

## **Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs, defence and trade**

**by Andrew Farran, former Australian diplomat and ministerial adviser, senior academic in international and public law, international trade adviser, and public policy publicist.**

### **Main points:**

*Australia is possessed by an overriding sense of insecurity about its place in the region, and the world generally, causing its strategic policy to be fixated on the inevitability of conflict.*

*Since the 1970s we have been engaged in wars of little or no strategic relevance, at a disproportionate cost in lives and substance.*

*We should act as an independent power within our own capabilities and not harness ourselves to the interests of a foreign power which complicates our relationships with others, especially our neighbours.*

*Australia does not lie in the natural sphere of influence of either China or the US, which gives it the option of dealing with both pragmatically on a case by case basis.*

*The Covid-19 virus could lurk indefinitely if no effective vaccine is developed, which will engender a mutual vulnerability pervading all nations constraining a readiness by some to promote conflict.*

*Talk of playing a military role 'above our weight' in other countries' affairs in an age of nuclear and hypersonic ballistics is pure fantasy unless we are prepared to contemplate national suicide, which most Australians are not.*

*A response to the Covid19 pandemic that would subordinate all public policy under a national security umbrella "would significantly dilute the quality of advice and expertise going to government".*

## **The strategic implications**

The strategic implications of COVID19 are largely unknowable at this stage and the danger is that they can be exaggerated along with notions of enhanced threat and insecurity. It can be argued that Australia has been, and has continued to be, obsessed by an overriding sense of insecurity about its place in the region, and the world generally, causing its strategic policy to be fixated on the inevitability of conflict, discounting its ability to sustain an effective role in an orderly and stable world. Since the 1970s we have been engaged in wars of little or no strategic relevance, at a disproportionate cost in lives and substance. The only military examples of constructive relevance was our unarmed intervention in 1999 in East Timor under INTERFET, and peacekeeping or police operations in the Southwest Pacific under RAMSI in 2003, both with the full acceptance of the affected parties.

The strategic implications of Covid19 in this respect are that we may be expected to do more on these lines and not more of the over-reaching interventionism of the kind witnessed in recent decades in the Middle East. We should act as an independent power within our own capabilities and not harness ourselves to the interests of a foreign power which complicates our relationships with others, especially our neighbours. If we continue to be connected 'at the hip' with an unreliable and irrational major power we will again be the first casualty of its misconceived adventurism. This will remain the case regardless of Donald Trump. The US has been transformed in recent decades and is not the society it was when it shaped post-WW2 politics and international relations from its Eastern seaboard. The rest of the US except for pockets in California and Texas, and possibly Washington State, are indifferent to Australia and are governed and motivated essentially by their own self-interests.

It is natural that the major powers will be preoccupied with force and influence issues *inter se*. These will be sorted and settled, even in situations of maximum stress, not by total warfare, which would lead to mutual destruction - as it nearly did in the Cold War with the now defunct Soviet Union - but by a process of give and take around respective pressure points. Lesser powers will themselves make political adjustments where they lie within a natural sphere of influence of a major power. Australia does not lie in the natural sphere of influence of either China or the US, which gives it the option of dealing with both pragmatically on a case by case basis

while sustaining constructive and progressive relations with our neighbours, particularly Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand.

It is not impossible that the Covid-19 virus , if it continues to lurk indefinitely and no effective vaccine is developed, will engender a mutual vulnerability that will pervade all nations, whether great or less, and that this fact will temper those that might otherwise seek to sow conflict and discord in their international relations.

For our armed forces and force structure, the immediate implications are that we should eschew, for strategic and cost reasons, involvement in external conflict beyond our region that does not directly engage the national interest. In this regard the acquisition of expensive long range capital units such as long range submarines and long range guided ballistics exceeds purpose and can only be regarded as provocative, and hostages to fortune for us, by those threatened - as would the continued operation of the US founded facility at Pine Gap. Instead we should concentrate on the acquisition of units, especially amphibious forces, that would protect our near-shore and coastal regions and allow us to play a constructive role in the maintenance of regional peace. Talk of playing a military role 'above our weight' in other countries' affairs in an age of nuclear and hypersonic ballistics is pure fantasy unless we are prepared to contemplate national suicide, which most Australians are not.

There will remain questions of self-sufficiency in relation to low-level threats - as to whether we should aim for capabilities of area control or area denial, particularly concerning drones and cyber disruption. The answer would depend on the circumstances as read at the time and how far out we would need to go to protect direct interests.

A response to the Covid19 pandemic that would subordinate all public policy under a national security umbrella "would significantly dilute the quality of advice and expertise going to government", to quote a former head of the Department of Defence, DFAT and ASIO, who added that: "A strong economy is foundational to national security" (Dennis Richardson in an interview with Paul Kelly, published in *The Weekend Australian*, 9.5.2020).

Currently the world would be a dangerous place for Australia were we to put ourselves unwittingly again at the disposal of the United States or felt obliged to go wherever a US President might wish to take us. A deep

concern remains from the fact that Australian Prime Ministers are accorded wide discretion on committing the nation to overseas conflicts without Parliamentary authorisation whether exercising the Prerogative Power power or not. Presently we could find ourselves overnight in conflict again in the Middle East, arising from the US's vendetta against Iran; over the offshore islands and straits in the South China Sea; or over Taiwan should it be fouled up with China. If we studied history better we would acknowledge that we should not be involved in any of these potential conflicts.

### **Other aspects:**

Regarding other aspects of the Committee's terms of reference I would state briefly:

1. Global rules-based systems are continually in a state of evolution and compromise as power relationships change. The foundational principles must be respect for national sovereignty, the avoidance of international conflict, supporting effective multilateral systems, and respect for treaty commitments under the rule of *pacta sunt servanda*.
2. Australia should observe its commitments under human rights agreements and not pick and choose between those that are convenient and those which are not. We should support and uphold the work of the UN Council on Human Rights.
3. Australia should support and enhance the World Health Organisation in its critical role for safeguarding global health and assessing members' responses to pandemics and the like.
4. We should promote the role and effectiveness of the World Trade Organisation, in particular by facilitating plurilateral arrangements among members (e.g. the recently established Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement to overcome US obstruction of the appellate process) in matters of mutual interest as long as such arrangements remain open for other members to join at their discretion.
5. Our supply chains are not over-extended except in relation to petroleum reserves which should be kept at prescribed levels onshore. We should develop near self-sufficiency for personal protective equipment (PPE) against the likelihood of future pandemics. We should not seek self-sufficiency for its own sake or resort to protectionism.

6. We should prioritise fast rail through Victoria, along the Eastern seaboard, and inland across to South Australia. As for defence, see main submission above.

7. As for a national framework, this would benefit from Constitutional reform revising the distribution of powers between the Commonwealth and the States, limiting the powers of the Senate as a house of review only, and a preselection system open to a wider constituency with strict limits on party and electoral funding.

8. Last but not least serious action on climate change is critical. Its link with the causes of pandemics is irrefutable.

Andrew Farran

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