

Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee



WATCHING BRIEF 23-3: THE MILITARISATION OF FOREIGN POLICY

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government, we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

May 2023

The rapid moves to expand the military aspects of Australia's foreign policy are deeply concerning. This Brief outlines the extent of the changes being undertaken, and offers some reflections and suggestions for practical action in response.

Foreign Policy Developments

The story of Australia's relations with the rest of the world is mixed. It has included significant contributions to international efforts for peace, notably through the United Nations and peacekeeping. There have been constructive initiatives to build links with countries of our region (e.g., Colombo Plan, ASEAN, Pacific Forum) but at the same time there have been numerous examples of Australia joining in wars and armed conflict in support of the UK and USA over the years, in areas well beyond our shores.

The past decade has seen a marked emphasis on intelligence and security, and the extension of military budgets at the expense of non-military spending. This has been enhanced by the increasing intrusion of military influence in our universities, and the expansion of influence by overseas arms manufacturers to influence public policy and recruit Australians to join their projects. The outsourcing of public service functions to US ex-military staff, has added to this trend.

Most recently, the creation of AUKUS and the QUAD (with bipartisan support by Coalition and Labor) has meant a sharp surge in military-related plans and expenditure, a flurry of rhetoric against China as a threat, and a re-affirmation of alliances in the Anglosphere made mainly by men. The Defence Strategic Review has reinforced the integration of military forces into the American strategies to maintain western dominance and 'rules', and the purchase of nuclear submarines has brought Australia closer to long-range projects that will stretch our resources at great cost and well beyond the range of necessary defence of Australia. The voices of dissent in the political debate seem limited to the Greens and some independents, supported by NGOs including the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN), the Campaign for War Powers Reform and the campaign for the signing of the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty.

Responses by civil society

A summary of points that have emerged in response to these initiatives:

- There is no current military threat to Australia to warrant such an increase in military spending at the expense of needed spending on climate mitigation, housing, hospitals and education. The substantial switch towards military spending distorts our economy.
- Public opinion is divided about the threat from China, with many seeing opportunities for more constructive engagement in what is a complex relationship.
- The decisions on the change to our defence posture have been developed largely in secret, with inadequate public debate or Parliamentary oversight.
- The statements about Australia listening to the region and allowing nations to be free from coercion are undermined by the commitment to contain China.
- Countries in Asia and the Pacific have concerns about our plans, fearing they will upset the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Nuclear-Free Pacific Zone.
- The new policies will make us more subservient to the US alliance, and reduce our sovereignty. They will funnel billions of Australian dollars through US and UK defence industries, lead to the stationing of more US forces on our soil.
- Australia will have little choice about the use of our US sourced nuclear submarines – the US will not sell submarines to us if we do not agree to use them in America’s interests (e.g., in a war with China).
- Australia should be working to avoid war with China, and for a peaceful and prosperous region. Concerns about China need to be voiced without ‘sleepwalking into war’.
- The disposal of nuclear waste has not yet been solved, and Australia will be expected to find solutions in the face of significant resistance from Indigenous people and local communities.

Foreign Minister’s Speech

On 17 April 2023 Penny Wong addressed the National Press Club. She emphasized the appointment of a first nations ambassador as part of the re-focus of diplomacy on connecting with peoples of the region through their Indigenous communities. Some of her main points were:

- We can use our values and interests in dialogue to maintain stability, lower tensions and enable effective change.
- China’s interests may not always be ours, but it is our major trading partner and exerts significant influence in the region.
- Australia can contribute through programs of aid, diplomacy, and climate change, as well as modernising defence forces.
- More resources will be allocated for DFAT to reverse its loss of them in recent years,
- AUKUS is a way to strengthen our role in the region while maintaining our commitments to multilateral efforts for peace.
- America is our greatest ally and can be a force for stability and prosperity in our region.

Responses to that talk included:

Gem Romauld (*ICAN Australia*, 18 April 2023). Penny Wong said the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is of ‘substantive normative value’, and could spur more progress towards disarmament. At the same time she confirmed that any nuclear-powered submarines visiting Australia will not carry nuclear weapons.

Joanna Wallis (Adelaide University) and Gordon Peake (Georgetown University) (*The Conversation*, 18 April 2023). Penny Wong spoke of the region requiring ‘a response of unprecedented coordination and ambition in our statecraft’ – through aid, investment, security, diplomacy, and military capability. We believe that individuals, not policies, are the most important determinants of whether our statecraft succeeds.

Professor Wanning Sun (UTS Communications, in *Crikey*, 20 April 2023). Australian journalists have adopted a ‘cold war’ mindset on China. This reflects a gradual move to a securitisation narrative, leading to alarmist reports of a coming war with China. In contrast, domestic policies receive much more media coverage, focussing on politicians and powerful institutions. On foreign policy the media reinforce the interests of the security and defence establishments.

Mary Kostakidis (former SBS broadcaster, in *The Canberra Times*, 21 April 2023). Penny Wong’s speech at the Press Club was gentle in tone but had an underlying message that portrayed the US as committed to multipolarity, when it is clear that the US wishes to dominate the global agenda. Our record of joining in US-inspired conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the commitment to AUKUS, give our neighbours little doubt about where we stand.

Joe Camilleri (Politics, La Trobe University, *Pearls & Irritations* 23 April 2023). Penny Wong’s focus on China’s coercive approach omits reference to America’s overwhelming presence with allies to contain China. The conclusion is that Australia is comfortable with its integration into US planning to maintain dominance in the region. There is no analysis of the Taiwan situation, and no plans to promote peace and stability, especially through the UN, the G20 and the Asian security architecture. Pacific priorities for climate change and nuclear disarmament are ignored, and even plans for investment and trade give no indication of consulting the countries of the region.

Defence Strategic Review

The Review was conducted by Professor the Hon Stephen Smith (former Minister) and former Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Sir Angus Houston AK AFC. The public version of the Review was tabled on 24 April 2023 by the Prime Minister.

<https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>

The Review offered 6 priorities:

- The first priority or pillar of the AUKUS agreement is acquiring nuclear-powered submarines.
- Second is improving our precision strike capability. Guided weapons and explosives are in short supply, in part thanks to the war in Ukraine. The government also plans to invest in developing the ability to manufacture advanced long-range guided weapons onshore. It is expected that we will produce licensed versions of United States’ sourced weapons systems.
- The third priority is to support the second pillar of the AUKUS- focussing on acceleration of technology such as artificial intelligence, hypersonics and longer-range precision guided munitions.
- Fourth is the redevelopment of Australia’s northern bases, from Cocos (Keeling) Islands ranging to the air bases and other defence infrastructure across northern Australia.
- Fifth is investment in recruitment and retention of ADF personnel.
- Sixth is an emphasis on improving relations with the region, with a particular focus on Pacific Island nations.

Responses to the Review

Adam Lockyer (Macquarie University, in *The Conversation* 25 April 2023) identified three different issues that influenced defence thinking over many years – (a) defence of the continent, (b) favourable balance of power in our region (with UK or US as allies), and (c) defence against terrorism, failed states, disease, and climate change. The Review reflects all three by its focus on securing the waters around Australia, seeking long-range missiles, and reliance on the US to resist the rise of China.

Matt McDonald (Queensland University, in *The Conversation* 25 April 2023) is concerned that the Review did not address climate change adequately given the threat of climate refugees caused by droughts, rains, and loss of arable land. Humanitarian help is an increasing need and will involve military resources.

Karen Barlow (*The Canberra Times*, 25 April 2023) said that the Review calls for the security strategy to be changed urgently as the country is no longer protected by geography from aggressors. This may lead to a separate natural disaster agency to handle fires and floods so that the ADF can resume its proper role in defending Australia.

Lowy Institute Polling in 2022

China- US conflict over Taiwan

Australians continued to be concerned about China and the potential for conflict in the Taiwan Strait. More than six in ten Australians (65%) said China's foreign policy poses a critical threat to Australia's vital interests, a 29-point increase from 2017. Concern about military conflict between the United States and China — the world's two superpowers — has been on an upward trajectory in Australia. 64% of Australians said 'a military conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan' posed a critical threat, a 12-point increase from 2021 and 29 points higher than in 2020.

China as a military and security threat

A substantial number of Australians were concerned about China becoming a military threat to Australia. Setting a new record by some margin, three-quarters of Australians (75%) said it is very or somewhat likely that China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years, an increase of 29 points from 2018. As well as a military threat, many Australians saw China as a security threat. Two-thirds of Australians (63%) said China is 'more of a security threat' to Australia, while 33% said China is 'more of an economic partner' to Australia.

Australia remaining neutral

While Australians were increasingly concerned about potential conflict in the region, a bare majority (51%) said that Australia should remain neutral in the event of a military conflict between China and the United States. This figure fell six points from 2021. Almost half (46%) said Australia should support the United States in such a conflict, a five-point increase from 2021. Only 1% said Australia should support China. As in 2021, there was a generational difference on this question. More than half the population aged over 45 (55%) said Australia should support the United States, while only 36% of Australians aged 18–44 agree with that approach. Younger Australians were more likely to say Australia should remain neutral, with six in ten Australians aged 18–44 (60%) choosing this position. Only 43% of Australians aged 45 and over preferred neutrality.

Quaker Perspectives

The Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee (QPLC) made a submission to the Defence Strategic Review, summarized as follows:

1. The major areas of our concern are the expansion of production and export of weapons, increased participation in preparations for war (e.g., RIMPAC, Pitch Black, Pacific Vanguard, Talisman Sabre), the commitment to offensive strategies rather than territorial defence, and the focus on bilateral rather than multilateral relationships. We have reached a stage where the costs of waging war have exceeded the capacity of people and the planet to survive.
2. We have doubts about Australia's official defence and foreign policies, and about the alarmist commentary by some public officials and media to confront China over Taiwan. Public opinion shown in Lowy Institute Poll in 2021 reflected this growing concern. 57% opposed military conflict with China, and 72% said good relations are possible with both US and China.
3. Australia's support for AUKUS is misplaced and should be reviewed and reversed. Its purpose is contrary to the real needs of defence policy, is too closely linked to US global military strategy, and reduces our capacity for independent approaches. It also increases the likelihood of Australia being drawn into a war with China.

One implication of the Review is the need for amending the Defence Act 1903 to take account of the full range of military activities required to defend Australia, ensure the 'interoperability' of Defence with international partners, and improve the security of military capabilities. In relation to the Defence Act, QPLC put forward comments to Parliament, emphasising the need to ensure adequate supervision by Parliament, and expressing concern at the intrusion of international arms dealers into the Defence procurement policies. This is all the more important now that Parliament has rejected the proposal for the decision to enter a war to be driven by Parliament rather than the Executive.

QPLC also draws attention to IPAN's report on its Inquiry into attitudes to Australia's current policies - see *Watching Brief 22-5*: www.quakersaustralia.info/concerns/peace

The trend towards greater war preparation is of great concern, with insufficient evidence of non-military initiatives to prevent war. War has significant negative impact on the populations involved whatever the outcome and should be avoided at all costs. Quakers have a strong tradition of opposing war and seeking to remove its causes. Silent vigils for peace are a feature of Quaker witness over the years, and these can be part of the response today. We cannot rely alone on traditional methods of lobbying in an environment where the major parties are subject to 'state capture'. Non-violent direct action may be called for, and protests directed more specifically at influencing companies, local government, and NGOs.

Suggestions for Action:

- Write to the Foreign Minister reinforcing the need for non-military initiatives through diplomacy, aid, and people-to-people contacts that the government will undertake to build more positive relations with the Asia-Pacific region.
- Write to the Prime Minister to ask what measures Australia is taking to de-escalate tension between the US and China, given the catastrophic scenarios of a nuclear war breaking out.
- Write to MPs and Senators to press for the government to sign and ratify the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

- Work with NGOs committed to peacemaking, support for refugees, climate change projects, development education, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Seek opportunities for conversation with Chinese Australians about the impact of current policies toward China.
- Join IPAN <https://ipan.org.au/> or their local branch of the Australian Anti- AUKUS Coalition <https://antiaukuscoalition.org/contact/>

Canberra
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