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Australia's Alliance Pre-occupation

By Chris McInnes

The respected International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) recently described Australia's defence policy as one 'preoccupied with alliance management'. This is concerning: alliances are a means of defence policy, not an end in themselves. The IISS pronouncement should prompt pause to consider whether Australia's best interests are being served by such a policy or the alliance at the centre of it.

The IISS' evidence for Australia's defence preoccupation is the pattern of Australia's current overseas deployments, in particular the forces committed to Afghanistan and the Middle East. The Defence Department's website lists the current commitment as approximately 2,300 soldiers, sailors and airmen; 1,500 troops in Afghanistan proper, with an additional 800 personnel deployed throughout the Middle East. Prima facie, this seems a modest contribution from an ADF of over 80,000 permanent and reserve personnel.

Closer examination of the ADF presence in Afghanistan indicates the grounds for the IISS' concern. The forces Australia has elected to commit to Afghanistan are those most likely to be needed at short notice closer to home. The headline ADF element in Afghanistan – a Mentoring Task Force in Uruzgan province – will be difficult to extract and redeploy rapidly. Moreover, the need to protect inherently vulnerable ground forces consumes a disproportionate share of the ADF's supporting elements, such as logistics, communications and intelligence. Add to this the distorting effect that current operations have on ADF focus and capability, and it becomes disturbingly clear that the IISS' pronouncement is well justified.

Prime Minister Gillard gave two 'vital national interests' as the reason for this deployment during last year's parliamentary debate: firstly, the denial of Afghanistan as a safe haven for violent extremists and, secondly, to honour Australia's alliance commitment to the United States. Both interests are worthy but they are not inextricably linked; neither Australia's national security nor the US-Australia alliance are necessarily best served by Australian ground forces operating in the Middle East. The alliance – and how Australia contributes to it – needs to be balanced against broader national interests.

The world has changed since Prime Minister Howard invoked the Anzus Treaty in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001. American power – perhaps at its zenith in 2001 – has declined, particularly since the global financial crisis laid bare the shaky foundations of the US economy. The quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan, together with the relentless expansion of China's economy – and holdings of American debt – have thrown into stark relief the limits of American power. Long-time allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, are actively considering how to adapt their security postures for a world where Washington does not reign supreme. Canberra needs to do the same.

Despite difficulties in the last decade, the United States remains the most powerful nation on the planet and Australia is a stronger, richer, freer nation because of the United States than it would otherwise be. The Williams Foundation believes a continuation – even strengthening – of the Australia-America alliance is fundamental to Australia's security for the foreseeable future.

But adaptation is necessary. Firstly, Australia needs to ensure that its alliance commitments leverage strengths rather than weaknesses. Advanced, highly capable air and naval forces are Australia's

The Williams Foundation is an independent research organisation whose purpose is to promote the development and effective implementation of National Security and Defence policies specific to Australia's unique geopolitical environment and values.

comparative military strengths. There are good reasons why air and naval assets have been the contribution of choice for Australian governments in past alliance operations. They are light and agile, so can be rapidly redeployed, reducing the likelihood of embroilment in a quagmire and maximising the chance that Australian forces will be available for Australian needs when required. Some elements, such as air combat assets, are also of limited utility in contingency operations likely to arise at short notice in Australia's neighbourhood – making them ideal for UN and alliance commitments further afield.

Secondly, Australia needs to focus its contribution where it can do the most good for Australia's security, its near region. Prime Minister Gillard's use of three terrorist attacks in the Indonesian archipelago to explain why Australia needed to deny Afghanistan as a base for violent extremists highlighted the fundamental geography of Australia's security. Moreover, Asia is the most likely location for global security to be rattled as an international order based on American pre-eminence adapts to a rising China and India. The potential consequences for Australia if this evolution does not progress peacefully are greater than anything it has faced since the Second World War.

The near region is also where Australia can contribute most to the alliance. Australia has a unique perspective on Asia and has a different style of relationship with regional countries compared to the United States. These can be invaluable assets during times of tension. Not only is the near region where Australia can contribute most effectively, it is also where Washington probably expects – and needs – Canberra to contribute most.

As the world changes, an Australia that can provide insightful, forthright counsel on its near region and highly capable forces tailored to its primary security interests – but available further afield – will be in the best interests of both allies.