



Submission No 22

Inquiry into Australia's Defence Relations with the United States

Organisation: Medical Association for Prevention of War
(Australia)

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COMMENT ON ISSUES PAPER

AUSTRALIA'S DEFENCE RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES

***SUBMITTED BY THE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION FOR
PREVENTION OF WAR (AUSTRALIA)***

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In this submission, MAPW (Australia) will provide only brief comment on a number of matters raised in the Issues Paper on Australia's Defence Relations with the United States. While many of the issues raised in the paper are very significant in addressing the welfare and security of Australians, we will focus on some of those which appear most critical in the current context.

2. The ANZUS Alliance

2.30: There is a perception that Australia, in its alliance with the US, does not exercise sufficient independence and is acquiescent to US strategic policy.

What should Australia do, if anything, to demonstrate that it exercises sufficient independence in its alliance relationship with the US?

MAPW finds it surprising that the above question has been posed regarding the perception of Australian acquiescence to US policy, as it implies that the perception is wrong. In MAPW's view, and we believe the view of very many Australians, the perception is in fact accurate. That is, Australia is indeed acquiescent to US foreign strategic policy, and this acquiescence undermines the security of Australians by our involvement in dangerous and unilateralist policies. To change the perception, the reality must change.

As but one example of this acquiescence, Australia's policy on nuclear weapons should be examined. The Australian Government professes grave concern at the problem of weapons of mass destruction, of which nuclear weapons are by far the most destructive. The Government's concern has led to our nation's participation in war, the most far-reaching decision a government can make, and in itself an extreme example of acquiescence to US policy. And yet the Australian Government has been virtually silent on the approximately 10,000 nuclear weapons retained by our ally the US.

In January 2002, the Nuclear Posture Review of the US Department of Defense outlined projections for US nuclear forces over the next 20-30 years. The Review revealed confirmation that nuclear weapons will continue to play a 'fundamental' role in US military planning, the retention of the option of developing new warheads and a possible resumption of nuclear testing. (However it should be noted as important and commendable that Australia has been a consistent advocate and supporter of the need for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to come into force.) There was no response from the Australian Government to the profoundly disturbing developments inherent in the US Nuclear Posture Review, and similarly there has been no response on the occasions when President Bush has confirmed US reliance on its nuclear arsenal.

However, it is not simply the existence of US nuclear weapons which is of grave concern. It is also the increasing US readiness to use those weapons which should be ringing alarm bells for all governments. The Nuclear Posture Review went so far as to name seven nations (five of them non-nuclear weapon states) as possible nuclear targets. The Australian Government raised no objection to such a major departure from previous nuclear weapons policies, a departure whose significance cannot be overstated.

On February 6, 2003, the Australian Senate passed a motion calling on the Prime Minister to convey to US President Bush (and to UK Prime Minister Blair) Australia's opposition to the threat or use of nuclear weapons in Iraq. The Government opposed the motion.

Such inactions on the part of the Australian Government in relation to our ally's nuclear arsenal, coupled with sufficient concern with the problem of alleged weapons of mass destruction elsewhere to lead us to war, can be interpreted only as acquiescence to US policy on a matter which is one of the greatest threats to human security.

2.38: Is there a need to increase public knowledge of the value and importance of the US alliance?

Again, this question appears to be based upon an assumption which may well be less certain now than previously, the assumption that the US alliance serves the genuine interests of Australians. That assumption should be examined in the light of Australians' experience of the alliance in the last two years - the experience of being involved in two US-initiated wars. MAPW suggests that a far more useful question to address would be: 'Is there a need to encourage public debate on the purpose and the nature of the US alliance?' MAPW would strongly support such debate.

Such debate would properly encourage an examination of the ANZUS Treaty itself, as the Treaty forms the foundation of our alliance with the US. Central to an examination of ANZUS is recognition of both the actions the Treaty demands of its parties and the actions it does not demand. It would for example become apparent that the invasion of Iraq has most grievously violated the Treaty, which commences with the words '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 ...'

Public debate on the ANZUS treaty would thus highlight the obligation of each of the parties to uphold rather than marginalize the work of the United Nations, and to work towards the peaceful resolution of all disputes, obligations of which we must constantly be reminded in Australia.

2.44: What are the advantages that could arise for the parties of the ANZUS alliance if New Zealand was 'welcomed' back into the alliance?

It should be noted that New Zealand did not ever 'leave' the alliance. New Zealand made a decision to deny access to its ports to warships which might be nuclear armed. That decision was absolutely consistent with both the spirit and the word of the ANZUS Treaty, and did not threaten the Treaty or the security of any of its three signatories. The perception that New Zealand left the Treaty, simply because it exerted its independence in relation to the United States, has much to say about the subservient roles expected of two parties to the Treaty.

Nevertheless, to 'welcome' New Zealand 'back' into the alliance, if that means to pay full respect to the security needs and independence of each of the three parties to the Treaty, would indeed be beneficial. In particular, New Zealand governments have been proactive on the need for nuclear weapons elimination, a goal which the Australian Government claims to share, and far greater cooperation to this end would be advantageous and in keeping with the spirit of the ANZUS Treaty.

4. Combined Defence Exercises

MAPW considers it deeply regrettable that the issues surrounding combined defence exercises have been so narrowly addressed in the Issues Paper. Of particular note is the absence of any reference to the enormous environmental and social costs to Australia of large scale military exercises. Such an omission stands in stark contrast to the increasing attention being paid generally in Australian society to the environmental threats we face both domestically and globally, and in particular to the fragility of the Australian landscape.

To take a particular example of current concern, Operation Talisman Saber 2005 is due to take place in Queensland and the Northern Territory from 10-30 June this year, with pre and post-deployment conducted either side of these dates. While Operation Talisman Saber 2005 (TS05) will be one of the largest bilateral military exercises to be conducted in Australia, it will be merely a prelude to a much larger exercise in 2007. TSO5 will involve at least 17,000 Australian and US troops and will incorporate a wide range of land, air and maritime activities. Of particular concern is the possible use of depleted uranium munitions, which already contaminate training grounds elsewhere used by US Defense Forces. Depleted uranium's radioactive legacy is permanent (its half-life being 4.5 billion years), and it is strongly suspected to contribute to the high rates of cancer in Southern Iraq where depleted uranium was used in the 1991 Gulf War. While the medical effects of depleted uranium have not yet been confirmed (because the necessary studies have not been conducted), there is sufficient serious

concern regarding its effects to render a ban on its use imperative until we have further information.

The environmental impacts of the forthcoming Talisman Saber exercise are likely to be enormous and go far beyond the single issue of depleted uranium, but at the absolute minimum the Australian Government should ensure that depleted uranium weapons are not used. Failure to do so would be an abrogation of the Government's responsibility towards the health of the people of Australia.

A further health concern in relation to large scale military exercises is the impact on health for women (and men) in the area. MAPW believes that any assessment of the outcomes of such exercises which does not measure the rise of sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies and other undesirable social outcomes, is incomplete.

A more fundamental concern with such large scale exercises being conducted in Australia is the message this sends to our neighbours and others, who could well ask: Why is Australia doing this? There is currently no threat to Australia for which Operation Talisman Saber is relevant. Therefore the following question remains unanswered: Against whom is Australia preparing to fight? Such uncertainty is destabilising, and can only undermine our relationships with our neighbours.

5. Dialogue with US on Missile Defence

This issue, and Australia's response thus far to it, poses enormous problems. The problem is implicit in the first sentence of Chapter 5: 'Australia, like many other countries, is concerned at the destabilising effect of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and of their delivery systems, such as ballistic missiles.' It is indeed Australia's preoccupation with the proliferation of WMD, rather than their very existence, that lies at the heart of the problem. It is imperative that attention be focused on the need for the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction, rather than on a destabilising and provocative 'defensive' system with the potential to trigger renewed arms races.

MAPW notes also in Paragraph 5.2 of the Issues Paper the statement that dialogue between the US and Australia on missile defence 'has generated debate in Australia'. While the extent of that debate seems to have been very small, what was not stated was the extraordinary fact that there has been virtually no debate in parliament on this issue. It is difficult to comprehend how an agreement between Australia and the US of such significance to the security of Australians could have been deemed unworthy of any significant discussion in parliament.

Again one cannot escape the conclusion that Australian decision-making was based on compliance with the wishes of the US. Defence Minister Robert Hill

himself stated in July 2004, 'We don't have any threat against us from ballistic missiles at this time, but the day might come when we have.' Thus a decision has been taken to engage Australians in an extremely expensive, deeply destabilising and provocative (and thus far technically unworkable) development to counter a non-existent threat. Australians could be forgiven for thinking 'déjà vu'.

At the very least, Australians have a right to expect honesty from their government on this, as other, matters. While Canada has decided not to take part in missile defence, it is informative to note that political rather than security factors played a significant role in Canada's initial consideration of missile defence. In September 2004, the Canadian Defense Minister, Bill Graham, admitted that a role for Canada in missile defence would be more about maintaining good relationships with the United States than about protecting the Canadian people. It is difficult to conclude that the Australian government has been totally honest with the Australian people on this issue.

MAPW calls for a full public and parliamentary debate on missile defence.