

***What can Australia do to help build a world  
that will be at peace with itself?***

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*Within this question is an assumption (which is all too plausible) that Australia has done – and still does – very little to contribute to the making of a world that can live at peace with itself. The grim truth is that for most of the history of European intervention on this continent, Australian governments have spent far more of the country's resources on fighting wars than on contributing to peace making. In the beginning there were wars against Indigenous Australians. (And given the composition of our prison population today, those wars are ongoing, albeit in a different form.) From the late nineteenth century – and ever since – this country's proclivity for war-mongering has extended way beyond its shores. Australians have fought, and continue to fight, in other states' wars – most of them 'unnecessary wars' as Henry Reynolds has so aptly labelled them. Thoughtful Australians need to reach beyond governments to enliven civil society groups to agitate, demonstrate, and educate their fellow Australians about 'peace as an immediate duty', while persuading the makers of Australian foreign policy to integrate the country into a concert of peace-oriented middle powers. It's time to imagine an Australia that, in John Lennon's wistful words, will 'give peace a chance.'*

One of the sourest pessimists of the seventeenth century – and, incidentally, one of the forefathers of today’s realists – the British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, argued that without an authoritarian sovereign lording it over us (a *Leviathan*, as he called it), we humans are condemned to live in a hellish condition of *bellum omnium contra omnes* (a ‘war of all against all’). For Hobbes, human nature was essentially selfish and narcissistic; we are, he believed, an inherently vicious, warlike species. Without the looming presence of a fearful state – effectively a totalitarian state – to terrorise us we are doomed to living lives that will be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.’

In sublime contrast to Hobbes, the eighteenth century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, argued that by participating as free and equal citizens in properly constituted – that is, truly democratic – republics, we humans possess the imaginative powers to live richly fulfilling lives within a *pax aeternum* (a state of ‘perpetual peace’). He wrote: ‘... *reason, as the highest legislative moral power, absolutely condemns war as a test of rights and sets up peace as an immediate duty.*’ This, he argued, may be achieved through ‘a federation of peoples’ across the globe – something like an uncompromised United Nations Organisation, if you like – that would nurture a world at peace with itself.

In the face of Kant’s admirable idealism, Australian foreign and security policy has been consistently Hobbesian in its formulation and application. The first manifestations of our very own ‘war of all against all’ are vividly evident in the massacres of Aborigines throughout the late eighteenth, the nineteenth, and well into the twentieth centuries, and the violence against Chinese gold seekers in the middle of the nineteenth century. Our inclination for belligerence moved up a gear when the Australian colonies sent troops to the Boer War at the end of the nineteenth century. Then it was off to World War I, as the new federal government enthusiastically sided

with what was then called ‘Great Britain,’ in the firm belief that Australia was an integral part of the British Empire – that we were Britain’s ‘mates in the Empire’, as Donald Horne portrayed us. At first it was a ‘boys own’ great big adventure until the diggers were traumatically confronted by the hideous realities of mud and rats, by the horrifying screams of the wounded, by the mounting deaths of comrades, by the gas and stench of the trenches in France and Belgium, by the furnace and fury of the North African deserts, and then by the grim catastrophe that was Gallipoli. Yet we remained cravenly loyal to the Empire, right up until that fateful second week in February 1942, when Singapore was over-run by Emperor Hirohito’s Imperial Forces. The fall of Singapore abruptly taught Australians that their security dependence on the British was now misplaced. But instead of choosing independence, they turned to the United States of America, eventually framing their alliance with this latest ‘great and powerful friend’ in the ambiguous terms of the ANZUS treaty that came into force a decade after what has been rightly described as the ‘bloody shambles’ of Singapore.

*The price of this confected arrangement with the USA is that Australia has been involved in every American war ever since. And it’s not just America’s wars that we are eager to get into. We must never forget – ‘lest we forget’ – that this has come at immense cost to the country in terms of blood and treasure. Regardless, Australia continues to cast itself as a belligerent nation, oblivious to the very idea that we have a sacred duty to ‘give peace a chance.’ Whenever our great and powerful ally calls on us – and sometimes even before they call on us – we are more than ready and willing to leap to America’s side, whether it be on the Korean Peninsula, throughout the terrible years and proxy wars of the Cold War era, in Vietnam, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Syria and in other clandestine conflicts about which the Australian public*

rarely hears. And now we have a Minister for Defence who wants to capitalise on Australia's proclivity for going to other people's wars by making the country a major arms exporting nation – including, it must be noted, exporting arms to Saudi Arabia. We have a Prime Minister who has recently announced that his government will outlay half a billion dollars on enlarging the National War Memorial in Canberra – effectively celebrating war rather than interrogating it as tragedy. Meanwhile Australian war veterans continue to suffer with inadequately funded post-service medical and psychiatric services.

There are some signal diagnoses of Australia's embrace of war as a national pastime, as if it's some kind of sport, like footy or cricket. Geoffrey Blainey told us that it was because we are tyrannised by the distance between us and nearly all our sister nations in the so-called 'Anglosphere' (Britain, Canada, and the United States – with of course New Zealand being close, even as we try hard to forget it's there, because they defeat us regularly at rugby, or, more importantly, generously offer refuge to the asylum seekers we are brutally incarcerating on Manus and Nauru). David Walker nailed it better by showing that Australia is a nation within whose collective consciousness culturally entrenched anxieties fester, like abscesses on the body politic, about our geopolitical proximity to Asia and Asians. Allan Gyngell has pointed to our related 'fear of abandonment': a deep seated sense that unless we consistently prove our abject loyalty to great and powerful allies we'll be ripe for attack or invasion; a fear that we are alone in an alien region and a threatening world. Meanwhile, Marilyn Lake has shown how the extraordinary – and growing – national enthusiasm for celebrating ANZAC Day says much about the jingoistic militarisation of our history, particularly since the time of John Howard.

Yet for all our cultural cringing and geopolitical fearfulness we are simultaneously a truculent nation, arrogating to ourselves the title of middle power, expecting the international community to gratefully bestow us a seat in global forums like the UN Security Council and the UN's Human Rights Council. What we don't interrogate is precisely what kind of middle power we are. Instead it is simply taken for granted, by the majority of our policy makers and commentators, that, in the words of Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant: *'Australia is a middle power. We are manifestly not a great power; nor, however, are we small or insignificant.'* This belief is worrying because it is indicative of a lack of a national self-awareness about what kind of country we are, and how we might be regarded in our region, and internationally. This is actually dangerous for the country's security. Interrogating the middle power assumption underlying Australian foreign policy is a matter of urgency.

### **Locating middle powers**

In the scholarly literature there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a middle power. I submit, however, that it's possible to identify three categories of states that claim the mantle of middle power status.

#### *Category 1: Dependent Middle Powers*

Whatever influence these states are able to exercise in regional and global forums is a direct consequence of their alliance with a big power. Without such an alliance they have little or no influence. Like small kids in a schoolyard, they fawn around the big kids, accruing status so long as the big kids tolerate them, or find them useful.

#### *Category 2: Regional Middle Powers*

These are relatively small states, that on their own lack regional or global standing, but when they cluster together into regional groupings they are able to benefit from a collective status in regional and global affairs. Member of the European Union (the

EU) are of this category, as are, perhaps, the ten states within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Outside such regional groupings individual member states lack influence, but within the groupings they acquire greater degrees of influence than they would otherwise enjoy.

*Category 3: Middle Powers as Global Citizens*

This category embraces states that, despite their relatively small economies and limited military power, attract attention internationally for being what we can refer to as ‘global citizens.’ As they saying goes, they effectively punch above their weight. Norway, for example, is sometimes viewed in this light by states in the European Union (of which it is *not* a member) and, more importantly, in the United Nations. Its record of human rights advocacy (for example in regard to Myanmar), along with its leadership in negotiations to counter the stock piling of nuclear weapons, are examples of actions that attract the high regard of the international community and influence it accordingly.

There is another quality of middle powers that have achieved global influence that merits our attention. I refer to this as their *governance integrity*. By this I mean their records of effective domestic (or internal) public policy – for example, in the provision of high quality health care, excellent education systems (e.g., Finland), the prudent cultivation of sovereign wealth funds, and their highly effective redistributive welfare programs – these things win for them high international approbation.

My view is that, this third category of middle powers, are the real middle powers, achieving international kudos and respect *in their own right*. They are not reliant on relations with other states to gift them status in regional and global affairs. *Dependent* middle powers and *regional* middle powers are reliant on alliances with other, bigger states to provide them with recognition in regional and global forums.

They are not independent middle power global citizens. For this reason I suggest they are ‘fake middle powers’ (if I may adopt a Trumpism).

### **Australia**

Australia’s claims to (or assumption of) middle power status, I suggest, is entirely related to its alliance with the USA. This is not to say that there haven’t been glimmerings of the country being accorded international recognition as a good global citizen. Right at the beginning of Indonesia’s independence that country’s rulers regarded Australia as Indonesia’s best friend in the world – up until 1949. Then the relationship went down hill (and has more or less remained down hill ever since). In 1977 Malcolm Fraser earned considerable international respect, in Africa and beyond, when he stood up to Margaret Thatcher by locking in economic and sporting sanctions against the South African apartheid regime. As the great Nelson Mandela noted, Fraser’s intervention was absolutely vital in smashing the chains of the hideous apartheid system. In 1979, at the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Lusaka, Mr Fraser was again instrumental in bringing about the end of white minority rule in what was then Rhodesia, winning respect for Australia across Africa. In 1989 Gareth Evans won real acclaim for Australia in the United Nations, when he persuaded the UN to mount an international campaign to enforce a regime change in Cambodia, ridding it of the invidious Khmer Rouge.

However, despite these brief moments of real diplomatic achievement, *Australia remains the archetypical dependent middle power*. When John Howard *allegedly* described Australia’s importance in the Asia Pacific as the United States’ ‘deputy sheriff’ – *if* he said that, and there is some debate about it – he was articulating an Australian national imagining that seriously impedes its standing in global politics. Moreover, President George W. Bush compounded this delusional

national imagining by declaring that Australia in fact was America's *sheriff* in the region, not its deputy!

For all various Australian governments' misplaced ambitions for the country to be represented on the UN Security Council, to be welcomed into the G20, or to join the UN Human Rights Council, for example, or for it to be recognized as the founder of something like APEC (Bob Hawke) or an Asia Pacific Community (Kevin Rudd), the fact remains that this country is not seen as a particularly good or effective global citizen. First and foremost we are seen as an appendage of the United States' security arrangements in the Asia Pacific – including its extended nuclear deterrence. Without America we are not viewed as holding much sway at all, in the Asia Pacific, or in the wider world. 'Down under' has more than one meaning.

Can this be turned around? Can Australia be transformed from being a dependent, that is, a 'fake middle power,' to become a middle power that achieves respect and influence as a good global citizen? I think it can, but it will take at least three initial steps to achieve this goal. First, it must extricate itself from the ANZUS alliance. Second, it must address its lack of (domestic) governance integrity. Third, it must align itself with like-minded, peace-oriented states in a regional and global concert of middle powers. Permit me to briefly consider each of these steps.

### **Extricating ourselves from ANZUS**

In his passionately argued book, *Dangerous Allies*, Malcolm Fraser makes the very important point that *the America with which Australia signed the ANZUS treaty in 1951 is not the America of today*. Over the many decades of the ANZUS treaty's existence there have been a profound changes in the social structure, the economy, the collapsing political system, and the fragmenting culture of the United States. This is evident in the election of Donald Trump to the presidency – but let us not make the



mistake of blaming it all on Trump. Trump is a lurid *symptom* of contemporary America's negative transformation; he is not its cause.

But extricating ourselves from ANZUS won't be easy. A great deal – some may say *all* – of our security policy making, our acquisition of much of our defense materiel, our access to American and the 'Five Eyes' intelligence networks, our defence forces training programs, and our security policy-making is *interoperable* with the United States' military. We host – some believe naively – highly sensitive and secretive American communications bases such as Pine Gap near Alice Springs, and the Harold E. Holt US naval base on the north-west coast.

In short, Australia is deeply entrenched under the American defence umbrella, and within the US military-industrial complex. Getting us out of this appallingly complicated and increasingly dangerous entanglement will require serious and strong political leadership and high-level bureaucratic and defence force coordination and commitment. It will also require a sustained and transparent civil society movement to educate the Australian public and keep up the pressure on recalcitrant politicians. For sure, the Americans will resist any such move and will want to punish us if we proceed with it. There will be a price to pay if Australia is to demand independence from the USA. However, it is arguably a necessary cost and one that Australia will surely benefit from in the medium and longer terms.

### **Addressing our lack of governance integrity**

The second step that must be taken to rid Australia of its 'fake middle power' status relates to governance integrity in this country. I'm going to be blunt here: Australia is seriously lacking in governance integrity. This is most shamefully obvious in the relentless marginalisation of Indigenous Australians – Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The abject failure of public policy over so many decades to eliminate

racism and ameliorate the sufferings of our First Peoples condemns us in the eyes of many states in our region, and globally – *especially when we have the temerity to criticise them for their human rights failings.*

There are numerous other aspects of Australia’s governance that are equally problematic – the relentlessly on-going maltreatment of asylum seekers, the cultural, social and economic ravages of neoliberal economic policy, the ideologically backward thinking of our politicians, the country’s international reputation as a laggard state on climate change, the failure of our political leadership to nurture the early promise of multiculturalism, the fact that the country lacks a charter of human rights, our ramshackle constitution, our system of *unrepresentative* government, and our seriously outdated federal system ... The list could go on. These examples are clear evidence that Australia’s system of governance seriously lacks integrity. We are turning inward; we have become a complacent country that lost its way thirty or forty years ago.

### **Aligning with a concert of like-minded, peace-oriented middle powers**

The third and final step I want to outline for Australia to transcend its dependent middle power status – and which assumes the two preceding steps – is for an independent Australia to work in concert with similar states with similar security interests, to act together to achieve a world at peace with itself. Australia has a history that it can draw on. For example, Australia’s External Affairs Minister in the Chifley government, Dr H.V. Evatt, was extraordinarily active at the foundation of the United Nations in the late 1940s. As John Murphy has shown in his biography of Evatt, ‘... the question [at the making of the UN] was how to ensure the great powers did not dominate the new organisation; they must recognise the equality of states, allowing fair representation to smaller states.’ Evatt fought tenaciously to curtail the threats to

world peace posed by the emerging superpowers – winning for Australia, for a brief time, the admiration of many leading international commentators, as well as supporters of the supreme ideal of a world living in perpetual peace.

It's time for a far-sighted Australian government to pick up that dropped baton. As Paul Kennedy has noted in his history of the United Nations: 'Change is not impossible, but the burden is on the reform-minded critics of the present system [...] to propose changes that might work.' Australia should be once again – like Dr Evatt was three quarters of a century ago – at the forefront in advancing reforms to the United Nations that can work far more effectively to bring about a peaceful world.

While Australian foreign policy should be primarily focused on the Asia Pacific region, it must not lose sight of the rest of the world. In searching for like-minded middle powers, with which it could act in concert, Australia should adopt a two-stage process. It should look first to the Scandinavian states – especially Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. Simultaneously, it needs to comprehensively overhaul its diplomatic relationship with Canada. New Zealand is ignored by too many of the grossly inflated egos that populate our political parties – New Zealand's diplomacy in the South Pacific, for example, is infinitely superior to Australia's.

The second stage should see us reaching out to states in our region – South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, to begin with. We should be watching developments in Malaysia, especially when Anwar Ibrahim becomes Prime Minister. Improving the relationship with Indonesia should be part of this diplomatic journey. And in India, when a reformed Congress Party returns to power, Australia will have foreign and security policy concerns in common with a progressive Indian government – concerns, that is, other than obeying an American demand for us all to join in a Washington strategy of containing China.

One other straw in the historical wind that should encourage Australia to be part of a concert of like-minded middle powers for peace, is the early nonaligned movement, that came briefly into being among newly independent states in the 1950s under the leadership Prime Minister Nehru of India. Shashi Tharoor notes that the ‘newly independent nations [...] saw in nonalignment a strategy for leveraging their material weakness on the world stage.’ He goes on to note: ‘The undoubted skill of Indian diplomats from Nehru on down in developing and articulating their position meant that, through most of the 1950s, Nehru’s India enjoyed an international stature out of all proportion to either its military strength or its material means.’ That is a template for an Australia that seeks recognition as a *true* middle power – for an Australia that is becoming a valued global citizen.

The concert of middle powers that I am speculating about here should draw from the agenda that was initiated by Evatt in the fledgling United Nations and by Nehru in the early stages of the nonaligned movement. The first item on that agenda was standing up to the big powers, constraining their capacity to bully the globe in their own very narrowly conceived interests. As I like to remind my students, all big powers are dangerous. A strong concert of middle powers will impose international law on the big powers while simultaneously defending small powers, when they are in the right, while acting in conformity with the United Nations doctrine of the responsibility to protect – intervening when those small states are either incapable or unwilling (or both) to guarantee the security and wellbeing of their citizens.

There are five major initial issues on which the concert must lead the world in mobilizing strong and coordinated international cooperation and action: (i) climate change; (ii) ridding the world of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (as part of a comprehensive global disarmament plan); (iii) establishing an

effective and enforceable code of international law (which embraces a strong defence of human rights – especially the rights of refugees and asylum seekers the world over); (iv) eliminating global poverty; and (v) halting the spread of life-limiting and fatal diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB, etc.

There are numerous ways in which Australia could be an active participant in the kind of concert that I'm advocating here. As noted earlier, it will mean quitting our national self-imagining as a dependent – or what is in effect a mendicant – middle power. It will need to overhaul its governance system to place a high priority on human rights issues. It will need to thoroughly interrogate its past successes as a multicultural society in order to make it as genuinely cosmopolitan society. Drawing on the resources that cosmopolitanism provides us, we can initiate sustained conversations within the region and the world – conversations committed to nurturing the greatest happiness of the greatest number rights amid perpetual peace right across the globe.

## **Conclusion**

So I propose that it's time to imagine a new Australia:

- that has shed its psycho-cultural proclivity for belligerence
- that seeks to be fully and freely independent from any alliances that imperil regional or global peace
- that is a truly cosmopolitan state and society
- that can act creatively and cooperatively with like-minded middle powers to help nurture a world at peace with itself
- that is the enemy of no one and a friend of all

## References

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