

## **To the joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs , Defence and Trade, Parliament House, Canberra ACT**

Email: [www.aph.gov.au](http://www.aph.gov.au)

*Reference: Inquiry into the benefits and risks of a Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement, as a basis of planning for, and funding of, Australian Defence capability.*

### **SUBMISSION ON BEHALF OF AUSTRALIANS FOR WAR POWERS REFORM**

At the outset, we believe this is a thoroughly bad idea. We agree with Richard Tanter (Submission No. 14) and his conclusion that the existing degree of bipartisanship inhibits the capacity for systematic consideration of Australia's strategic interests and a foundation for its defence. A formal Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement would, he stated, “create a policy environment even more inimical to democratic accountability of government based on public consideration of the interests of Australian people”.

#### **Procurement proposals and decisions should arise from a sound strategic basis and doctrine**

Over past decades we have seen one Defence White Paper after another exhibiting confusion and inconsistencies as to strategic purpose and the means of its achievement. In one essential respect there has been consistency, namely where the US goes so too do we. But that policy has committed us here and there, from Vietnam to Afghanistan, to Iraq and Syria - the last three being beyond our region of direct strategic interest, and the first involving a mistaken analysis of strategic and political reality in that theatre. All four of these military commitments have served to distort and misdirect force structure development and left the defence forces without the capacity to deal independently with contingencies closer to home. Weapons and systems procurements have been concerned primarily with a notion of 'inter-operability' with US systems and forces which leaves us in critical respects with, as it were, only half a pair of trousers if the US were not to be there when needed.

Looking ahead from now and for decades we are facing major strategic changes which have given rise to a vigorous debate about the US alliance and

whether it is possible to balance our interests in that regard with our trade interests in China and Asia generally, and whether Australia can or should adopt an independent foreign and defence policy. The options crudely are: 1. being “joined at the hip” with the US in the alliance; 2. an independent policy within the framework of the alliance; and 3. an independent policy. As the political debate across parties and internet groups is widely divergent on these options the prospect of settling a formal bipartisan defence agreement as a basis for procurements is practically negligible.

To illustrate: if defence policy is to lock-in with future US military campaigns, whenever and wherever as now, there may be an argument for acquiring as many expensive F-35A combat aircraft to supplement US formations; for acquiring as many expensive submarines with inter-oceanic capabilities; for expensive DDG guided missile destroyers equipped with SM-6 missiles, and for acquiring even bigger Hawkei combat and reconnaissance land vehicles than as now ordered. Short of that, practically speaking, we may be better off with less complex fighter aircraft, fewer submarines, faster land platforms and smaller, more mobile frigates, corvettes and patrol boats; The point here, without getting too bogged down with specifics, is that defence equipment (capital and otherwise) is hugely expensive. By trying to meet inter-oceanic maritime and inter-continental air contingencies, along with the US, as implied by alliance commitments, we are precluded from equipping the military with all that might be required for meeting national defence contingencies in our region on our own.

To repeat: there will be widely varying views on these matters in the coming decades (note: procurement decisions often take decades to materialise on the ground). If decisions, whenever taken, are not made contestable in a wider political context because of some prescribed doctrine of bipartisanship the public (that is, the electorate) will be badly let down.

### **Realistic perspective on appropriate levels of defence procurement**

It is essential too to have a realistic perspective of the parameters of defence procurement, their purpose in foreseeable contingencies, and the likelihood that the electorate as a whole may not share these perspectives similarly. Consider the China question: it seems assumed that we could over these decades meet that contingency, however it might arise, with detailed planning

and a representative collective of lethal military items. On paper that might look alright. But the reality is that by 2030, not far from now, China will have a GDP 25 times greater than ours. Already its current military expenditure is 25 times greater than ours. If we were to rely solely on the US's extended nuclear deterrence, as have both South Korea or Japan in the face of recent North Korean threats, we may find, as they might yet find, that the US had gone further down the road towards a unilateral doctrine of "America First" - in which case we would greatly regret having believed we were "joined at the hip" and not having put diplomacy first. Such a disparity of forces, and recent technological advances, make single expensive military items - ships, planes, missiles and cyber facilities - highly vulnerable to the latest unconventional attack capabilities, leaving a relatively small force like ours with next to nothing for a counter-attack. Are these the eggs we wish to put in our basket? Are we on the wrong track anyway? It could take years to achieve bipartisanship on such questions.

### **Who will benefit from the proposed BADA?**

Which raises the next, basic question: where is the drive towards low contestability of defence decisions coming from? Much has been written in the public domain lately about the disproportionate influence of the military/intelligence complex on Australia's defence and foreign policy, circumscribing Australia's diplomatic options within and beyond the region. Informed discussion on these matters can be found, for example, in John Menadue's internet blog: "Pearls and Irritations" ([www.pearlsandirritations.com](http://www.pearlsandirritations.com)) and on our website: Australians for War Powers Reform (<http://www.warpowersreform.org.au>) These sites are mentioned because the base for policy development in this area is relatively narrow compared with the interests of political parties, the media, universities and other groups in the wider community. Yet the latter, as explained by Richard Tanter, are being effectively excluded from participation, both by the withholding of critical information and from an unresponsiveness in affording opportunities for better than perfunctory consultation. Even Parliament itself is being denied the essential information required to examine and monitor this area of government. There has not been a proper debate in Parliament on the 17 years long war-without-end in Afghanistan and the highly dubious, almost as long, campaign in Iraq, and its more recent extension into Syria - a situation in terms of public accountability that must be considered wholly unsatisfactory.

The greater danger is that decision-making in relation to defence, and decisions to go to war, will continue to remain entirely in the hands of a select group of politicians and military advisers, as has been the case disastrously since Vietnam, and particularly in relation to Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Singularly and collectively the above factors, and others, are sufficient to illustrate the constraining effect on the development of an appropriate defence policy and relevant procurement systems that would follow from the adoption of a Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement. AWPR does not support this proposal and recommends that it be dropped.

## **Submission prepared by Andrew Farran on behalf of Australians for War Powers Reform**

### **Australians for War Powers Reform**

*Australians for War Powers Reform (AWPR) emerged out of the Campaign for an Iraq War Inquiry, established in 2012. That campaign called for an independent inquiry into the reasons behind Australia's participation in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and to draw out what lessons can be learned for the future. Australians for War Powers Reform takes these important questions of the original campaign forward into a renewed national examination of the original War Powers.*

*AWPR believe that any decision to take Australia into international armed conflict should be made by our Parliament, not by the Prime Minister or the Executive alone. We aim to create a climate of opinion among the public and opinion leaders supporting War Powers reform.*

*We continue to campaign also for independent reviews of Australia's wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, along with public reports on all aspects of them.*

