Soviet Union: The Incomplete Superpower*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

he could not give me the job of Director JIO because of my views on the Soviet Union. My retaliation came a few months later when I was made ministerial consultant to Minister for Defence Kim Beazley to write the *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*.³ I remember Sir William saying to me, in the same office where he had rejected my appointment as Director JIO just a few months earlier: 'Well, Paul, this is a turn up for the books.' It was, and I made sure that Cole's performance as secretary was scrutinised by the Dibb Review. I don't think Bob ever realised these threats to my career were going on at the time, but I have never forgotten his unwavering support for the publication of *The Incomplete Superpower*.

While I am addressing the issue of Bob's leadership of the institute, I would be remiss if I didn't record that he was an outstanding manager of that body, and the only Australian to have ever done so. I watched him at the institute's annual conferences, masterfully undertaking a role that was completely beyond me. Over two full days of a large international conference, he would be busy listening and analysing what the key points were, and at the end of the conference he would make the final address, which would draw together what invariably were very complex and competing ideas. That is a role that very few people can do, but Bob O'Neill did it with great aplomb.

Australia's Defence Policy

As the Head of SDSC, Bob O'Neill took important steps to bolster the centre's academic research into Australian defence policy. His predecessor, Tom Millar, had pioneered university work in Australia on defence policy issues, including his book *Australia's Defence*, which observed that '[s]uccessive governments have not been especially interested in defence as a subject'⁴ and his 1967 ANU booklet *Australia's Defence Policies 1945–65*.⁵ O'Neill himself had edited another early publication called *The Defence of Australia*:

3 Dibb, Paul (1986) *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

4 Millar, T.B. (1965) *Australia's Defence*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, p. 163.

5 Millar, T.B. (1967) *Australia's Defence Policies 1945–65*, Canberra: The Australian National University.

Fundamental New Aspects, which was published by SDSC in 1977 and ranks among the centre's first publications on detailed Australian defence policy matters.⁶

In the foreword to that publication, O'Neill observes that he had long wanted to organise a conference on the defence of Australia, but had been deterred by it being such an ambitious undertaking:

[It] would be a pioneering effort in terms of the assembly of expertise and the availability of relevant scholarly literature. It would also involve public entry into a field in which the numbers of those in Government service with real expertise must inevitably outweigh heavily the numbers of academic participants, thereby raising the very real question of by what right was the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre venturing to hold such a conference.⁷

Bob went on to state that, 'until approximately 1975, the Centre lacked the people around whom such a conference could be built'.⁸ He went on to note that, in 1974, with the establishment by Mr Lance Barnard, then Minister for Defence, of the two posts in the centre occupied by Mr Peter Hastings and Dr Desmond Ball, and Mr Ross Babbage's arrival to work for a PhD on Australian defence policy, 'the Centre now had a team around which a conference on the Defence of Australia could be built'.⁹ Bob proceeded to build on that remarkable team, and later recruited Jol Langtry as executive officer. Under Bob's guidance until he left the centre in 1982 to go to London, this team was responsible for producing a substantial output of publications concerning defence policy in Australia, particularly pioneering academic work on the north of Australia and its central relevance to the defence of Australia concept. This included such books as:

- *The Future of Tactical Air Power in the Defence of Australia*¹⁰
- *Australia's Defence Resources: a Compendium of Data*¹¹

6 O'Neill, Robert J. (ed.) (1977) *The Defence of Australia: Fundamental New Aspects*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University.

7 Ibid., p. v.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., pp. v-vi.

10 Ball, Desmond (ed.) (1977) *The Future of Tactical Air Power in the Defence of Australia*, Canberra: The Australian National University.

11 O'Neill, Robert, J. O. Langtry and Jolika Tie (eds) (1978) *Australia's Defence Resources: A Compendium of Data*, Canberra: The Australian National University.

- *Controlling Australia's Threat Environment: a Methodology for Planning Australia's Defence Force Development*¹²
- *Problems of Mobilisation in Defence of Australia*¹³
- *Options for an Australian Defence Technological Strategy*¹⁴
- *Rethinking Australia's Defence*¹⁵
- *New Directions in Strategic Thinking*¹⁶
- *Strategy and Defence: Australian Essays*.¹⁷

In addition to his administrative and conference management responsibilities and writing forewords and conclusions to various books, Bob O'Neill had time to write SDSC Working Papers with titles such as: *The Defence of Continental Australia*, *Structural Changes for a More Self-reliant National Defence*, and *The Structure of Australia's Defence Force*.¹⁸ I mention this because many of the publications I cite above, as well as later centre publications, became important to me when I was writing the Dibb Review for Minister for Defence Kim Beazley. I probably never got around to mentioning that to Bob, but I do so here. When I combined the output of the centre, together with over a decade's worth of hard work on defence of Australia concepts in the Department of Defence, they made my task immeasurably easier in 1985.

12 Langtry, J. O. and Desmond Ball (eds) (1979) *Controlling Australia's Threat Environment: a Methodology for Planning Australia's Defence Force Development*, Canberra: The Australian National University.

13 Ball, Desmond and J. O. Langtry (eds) (1980) *Problems of Mobilisation in Defence of Australia*, Canberra: Phoenix Defence Publications.

14 Gower, S. N. (1982) *Options for an Australian Defence Technological Strategy*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University.

15 Babbage, Ross (1980) *Rethinking Australia's Defence*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

16 O'Neill, Robert J. and D. M. Horner (eds) (1981) *New Directions in Strategic Thinking*, London: Allen & Unwin.

17 Ball, Desmond (ed.) (1982) *Strategy and Defence: Australian Essays*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

18 O'Neill, Robert J. (1978) *The Defence of Continental Australia*, SDSC Working Paper, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University; O'Neill, Robert J. (1978) *Structural Changes for a More Self-reliant National Defence*, SDSC Working Paper, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University; O'Neill, Robert J. (1979) *The Structure of Australia's Defence Force*, SDSC Working Paper, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University.

Bob had the strategic perspicacity to observe in the final chapter of *The Defence of Australia: Fundamental New Aspects*:

The acceptance by recent Australian Governments that Australia's defence policy should be concerned primarily with the defence of Australian territory rather than that of non-communist South-east Asian states is perhaps the change of greatest significance. It means that we must conceive policies for the defence of the nation at large and accept prime responsibility for conducting military functions to carry those policies into effect ... The change in posture requires that the services develop techniques for operating in and around Australia, rather than Southeast Asia — obviously creating a major task for the Army in particular.¹⁹

With great foresight, he argued: 'Primacy must be given to our operational doctrines to the defence of Australia.'²⁰ He strongly supported 'a nationwide, functional joint service command structure', which he believed would 'be the ultimate answer to our requirements'.²¹ In this seminal work, he concluded that

military history suggests that we have little experience on which to draw in the area of shaping nationwide response capacities and strategies. It is in this area principally that our attempt to develop doctrines will be most crucial. It promises to be many years before the intellectual challenge has gone out of the field of Australian defence studies.²²

As I tussled with the Dibb Review, I constantly kept this key intellectual guidance in my mind.

Managing SDSC: From O'Neill to Dibb

Bob O'Neill and I were the two longest serving heads of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre: together, we managed the centre for almost a quarter of a century. We both experienced the problems of running a small centre with inadequate finances, and we were discriminated against in The Australian National University's allocation of funds

19 O'Neill, Robert J. (ed.) (1977) *The Defence of Australia: Fundamental New Aspects*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, p. 126.

20 Ibid., p. 131.

21 Ibid., p. 134.

22 Ibid., p. 143.

because we were a centre and not a department. However, we managed the centre in entirely different geopolitical circumstances. Bob's reign was effectively after Australia's commitment to the Vietnam War had ended, but at the height of the Cold War and the USSR's military strength. My management of the centre from 1991 coincided with the end of the Cold War, Fukuyama's end of world history thesis, and the need to retool traditional strategic studies to our own region. As I said in the book commemorating the 40th anniversary of the centre, the reorientation of the centre after the Cold War was a difficult transition.²³ Both Bob O'Neill and his successor, Des Ball, grew the centre to international repute during the 1970s and 1980s. But with the sudden end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the centre had to adjust rapidly to an altered international strategic environment and to new subjects for strategic analysis. In the mid-1990s, the government changed and there was a move away from defence ideas which the centre had played a key role in developing from the early 1970s. The policy focus shifted away from the defence of Australia to Australian expeditionary forces in the Middle East — which remains the case to this day.

During my tenure, ANU also experienced significant financial difficulties, which had a serious impact on the centre's budget and its ability to fund research on important issues.²⁴ By the late 1990s, we were barely a critical mass, with only five academic staff, and the future did not look all that promising. I say that noting Bob has expressed a view that, 'I think it has been many years since any head of the Centre has needed to worry about whether it would be in existence in one or two years' time'.²⁵ Of course, he was right, and we did indeed turn the corner as SDSC entered the new century and its finances improved once again. Right now we have by far the largest academic staff numbers the centre has ever enjoyed in its 50 year history (and in the Hedley Bull Centre we have by far the best accommodation we have ever had). Moreover, we have also built on the legacy that Bob O'Neill left us in such areas as media appearances, giving evidence before

23 Dobb, Paul (2006) 'SDSC in the Nineties: A Difficult Transition', in Meredith Thatcher and Desmond Ball (eds), *A National Asset: Essays Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre*, Canberra: The Australian National University, p. 83.

24 Ibid.

25 O'Neill, Robert (2006) 'From Childhood to Maturity: The SDSC, 1972–1982', in Meredith Thatcher and Desmond Ball (eds), *A National Asset: Essays Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre*, Canberra: The Australian National University, p. 55.

parliamentary committees, massively developing our postgraduate and undergraduate programmes, and our teaching commitments at the Australian Command and Staff College at Weston Creek under the very competent direction of Professor Dan Marston.

Thanks to Bob's groundbreaking work in establishing the centre's domestic and international reputation, we are the leading academic authority in Australia on strategic and defence problems, and we are a well-recognised entity within the regional and international network of research institutions in the field of strategic studies, as Bob has pointed out.²⁶ The centre was indeed fortunate that Bob devoted more than 11 years of his career to establishing SDSC's reputation from such slim resources. And I am fortunate that as Director of IISS he was so willing to undertake the gamble of publishing my work on the USSR — for which I remain greatly indebted.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, Bob would be more than pleased to read the words of the then Secretary for Defence, Tony Ayers, in 1996 to the ANU Chancellor when I was head of the centre:

The Centre brings much credit to the University for its contribution to the understanding of defence matters in the Australian community and in our region ... The Centre's excellent reputation in the region has ensured continuing participation in its programs by officers and civilian defence planners from regional countries. This helps to promote a rational and disciplined approach to defence policy-making in neighbouring countries. From the perspective of Australian Defence personnel development, the Centre's courses, programs and publications have directly benefited Australian Defence Force officers and civilian staff.²⁷

This does not mean that SDSC should only focus on practical defence policy issues. As I noted in the essays commemorating the 40th anniversary of the centre, we must continue to be well-grounded in academic scholarship on the security of our region and the contending

26 Ibid., p. 58.

27 Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (1996) *Annual Report*, Canberra: The Australian National University, pp. 77–8.

theories of strategic studies.²⁸ These are thoughts I know Bob O'Neill would thoroughly endorse. But, unlike in his day and mine, the centre faces more competition from a proliferation of well-funded new research organisations in Australia, including the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the Lowy Institute for International Policy, and the Institute for Regional Security (formerly the Kokoda Foundation). The centre does not receive such lavish private sector or government funding, but one of our comparative advantages continues to be that we operate within the university system, where there are no financial strings attached; we can be frank in what we say on any subject without fear of angering our sources of funding. And, for good reasons, we do not accept any funding from defence companies — except for some small amount of money in the past (but not now), to help with supporting the centre's library.

Our other big competitive advantage is that we have the most experienced collection of senior academics (including seven professors) and former very senior military officers and defence officials (including a former chief of the defence force and three former deputy secretaries of defence) in Australia. This lends tremendous prestige to both our scholarly and policy-relevant research, and to our postgraduate and undergraduate teaching. This is an attainment of which Bob O'Neill should be justly proud, having brought the centre from childhood to maturity in his tenure from 1971 to 1982.

28 Dibb, Paul (2006) 'SDSC in the Nineties: A Difficult Transition', in Meredith Thatcher and Desmond Ball (eds), *A National Asset: Essays Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre*, Canberra: The Australian National University, p. 96.

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