



## ROLLING THE DICE: AUSTRALIA'S GAMBLE ON AN 'INTEROPERABLE' ANZUS ALLIANCE

William Baulch

### SYNOPSIS

*The push for seamless interoperability with US forces threatens Australia's security and the stability of the region.*

The current restructuring of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to fit in with United States (US) operations is compromising Australia's security. The changes make Australia overly reliant on the US for defence if it comes under threat from a foreign power. They also reduce Australia's capacity to lead regional interventions and peacekeeping missions, which are vital to Australia's long-term defence interests.

On 25 April, the US approved Australia to become the first foreign operator of AIM-120D Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM). The US Defense Security Cooperation Agency, in its statement concerning the US\$1.22 billion sale, claimed the missiles will "[increase interoperability with the US Air Force](#)". The deal complements the delivery of twelve EA-18G 'Growler' electronic attack jets in July 2015, which completed the Royal Australian Air Force's (RAAF) transformation into a miniature clone of the US Navy's air wing. According to retired Chief of Air Force Air Marshal [Geoff Brown](#), the Growlers advance the RAAF's goal of becoming "seamlessly interoperable" with US forces. But an air force designed to fit in with US operations is not necessarily an air force capable of meeting Australia's security interests.

Australia and the US have different strategic objectives. The mission of the [US Navy](#) is "to maintain, train and equip combat-ready Naval forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression and

maintaining freedom of the seas". In contrast, the primary role of the RAAF is to defend Australia's airspace and northern approaches. The Australian government clearly believes that in the event of an attack on Australia, these two objectives will coincide and the RAAF will operate alongside the US Navy's air wing. However, history shows Australia should avoid being dependent on its 'great and powerful friends'.

A core Australian strategic interest has always been to prevent major powers from establishing a military presence in the northern approaches to the continent. Yet in the 1880s, the British allowed Germany to occupy New Guinea because London's interests were served by appeasing the rising European power. The British decision demonstrated to the Australian colonies that London would sacrifice their safety for its own security. This drove the colonies to federate and to establish an independent defence force.

The situation was repeated after the First World War when the British allowed Japan to occupy Germany's Pacific colonies despite fierce Australian resistance. These territories brought the Japanese presence thousands of kilometres south, causing widespread concern in Australia. London eased fears of Japanese imperialism by continuing to guarantee Australia's security, and Australia's military forces remained structured to fight alongside the British in a conventional European war. But when war did break out, the British abandoned the Pacific in favour of self-preservation, leaving Australia exposed to Japanese attacks.

Overreliance on the US is similarly perilous. Washington has failed to aid Australia before. In 1965, the ADF was deployed to Borneo to confront Indonesian expansionism. Yet the US played little role in the conflict for fear that it would tip Indonesia into the global communist camp. In the modern era, when US interests remain global but its capabilities are increasingly stretched, Australia would be naive to structure its defence forces around the expectation of US assistance.

Even if the Australian government is willing to gamble Australia's security on the alliance, there are other compelling reasons to maintain independent military capabilities. Australia's northern approaches are screened by a series of weak, developing states. These countries are at recurring risk of collapse, which could lead them to become sources of refugees, havens for international criminals, or incubators of disease. As these challenges can quickly become transnational, Australia has an interest in ensuring these states do not fail - an interest the US may not share.

Australia has borne the greatest share of the burden for preserving stability in the Southwest Pacific. For instance, Australia organised and led the 1999 peacekeeping mission to East Timor, to which the US only provided logistical and intelligence support and 'over-the-horizon' deterrence. The mission

was a success because Australia could draw on its unique and comprehensive military capabilities. Australia still requires these capabilities because it will likely have to intervene in the region again.

East Timor is far from the only neighbouring nation of concern for Australia. Bougainville is due to hold a referendum on independence from Papua New Guinea by 2020, which [may reignite the small island's bloody conflict](#). The Solomon Islands face [internal migration driven by climate change](#), threatening to recreate many of the volatile factors that prompted an Australian intervention in 2003. Archipelagic neighbours like Fiji and [Vanuatu frequently need aid in the wake of natural disasters](#). The skills the ADF requires to address these challenges risk being lost if it continues to pursue 'seamless interoperability' with US forces.

The [French experience in Mali](#) (PDF) provides a cautionary tale for Australian policy-makers. After years of close cooperation with US forces in Afghanistan, French soldiers deployed to the former West African colony found they had adopted a form of warfare that was only possible with US fire support. As the US presence in West Africa was limited, the French Army had to "de-Americanize" and abandon the "bad habits" they picked up in Afghanistan before they could carry the fight to the Islamist insurgents. The ADF, with its ongoing focus on interoperability, is in danger of repeating France's mistakes.

The task for Australian policy-makers is deciding whether future defence procurements align with Australia's national interests or facilitate interoperability. In an ideal world, all decisions concerning the ADF would fall into both categories, allowing Australia to rely on the US but maintain a force structure capable of independently providing for Australia's defence and regional stability. Yet in the realm of military strategy, such ideals often fall by the wayside. The hard realities of conflict prevail. Policy-makers must ask themselves, how much can they depend on the US to aid Australia, even in the face of war? Will American politicians choose to sacrifice American lives to protect Australian lives? Perhaps their answers to these questions will come down in favour of the alliance, in which case interoperability is the way forward. But these questions cannot be shied away from or ignored, otherwise they may have to be confronted in the most extreme of circumstances.

The decision to purchase Australia's next submarines from France rather than Japan - whose bid the [US tacitly supported](#) due to its 'interoperability' - shows the government is capable of separating Australia's national interests from the demands of the alliance. However, this decision is proving the exception to the rule. If the ADF continues to structure itself around US operations without considering the inherent risks entailed, the costs will be very high. The ADF will dwindle from a highly skilled and flexible military force to a tokenistic appendage of the US Armed Forces, with its most distinguishing feature being the Australian flag. Australia's capacity to aid its neighbours will recede

and the chance of failed states emerging in the Southwest Pacific will increase. Finally, should a regional threat develop to which the US is unable or unwilling to respond, the ADF may again find itself abandoned and ill-equipped to defend Australia. Such is the price of 'fitting in'.