



ANZUS call to arms would fail the pub test

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Bob Carr

In the East China Sea, where five islands are disputed between China and Japan, military aircraft could collide in the crowded skies. A ship could be sunk by accident. Roaming fishing fleets and cruise liners complicate the scenarios.

Monday's report by two academics, Nick Bisley and Brendan Taylor, shows how easily conflict could flare. With the US committed to Japan, would the ANZUS Treaty propel Australia into war? It is a war that few Australians would think was in our interests.

Every minister for Foreign Affairs is briefed on what to say if asked "Does ANZUS apply?" The department suggests the Minister should say, first, "That's a hypothetical question." And, second, "The ANZUS Treaty commits us to consult."

In 2004, Alexander Downer tried to cool the idea ANZUS would oblige us to fight in the Taiwan Strait. He faced heavy criticism. On June 12 this year, Defence Minister Johnston was asked about China and Japan. He said he didn't believe ANZUS would apply. There was no criticism.

It was as if Australians regarded his view as common sense. Any alternative would, as they say, fail the pub test.

In fact, suggesting Australia lend a frigate to such a conflict would probably be viewed as being as nutty and far-fetched as the notion that we should have sent the navy to help Britain in the Falklands.

In 1963, Prime Minister Menzies directly asked President Kennedy whether US assistance under ANZUS would be immediate if Australian forces were attacked by Indonesia. Kennedy said that officials would consult. In 1964 the Australian government sent Arthur Tange, Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, to Washington to ask what would happen if there were a conflict between our forces and Indonesia. Would ANZUS be triggered? Tange himself wrote, "The consultations with the Americans brought home to the Australian government that any US support to Australia with combat troops was neither guaranteed in advance nor unconditional".

It was not in the US's interests to antagonise Indonesia. They let Australia know ANZUS would not apply.



In my recently published diaries I record advice from Dennis Richardson, former head of DFAT and currently the head of the Department of Defence. We discussed whether at annual talks with the US in 2012 we should announce a new burst of strategic co-operation with the US – more B-52 flights and ship visits.

This was one year after the headline-grabbing announcement about marines in the Northern Territory. Richardson agreed this was not the time for more such initiatives. "Our interests are different from a great power's," he said. When it comes to the East China Sea it is this notion that should guide us.

The US is a global power with a defence treaty with Japan. We are not a great power but a G20 member of middle power with a strong economic stake in China's peaceful and prosperous rise. We are warm to Japan and its values but have reservations about nationalist currents in its politics. We are not an ally.

With deft diplomacy, Australia should let the US know it is not in our interests to slide into war with our major trading partner if there's a flare-up about uninhabited islands that, in an ideal world, would be part of a maritime national park. Or, as a second-best solution, islands that would slumber under the benign neglect both China and Japan applied until Japan unilaterally changed their status by nationalising them in 2012.

Both our ally the US and our friend Japan should be quietly coached that Australia's interests on this question may be at odds with their own, although they can count on us exerting every bit of influence we have with China to urge caution and restraint. We'll have more influence in Beijing, anyway, if we are respected for a neutrality based on the view ANZUS is not an automatic call to arms but, yes Minister, an invitation to consult.

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