

Foreign Policy White Paper

Submission by Marrickville Peace Group

Marrickville Peace Group (MPG) is a community-based lobby group. It is composed of ordinary citizens with shared concerns about peace and war. The group has been active since late in 2002, at the time the invasion of Iraq was threatened.

Introduction

In writing this submission, the 'key issues' and questions outlined in the invitation to the public have been considered carefully. MPG is concerned more with matters of peace and war than matters of trade and growth. Consequently, some questions have been omitted or only given very short answers.

The underlying assumption of perpetual growth, revealed in the public invitation, in itself betrays a lack of awareness of likely future developments.

Particularly striking is the fact that the 'key issues' make no mention of climate change as a 'transnational challenge'.

One of MPG's abiding concerns is that climate change will produce instability and that the likely response of national governments will be military in nature. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that the problems of climate change will be compounded and amplified by the addition of war - a consideration that has enormous ramifications for foreign policy.

1.0. AUSTRALIA'S FOREIGN POLICY NEEDS TO BE GROUNDED IN A CLEAR-EYED ASSESSMENT OF OUR NATIONAL INTERESTS

1.1. How should we define Australia's national interests in a changing world?

The most basic national interest lies in keeping the nation safe and secure. To ensure this, it is necessary to take account of our nation's geography and its cultural history.

Australia is an island continent, with the great majority of the population situated towards the south. Internal lines of communication to the north of the country are few and long. The continent covers a vast area and its interior is dry and inhospitable.

These geographical factors make Australia an inherently a safe and secure place. The continent has only ever been invaded once and it took the invaders (the British) about 150 years to dominate it entirely, despite having an enormous technological advantage over the indigenous population. Although there were attacks on parts of Australia during WWII, at that time the Japanese military hierarchy decided that an invasion was out of the question for logistical reasons. The difficulties of invading, subduing and dominating Australia make the possibility of an invasion utterly remote.

There is, however, a persistent, traditional view that the nation is under constant threat from some unspecified enemy. This tradition may well have cultural roots in the colonies' early history, when the population was small - and there was considerable, military rivalry between colonising, European powers. During WWII, it is understandable that the government maintained the myth of the nation being threatened with invasion, so as to galvanise the people and maintain support for the war effort. ⁱ

If they ever existed, the days when invasion was a genuine threat are well past. However, the myth of that danger persists and finds its reflection in current foreign policy.

Being a safe and secure place to live, Australia need fear no other nation and therefore need have no enemies. With that in mind, so long as Australia poses no threat to any other nation, it can afford to be on friendly terms with every one of them.

Australia has no need for involvements in military confrontations. It has no need to rely on any powerful ally for 'protection'. It is a very secure place. The nation should be aware of and treasure its unusual and special situation.

This knowledge should form the basis for a confidently independent and secure foreign policy.

1.2. How should our values underpin Australia's foreign policy?

Ours is a democratic society, in which all citizens are considered equal under the law. We aspire to be an inclusive society, in which all will be treated on equal terms, regardless of racial, gender, ethnic or religious considerations. We treat one another with respect.

The same values should also underpin our foreign relations. We should treat other nations as equals. We should treat them with the respect they deserve. We should have an international presence that is independent, confident and secure (reflecting the secure place from which we come).

1.3. What should we do differently?

As a general point, Australia should be more aware of its appearance in the eyes of other nations.

Australia is developing a habit of ignoring the views of the majority of nations, represented in resolutions at the United Nations. The UN is the forum in which the nations of the world form a collective position. Australia would be well advised to attend closely to the prevailing views of the majority of nations.

Over recent years, Australia has managed a number of spectacular blunders that have given us an international reputation that continues to suffer and deteriorate. This will go on as long as we make poor foreign policy decisions. Some are listed here. These should give an indication of what might be done differently.

1. Australia should negotiate with East Timor 'in good faith'.

Australia was recently 'caught out' spying on its neighbour East Timor and thus failing to negotiate the border between our two nations in good faith. This does not indicate respect towards this neighbour. Negotiation of an appropriate boundary between our two nations, on equal terms, should take place as soon as possible.

2. Australia should be more aware of the cultural sensitivities of other nations in our region.

The recent diplomatic incident involving Indonesia breaking off military ties with Australia is an example of Australia failing to show proper sensitivity to the culture of this large and powerful near neighbour. This must not be repeated.

As a near neighbour with a massive population and growing power, the quality of Australia's relationship with Indonesia should be of the highest priority.

3. Australia should re-assess its relationship with the USA, particularly its military relationship.

The presence of an ongoing US military presence in Darwin sends a signal to neighbouring countries. So far from being 'confidently independent', Australia has the appearance of being insecure and frightened and ready to be America's 'Deputy Sheriff' in the region. This image is not good for Australia's regional and international reputations.

The existence of the intelligence facility at Pine Gap, likewise gives foreign countries the impression that Australia is willing to be an integral part of the USA's military operations. This must be particularly disturbing to nations such as Pakistan, the Yemen and Somalia, where US-initiated drone assassinations have taken place (there being justifiable suspicion that these attacks depend upon the operation of facilities at Pine Gap).

The USA is a country characterised by extreme internal violence. It is a country that has enemies everywhere, whereas, as has already been pointed out, Australia need have none. The closeness of the alliance between Australia and the USA means that every enemy of that country could also become our enemy.

4. Our willingness to be drawn into supporting and joining US-led military actions must be re-considered.

The prime example of this willingness is the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Australia had no valid reason to join that action. The attack was initiated on the basis of falsehoods manufactured in the USA. The consequences of the military action in Iraq are being felt to this day. They include the rise of ISIS and a diminished view of Australia's role in the international community. In other words, Australia is still paying the price for the folly of this policy.

Australia's current involvement in the civil war in Syria is another spectacular blunder, doing nothing but damage to Australia's international reputation and doing nothing to contribute to peace or stability in the Middle East.

It is heartening that, for the present, Australia has resisted pressure from the USA to take part in so-called 'Freedom of Navigation Operations' in the South China Sea. Engaging in such military action would be highly provocative and a definite threat to the regional stability we profess to value.

5. Australia's approach to the Israel/Palestine question has been consistently partisan (siding with Israel, at the behest of the USA).

On the one hand we espouse equality; on the other we support the demonstrable inequality that pertains in the occupied territories of the West Bank, dominated by the Israeli Defence Force. This position has diminished Australia's standing internationally – for it displays hypocrisy.

It is hard to understand the current government's opposition to the UN resolution condemning Israel's position on settlements on land owned by Palestinians.

The trade in military hardware and the exchange of military know-how with Israel should cease immediately.

6. As a safe and secure nation, under threat from no-one, Australia's position on the question of nuclear armaments is incomprehensible.

Australia should immediately change its position to one of seeking the complete elimination of these appalling weapons. The idea that the US 'nuclear umbrella' makes this country more secure is nonsense. The only possible reason for Australia to be threatened with any nuclear attack is because of our alliance with the USA and that nation's military presence on Australian soil.

The recent events at the United Nations, when Australia actively attempted to thwart moves to have the question of nuclear disarmament discussed in the General Assembly, was embarrassing for any thoughtful Australian citizen.

On February 17, 2017, it was reported that Australia will boycott negotiations on the treaty to ban nuclear weapons, at the UN in March. This is deplorable. Australia has been a leading partner in treaties to prohibit chemical weapons, landmines, cluster bombs and biological warfare. Why not join discussions about banning nuclear weapons? The boycott does not make sense.

7. Australia's treatment of 'boat people' is not consistent with the values we espouse.

Through its detention of refugees arriving by boat, Australia has allowed itself to now be viewed as a thoroughly unwelcoming nation, in the eyes of much of the global community. For desperate people, displaced from their homes, Australia used to be seen as a safe refuge, if only it could be reached. That image has been replaced by one in which we are being seen to treat such people as though they have committed crimes.

1.4. How can we do better?

Australia should:-

- stick to the values it says it espouses;
- treat other countries with equal respect;
- go to lengths to avoid situations that can lead to the accusation 'Hypocrite!';
- stand tall and independent – and beholden to no other nation;
- be a confidently independent figure in world affairs (rather than constantly standing in the USA's shadow);
- show greater willingness to offer a safe refuge to those who need one, and
- pay better attention to reports and resolutions coming from the UN.

2.0. AUSTRALIA HAS DIVERSE INTERESTS THAT SPAN THE GLOBE

2.1. Which countries will matter most to Australia over the next 10 years? Why and in what ways?

Indonesia, China, Japan, USA

Economic size. Population size. Military considerations.

2.2. How should we deepen and diversify key relationships?

More diplomacy and less bullying. Less emphasis on military relationships. Australia should show willingness to engage in discussion before resorting to threat.

For example, in the matter of the disputed islands in the South China Sea, rather than siding with the USA, Australia would be better advised to take a more active role in ASEAN-sponsored negotiations.

2.3. Which global trends, such as developments in technology, environmental degradation and the role of non-state actors, are likely to affect Australia's security and prosperity?

1. Environmental degradation and global/ocean warming will have profound effects and huge social consequences in years to come.

The global consequences of warming will produce great instability and tension between nations. Above all, they will increase the likelihood of war. However bad the physical effects of global warming, these would or will be made infinitely worse if they are compounded by the addition of widespread war.

Rather than responding to the instability resulting from global warming in the intuitive manner (i.e. by increasing military preparedness), Australia should be looking for ways to lessen and ameliorate the social consequences of global warming, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflict.

Consideration should be given to increasing immigration, for example, in the face of the huge pressures that may well arise. Fighting migration through a more militarised border protection system is a false policy that will do nothing to assist in solving what is, in fact, an international predicament that is likely to grow in size as climate change deepens.

2. Non-State actors (Terrorists)

Terrorism is not yet and need never become a real threat to Australia.

Terrorism is very unlikely to have any serious impact on Australia's security or prosperity. It is certainly not an 'existential threat', despite the attention currently devoted to it by the media. The level of attention it currently receives is grossly out of proportion to the size of the problem.

Australia would, however, do well to distance itself from activities, particularly military actions, that foster the view that 'The West' is the 'enemy'. It should re-assess how its alliance with the US makes it a potential target of terrorism and extricate itself from actions that escalate the supposed threat (prevention being better than cure).

3. Migrants

How Australia deals with large numbers of humans leaving their traditional homes in desperation, in search of a better life, will be of paramount significance in the coming years. The focus of foreign policy should shift away from countering terrorism and towards reaching global agreements on dealing with refugees.

2.4. How should Australia respond?

Australia should:-

- Work at improving its image through better diplomatic relations.
- Shrug off the image of 'Deputy Sheriff' for the USA.
- Take the terrorist threat less seriously, diminishing its significance, rather than cowering before it.
- Work to improve relations with other countries, particularly less wealthy countries, (and non-state actors!) through the provision of aid (i.e. overseas development assistance), mutually beneficial trade, cultural exchanges, educational opportunities etc.
- Adopt policies that prepare the population for increased immigration, in its capacity as a 'good global citizen'.

3.0. AUSTRALIA IS AN INFLUENTIAL PLAYER IN REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS.

3.1. Which regional and global organisations matter most to us?

UN. ASEAN.

3.2. How should we support and shape them?

Take part as a genuinely independent nation.

3.3. How can we maximise our influence?

(Why do we need to?)

Discussion/persuasion/diplomacy/consistency. Avoid the use of threat.

4.0. AUSTRALIA NEEDS TO BE AMBITIOUS IN GRASPING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES.

4.1. What steps should be taken to maximise our trade and investment and expand commercial opportunities for Australian business?

Emphasis on 'expansion', 'growth' and 'grasping economic opportunities' are the very things that have produced the environmental dangers that the world currently faces.

It is time to stop looking for opportunities for expansion and focus on the reality of a future with fewer such opportunities. The time of constant economic growth was a brief era that is coming to an end.

4.2. How can we ensure Australia is positioned to take advantage of opportunities in the global economy?

(Unanswered)

4.3. What are the key risks to Australia's future prosperity and how should we respond?

If the countries of the world continue on their current trajectory, the greatest risk to Australia's future is probably the risk of war.

Australia should respond by immediately re-assessing its overall defence strategy, particularly its military relationship with the USA (see above).

From the perspective of Australia being a safe place, under threat from no party, current defence and foreign policies make little sense. We imagine enemies that do not exist – except in so far as our behaviour brings them into being.

Australia should be less willing to engage in military actions and more willing to put effort, resources and energy into humanitarian activities. Some of the financial resources currently spent on military activity and hardware could usefully be diverted to fostering better international relations by the provision of aid etc.

The emphasis should shift from the capacity to wage war to a capacity to produce and nurture relationships in which war becomes unthinkable.

Australia should work to foster good relations with all the nations of the world.

In the face of massive environmental upheavals, it is mutual support and assistance that will bring a better world, rather than confrontation.

5.0. AUSTRALIA CONFRONTS A RANGE OF STRATEGIC, SECURITY AND TRANSNATIONAL CHALLENGES.

5.1. How can Australia best deal with instability beyond our borders?

The obvious and best way to deal with instability beyond our borders is through fostering good relations.

Australia should keep out of alliances that give neighbours grounds for suspicion.

Australia should give serious consideration to taking a neutral, non-aligned position.

5.2. How can our foreign policy, including our overseas development assistance program, support a more prosperous, peaceful and stable region?

Provided it actually reaches those in need, an enhanced overseas development assistance program can alleviate inequality and improve Australia's reputation in the region. Good relations are key.

Some of the root causes of instability (and possibly terrorism) lie in inequality. In lessening inequality through development assistance and mutually beneficial trade, the risks of regional instability will be reduced. The benefits, which would include an improvement in Australia's international image, would far outweigh any costs.

5.3. How should our international engagement work to protect Australia against transnational security threats, such as terrorism?

Terrorism is not an existential threat to Australia. It is a minor security threat. However, it can be countered through the sharing of intelligence and an improvement in the manner in which other international players view Australia.

Australia should be careful to nurture its reputation as a 'good global citizen'. It should be ready to reduce inequality by providing overseas assistance. It should be less ready to join wars that harm the innocent citizens of foreign nations, thereby providing justification for the views of would-be terrorists.

5.4. Climate change (An additional ‘transnational challenge’.)

The greatest transnational challenge faced by Australia is not mentioned among the ‘key issues’. This, in itself, indicates that it is not receiving the attention it deserves.

Climate change and global warming are of enormous future significance. Rising sea-levels, as one example, could well result in many millions of people from the most densely populated regions of the world (river deltas) becoming unable to support themselves. This could result in mass migrations. As arable land and available water become scarce resources, droughts and famine brought on by climate change could have a similar consequence. Extreme weather events, floods and fires will all contribute to instability and place huge pressures on global systems. Meanwhile, resource depletion will only be adding to these problems.

As nations currently conduct themselves, the common response is to see climate change as a threat to national securityⁱ. It is likely that this perceived threat will be met by increasing defence preparedness. Indeed, as the physical impacts of climate change approach, global expenditure on military hardware is increasing. This, in turn, will only serve to further increase international instability, rather than reduce it. The scenario may develop in which the possibility of war therefore becomes very much greater.

No matter how devastating the physical impacts of climate change, they will be infinitely worse if they are compounded and amplified by the addition of warfare. It is unwise to follow policies that involve militaristic ‘solutions’ to climate change problems.

Foreign policy must take these challenges into consideration, now.

The intuitive response to climate change, which involves arming up to protect security, is totally inappropriate and will only exacerbate the problems of climate change. It is time to seek ‘counter-intuitive’ responses that seek to avoid the possibility of war.

6.0. AUSTRALIA USES A RANGE OF ASSETS AND CAPABILITIES TO PURSUE OUR INTERNATIONAL INTERESTS.

6.1. What assets will we need to advance our foreign policy interests in future years?

Australia will need more personnel engaged in diplomatic activities. The personnel need to be well equipped, in terms of their training. Above all, they will need to develop skill in the art of treating all others as equals.

February 2017

ⁱ Peter Stanley, “He’s (not) coming south” the invasion that wasn’t, Remembering 1942 History Conference, Australian War Memorial, 2002.

https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/conference/2002/stanley_paper.pdf

ⁱⁱ New York Times, ‘Climate change seen as threat to US security’, August 8, 2009.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/science/earth/09climate.html>