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ACT 2603
20 September 2005

Dr Kathleen Dermody
Committee Secretary
Senate FADT Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

A submission to the Senate FADT Committee

Australia as non-combatant in a US/China war: best case planning for worst-case scenarios

Dear

You may recall our phone conversation on Monday this week.

I attach a copy of the letter and supporting documents that I have sent to Senator Hutchins today as a contribution to the Senate FADT Committee's current reference on China.

Our best case planning to avoid involvement in a US/China war can only emerge from a political decision to establish Australian non-combatant status well before any major crisis erupts.

Among the many others, a key issue in the Committee's consideration is the impact on hundreds of thousands of Australian Chinese and other Australians of Asian descent in the event of our being drawn into a US/China war. In my view, the Committee should call representatives of Australian Asian communities to give evidence of the likely impact on them of Australian involvement in a US/China war.

I have asked for the opportunity to appear before the Committee.

I will contact you next week to follow up my letters.

Yours sincerely,


Tony Pratt

Senator Hutchins
Chair, Senate FADT Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



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Australia as non-combatant in a US/China war: best case planning for worst-case scenarios

Dear

At the Senate FADTC 13 September 2005 discussions on China with a number of Australian strategic planning experts you ended the session with the observation that it had been "very enlightening for us, and somewhat disturbing as well."

You will recall Professor Harris' view: "It seems to me that it (Australia's being caught up in a US/China war over Taiwan) is still the most important issue in our security framework."

You and Professor Harris are right to be concerned: in our present circumstances – Government/DFAT "hypotheticals" notwithstanding – we confront the potential for being drawn, against our best interests, into a war that would have extensively disastrous consequences for us whatever its outcome.

In the attached papers I propose a political strategy that aims at establishing well in advance acceptance of Australia as an appropriate and useful *non-combatant* in any US/China war.

It is quite clear that Australia would not accept involvement in a war caused by Taiwanese ineptitude. It should not be too difficult for the US to come to understand and accept this position. Thereafter, it becomes easier for the US to accept that Australia should not be involved in *any* US/China war.

There is no intention here to repudiate the ANZUS Treaty or to renegotiate its terms. Our position is simply that it will not apply to a US/China conflict. This way we maintain control over our national destiny.

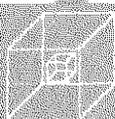
It is important that this complex issue be given an extensive and continuous public profile so that momentous decisions are not left to a time of crisis.

Any examination of the potential for Australia being involved in a US/China war must include an analysis of the threat of such a war's impact on the hundreds of thousands of Chinese Australians and other Australians of Asian descent. I strongly recommend that the Committee include this aspect in its investigation.

Should an opportunity arise at this late stage, I would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee to argue the case.

Yours sincerely,


Tony Pratt


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Tony Pratt
Friday 13 May 2005

Topic: No Australia/US/China War

Program Transcript

Here's the scenario.

Without any warning – just as happened on 1 April 2001 – Chinese fighters force a US EP3 spy plane down in disputed international air space off the Chinese coast. The damaged plane lands on Hainan Island.

This time though – post 11th September, post Afghanistan, post Iraq – the neo cons in the US Administration convince President Bush the Chinese “attack” provides a “window of opportunity” to pre-empt the rise of Chinese power in the 21st century.

The US Cabinet sets the wheels in motion: the war begins when the US thinks it is ready. Australia is caught up in the maelstrom – locked in the vice of our commitments under the ANZUS Treaty.

It's the worst man-made disaster the world has ever experienced.

.....

A major threat to Australian well being in the 21st century lies with the outcome of the growing strategic competition between the US and China.

Prime Minister Howard alluded to this in his 31 March Lowy Institute speech, taking an optimistic line before his recent visit to China.

However improbable the event, the US and China are primed for war: for their reasons – not ours. Potential nuclear war is in place and ready to go. Australian governments base our policies on the punt there won't be war. A better bet is to consider war a possibility and do something about it. Commentators tell us a sudden, forced US or China choice is a “nightmare” in Canberra.

Everywhere else in the country it would be much worse: ordinary citizens in the armed forces and the wider community would carry the burden of sacrifice, contributing their blood and untimely deaths – without any say in the matter.

Canberra's nightmare is exacerbated by fear of the political consequences of making the wrong call.

This need not happen. The recent Lowy Institute survey *Australia Speaks 2005* showed 79% of Australians surveyed said NO to involvement in a US/China war.

A well-informed, determined Australian community could provide irresistible political backing for a government decision well in advance not to take part in any US/China war.

We have unique standing in the region with the US and (growing) with China that we can use to establish our prior status and role as a non-combatant honest broker should war occur.

Our domestic circumstances – including a potential racist backlash against hundreds of thousands of Australians of Asian descent – and our substantial interests with both countries preclude us from taking part.

Indeed, if there is war, the US, China and Taiwan will need a trusted non-combatant friend with appropriate “even-handed” status to help resolve the conflict.

Too difficult, critics will say: there’s no need now to upset the Australia/US applecart and or give heart to China – a good idea maybe, but 25 years too soon. The Lowy Institute survey shows most Australians would think it a good idea – *right now*.

.....

Of course, Canberra bureaucrats are smarter than your average punter. Here’s what they’d tell Cabinet (edited for brevity) if it asked. Don’t reduce the ambiguity of our position until we have to: that might actually increase the likelihood of China going to war through miscalculation. We could be accused of adding to international insecurity for selfish gain.

Why trade off our Washington kudos against an event that might never happen? There’s no need for a long and acrimonious debate about the benefits/liabilities of ANZUS – it could be politically disastrous. We need the US as a continuing source of weapons/intelligence/spare parts/inter-operability with the Australian Defence Force etc, etc. If Taiwan provokes China we won’t have to help. If China attacks, Australia should help defend the plucky and democratic Taiwanese. (We’ll get back to you later on what might happen after that.)

.....

In this kind of strategic calculus there is usually little consideration of the impact on ordinary citizens of Government decisions, dressed up as policies of so-called “mature design” – but dangerously past their use-by date.

There is no intention here to repudiate ANZUS – the alliance will remain mutually useful for a wide range of reasons.

Even if Mr Downer is signalling the US we’d rather sit out a war – as some believe – it will be difficult for him to be a little clearer about it. If he can’t, the rest of us can.

We better start right away: these new arrangements could take 25 years to get sorted. How long do our children and grandchildren have?

Guests on this program:

Tony Pratt
Former Defence official

Further information:

Lowy Institute
Follow the prompts to Prime Minister Howard’s 31st March and to “Australia Speaks 2005”
<http://www.lowyinstitute.org/>

No War website
<http://www.noaustuschinawar.org.au>

Producer: Sue Clark

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Best case planning for a worst-case scenario

Australia as non-combatant in a US/China war

Could the ANZUS Alliance survive a decision by an Australian government not to take part in a US/China war? It is shocking that such a question might even be asked, given the context of more than 50 years of ANZUS Alliance history and the present day unprecedented economic and military cooperation between Australia and the United States. Nevertheless, the question and its significant, wide-ranging implications lie just below the surface of Australian politics and the Australia/US relationship. With the propensity of North Asia to provide a steady supply of predictable crises, we can expect the potential for an Australia/US/China war to become increasingly emergent in Australian public and political consciousness.

There have been a number of irruptions in the past year. In mid August 2004, during his visit to Beijing, Australian media reported that Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had signalled a strategic policy shift towards China, saying that Australia would not be obliged to help the United States in a military defence of Taiwan. According to Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper of 18 August 2004, Mr Downer described the ANZUS Alliance as "symbolic" and said that it would be invoked in the event of an attack on the US or Australian mainland but not necessarily by military activity elsewhere.

These comments naturally caused a considerable stir. The controversy was diminished, but not extinguished, by Prime Minister John Howard's intervention a few days later and Mr Downer's subsequent clarifications. There was another flurry in early March 2005, associated with the lifting of the European Union arms embargo on China that Australia did not oppose. This time Mr Downer was more forthright and less – though not completely – unequivocal. He told *The Australian* newspaper on 9 March: "The ANZUS Alliance with the US is a very important bilateral alliance. It's worked exceptionally well for over 50 years and we've not had any discussions on making changes." The next week it was back to equivocation. On 15 March 2005, quoted in *The Canberra Times* on what Australia might do in a hypothetical war between China and Taiwan, Mr Downer said: "We would be bound to consult with the Americans and the ANZUS Treaty could be invoked but that's a very different thing from saying we would make a decision to go to war."

Then in late March 2005 the prestigious Lowy Institute in Sydney published the results of a survey *Australians Speak 2005* that included the proposition: "Australia should act in accordance with our security alliance with the United States even if it means following them to war with China over the independence of Taiwan." The Institute reported that only 21% of Australians surveyed

agreed with the proposition. The Institute had the following comment on this result: "The survey has exposed a seam of antipathy towards the United States and its influence over our affairs, but how deeply felt is it, and will it really affect our relationship? Australians are pragmatic about the value of the ANZUS alliance, with 72% saying it is either very or fairly important for Australia's security. But when we asked whether Australia should act in accordance with the alliance if it meant following the United States to war with China over Taiwan, the answer was a resounding 'No'."

More recently Australian journalists have raised the issue with Defence Minister Senator Robert Hill (20 April 2005) who rejected the notion that Australian free trade negotiations with China would put pressure on an Australian military response (in defence of Taiwan), and with former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage (12 May 2005) who advised – as he routinely does – that the US expects Australia to fight alongside it in any military contingency involving the US in the Pacific, presumably including one involving the use of nuclear weapons.

The difficulty for many Australians – if not yet the Australian government – is that under extant interpretations of the ANZUS Treaty Australia would almost certainly be drawn willy-nilly into a US/China war, despite its predictable and disastrous consequences. Such circumstances would be reminiscent of Australia's involvement in WW1 rather than in WW2, there being a growing perception in Australia that the campaign in Gallipoli and the 1914-18 war in Europe – however courageous the Australian participants – lacked a proper relationship to fundamental Australian interests. In the event of a US, China or Taiwan miscalculation, Australia would be forced to consider joining a war waged primarily for other countries' reasons. There is every likelihood that the majority of ordinary Australians would feel that the country had once again lost control of its destiny.

There is another option, one that could bring benefit to both the US and China and set Australia, to some degree at least, outside the impact of possible US /China hostilities. It will need time – perhaps the 20-to-30 years that may become available if China and Taiwan adopt Professor Kenneth Lieberthal's recent suggestions – at the ANU Rio Tinto China Partnership seminar in Canberra on 5 April 2005 – for an "agreed framework for stability across the Taiwan Strait"; a lot of careful diplomacy and strong Australian community and multi-partisan political support.

The core proposal here is that Australia has unique standing in the region with the US and growing with China that should allow establishment of an Australian prior status and role as a *non-combatant* honest communication conduit in the event of a war. The argument is that Australia's domestic circumstances – including the potential for racist backlash against the hundreds

of thousands of Australians of Asian descent – and its substantial interests with both countries preclude it from taking part. Indeed, if there is a war, both the US and China will need a trusted friend with appropriate “even-handed” status with both camps to help resolve the conflict. The important value of this non-combatant role will need to be acknowledged and accepted by all parties in advance.

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Critics of this proposal will say that it is unnecessary and probably dangerous. Their arguments run along the following lines. For Australia to declare in advance that it would not support the US in a war with China over Taiwan might actually increase the likelihood of war. The Chinese leadership might consider the Australian position as indicative of international (particularly Western) opinion generally, especially as Australia is America's "U.K. in Asia", and formally allied to the US Australia could be seen as selfishly adding to international insecurity, in a transparent attempt to gain some security and economic benefit in difficult circumstances.

Continuing, this argument says there is no need for Australia to trade off the kudos it has gained in recent years in Washington against an event that might never occur. A better policy is to maintain some ambiguity about Australia's likely future reaction to a US/China conflict. At the very least this would complicate China's calculations about where the balance of its interests lay. From the domestic political perspective, there is no need to have a long and acrimonious debate about the importance of ANZUS – it could be politically disastrous for any government.

Most importantly, Australia needs the US as a continuing source of weapons/intelligence/spare parts/inter-operability with the Australian Defence Force etc, etc. In particular, there is the long-standing and important intelligence cooperation, including especially that conducted through the cooperative management of the Joint Defence Space Research Facility at Pine Gap. If Taiwan is silly enough to provoke China, Australia will not have to join in its defence. Over time, the US could quietly come to accept that position. If China attacks without provocation, as good international citizen Australia should help defend the plucky and democratic Taiwanese.

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One difficulty with this line of argument is that it does not give sufficient weight to the dramatic rise of the impact of Chinese growth on Australian wellbeing. A few pertinent economic facts give sufficient illustration. At the end of the 1990s, Singapore was a larger export market for Australia than China. By the end of 2004, Australian exports to China had almost tripled to a little less than \$A11

billion, accounting for 10% of all Australian exports. China has now overtaken the US as Australia's second biggest export market and experts predict that with a bilateral free trade agreement China may well surpass Japan as Australia's biggest export market within 20 years.

Another difficulty is that this argument does not give enough consideration to the constraints on Australian government decision-making confronted with a suddenly arising and rapidly escalating crisis between the two strategic giants of the 21st century. Here again Richard Armitage, reputedly a "good friend" of Australia and well known to political leaders in both government and the opposition, gives relevant guidance. For several years Armitage has been widely quoted in the Australia media, most recently on 13 April 2005, for his opinion that "It's entirely conceivable that we could wake up tomorrow and find that a major war had broken out in Asia." Armitage presumably does not mean a war caused by the US but his status, knowledge and experience require that his warning be taken seriously. This would be *terra incognita* for any Australian government. With little warning it would engage a bewildering complexity of national interests that would make the decision to join the invasion of Iraq look relatively "easy" in comparison, the wide-spread popular opposition to that decision notwithstanding.

Up to the present, Australian governments have based their policies on the assumption there will not be a US/China war. A more effective and far-sighted policy would be to consider war a possibility and do something about it. Unsolvable disagreements about Taiwan are the most likely cause of such a war but there are other deep currents flowing in the same direction. China continues to increase its military capability for attack on Taiwan. Taiwan wants to be free of China's hegemony. The US will not allow any other power to develop a military capability that would seriously threaten it. Pre-emptive attack against serious threat is a formal component of US national security strategy. Tensions between China and Japan could suddenly precipitate a crisis. North Korea could miscalculate. Australia continues to acquire military capabilities that could be used in a large-scale war, anywhere.

Taiwan and other 'crisis initiators' aside, the magnitude of US and Chinese competition has the potential to bring on crisis with little or no warning, as happened with the Chinese downing of the US EP3 spy plane on Hainan Island on 1 April 2001. Alternatively, crisis might emerge slowly, by increments, stepping up over time until a point is reached – concerning say, the development of theatre or long range nuclear missiles - where one side decides it must act pre-emptively to protect so called vital national interests.

In the event of war it would be ludicrous to suggest that Australian intelligence and military support would be anything other than of marginal benefit to the US. It is likely that the US already has in place alternative intelligence gathering

systems that could fill the gap of any diminution of an Australian-based contribution. Even if Australia was to contribute a large proportion of its fighter aircraft, surface ships and submarines, none of this deployment, set against the capabilities of the US and China, would in any meaningful way tip the result in favour of the US. And what would be the consequences for Australia's regional defence capability – and Alliance interests in South East Asia – if Australia were to lose a significant component of its force structure in a war in North Asia?

What can Australian governments and people do about these awful predicaments? First of all, the government should make clear that a decision to seek non-combatant honest broker status for Australia well in advance of any US/China war is not intended as a repudiation of the ANZUS Treaty, or the manifest mutual benefit of the Alliance in a wide range of circumstances. Rather, it would be to limit the ambit of the Treaty so as to preclude its application to a U.S./China war. Some have suggested that in the backroom diplomacy where the "hard men" talk, Australian ministers could offer their US counterparts the compensation of potential future Australian participation in a range of future US conventional military operations (such as happened in Afghanistan and Iraq) that do not engage Australian national interests in the direct and fundamental way that a war with China would. There is a case to be made that even knowledge that the Australian government was considering this reduction in the ambit of the Treaty as an option could generate debate within the US Administration, the more conservative wing of the US political elite and their associated think tanks concerning the advisability of maintaining a perspective of China as a "threat" to the US

The Australian government should give the US Administration a frank and unequivocal assessment of the reality of the situation as seen from an Australian perspective. If the trigger for a war in North Asia involving China and the US is a Taiwanese miscalculation there is no way that the Australian government could agree to participate, as Mr Downer has begun tentatively to suggest. The Australian government and people could not contemplate hazarding the national interest on behalf of such a paltry cause, however grandly it might be packaged by Taiwan and the US. This is likely to be unpalatable advice in Washington but it is better to be given in peacetime. It would be unconscionably pusillanimous for the Australian government to hold off advising the US of this decision until a crisis had emerged – accusations of betrayal would be instantaneous and retribution swift – so it is preferable and appropriate to be clear about these intentions well in advance of any war. Once the US has grudgingly accepted this Australian position – how long will it take: 20 to 30 years? – it is much less of a step to extend the potential ANZUS exclusion zone to include *any* US/China war brought about for *any* reason.

Second, the government should raise with the US the delicate and vexing question of the potential circumstances of the hundreds of thousands of

Australian citizens of Asian descent (in the US how many millions of US citizens of Asian descent?) in the event of Australia being involved in a war with China. The government will have to say that in a war with China – potentially a nuclear war – there is likely to be a wide spread and virulent racist backlash against people in Australia of Asian descent. This has to be avoided at all costs. A positive U.S response to an Australian claim for status as non-combatant honest broker in a US/China war will probably reduce such backlash in Australia and possibly in the US (In previous major wars Australian governments have incarcerated Australian citizens originating from war initiating countries – Germany, Austria, Italy and probably others.)

A decision to begin a frank and robust discussion with the US over Australia's intention to sit out any US/China war could, over time paradoxically enlarge rather than diminish the relevance, strength and effectiveness of the ANZUS Alliance. This would emerge, from the Australian perspective, primarily because such discussions and eventual agreement would give the Australian government and people confidence that the preponderant power of the US in the "unequal" Alliance would not drag them into a major war against their will.

Could some future anniversary of the ANZUS Alliance Treaty – the 54th is due on 29 April 2006 – bring a new dawn in Australian/US/China relations? Whose destiny would that serve? All three, we say from Downunder!

Tony Pratt ©
Canberra

September 2005

Tony Pratt is a former Defence official with more than 20 years experience in international policy management. His last job in Defence was Director United States in the Strategic and International Policy Division. He left in July 2003.

Plan B needed if Taiwan reaches flashpoint

Australia has to make clear its obligations under the ANZUS treaty or risk involvement in any future China/US clash, argues **TONY PRATT**

IN THE PAST two months Foreign Minister Alexander Downer made two major — but little reported — public speeches with a key focus on the future of the Australia/US/China relationship. He has helpfully posted his speaking notes for both speeches on the DFAT website.

The good news is that the Government believes things are probably going to turn out okay. The bad news is there appears to be no Plan B.

The reasons why a plan B is needed are posted on the US Department of Defense web site — specifically in the Office of the US Secretary of Defense's annual report to the US Congress "The Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2005", and its description of China's current and improving capacity to strike all Australian cities with intercontinental nuclear missiles. More of that later.

Here's how Mr Downer described a possible US/China future in his July 5 speech to the Victorian Branch of the Australian Institute of International Affairs: "I do not believe that escalating strategic competition between China and the United States is inevitable".

And, more elaborately, in Canberra on August 8 in the inaugural Sir Arthur Tange Lecture on Australian Diplomacy: "It is not inevitable — indeed, it is not likely — that an irreconcilable, increasingly destabilising and ultimately confrontational strategic rivalry between China and the US will develop. Nor is it likely that countries like Australia will be confronted by some great strategic choice between starkly opposed alternatives."

The first thing to note about this is that if by "confrontational strategic rivalry" Mr Downer means war between the US and China and some tendentious misreading of our obligations under the ANZUS Treaty drew us into it, there won't be any other countries "like Australia" in our part of the world. New Zealand won't join in and, US pressure notwithstanding, every one of the 11 countries in maritime and mainland South-East Asia will find very good reasons to insist on some form of neutrality. We will be on our own in our strategic backyard, with our truly vital national interests put at hazard on behalf of other countries' interests.

Mr Downer's judgement is based on the assessment that what his August 8 speech calls "new scope for constructive global interaction" created by the rise of China will prevail over "issues of competitiveness" emanating from the same source.

Both speeches provide an array of encouraging US/China developments — trade, investment, political contacts — to buttress the

preferable "constructive" outcome. There is no elaboration whatsoever in either speech of what might be involved if the "competitive" possibility were to emerge.

This is probably because Mr Downer's key objective in his August 8 speech is to put paid to "the argument that Australia needs to choose definitively between its alliance with the US and its links with China".

Who exactly is making this argument is not revealed, but it is quite clear that any circumstance that ever brought us to having to make a choice between the US and China would signify the most ghastly failure of Australian policy.

A much more preferable policy alternative is that we ensure that we always remain as we are now — in whatever future circumstances that may prevail — to be able to choose both the US and China, or, if they are incompetent enough go to war — neither. This is Plan B.

While Mr Rumsfeld's report to Congress acknowledges the range of efforts the US and China have undertaken in recent years to improve their relationship, it provides a pointed and detailed contrast to Mr Downer's encouraging analysis.

Some examples from the executive summary:

■ "PLA (Chinese People's Liberation Army) modernisation has accelerated since the mid-to-late 1990s in response to central leadership demands to develop military options for Taiwan scenarios.

■ "In the short term, the PRC appears focussed on preventing Taiwan independence or trying to compel Taiwan to negotiate on Beijing's terms.

■ "A second set of objectives includes building counters to third party, including potential US, intervention in cross-Straits crises."

Australia gets one specific mention in Mr Rumsfeld's 42-page report — in the context of China's intercontinental ballistic missile capability. The accompanying map makes it very clear that potentially all of Australia (and the US) is within range of the currently deployed CSS-4 and CSS-3 ICBMs and two new missiles (DF-31 and DF31A) which will reach initial operational capability by 2009.

These weapons are presumably among those that Chinese PLA Major-General Zhu Chenghu said last month that China would use against the US (and others?) if the US intervened militarily in any conflict over Taiwan.

It is hard to imagine what set of circumstances could ever justify any Australian government putting the country at risk of nuclear attack, and especially if the trigger for such a threat was an issue as paltry as a move by



Taiwanese politicians to gain de jure independence from China. This should not be a difficult concept for the US Government to understand, however difficult it may be to accept.

It's also hard to imagine any benign conditions prevailing after the cessation of nuclear hostilities, even if the US and its allies were to "win" such a war.

Would the US take up the slack of Australian resources exports to China no longer needed by bombed out industry and exhausted people? Highly unlikely.

The main point about any near-term crisis involving China, Taiwan and the US is that it can arise very quickly — as Mr Rumsfeld's report to Congress makes abundantly clear.

In the white heat of rapidly escalating events, an Australian government that had not been hitherto frank with the US about Australian intentions not to take part in a US/China war would come under immense — and probably overwhelming — pressure to comply with US wishes, including joining a nuclear war. This is why the Australian people should insist the Government keep working with Plan B.

By inadvertence or design, Mr Downer got the ball rolling in Beijing last August with his

description of the ANZUS alliance being "symbolic" and to be invoked in the event of an attack on the US or Australian mainland but not necessarily elsewhere.

Mr Downer gets the opportunity to keep this line going at the 2005 Australia/US Ministerial (AUSMIN 05) talks to be held in Australia later this year and at the inaugural Ministerial level US/Australia/Japan Trilateral talks. Somebody's sure to ask.

■ Tony Pratt, a former Defence official with more than 20 years experience in international policy management, was a member of the Australian delegation to the annual Australian/US Ministerial (AUSMIN) talks in Washington in October 2002.



Caught in the middle

Tony Pratt on how to keep the peace

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The global resources giant Rio Tinto and the Australian National University recently opened their "China partnership" with a seminar entitled "Can anything derail China's growth?". Billed as "a model of co-operation between industry and university in the development of Australia's intellectual and business capacities on China", the partnership's seminar last month attracted more than 100 China experts and inevitably focused upon the prospects for the continuing peaceful management of relations between China and Taiwan.

A keynote speaker, Kenneth Lieberthal of the University of Michigan, also an occasional US Defence consultant, a former adviser to Bill Clinton and a global politics expert, said the basic problem was the profound lack of trust between the leaders in China and Taiwan.

The kind of trust lacking in their relations needed a long time to grow, he said. Lieberthal proposed a new framework in which Taiwan would agree not to declare independence for 25 years in return for a Chinese undertaking not to attack Taiwan during the same time. This would give a new more trusting generation time to emerge to manage their differences without resort to war. The seminar did not come to a view about whether this would work but in the corridors, some participants reckoned it was worth a try. Australian governments could put 25 years breathing space to some good use too as a major threat to the country's wellbeing in the 21st century lies with the outcome of the growing strategic competition between the US and China.

Our overwhelming preference is that the US's and China's "inevitable differences" — as Prime Minister John Howard described them in his optimistic pre-China visit speech to the Lowy Institute on March 31 — do not lead to war.

If there is to be a war our next best option is not to be in it. In his Lowy speech Howard was not specific about Australia being an "honest broker" (*The Sydney Morning Herald* headline supplied that vision) but as of now China is likely to see us as one-sided in the role — hobbled by our ANZUS treaty commitments to the US.

Howard would probably disagree — publicly at least — with the opinion of Clinton's deputy national security adviser Jim Steinberg that: "the problem of Taiwan is so huge and the situation so unpredictable that it's hard to be optimistic". (*SMH* April 1, 2005)

But he would have to take notice of the views of the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, that China's "anti-secession" laws, passed on March 14 and which ostensibly lay a legal foundation for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, "clearly did increase tensions".

And Howard will probably remember advice from the former US deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, that the US would expect its Australian mates to fight alongside it in any conflict with China over Taiwan. In Armitage's opinion "we could wake up tomorrow and find that a major war had broken out in Asia". (*SMH* April 13, 2005)

However improbable the event, the

US and China are primed for war — for their reasons, not ours.

Australian governments base our policies on the punt there won't be war but a better bet would be to consider war a possibility and do something about it.

Commentators tell us that the thought of a sudden, forced choice between the US and China is a "nightmare" in Canberra.

Elsewhere in the country it would be much worse than a nightmare: ordinary citizens in the armed forces and the wider community would carry the burden of sacrifice, contributing their blood and untimely deaths — probably without any influential say in the matter.

interests with both countries preclude us from taking part.

Indeed, if there is a war, both the US and China will need a trusted friend with appropriate "even-handed" status with both camps to help resolve the conflict. The important value of this non-combatant role can be acknowledged and accepted by all parties in advance.

An obvious criticism of the proposal is that it would be too disruptive of our relationship with the US and of the ANZUS agreement and could give heart to China in its designs on Taiwan. In other words, a good idea maybe, but 25 years too soon. The Lowy Institute survey shows most Australians would probably think it is

have to join in their defence. If China attacks without provocation, as a good international citizen Australia should help defend the plucky and democratic Taiwanese. (We'll get back to you later on what might happen after that.)

In this kind of strategic calculus there is usually little consideration of the effect of government decisions on ordinary citizens, dressed up for years on end as policies of so-called "mature design" — but no one's checked the package for its use-by date.

Unsolvable disagreements about Taiwan are the most likely cause of a US/China war but there are other deep currents flowing in the same

side decides it must act pre-emptively to protect so-called vital national interests.

Discussion of Australia's potential as non-combatant honest broker for a US/China war should not be confined to private dialogue among governments. Otherwise we are hostage to the doubtful benefits of "dog whistle diplomacy" about our commitment under ANZUS that Foreign Minister Downer used recently when commenting on a hypothetical war between China and Taiwan. He said: "We don't know what the situation would precisely be, nor is it terribly productive continually to speculate on what we would or wouldn't do. We don't know what we would do." (*The Canberra Times* March 15, 2005).

An alternative view is that the Australian community should know what we would do. Even if Downer is signalling to the US that we'd rather sit out a war — as some observers believe — neither he, nor anyone else in government or the opposition, for that matter, is able to be any clearer about it. With strong, widespread community support for the proposal, they could be. And right now, if they can't, then the rest of us can.

There is no intention to repudiate ANZUS — the alliance will remain mutually useful for many reasons. The proposal is to exclude from its ambit our automatic involvement in a US/China/Taiwan war. But we had better start right away; these new arrangements could take 25 years to get sorted.

A well-informed Australian community, working through many national and international networks (academics, business, non-government organisations, city to city, state governments, journalists, politicians, private individuals and others), can help in these ways:

- All national governments involved would make policy decisions that maintain a common trajectory towards peaceful outcomes.
- Establish people-to-people links in all relevant countries — ordinary people hardly ever want war.
- Support those traditions of US foreign policy formation that are less likely to consider war with China a feasible and acceptable option.

- Encourage Taiwan's restraint long enough to let China's middle classes develop an economic interest in peace that outweighs any seeming benefit from the hazards of war.
- In Australia, promote and encourage community understanding of the issues so the government gains a clear sense of what the people want.

We should maintain the momentum of public debate that the Lowy Institute survey and Howard's speech and his visit to China have unleashed. We need our experts in many fields — social, community affairs, participatory democracy, economy, trade, business, politics etc, as well as foreign affairs and defence — to inform the public debate. Accompanying this article are some questions they might help consider. There are many more.

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Photograph: NATALIE GEBRING/REUTERS

War with China: some home truths

- Could present or probable future Chinese nuclear and other weapons threaten Australian cities?
- What is the likely loss of life in the event of a Chinese nuclear attack on Australian territory?
- Will there be a racist community backlash against the hundreds of thousands of Australian citizens of Asian descent if Australia is involved in a war with China.
- There are more than 100,000 Australian citizens of Chinese descent living in all corners of the country — will these citizens need official protection for their own safety?

if so, how, where?

- What will happen to the "Chinatowns" in our major cities?
- Could the US "lose" Taiwan without going to war with China, following the Wilsonian, Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian traditions of foreign policy less likely to consider war as a feasible option.
- Or is Taiwan a "cover" for US hawks whose longer-term intent is to constrain China as a competitive superpower or strategic threat to the US — whatever it takes?

Canberra's nightmare — for any government — is exacerbated by the domestic political consequences of making the wrong call.

This need not happen. There is another option: the recent Lowy Institute survey, "Australia Speaks 2005", showed that 79 per cent of those surveyed said "no" to involvement in a US-China war.

A well informed, determined Australian community can provide irresistible political guidance aimed at ensuring that the Australian government decides well in advance not to take part in any such confrontation.

The core idea is that Australia has a unique standing in the region with the US and one that is growing with China and that that should allow it to establish a prior status and role as a non-combatant, honest broker in the event of a war.

The argument is that our domestic circumstances — including a potential racist backlash against the hundreds of thousands of Australians of Asian descent — and our substantial

a good idea — right now.

Of course, Canberra bureaucrats are much smarter than the average punter. Advice to cabinet (edited for brevity) would be along the following lines.

"We should not reduce the ambiguity of our position until we have to: to do so might actually increase the likelihood of China going to war through miscalculation. We could be seen as selfishly adding to international insecurity to gain security and economic benefit for ourselves.

"We should not trade off the kudos we have in Washington against an event that might never come to pass. There is no need to have a long and acrimonious debate about the importance of ANZUS — it could be politically disastrous for any government. We need the US as a continuing source of weapons/intelligence/spare parts/inter-operability with the Australian Defence Force etc, etc. And there's the Pine Gap. If the Taiwanese are silly enough to provoke China, we don't

direction. They include: China continues to increase its military capability for attack on Taiwan. Taiwan wants to be free of China's hegemony. The US will not allow any other power to develop a military capability that would seriously threaten it. Pre-emptive attack against serious threat is a formal component of US national security strategy. Tensions between China and Japan could suddenly precipitate a crisis. North Korea could miscalculate. Australia continues to acquire military capabilities that could be used in a large-scale war, anywhere.

Taiwan and other "crisis initiators" aside, the magnitude of US and Chinese competition has the potential to bring on crisis with little or no warning, as happened with the downing of the US EP3 spy plane on April 1, 2001.

Alternatively, crisis might emerge slowly, by increments, stepping up over time until a point is reached — concerning say, the development of theatre [intermediate-range] or long-range nuclear missiles — where one