

AUKUS and the threat of war with China – tasks for the peace movement

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Note: Since the three speakers who preceded me had given very interesting and useful talks on AUKUS itself I omitted detailed discussion of AUKUS.

We are on the verge of an almost irrevocable historical choice to assist United States plans for an existential nuclear threat to China in the event of major conflict between the US and China.

The recent mild thaw in diplomatic relations led by Prime Minister Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong is extremely important.

But notwithstanding that overdue development, Australian involvement in US military planning continues under defence Minister Richard Marles.

Even if we avoid war, China is unlikely to forget Australia's willing and indeed in some respects pro-active role in what amounts to assisting US capability to mount an existential nuclear threat to China in time of war.

I will speak briefly about five aspects of this threat to our security, in each case suggesting directions for important work by the peace movement.

- the nature of Australian militarisation and the northern arc of militarisation
- new forms of US alliance structures
- the AUKUS allies – dangerous and dysfunctional
- China – the ideological threat construction
- the centrality of nuclear threat

1. Contemporary Australian militarisation.

Citizens of liberal democracies like Australia are not accustomed to thinking of this country as one which should be regarded as militarised. After all, our military forces are not large, and they play little role in politics, and remain, at least the level of policy, firmly under civilian control.

In fact Australia can be considered a case of a particular kind of contemporary militarisation, which can be summarised as [liberal, high technology, alliance-dependent militarisation](#). We are not the only US allied country to share these qualities. Australian militarisation and its foreign policy remains marked by the failure to recognize and transcend the settler-colonial violence that literally constituted the Australian state, and its racialised shadow, deep anxiety about relations with powerful Asian states – most notably Indonesia and China.

[The northern arc of militarisation](#)

This high technology, alliance dependent militarisation is now most clearly visible in the arc of militarisation driving an expansion of ‘joint’ military and intelligence facilities and force capabilities across northern Australia.

On North West Cape in Western Australia, [a high technology cluster the length of the Exmouth Peninsula](#) which, in addition to longstanding communications facilities linking to submerged submarines and land forces, now includes a Space Surveillance Telescope and a Space Surveillance Radar feeding data on the locations and characteristics and behaviour of adversary satellites in order to fulfil the US mission of space dominance.

The Darwin-based US [Marine Air-Ground Task Force](#) is now to be joined by [a US Air Force Bomber Task Force](#) of six B-52-H long-range bombers to be based – on ‘permanent rotation’ – at RAAF Base Tindal outside Katherine. These giant bombers are home based at [Barksdale Air Force Base](#) in Louisiana, but often transit Guam en route to operations – [including nuclear coercion](#) against North Korea - in East Asia, the South China Sea, and until the US defeat in Afghanistan, bombing operations in that country.

About half of the current fleet of modernised B-52-H bombers are capable of carrying nuclear weapons, and all, nuclear-capable or not, carry cruise and other missiles to be launched against enemy targets from a safe distance.

Australia's tanker aircraft, early warning and control aircraft would facilitate B-52 operations to Australia's north, with F-35 strike aircraft contributing to fighter protection – but a Chinese strategic planner will not be able to distinguish that once the incoming aircraft emerge on a radar screen.

The Pine Gap intelligence facility outside Alice Springs has been of huge importance to the United States for over half a century, and now more than ever.

Its three main systems of intelligence surveillance are critical for US strategic-level intelligence and for day-to-day military operations in combat zones:

- space-based signals intelligence satellites downlinking massive amounts of intercepted communications and other electronic information to Pine Gap for processing and analysis;
- ground-based signals intelligence antennas listening to, processing and analysing the downlinks from foreign communications satellites; and
- space-based infrared surveillance intelligence downlinked to Pine Gap from US early warning satellites with extremely powerful infrared telescopes which detect the thermal bloom signalling the launch of enemy ballistic missiles.

In the past decade Pine Gap has been expanding at an unprecedented rate, expanding in physical size and number of antenna systems, and modernising its capabilities. In the event of any prospective war with China, Pine Gap will have central, critical and largely irreplaceable, roles in developing the signals intelligence interception to map the China's electronic order of battle locating the entire range of Chinese military and political command locations of importance and if war escalates to the use of nuclear weapons, pinpointing which elements of China's nuclear arsenal remains intact and hence, targets of US second nuclear strikes.

Task No. 1: Peace movements are most sustainable when advocating positions based on sound evidence-based analysis and intellectual honesty. The movement needs to ramp up activist peace research and peace education. Effective campaigning on Australian militarisation, the nature of alliance integration and planning, and in particular, the extraordinary developments underway at northern Australian bases requires a firm understanding of those developments based on reliable and authoritative information presented in accessible forms. Activist-based research on Pine Gap, North West Cape, Darwin, Tindal and other 'joint' facilities is essential, but is only useful if it is reliable, and not easily dismissed as erroneous or exaggerated.

One characteristic of the Australian pattern of militarisation is that much of what we need to know about takes place far from population centres, and peace activism in small cities and remote towns is always difficult. But access to digital media and information sources means that even those far from Darwin or Alice Springs can learn about the coming and going of US forces, and perhaps more importantly, provide support to people and groups in those remote locations willing undertake the slow and often tedious work required.

2. New forms of US alliance structures

The Quad agreement between Australia, the US, Japan and India, and the AUKUS agreement with the US, Australia and the United Kingdom, have received a great deal of attention, for obvious reasons. But AUKUS and the Quad are not the only innovation in US alliance matters that Australia is involved in.

US interest to extend the multilateral NATO network from Europe and the North Atlantic to Asia and the Pacific was evident during the two decade Australian war in Afghanistan under NATO command, resulting in a dense web of technological, doctrinal and personal ties between the ADF and its NATO partners.

Recall that for over 70 years the US alliance structure in Asia has centred on the hub-and-spokes set of US bilateral alliances with Australia, Japan and South Korea, with very little cooperation between the junior partners.

With Australia now a NATO Enhanced Strategic Partner, Prime Minister Albanese attended the 2022 NATO Leaders Summit, along with leaders of NATO's other Asian partners, most importantly those of South Korea and Japan and India.

While as yet there is no Asian version of NATO's Europe-centred multilateral military and planning structure Australia is now deeply embedded in the extended version of "Global NATO".

The second American innovation in Asia has been to encourage its 'second-tier' allies and quasi-allies to make bilateral ties between themselves. In the realm of the US-auspiced "Indo-Pacific" a new web of second-tier bilateral security cooperation agreements now links [Australia and Japan](#), [Australia and France](#) (to assist control over France's Pacific and Indian Ocean colonial possessions), [Australia and India](#) – and [India and France](#) as well as [India and Japan](#).

The details vary somewhat, but those involving Australia with France and Japan have taken on a fairly standardised form concerning mutual basing access, intelligence and counter-terrorism cooperation, and the important, if dull sounding, matter of logistics access to facilitate operations far from home.

Not least these agreements oblige Australia to provide certain kinds of support for the operations of these partner militaries – which could include assistance for French operations in New Caledonia or France's other colonies in our region, or for Japan in an armed conflict in its territorial dispute with China (and Taiwan) over the uninhabited rocks of the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands in the East China Sea.

The key point in both the globalising of NATO and the web of second-tier bilateral relations between US allies is that the US has been active in modernising its dilapidated alliance system, apparently with considerable success.

Task No. 2: Broadening peace movement cooperation beyond the Anglophone allies with like-minded groups in Japan, South Korea, India, and France and its colonial possessions – all of which have strong civil society traditions.

3. AUKUS allies – dangerous and dysfunctional

In functional terms – as opposed to the ideology of the Anglosphere - the AUKUS agreement centres on the nuclear-powered submarines issue. Much has been written on this, not a lot of it well-informed. Moreover, there is at present little reliable information on actual government intentions, other than to say the Albanese government appears to have adopted the Morrison general commitment without modification, and that there is an emerging possibility that either British or US (or both) nuclear-powered attack submarines may be based at Australian ports, most likely Stirling in Western Australia.

For the present I commend the very useful expert paper by former Defence officials and senior RAN submariners Allan Behm, Rear Admiral Peter Briggs (retired), and Commodore Paul Greenfield RAN (retired): [Australia's future submarines: An explainer](#), (The Australia Institute, October 2022). Behm also authored what remains the best short critique of the strategic thinking behind the nuclear powered submarines decision in his September 2021 Nautilus Institute paper [Scott Morrison's giant nuclear election ploy](#) (in addition to his [path-breaking 2022 book](#) calling for a rethinking of Australian defence and foreign policy, [No Enemies, No Friends](#)).

The absurdity of Boris Johnson's claim that AUKUS shows that the United Kingdom is an "Indo-Pacific power" – based on a material regional presence of its colonial possessions of Pitcairn Island (47 sq. kms.) and Diego Garcia (30 sq. kms.) – is clear.

Moreover, in nuclear weapons terms Britain is not an independent country but a dependent nuclear power, renting its nuclear submarine missiles from the United States, utilising US nuclear targeting systems, and subordinating command of its nuclear weapons to US-dominated NATO.

Yet, while the political chaos of Westminster and the country's accelerating post-Brexit economic decline after Brexit make the dysfunction of the "UK" part of AUKUS evident to all along with its absurdity, the more salient issues are the dangers of the Australian alliance with the United States now entering its eighth decade, to which the AUKUS add-on agreement is largely irrelevant, the submarine question apart.

The alliance-cancelling antics of former president Trump produced a brief shiver in alliance management circles in Canberra. However, all was said to be well because, it was claimed, alliances are between states, not between administrations.

That turned out to be correct, at least in the short run, as alliance managers on both sides of the Pacific continued the work of alliance renovation initiated by the Obama administration through the Pacific Pivot. The occasional manic interventions of the president were ignored by the 'safe hands' of the Trump administration – or just waited out until normal transmission was restored by the Biden administration.

However, as the late Malcolm Fraser warned in his final book *Dangerous Allies* the United States has become a much more unstable country than alliance loyalists in Australia understand – and this is much more than just the Trump factor.

Quite simply, a country which has faced a coup attempt incited by a defeated president, and where reliable opinion polls report that more than 40% of Americans believe that armed civil war is at least 'somewhat likely' in the next ten years, with that number rising over half of 'strong Republicans' ([The Economist](#)), is not a plausibly reliable ally.

Australians' deep Anglophone cultural and social familiarity with the US occludes the reality Fraser discerned: not only is a highly dysfunctional US political system an unsound basis for any alliance, but for a country like Australia with an historically limited sense of independence from empire, it is a deeply dangerous relationship.

Task No. 3: Fleshing out and campaigning for an independent foreign policy and a defence policy based on the actual security requirements of Australia and Australians.

4. How not to think about China: The Ideological Three Equations

- Russia = China
- Putin = Xi
- Ukraine = Taiwan

One fundamental challenge for building an independent Australian foreign policy is facing the fact that we now have to deal with two imperially-minded forces shaping our foreign policy environment.

Australia has found it hard enough to think clearly about the predominant US influence, and the rise of the assertive version of China magnifies the problem. The combination of internal [heightened repression](#), [settler colonialism](#) in Tibet and Xinjiang, coercive diplomacy, and [militarised territorial expansion in the South China Sea](#) provide grounds for thinking very carefully about China today.

China has always occupied [a special, and historically negative place](#) in the imaginations of settler Australia. At the time of Federation the Australian [states](#) had sent naval and military [forces](#) to assist in the foreign imperialist powers' suppression of the Boxer Rebellion.

For Australia, the key issue is how to think about Australia within a Chinese sphere of influence, where China, not the US, is the major influence on the foreign policies of Southeast Asian states. Australia needs to consider what are tolerable, and intolerable versions of a Chinese sphere of influence.

Answering that question serious will not be straightforward or easy, but the answer from Canberra over the past five years appears to be that there is no tolerable future for Australia in a Chinese sphere of influence: instead, we are doubling down on the declining power of the United States.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated a powerful ideological narrative concerning China in Australia, made up of a set of three equations:

- Russia = China
- Putin = Xi
- Ukraine = Taiwan

There is much to be concerned about in China, and there are points where Australian and Chinese interests are and will be opposed. How serious and how remediable these may turn out to be in the future is unknowable at this stage. What is clear is that all three ideological equations in the current narrative are unsound and misleading.

The Chinese silence over the Russian war in Ukraine aids the argument that Chinese CCP rule can be equated with Russia's quite simply fascist land grab in Ukraine.

Chinese settler colonial policy in Tibet and Xinjiang is full of horrors – as Australians ought to recognize from our own history - with the [additional horrors of carceral surveillance](#) in the name of preventive counter-terrorism reflecting our own smaller scale competitive cruelties on refugee policy.

Xi Jing Ping is [many things as a leader](#), some of them deeply concerning, but he is far from the murderous former KGB operative heading a shrinking and revanchist Russian kleptocracy.

The prospect of a Chinese invasion to 'recover' its wayward island neighbour – or an all-out US-led war of defence of the island – is an appalling prospect, not least because of geography and population densities. Twenty four million people live on an less than 400 kms in length, with most of them crammed in a narrow strip between mountains and the Taiwan Strait not much more than 50 kms wide at best. Any conflict on the island of Taiwan will have greater human impacts than in the case of Ukraine.

The self-inflicted Chinese wounds of wolf diplomacy and the takeover of Hong Kong apart, Chinese policy on Taiwan remains as it has been for many decades – Taiwan is an

inseparable part of China, and reunification is a priority, preferably peacefully but in the last resort by force. Taiwanese identity-based nationalist independence sentiment has understandably grown in response to both Taiwan's economic strength and robust democratic politics magnified by the lessons it draws from the crushing of Hong Kong's autonomy, but independence-minded Taiwanese political leaders have, with strong US encouragement, walked a careful line short of declaring independence.

While western commentators point to President Xi's amplified demands for Taiwan to return to the fold and China's undoubted growing military capabilities as evidence for 'certainty', according to commentators such as Kevin Rudd, that China will invade Taiwan within [the coming two decades](#).

There are no certainties here, one way or the other. Putin's land grab and willingness to use a World War 2 scale of bombardment of civilians to secure victory has made clear that the argument of realists that the future acts of leaders cannot be known with certainty is correct.

Equally, it is far from certain that even if a PRC invasion of Taiwan were to be attempted that the balance of consequences for China, both materially and politically, would be as positive as China's hawks seem to presume.

The CCP's legitimacy is rooted in the combination of China's ongoing capitalist economic growth coupled with nationalism. If it was not obvious before, the consequences for both Ukraine and Russia of the Russian invasion make clear that the continuation of Chinese economic stability depends on avoidance of large scale war.

China's military expansion has been substantial and will continue, but beyond a new capability to limit, though not deny, US access to East Asian waters, its military capabilities cannot be compared with those of the United States – either in conventional or nuclear terms.

Freedom to speak openly and honestly about China policy has [dramatically shrunk](#) in Australian public and academic life. On the one hand, Chinese government and CCP organisations are reportedly harassing Chinese students. On the other hand [universities](#) have been particularly impacted by the malign [effects of foreign influence legislation](#) introduced subsequently.

China is equated with the Chinese Communist Party as an unspeakable other. Social and cultural interaction with China and its people has long been already limited by our disposition to not learn 'foreign' languages and historical unfamiliarity (compared with our super-saturated cultural acquaintance with the multiple cultures of the United States).

These longstanding difficulties are now further constrained by the hostility of the Australian government and media, and, it must be acknowledged, by [CCP penetration activities](#) and demands placed on Australians of Chinese descent to supervening loyalty to the motherland based on race.

Task No. 4: Counteract these repressive tendencies of the Australian government and media by working to establish a basis for dialogue with Chinese partners. Dialogue on a genuine basis is always hard, and given the nature of comprehensive CCP control, finding appropriate dialogue partners will be harder still. Care, persistence, genuine respect, honesty, transparency and demands for country-agnostic policies are prerequisites.

5. Nuclear issues are a central concern for the whole Australian peace movement

Nuclear weapons and preparations for their use are central to Australia's current defence posture, and as a result, campaigning for the eradication of that reliance must be a central concern for the peace movement.

Successive governments have proclaimed policies of defence self-reliance, at least rhetorically . The constant stated exception has been explicit and open reliance on the United States to use nuclear weapons in the defence of Australia in the face of nuclear threats to this country. There are good reasons to doubt that the US has in fact given such a reliance to Australia, and even more serious reasons to doubt the fundamental credibility of

any such assurance if it existed. In 2022 former Assistant Secretary of Defence Allan Behm published the most damning professional critique of what he described as the ‘theology’ of US extended nuclear deterrence for Australia.

Australian reliance on extended nuclear deterrence is [absurd, obscene, and strategically reckless](#). *Absurd* because there is no evidence of such a promise by the US to Australia, whereas such promises are made openly to the NATO and East Asian US allies. *Obscene*, because at root, extended nuclear deterrence means calling on the US to use nuclear weapons to defend Australians by killing hundreds of thousands of people. When other countries we dislike pursue such policies we rightly describe them as using weapons of mass destruction. And *strategically reckless*, because Australian reliance on nuclear defence is the best possible recommendation to neighbouring countries to follow on. What other lesson do we think should be drawn?

But Australia’s nuclear connections do not stop with the policy that the US will in fact do as we hope and use nuclear weapons to protect us.

Pine Gap, the most important military facility in country, and one of the most important in the world for the United States, has multiple critical nuclear weapons roles. These include:

- Nuclear operations attack planning support: Pine Gap’s signals intelligence ‘big ears’ in space and on the ground providing the enemy ‘electronic order of battle’, including the locations and characteristics of all enemy units’ electronic emissions, including radars and air defences, military and political communications and command systems; and collaboration in tracking mobile ICBMs and missile submarines at sea.
- Missile launch early warning: Pine Gap’s infrared satellites detect the infrared bloom of enemy nuclear missile launches, giving the US a few minutes of warning of nuclear attack.
- Nuclear second strike targeting support: the infrared satellites detect which enemy missile silos (and missile submarines) have fired and which have not, and are therefore to be targeted in a US second nuclear strike; and the signals intelligence satellites are used to help locate Chinese road-mobile missiles.

- Missile defence: when Pine Gap detects the first seconds of missile launches and calculates the missiles' likely trajectories, it passes the information to the US missile defence systems, cueing their fire radars to search a tiny portion of the sky where the incoming missiles are gathering enormous speed. Cued by Pine Gap, and if they work as the Pentagon and the arms manufacturers advertise, US missile defences might, just might have a chance of firing their own missiles to hit and destroy the enemy missiles. China has no comparable missile defence capability.
- Verification of certain arms control agreements (by no means all) by detecting characteristics of adversary test missiles – now limited further by the decline in US and Russian arms control initiatives of any kind, and their complete absence from US-China nuclear relations.

There are numerous other nuclear weapons connections beyond Pine Gap. The most recent concerns the B-52H bomber task force to be deployed on permanent rotation to RAAF Tindal near Katherine. To begin with, the task force will certainly be made up of aircraft that have been converted from their longstanding role as strategic nuclear bombers to using only conventional 'smart' bombs and long-range stand-off air-launched missiles.

Locating some of the B-52 fleet in Australia reduces the risk that aircraft in Guam or elsewhere close to China could be threatened by Chinese missile attack.

However, for several years there have been hints in Australian strategic studies circles that if there is a serious conflict with China the US may want to deploy to Australia some of the 46 nuclear-capable version of the B-52H aircraft currently based at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana – with their weapons.

The Australian government needs to confirm that the B-52H aircraft to be deployed to Tindal will never include nuclear-capable versions – even for 'training' purposes.

Permanent deployment of US aircraft carrying nuclear weapons into Australia is prohibited under the South Pacific Nuclear Weapon Free Zone to which Australia is a party. But that treaty allows member states to decide for themselves to allow 'transit' of nuclear weapons

by 'visiting' aircraft or ships – a matter that Pacific island treaty parties want to see reformed.

But the peace movement needs to understand that these roles of Pine Gap and the Tindal bomber task force and other nuclear-related bases are not simply a matter of nuclear deterrence. Too often we easily accept the language of deterrence, concentrating on whether or not nuclear deterrence will 'work' by maintaining an uneasy peace, or whether particular developments in the nuclear arms race stabilise or destabilise the nuclear balance of terror. These are not negligible issues, but they mask two more important realities.

The first ignored reality is that to 'work' as advertised, nuclear deterrence must succeed not just for the present, but forever. We have no way of knowing for certain whether it will, but our governments are betting that it will work and continue to do so - literally wagering the lives of billions on a [speculation viewed as a certainty](#). And the chances of a 'failure of nuclear deterrence' have always been high and are getting higher with nine nuclear weapons states, more complex and powerful weapons systems, and an 'entanglement' of nuclear weapons in non-nuclear wars – as now seen in the Russian war on Ukraine.

The second ignored reality is that planning in the Pentagon and its Russian and Chinese and six other equivalent nuclear command systems does not stop at deterrence, difficult enough though that is, but spends most time on what is to happen when deterrence fails. This is the realm of nuclear war-fighting – how nuclear weapons can help win a war once use of nuclear weapons has started. No country enters a war planning to lose, and nuclear war-fighting planning involves rehearsals for just that.

Pine Gap and the B-52s do have potential roles to play in nuclear deterrence, for better or worse. But we must understand that for the United States their ultimate role is to help ensure that the US does not lose a nuclear war.

Nuclear deterrence is a special case of nuclear war-fighting, as deterrence is in general one aspect of war and its avoidance. Governments find it acceptable to talk about a contribution

to nuclear deterrence, but in public look away from the reality of involvement in planning for nuclear war fighting.

We need to see Australia's connections to nuclear weapons to not just deter the use of nuclear weapons, but to use nuclear weapons to fight and win a nuclear war – with all planetary dangers and horrors that would bring.

Task No. 5:

All parts of the peace movement should become involved in the campaign to force the Australian government to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

To do so Australia must do two things:

- *abandon the policy of reliance on US extended nuclear deterrence, which violates the treaty's prohibition on 'inducement' to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons), and*
- *close Pine Gap's most egregious involvement with nuclear weapons, the Relay Ground Station for the US infrared satellites which provide prohibited critical 'assistance' to US operations for nuclear second strikes.*
- *Australia should cooperate with Pacific island states to strengthen the South Pacific Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, including the 'transit' loophole.*
- *The Albanese government must state its opposition to Australia allowing such visits under any circumstances, but in particular in relation to nuclear-capable B-52 aircraft.*
- *The Albanese government should follow the New Zealand example of rejecting the US practice of refusing to confirm or deny whether it is bringing nuclear weapons into Australia.*
- *Australia should cooperate with Pacific island states seeking to strengthen the South Pacific Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, in particular to eliminate the loophole allowing transit of nuclear weapons..*