

What is the Real Question at the Heart of Dibb’s Recent Musings on Australia’s Defence?



FIGURE 1. RAAF TINDAL

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In the March 15 edition of *The National Interest*, renowned Australian strategist Professor Paul Dibb AM, in his piece, [How Australia Can Defend Itself Against China’s Military](#), raised two main points – both of which pose the question – what is meant by ‘Australian defence?’

The Centrality of ANZUS

It is a given that Australia has long sheltered under the ANZUS Treaty in order to ward off opportunistic military forays against the country’s national interest in its immediate region. When ANZUS was founded in 1951, the types of threat Australia worried about were communist bloc or aligned countries seeking to harm Australia in traditional military ways. Back then there was no cyber war, no drones, no battlefield robots,

virtual or augmented reality. The high frontier of space, so central to all military operations today and to international commerce would not be conquered until the 1956 launch of the Soviet Union's Sputnik satellite. Most military planners believed that war, any war would resemble World War II, but with the possible addition of nuclear weapons.

Between 1951-2020 the price all Australian governments have and continue to pay to maintain ANZUS is to lend support to American military activities.

As recent history has shown, Australian governments have lent their support to American military operations even if these were deemed unpopular by the Australian public. ANZUS is Australia's equivalent of nuclear deterrence. No belligerent country could ever be entirely sure if the US would intervene on Australia's behalf in a state-on-state war.

For 69 years this strategic ambiguity has served Canberra well.

However, since the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016, [old certainties are less clear](#) as the US is seen to be moving toward a more transactional and less sentimental approach in foreign policy. As the US is currently in an election year, four more years of a Trump presidency would certainly present problems to *all* treaty allies of the US. However, the likely alternative of a Biden presidency does give some hope for a partial restoration of old alliance values and solidarity. For Australia a Biden presidency might jolt the country out of its current strategic navel gazing and return it to the country's more natural role of strategic complacency. Many would breathe a sigh of relief were this to happen, but the one silver lining of Trump has been in making Australian policymakers think hard about what Australia's role in the world would be like without any guarantee of US strategic commitment.

The Dibb Prognosis

According to Dibb, at the crux of his article are two major points, firstly:

a \$1.1 billion upgrade to the Royal Australian Air Force base at Tindal, which is about 300 kilometres south of Darwin, to lengthen the runway so that US B-52 strategic bombers as well as our own KC-30 air-to-air refuelling aircraft can operate from there.

And secondly:

the announcement by the US State Department that Australia has been cleared, at a cost of about \$1.4 billion, to purchase 200 AGM-158C long-range anti-ship missiles (LRASM), which can be fired from our F/A-18 Super Hornets and the F-35s when they are delivered.

Dibb's piece is interesting in that central to these two points assumes that whoever the incumbent is in the White House, post-November 2020, Australia's national security policy will maintain a strongly American focus.

The problem for Australian policymakers is that in this new age we are living through, it won't matter how pro-American the Canberra elite is, if a US administration does not think an Australian strategic problem aligns with American interests – Australia may not have Washington's support.

Furthermore, there is an assumption that the presence of USAF aircraft on Australian soil would be enough of a deterrent to prevent any form of Chinese or Russian [hybridised military action](#) against Australian interests along archipelagic Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. But these foreign, though allied, aircraft will not be under the sovereign direction of the RAAF or the Australian government. They will be under the authority of the US government. Here the decision to use them in support of Australian defensive measures stops with Washington. And while the signalling of American strategic support for Australia is important to keep the ANZUS Treaty relevant, for the Australian government, American support should never be taken for granted. After all, if NATO and its much-vaunted '[Article 5](#)' whereby an attack on one is considered an attack on all is currently being questioned among many NATO member states – ANZUS – which does not have a similar mechanism for automatic mutual support, should give Australian authorities pause for thought.

So, let us look at the known strategic threats to Australia.

The Lucky Country

From a state-on-state level, Australia remains the lucky country. Canberra has good, pragmatic relations with many regional states. Australia's position as a farm and a mine for Chinese industry means that it is highly unlikely that the PRC would deliberately use force against Australia under any rational circumstance.

However, as an American staging base, Australian territory hosting US facilities may come under PRC attack should the destruction of these facilities be accorded a high priority by Beijing. This would only happen should a conventional war break out and rapidly escalate between Chinese and American forces over touchstone issues like Taiwan or the South China Sea.

For more peripheral hybridised operations directed against Australian interests, potentially sparked by non-state actors along Australia's arc of strategic interest, from archipelagic Southeast Asia to the South Pacific, the upgrading of RAAF Tindal to host US strategic bombers is less about *Australian defence* and more about America building-up power projection redundancy should its forward positions in South Korea and Japan decline for political reasons.

Does this add to or diminish Australian security? It is a polarising topic.

For defenders of ANZUS, any increase in US personnel flowing through to Australia *increases* the country's defensibility under *any and all* circumstances. This is the public line of their argument, and it makes sense to maintain the close US-Australian relationship since being close to the US does give Australia access to critical technologies and intelligence. Making Australia relevant to America therefore is a rational action to take in spite of any known gaps. From an Australian perspective, the commitment of 'penny packet' forces to protracted and unpopular American military missions to the Middle East or elsewhere is a small price to pay for keeping Australia as a steadfast ally foremost in the minds of American politicians and policymakers. Fear of abandonment is strong among the Canberra political and policy making elite.

For sceptics of ANZUS, any increase in US personnel or facilities in Australia limits our foreign policy options and damages the Australian brand among countries whom it trades with but who are not enamoured with US strategic and foreign policy. Furthermore, sceptics have a far darker assessment of America's commitment to Australian defence. For them, the US will do what the US does in order for it to advance its own interests – even at the expense of its 'enabling' allies.

But like with most polarising topics, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. And it is up to Canberra to navigate between its sovereign needs and requirements and those of its primary ally and trading partners. Not an easy task by any stretch. Made worse by the fact that Australia has no clear strategic narrative.

So, upgrading RAAF Tindal for USAF strategic bombers can be seen both as a net strategic gain for Australia and a net detriment, depending on where one sits on the ANZUS Treaty. Increasing the base's capacity to host domestic KC-30 air-to-air refuelling aircraft is important, not so much for the sovereign defence of Australia though there is that element to it, but for in-flight refuelling of RAAF fighter planes escorting USAF strategic bombers in long-range missions designed to 'signal intent' or to conduct harassment of PRC maritime traffic in the South China Sea.

The second point, the purchase of 200 AGM-158C long range anti-ship missiles again can be seen as a way for the RAAF to better defend Australia against seaborne conventional naval threats.

Is this purchase based on a need to hedge against localised naval developments along Australia's strategic arc?

Yes, but only at the very outside of likely scenarios. A country always has to hedge against fast changing circumstances. But modernising and building a fleet of warships and fighter planes to alter the regional balance of power and threaten Australia is not something that any state in Southeast Asia or the South Pacific can do easily, stealthily or affordably. And, whatever these states have in their existing orders of battle are neither of the numbers nor of the quality that Australia has to worry about.

So, the purchase of these long-range anti-ship missiles again is more likely to keep the RAAF technologically up to fighting alongside the USAF in anti-PRC missions should an outbreak of war take place between China and the US.

And what of the threat from China to Australia? Is it a military threat or something else?

The China Question



FIGURE 2. SHUTTERSTOCK IMAGE OF PRC

China has run intelligence operations against the Australian government by attempting to buy influence through the country's politicians and political parties. It has run cyber operations against Australian businesses. But China lacks the capacity for sustained long-range probing flights or a sustained naval presence in or near Australian

waters. Much of China's military is deployed close to its coastline and to countries that are in close geographic proximity to it. Long-range (naval) missions are usually limited to occasional short-duration forays towards [Alaska](#) or [Queensland](#). The country's strategic ballistic missile fleet is also limited in size and capacity. The level of threat to Australia from Chinese physical assault is therefore small, but manageable. The threat China poses to American facilities in Australia is a larger concern. And it is a concern that squarely puts Australian territory in harm's way. For instance, a Chinese ballistic missile strike against [Pine Gap](#) with either conventional high explosive, nuclear or EMP warheads could degrade or destroy a significant American intelligence outpost in a relatively unpopulated part of Australia. Casualties would be low, but the facility's loss would cause immeasurable shock to the US and Australian governments. Operationally, much of Pine Gap's intelligence gathering capacities might be re-routed to other American facilities, however, if the US were fighting Chinese forces, in a fast moving war where real-time and near real-time intelligence is of the essence, the loss of Pine Gap would hurt US war fighters and their allies.

A similar attack on RAAF Tindal would put the Australian government in an even greater quandary. While Pine Gap is a US facility on Australian soil, RAAF Tindal is a sovereign Australian military facility, hosting American strategic air assets. How would Canberra react to the loss of this critical forward base in northern Australia? If Australia were actively assisting American forces in a hot war with the Chinese over the South China Sea, RAAF Tindal might be considered a viable target by Chinese strategic missile forces, eager to roll back the reach of American aircraft.

Returning to Dibb's two points, successive Australian governments have made it clear that it sees its continuing interest in keeping the US as the indispensable strategic partner, while at the same time keeping the PRC close as an economic partner. The

peculiar nature of this balancing act is not lost on some commentators who have observed that in this case, you can't have your cake and eat it too. Australia will never abandon the US for fear that no other Western country will be in a position to replace the United States as Australia's senior strategic ally.¹ China on the other hand is a 'work-in-progress'. With China, Australia can make hay while the sun shines until the PRC milch-cow dries up or changes into something completely different. It is dispensable. Made all the more because of the PRC's cultural and political divergences from Australia in its human rights record, its politics and the heavy-handed social practices of the CCP. Unless or until Australia's politics and society adapt to CCP norms and conditions, a highly unlikely event,² these divergences will never be breached making communist ruled China a country to be economically exploited but never truly trusted.

So, can Australia defend itself against the Chinese military? This is perhaps the wrong question.

For contemporary Australia, the PRC is an *intelligence threat* first and foremost.

The country's efforts should therefore be marshalled to counter PRC [influence operations](#), commercial espionage, cyber-attacks and spying activities. This would make Australia safe from Chinese encroachments and manipulations.

Australia's geographic distance is still the country's greatest strategic asset.

The fact that China needs Australian raw materials and agricultural products to fuel and feed its industries makes Australia indispensable in keeping the Chinese economic juggernaut and autocracy alive.

Ironically in spite of the great leverage it holds over the PRC, Australia in a very tepid way believes itself to be a '[middle power](#)' but usually acts like a small power.

If on the other hand the question is asked, can Australia help defend American interests located in Australia against the Chinese military? This is another point entirely and will depend on whether the Chinese military are actively targeting American facilities in Australia and Australian sovereign facilities harbouring American strategic assets.

If we assume that this is the case, then lengthening RAAF Tindal's runway and purchasing 200 long-range anti-ship missiles will only be relevant to Australia's 'defence' if it is part of a planned American offensive against the PRC. And that can

¹ Which is why SAGE International Australia (SIA) recently proposed a novel global maritime security framework involving the UK, Australia and Japan (UKAJ). An outline of which was published in an OpEd in The Japan News, February 23, 2020 – "*Japan, Australia & Britain should forge closer security ties in a fast-changing world*" P. Jain, J. Bruni & P. Tyrrell.

² Though this can't be entirely discounted post-COVID19 with more and more countries thinking long and hard about utilising 'surveillance-state' methods for population monitoring and control.

only mean that an Australian government's ability to choose not to engage in such a US offensive is highly constrained, further undermining Canberra's exercise of sovereignty in its own defence.

If Australia's defence is really part of an American offensive posture, Dobb's points may make Australia capable of slipstreaming into a planned US attack on Chinese forces. It does not mean that Australia's sovereign defensive capabilities are any stronger because:

- a) Australia is acting as a facilitator and enabler of American power in the Indo-Pacific.
- b) US bases on Australian territory expose Australia to the risk of a pre-emptive Chinese ballistic missile strike against them, should regional tensions between Washington and Beijing escalate to open warfare.

What people are now suggesting is that Canberra invest in [Patriot anti-ballistic missile/anti-aircraft batteries](#) in order to plug the obvious gap in American military asset protection in Australia. The central question becomes, who should be responsible for this? The Australian or American governments?

**Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of
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