

Latest Australian Foreign Policy Venture in the Middle East a Symptom of a Much Wider Problem

By James O'Neill, American Herald Tribune, 23 August 2019

The announcement by the Prime Minister that Australia would be sending a military force to the Middle East is the latest in a series of foreign policy blunders that fails to recognise Australia's foreign policy interests.

The Prime Minister has announced yet another commitment of Australian forces, this time to the Persian Gulf. A small Australian naval contingent will join British and US forces to protect shipping from what is being labeled as "Iranian aggression" in the region.

The small Australian naval contingent is of little or no military value, being far too small to have any relevant military impact upon the hundreds of ships that traverse the waterway on a daily basis. It could be sunk with minimal effort by the Iranian Navy should the latter so choose to do so.

An Australian input is therefore of purely symbolic value. The Australian government will not bother to seek Parliamentary approval for this latest military engagement. Such a gesture would in any case be purely symbolic given that the Labor Party was quick to announce its support for the Prime Minister's gesture.

Questions as to the legality or wisdom of such a military engagement will therefore be left, yet again, to the minor parties and an array of forces outside parliament. If history is any guide then those dissenting voices will be ignored, just as they were with every foolhardy Australian military engagement since Vietnam.

To the outside observer it would appear that paying obeisance to yet another foolhardy and illegal US military enterprise rates more highly than Australia's own vital interests. The usual apologists for US military activity will argue that there is no conflict between their interests and ours. Such a view is profoundly wrong, not to say in direct conflict with Australia's professed belief in and adherence to the "rules based international order."

Missing from the latest announcement of Australian military engagement in a foreign dispute is any sort of analysis as to why there is a renewed outbreak of overt hostility in the Gulf anyway. Casual and wildly inaccurate slurs against the Iranian government are no substitute for rational analysis.

The origins of the current situation, which has the potential to launch the world into a military conflict of enormous ramifications, is largely lost in the current argument of the government and its non-opposition Labor Party.

One of the most important factors leading to the current crisis was the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA, exhaustively negotiated and unanimously agreed to by the permanent members of the Security Council (including the US!) plus Germany, the European Union and Iran.

This agreement ensured that Iran would not develop a nuclear weapons capability, although any such ambition that may have existed was quashed more than a decade earlier following a religious ruling by the country's religious leadership.

One of the not so subtle ironies of the present situation is that one of Iran's most fervent enemies and an advocate of military and other action against the Islamic Republic is the non-declared by heavily armed nuclear state of Israel. That country refuses to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and refuses to allow independent inspection of its nuclear facilities. One will wait in vain for critical comment on this behaviour from either the US or Australian governments.

The Trump administration ignored the major achievement of the JCPOA, not because it was not working, as it manifestly was, but because of two dominant factors in US internal politics.

The first is the aforementioned Israeli lobby, which has a long-standing loathing of the Islamic Republic and has actively sought to undermine the JCPOA. Israel has been a strong supporter of Iranian terrorist groups that actively seek the overthrow of the Islamic government. Such activities rarely, if ever, are seen in the Australian mainstream media.

The second factor is a long-standing US distrust of the Iranian government, the origins of which can be traced back to the US/UK organized coup of the Iranian government in 1953. That coup not only overthrew a legitimate Iranian government, it led to the installation of the Shah's regime, a loyal US ally, but hardly a byword for democracy.

The Shah's regime was in turn overthrown by the Islamic revolution of 1979. The seeds of the present distrust of the Iranian government were firmly sewn at that time and have remained a central component of US foreign policy ever since.

Quite why Australia should become involved in this dispute is only explicable in terms of Australian foreign policy being dictated by US interests rather than the vital interests of Australia itself. Loyalists would strongly argue that the two countries interests were synonymous, but in that they are profoundly mistaken.

A similar blind stupidity can be seen in the Australian government's adherence to the US anti-China campaign. A number of compelling arguments can be raised against this policy. These would include for example, Australia's overwhelmingly dominant reliance upon the Chinese market for its export trade (nearly three times the value of the next largest market, that of Japan).

Other factors pointing to the importance of China include the fact that China is the largest source of foreign tourists, the largest source of foreign university students, and the 3rd largest source of foreign investment. In the face of these data (and the miniscule role of the US and UK in modern foreign trade) Australia's self interest should be obvious.

Rather, what we are witnessing, are actions taken by the Australian government that reflect US interests and priorities rather than national self-interest. The latest foray into the Middle East is only another example. It should not be forgotten in this context that Australia's

previous forays into the Middle East, in Iraq and Syria, which are both ongoing, were also conspicuously lacking in UN Security Council approval.

The Australian military presence in Iraq is so unwelcome that the Iraqi government have refused to sign a Status of Forces Agreement with Australia and all Australian troops there have diplomatic passports!

That a country should act so manifestly against international law and its own long term vital interests to fulfill the regional ambitions of the United States reaffirms that Australia does not have an independent foreign policy and probably has not had one since the coup against the Whitlam government in 1975.

Given the miniscule nature of the Australian military commitment to the Arabian gulf misadventure, any practical military consequences will be difficult to ascertain. The reputational damage however, is much greater. Should Australia persist in its obsequious compliance with US wishes, not only in the Middle East but also in Asia, then a blowback is inevitable. The consequences of that for Australian well being and prosperity will be devastating. They have only themselves to blame.