Game of Dominoes: Australia's Security and the Cold War 1947-1991

Military History and Heritage Conference

13-14 April 2024

Keynote address

Peter Edwards

I congratulate Andrew Kilsby on bringing together such a distinguished group of participants to contribute to a fascinating program. The topics are truly diverse, stretching from military operations to matters of strategy, intelligence, international and domestic politics, and beyond. Bearing in mind what has just been said by Jim Barry about relevance and by Craig Stockings about timeliness, I will offer a perspective that I hope will put all these topics into a wider frame which I hope will help us to see the shape, or at least one way of shaping, the forest while seeing how the important trees fit into it. I will do that in the spirit of trying to learn from history, a topic of constant interest on which David Lowe and colleagues have recently produced an important new book. We all have our favourite aphorisms about learning or failing to learn from history: my own is that history is a debate between the present and the past about the future.

As Mark Twain famously observed, history doesn't repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes. If we look at Australia's history of engagement with the world for the past 100 years and more, we can see a pattern in the way in which the country has sought to learn from the past while

preparing for the future. After a period of major military engagement, the country celebrates what victories or achievements it can, mourns its losses, and tries to learn from the past while assessing the present to devise a strategy for the foreseeable future. This usually takes about a decade of often intense discussion and vigorous debate before a strategic framework is devised, after which the country seeks to implement that strategy, amending it as events dictate.

This pattern can first be seen after the Great War of 1914-18 when, despite the tensions that sometime arose between British and Australian military and political leaders, Australia - if I may use an anachronistic American expression - doubled down on the British imperial connection. This was manifested not only in the Singapore strategy in defence but also in the Ottawa agreements for imperial preference in trade; in the reliance on British capital for finance; in the reliance on British sources of news; in the way Australian courts followed British precedents and procedures; and in the reluctance, in contrast to other Dominions, to create a foreign office and diplomatic service until the very end of the period.

It was as if by reasserting Australian dedication to King and Empire, Australia could somehow strengthen the Empire as well as promoting Australia's national interests. (Perhaps there is a lesson in that for today.) But all that came undone in the Second World War, demonstrated most spectacularly by the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. Total reliance on the imperial connection was clearly over, but the memories and habits formed in this period lingered long afterwards.

What we see after 1945, and through the whole Cold War period, is a country coming to grips with its new status as an autonomous, post-imperial participant in world affairs, accepting responsibility for its relations with the rest of the world in peace, in war and in the 'grey area' between war and peace. The nation had to grapple with the requirements of developing not only a defence strategy but a national strategy for a country, so that it would not simply react in an *ad hoc* manner to events but have a strategic framework within which to make specific decisions.

Australians find it uncomfortable to speak of grand strategy or national strategy, so perhaps it is preferable to speak of strategic concepts. Australia developed two strategic concepts that between the late 1940s and the early 1990s were often summarised as forward defence in the third quarter of the twentieth century, and then, from late 70s to the 90s, the self-reliant defence of Australia (within an alliance context).

Australia after 1945 had to learn how to strike a balance between commitments and resources (as Arthur Tange often commented, if you haven't talked dollars, you haven't talked strategy); how to assess what can we do for ourselves and what requires working with allies and other partners; how much attention and resources to give to the continent and its immediate environment; how much to 'the region', however that might be defined - the Pacific area, the eastern hemisphere, the Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific; how much to cooperate with our traditional allies, Britain and the United States, who had the power but were far distant and whose interest in our region might be declining. At any given time, there are likely to be advocates for a continental, or regional, or global approach; but governments have to achieve what they think is the appropriate balance between those

approaches: and how do they manage both the regional and the alliance relationships so that they are complementary rather than contradictory.

While much discussion, both contemporary and historical, has always concentrated on Prime Ministers and perhaps a few close advisers, this process in fact requires the whole country to create, to shape and to develop the institutions that can create such a strategy; to establish the strategy's operational principles, seeking to ensure that it is a 'whole-of-government' approach, with each major institution understanding its role and cooperating as appropriate. It must also ensure that, as far as possible, the strategy has the informed support of the general public.

This includes reforming the Parliament and relevant committees, the Cabinet and its committees dealing with national security, the defence organisation and the armed services, the foreign office and diplomatic service, the intelligence agencies, the departments responsible for finance, commerce and trade, and the relevant areas of the private sector, such as defence industries.

None of this was easy: and it is easy to forget that Australia started on this process in the late 1940s from a pretty low base of individual experience in world affairs as well as institutional development in strategic policy-making.

All through the period we are examining, Australian discussion and debate on strategic and military affairs has often focussed on the weapons and weapon platforms allocated to the armed services. Of course governments and the nation as a whole has to be prepared for

external threats, whether foreseen or unforeseen; but to the greatest extent possible the capabilities and operational doctrines of the armed services, as well as the resources and operational directions given to the diplomatic service, the intelligence agencies, the aid agencies, the financial, trade and commerce departments, should be determined by the overall strategy, not the other way around.

The first of those strategic concepts, forward defence was stigmatised after the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. There are still a few people who glibly assert that it was little more than a combination of Australia's traditional phobias, the Red Peril and Yellow Peril. It deserves a little more credit than that: not three cheers but perhaps one and a half or two cheers.

Let us look at what happened in institutional development in the decade from the late 1940s to the late 1950s. This period saw a radical change in the way the country conducted land warfare, from a mass citizens' force to a small professional standing army, by creating the Royal Australian Regiment in 1948 and augmenting this by raising the first company of the Special Air Service in 1957; it saw the creation of ASIO, ASIS and the forerunner of what is now ASD, all of which encountered considerable difficulties in their early relations with each other, with other government agencies, and especially in ASIO's case with the wider public; It saw External Affairs, essentially a group of difficult relations with Defence, Trade et al, but knocked into shape, turning poorly organised group of young and talented men into something approaching an effective foreign office and diplomatic service. While official advice to the government was coordinated by a Defence Committee of senior civilian and uniformed officials, it was not until 1963 that a ministerial committee, known as the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee was formed, a forerunner of today's National Security

Committee. We should note, however, that ministers and prime ministers made reasonably frequent and detailed statements in Parliament, so that the public had a reasonable idea of the directions being taken by the government.

This was the institutional background within which the government of the late 1940s and especially the early 1950s, the early years of Robert Menzies' peacetime government, sought to assess the competing demands of the region and of relations with the 'great and powerful friends'. Were events in what was often called 'the cauldron' of Southeast Asia driven by external communism, or by nationalist drive for decolonisation of the European empires; or (an element too often overlooked by Australia and its western allies) by longstanding tensions and hostilities within the region? And how should Australia respond to requests for assistance from 'great and powerful friends' for assistance whether in the region or in global affairs, recognising that Australia security in this new era seemed to depend heavily, as it had before 1945, on the power and influence of those great powers.

What is remarkable perhaps, given the experience of the recent war and the complexities of the post-war situation, was the considerable degree of caution with which the government assessed likely threats and in responding to pressures from Britain and the US to intervene militarily. A fundamental decision in the early 1950s was that Australia would involve its military forces only in Southeast Asia, and not in the Middle East, despite considerable pressure from British political and military leaders. Even in Southeast Asia, Australia would accept military commitments only under certain conditions:

- Australia would only act alongside forces from Britain, the US, or preferably both;
- Australia would only intervene when requested by what it considered to be the legitimate authority: in other words, Australia would support defence of a legitimate regime, but it did not undertake invasions to institute regime change;
- while coordinating its actions as far as possible with Britain, the US and New Zealand, Australia sought to avoid the impression that four white countries were seeking to direct Asian countries by gaining the sanction of a multi-national and multi-racial institution, such as the United Nations (as in Korea), the Commonwealth (as in the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation), or SEATO (in which the Menzies government placed undue faith in the commitment to Vietnam).

Moreover, even when these conditions were met, the military commitment was often limited to somewhat less than the relevant ally had sought and was conceded slowly and grudgingly.

Through the 1950s and into the early 1960s, this seemed to work well. The Korean War came to be a template for how Australia wanted to conduct war, with the United States providing the power and the leadership while Australian forces operated more comfortably with British and Commonwealth forces, as they did in the Malayan Emergency and the Indonesian Confrontation.

Then came Vietnam. It is sometimes forgotten that the initial commitment to Vietnam was prompted largely by the perceived need to support the United States there in order to win at least diplomatic, and potentially even military, support in Indonesia's Confrontation of Malaysia. The major Australian decisions in late 1964 and early 1965, including the introduction of conscription, owed as much to the feared escalation of Confrontation as to events in South Vietnam itself.

Menzies seemed to think that the commitment to Vietnam would be as successful as that in Malaya, but the outcome was shaped by his open-ended and ill-explained commitment, which owed much to his personal dominance of his Cabinet and party, the deliberate exclusion of advice from Foreign Affairs and much of the Defence Department, the relative lack of independent military and diplomatic intelligence, the failure to realise that Australia knew much less about mainland Southeast Asia than about maritime Southeast Asia, and the failure to realise that the United States also knew less about Southeast Asia than about other parts of the world.

The focus on Southeast Asia as a destination for military involvement did not mean rejecting other forms of cooperation with Britain and the US in the wider Cold War. Australia offered its geography as an asset, first making Woomera and Maralinga available to Britain for weapons testing. This was done not just to support the West in general but to help Britain return to the 'top table' of nuclear powers. As this hope faded Australia turned to offering its real estate to the Americans for the 'joint facilities' at North-West Cape, Pine Gap and Nurrungar. The lesson of this period, then, is that success depends not just on the commitment of military assets but equally on the statecraft with which all national assets -

military, diplomatic, intelligence, geographic, financial - are deployed. The capabilities and doctrine of the armed services are shaped by the evolution of wider strategic decisions, not as an end in themselves.

The fall of Saigon in 1975 was widely seen as demonstrating the failure of not just the operational decisions in Vietnam but of the whole concept of forward defence. The next decade, from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, saw a great deal of public debate encompassing a reform of strategic policy, replacing forward defence with the concept of 'the self-reliant defence of Australia', focussed on the continent, its approaches and the 'air-sea gap' to the north, and the integration of the three armed services into one Australian Defence Force, in which the services would support each other rather than operating with sister services of our major allies. This process began with a statement of general principles in the first Defence White Paper in 1976, with the Dibb Report on the necessary capabilities produced a decade later in 1986 followed by another White Paper in 1987.

The same decade saw three inquiries, two of which had the status of Royal Commissions, which led to major reforms of the Australian intelligence community, restructuring all the agencies, directing their relationships with each other, with other parts of the Australian government, and with American and other allied intelligence agencies, at a time when many Australians believed that the CIA had been deeply involved in the Dismissal of the Whitlam Government. For that and other reasons, Australian media were also giving prominence to challenges from across the political spectrum to official statements of government policy.

This era of Australian strategic policy was welcomed by Australian foreign ministers and their department as giving Australia greater freedom of manoeuvre within the American alliance. Much of this was controversial but not seriously tested, as the first crisis requiring Australian military intervention in the East Timor in 1999, after the Cold War had ended.

Some general lessons can be drawn from this survey of the Cold War period. In short, the best decisions take into account all the major factors in strategic policy, including Australia's military, diplomatic, financial and geographic assets and weaknesses. They emerge from wide debate, involving not only ministers and officials from all relevant departments and agencies, but also in Parliament and the public. The major decisions that have proven to be ill-advised, such as in the Suez crisis of 1956 or the commitment to Vietnam in 1965, have often come when over-confident Prime Ministers acted with minimal advice, relying on a small group of advisers with a strong ideological commitment.

What happened next tells us much about what we did, and what we did not, learn from the Cold War experience in the post-Cold War years. In the 1990s Australia started a serious debate about striking the right balance between the US alliance and a rising, but at this time not aggressive, China. Then the events known as 9/11 led to Australian involvement in the so-called 'global war on terror', with Australian force committed to both Iraq and Afghanistan. Too many of the principles of the Cold War years were flouted. The government, and especially the Prime Minister of the day, did not seek advice on whether to get involved or on the limits to any commitment, but only on how to give prompt and strong support to the United States and thus strengthen the alliance, without taking into consideration other effects on Australia's interests and long-term strategy. Australia

supported invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, in order to achieve regime change. Australia thus became heavily involved in a region where the direct impact on Australian national interests, as distinct from the alliance and global order, was far less clear than it had been in Southeast Asia.

The involvement in this more distant and complex region came to an end with the withdrawal from Kabul airport on 15 August 2021, as spectacularly and dismal an admission of failure as Singapore on 15 February 1942 or Saigon on 30 April 1975. It seemed for a time that we would once again begin another long and intense debate about Australia's future strategy. Then, just 35 days later, came the announcement of the AUKUS agreement. This, too, flouted many of the lessons that should been learned. The new agreement had been negotiated in secret by the Prime Minister and a very small group of advisers, many of whom were enthused by the prospect of acquiring the 'apex predator' of maritime force. It had been negotiated without the involvement of other government agencies, to consider the implications for Australia's other international relationships and strategic interests, other Defence requirements, or the fiscal, technological and workforce implications.

Since the announcement the Defence Strategic Review of 2023 and other official statements have sought to compensate for these omissions by saying many of the right things. For example, that we need a whole-of-government, even a whole of nation, approach to strategy; and that statecraft is as important as sheer military power in securing our strategic goals. But the nature and timing of these statements gives the strong impression that the strategy and the statecraft are being built around one military capability, not the other way around. The capability cart has been put before the strategic horse.

Perhaps one major lesson of Australia's Cold War and subsequent geopolitical events is that, after a major turning point in world affairs, like the end of the Second World War or the Vietnam War, the country needs a robust, perhaps lengthy, debate about Australia's prospective role in world affairs in order to develop the appropriate strategic concepts, and then to establish, develop and give direction to the institutions that will implement the strategic concepts and ensure that they have the informed support of the general public. Only in the latter stages of that debate should the discussion go to the weapons and weapon platforms to be allocated to the Australian Defence Force.