

John Howard, Australia, and the Coalition of the Willing

BY JOSEPH M. SIRACUSA

On the evening of September 9, 2001, the upper echelons of Washington political society assembled at the Australian ambassador's residence for a typical Aussie barbecue to welcome Australian Prime Minister John Howard on his official visit to Washington. Howard's trip coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Australia-U.S. defense alliance, ANZUS. His visit was also meant to generate momentum for a potential U.S.-Australia free trade agreement. The following day, Howard was expected to deliver a speech to the U.S. Congress, which would have made him the first Australian prime minister to address a joint session of Congress in thirteen years. In recognition of the help given by Australian firefighters during the U.S. wildfire emergencies earlier that year, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Gail Norton presented Howard with a fireman's axe at the ambassador's residence. In the flurry of handshakes and smiles, U.S.-Australian relations seemed stronger than ever. "Of all the nations that we value and whose friendship we cherish, there's no relationship more natural, more easy, and one more deeply steeped in shared experience, in common aspiration for the kind of world we all want our children to grow up in, than the relationship between Australia and the United States," Howard said.¹

Two days later, nearly 3,000 people perished in terrorist attacks on New York, Washington, D.C., and western Pennsylvania. Howard perceived the events of September 11 as an attack not only on the United States, but on all civilized nations. "Of all of the events that I have been in any way touched by in the twenty-

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seven years that I've been in public life," Howard said, "none has had a more profound impact on me than has this."² The events of that day would prove to have a profound impact on the future of U.S.-Australian relations as well.

The Southern Anchor

For more than fifty years, Australia has been the "southern anchor" of U.S. Asia-Pacific security arrangements. Australia has always been a member of the "coalition of the willing," ever prepared to stand together with the United States. It was in this spirit that the government of Prime Minister John Howard invoked the ANZUS defense treaty in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

The ANZUS Treaty, conceived in 1951, was originally designed as a military alliance binding Australia, the United States, and New Zealand to cooperate on defense matters in the Pacific area, although today the treaty is understood to relate to attacks on the three countries anywhere in the world.³ Following World War II, Australia leveraged U.S. desires for a non-punitive treaty with Japan to persuade the superpower, albeit reluctantly, to join a security agreement with Australia and New Zealand.⁴ Consisting of just eleven articles, the treaty is quite short in length and, some have argued, overly vague in meaning.⁵ Australia wanted an alliance; the United States wanted to hedge against the possibility of a resurgent Japan, and neither party got what it wanted.⁶ To compensate for this ambiguity, the Howard government, like its predecessors, has based this relationship on a tradition of shared values, allowing the Australian government flexibility in justifying the treaty's existence. As a result, the ANZUS relationship has proved exceptionally versatile for more than half a century and has grown beyond its traditionally defensive purpose. The Howard government has not only embraced the United States with a zealotry unsurpassed by any of Washington's other allies, including the United Kingdom, but has also done so more than any previous Australian government.⁷

Following the 1999 U.S.-Australian Ministerial (AUSMIN) briefing, the two countries issued a communiqué that reaffirmed their shared commitment to ANZUS. These renewed obligations included the continuation of close cooperation on intelligence issues, increased military interoperability, and the development of trilateral relationships with other countries in the Asia-Pacific region and participation in regional organizations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).⁸ The statement emphasized a forward-looking, common agenda for the "natural alliance" of the U.S. and Australia and called for the

ANZUS Treaty to “remain a cornerstone of Asia Pacific security in the twenty-first century.”⁹ In his nine years at the helm, Howard has sought to demonstrate Australia’s credibility as a dependable and functional U.S. ally.

As part of the effort to become a strong ally, the Howard government has prioritized the rebuilding of the Australian Defense Forces (ADF).¹⁰ The 2000 defense white paper outlined a ten-year plan for the ADF, pledging a defense budget increase of Aus\$27 billion (approximately \$14.6 billion) over the coming decade.¹¹ Officials justified the increased defense spending by pointing to the unpredictability and instability of Southeast Asia and argued that boosting defense expenditures would enhance the credibility of Australia within the ANZUS alliance: “For political reasons we [Australia] might want to demonstrate our credentials as a ‘credible U.S. ally,’ able to deploy forces in support of the U.S. contingencies, such as the Persian Gulf or the Korean peninsula,” proposed Gary Klintworth of the Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade Group in 2000.¹² In addition, the United States’ advanced military technologies, notably those associated with the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs, have intensified the practical application of military technologies in combat, requiring Australia to spend a great deal of money to maintain the interoperability of U.S. and Australian forces. Considering the numerous cooperative military campaigns undertaken by the ANZUS partners since 1996, Howard’s upkeep of Australian defense resources has been necessary. According to Howard, events of the new century have vindicated the Australian government’s concerns about the country’s defense.¹³ The recent surge of terrorism against Western nations has prompted a review of defensive alignments and the global security environment.¹⁴ It is within this framework that Australia has increased its diplomatic proximity to the United States.

Awakening the Sleepy Alliance

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, irrevocably changed the United States’ view of the post-Cold War international order. Australia sought to reinvigorate its relationship with the United States and become a willing partner in the post-September 11 world. At the time, commentators questioned the relevance of Australia’s sleepy alliance with the United States. “What’s ANZUS?” joked James Lindsay, an analyst at the Brookings Institution who had served as a foreign affairs advisor to the Clinton administration. “You could walk the streets of America without finding anyone who knows what the heck ANZUS is.”¹⁵ But Australia was the first country to offer unequivocal, open-ended support following the attacks. In language reminiscent of former Prime Minister Robert Menzies on Australia’s entry into Vietnam in 1965, Howard later explained, “At

no stage should any Australian regard this as something that is just confined to the United States. It is an attack upon the way of life we hold dear in common with the Americans. It does require the invocation of ANZUS.”¹⁶

An Australian cabinet meeting, organized to discuss the consequences of the attacks decided, in consultation with the United States, that the mutual defense provisions of the ANZUS Treaty (Article IV) applied in the circumstances. Like NATO, Australia pledged military resources to help

HOWARD'S HARD LINE ON TERRORISM HAS RESONATED WITH THE AUSTRALIAN ELECTORATE.

the United States bring the perpetrators of the attacks to justice. Even Australia's opposition Labour Party wholeheartedly endorsed the government's decision and supported initial participation in military operations—a move facilitated by United Nations' approval of the effort. Accordingly, antiwar sentiment had been marginalized and pro-alliance public feeling

confirmed. The absence of the usual contentious Australian party politics reinforced the growing impression in Washington of a sturdy U.S.-Australian alliance—for the time being.

As the United States assembled its “coalition of the willing” to fight al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, most of its allies, and indeed most of the free world, publicly supported the global war on terrorism. However, while many countries abstained from committing troops to the cause, Australia augmented its original commitments to U.S. operations, pledging navy frigates, long-range maritime aircraft, tanker aircraft, FA-18 fighters, and 150 Special Air Service troops to the coalition.

Howard's hard line on terrorism and regional security resonated with the Australian electorate in the subsequent national elections. The Howard government was elected for a third successive term in November 2001 with a ten-seat majority in Parliament. Two issues dominated the election campaign: Australia's handling of refugees and asylum-seekers, and the Australian response to the terrorist attacks on the United States. Following September 11, large swings in opinion polls in Western countries favored incumbent leaders and governments.¹⁷ In accordance with this pattern, the majority of the Australian electorate reacted positively to Howard's posturing. The majority coalition increased its share of the national vote by just over 2 percent, the biggest swing to a presiding government since Harold Holt's victory over Arthur Calwell in 1966. Howard acknowledged that the coalition's tough approach to security and border protection was undoubtedly a factor in his reelection.¹⁸

Neighborhood Watch

As the possibility of a military campaign and invasion of Iraq gained momentum in 2002 and 2003, Australian ministers pledged diplomatic support for U.S. first-strike policy without committing military resources to the cause. While Australian Defense Minister Robert Hill supported the notion of preemptive U.S. strikes, Howard implied that Australia would launch preemptive strikes on neighboring countries harboring terrorist activities and would support an amendment of the UN Charter to address non-state terrorism. When asked whether he would be prepared to act if the Southeast Asia-based terror network Jemaah Islamiah were preparing an attack on Australia, Howard replied:

Oh yes. I think any Australian prime minister would...It stands to reason that if you believed that somebody was going to launch an attack against your country, either of a conventional kind or of a terrorist kind, and you had the capacity to stop it and there was no alternative...then, of course, you would have to use it.¹⁹

Howard's posturing provoked a furious rejoinder from many neighboring countries. The most vitriolic response came from Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who accused Howard of behaving like "the white-man sheriff in some black country."²⁰ He warned that he would consider any preemptive attack on Malaysia "an act of war." Alexander Downer, the Australian foreign minister, quickly reassured other states in the region that "[Prime Minister Howard] did not suggest we are going to land troops or send in bombers to neighboring countries."²¹ Philippines National Security Adviser Roilo Golez called for a "go slow" approach to talks in protest of what he described as "arrogant" comments by Howard.²² In contrast to the outcries of some of Australia's neighbors, Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda downplayed Howard's remarks as "just an idea...not a plan of action. That is why we do not need to overreact in our interpretation."²³ Meanwhile, President Bush supported Howard's stance as a justified response to the change from the pre-September 11 security framework. Despite strong disagreements on the issue, Howard focused attention in the region on terrorism.

By this time the war on terror was changing direction. In January 2002, evidence emerged from Afghanistan of plans for al-Qaeda affiliates in Southeast Asia to attack Western targets, including Australian interests in Singapore.²⁴ Osama bin Laden, in his first taped message after the 2001 attacks, specifically named Australia as a target of al-Qaeda.²⁵ This information did not surprise Australian security agencies, which had been monitoring the increasingly sophisticated global network of Islamic extremist

organizations with terrorist links in Southeast Asia. Concerns that Australia's neighbors harbored terrorists inflated Australia's longstanding anxieties about the security of its immediate neighborhood, particularly the arc of comparatively weak states in the Indonesian archipelago. These regional concerns prompted a laborious decision-making process about potential involvement in a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Howard publicly sympathized with U.S. concerns about the presence of weapons of mass destruction, yet recognized the importance of regional security to the Australian electorate. He was also acutely aware of the growing discontent in the Australian public's view of U.S. unilateralism. By September 2002, it was widely reported that the Australian government had been working behind the scenes in urging the United Kingdom to persuade the United States to make better use of UN mechanisms to address the Iraq issue.

A frightening new chapter in Australia's confrontation with terrorism began on October 12, 2002. The global war on terror arrived on the country's doorstep, when terrorist bombings in Bali killed eighty-eight Australians, sending shockwaves through the Australian public. The bombings reinforced the resolve of the Australian government in its anti-terrorism efforts, while highlighting the need for a regional focus. While expressing sympathy with the Australian prime minister, President Bush used the occasion to reassert the U.S. steadfastness in fighting terrorism.

A Second Front

Despite strong domestic resistance, the Howard government stayed the course in supporting U.S. policy on Iraq. Reaffirming Australia's commitment, Howard declared, "the war against terrorism must go on in an uncompromising and unconditional fashion."²⁶ At the 2002 AUSMIN proceedings, the United States and Australia renewed their commitment to ensuring that Iraq complied unconditionally with the terms of all United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding its weapons programs.²⁷ As a "middle power," Australia has traditionally sought UN authorization before entering international conflicts, as it did in the Korean War and the first Gulf War. Since the United States failed to obtain significant international support for the war, the Howard government faced the difficult decision of whether to support the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq without UN sanction. As the likelihood of Australian involvement in an Iraqi invasion increased, hundreds of thousands of Australians took to the streets, a phenomenon that arose in a half-dozen countries worldwide. The Howard government weathered the storm of public discontent by pledging minimal forces to the invasion and promising to bring Australian troops home as soon as the initial fighting had ended.

In an address to the nation on March 18, 2003, Howard pledged his government's support for an invasion of Iraq.²⁸ He "unapologetically" recognized Australia's commitment in Iraq as an ANZUS obligation.²⁹ The government rationalized that if the world could not disarm Iraq, it had no hope of disciplining North Korea, which was of more direct concern by virtue of its proximity.³⁰ Australia soon acted on its commitment to the United States in Iraq. Howard launched Operation Falconer, complementing U.S. Operation Iraqi Freedom, which aimed to depose Saddam Hussein and defuse the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Australian troops performed admirably and suffered no casualties. True to Howard's word, following the fall of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, the majority of the 2,000 Australian troops engaged in Iraq withdrew or prepared to do so by May 1. Australia resisted American pressure to contribute units to peacekeeping operations, offering instead niche resources for the rebuilding of Iraq. Approximately 900 troops would remain to aid the transition to an interim administration. The guided missile frigate HMAS Sydney, army commandos, and transport and maritime patrol aircraft were among the forces that remained.³¹ The speed of the initial victory, pride in the Australian forces' achievements, and Australia's relative detachment from the hazards of Iraq's post-invasion reconstruction all deflected much of the dissent expressed before the war, and limited the costs to Australia's relationships with its Islamic neighbors. U.S. counterparts praised Howard's resolve in the war on terror. "John Howard gets it," President Bush remarked. "The Prime Minister knows that we've got to be tough, and at the same time create the conditions where there's an alternative to terrorism, and that's freedom and peace."³²

Balancing the Books

Australia's commitment to the war on terrorism has produced other dividends. The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the United States and Australia, perhaps the most important bilateral economic agreement ever undertaken by Australia, has been widely viewed as a reward for Australian loyalty in the war on terrorism.³³ Upon taking effect in January 2005, the agreement eliminated tariffs on the overwhelming majority of goods traded between the two countries. Independent modeling by the Centre for International Economics (CIE) estimated the FTA would increase Australia's annual GDP by Aus\$6 billion per decade.³⁴ As a result of the deal, the United States became Australia's second largest trading partner, the foremost destination of Australian investment, and its most important direct investor.³⁵ President Bush's signing of the historic agreement confirmed the strengthened relationship between the two countries. The U.S. House of Representatives

passed the proposal by a margin of 200 votes, demonstrating Capitol Hill's enthusiasm for the ongoing ANZUS relationship. Despite its close ties to the United States, critical economic and security-related questions remained for Australia in its own strategic neighborhood.

The Howard government's success in negotiating a free trade agreement with the United States necessitated a juggling of regional interests and its ties to the U.S. How to cooperate with the United States while pursuing independent strategic interests remains an unresolved dilemma in Howard's foreign policy.³⁶ For instance, the Howard government initially hesitated to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which renounces military force in favor of peaceful dispute resolution, out of concern that the treaty could prove incompatible with Australia's ANZUS obligations.³⁷

Yet the ANZUS relationship has bolstered Australia's diplomatic clout in Asia. As Australian Foreign Minister Downer commented, "The alliance gives us access and influence in Washington out of all proportion to our size. This enhances our ability to pursue our broader international, security and economic interests."³⁸ Furthermore, this access has provided a useful backdoor for countries seeking influence in Washington. For instance, Indonesia found Australia's membership in ANZUS useful for liaising with the U.S. military when normal channels were closed.³⁹

Despite the success of the Australia-U.S. alliance, Canberra's increasingly close connection to Washington has also created problems. Many major powers in the region perceive the United States as an arrogant hegemon and typecast its ally Australia as a lackey of Washington. This image has damaged Australia's regional position among Muslim-majority countries, particularly Indonesia. It still remains unclear whether Australia can effectively manage its relationship with Indonesia, given the different political and diplomatic realities each faces. Although the Howard government acknowledged that the war in Iraq may be viewed by some countries, especially Indonesia, as an attack on Islam, Howard was still quick to rebut this notion, stating "our actions in Iraq in no way represented an attack on Islam."⁴⁰

Strait Talk

Australia's support for the war in Iraq attracted less attention in Washington than its increasing alignment with China, prompting considerable debate between Canberra and Washington about Australia's future loyalty to the alliance.⁴¹ Prospective free trade negotiations with China in the context of the ASEAN Regional Forum gave the Howard government a regional impetus

to temper its alliance with the United States. According to a February 2005 survey, public opinion favored a Sino-Australian agreement even more than the U.S. equivalent: the Chinese FTA received a 51 percent positive response from Australians; the U.S. FTA received a 34 percent positive response.⁴²

Australia's relationships with the United States and China represent different dimensions of its national interest: the former is a long-standing security relationship based on shared values, the latter a budding economic partnership that furthers regional integration. After meeting with Chinese leaders in August 2004, Australian Foreign Minister Downer controversially stated that Australia would not necessarily offer military support to the United States in any conflict between China and Taiwan.⁴³ Downer suggested that only a direct attack on either party would trigger ANZUS Treaty obligations.⁴⁴ If Australia followed the United States into conflict with China, the Chinese could cease bilateral free-trade talks and use their influence to lock Australia out of emerging regional bodies, economic groupings, and political associations. However, reluctance to support the United States on the Taiwan issue may severely strain the ANZUS relationship.

MANY REGIONAL POWERS
TYPECAST AUSTRALIA AS A
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Nonetheless, Australia has a special role to play in the Beijing-Washington balancing act. The likelihood of war between the United States and China is minimal: Washington and Beijing have a sophisticated and intricate relationship characterized by mutual respect for each party's strategic priorities.⁴⁵ Both parties have a vested interest in the stability of the Asia-Pacific region. Meanwhile, the near consensus of Australian and Chinese interests on issues such as North Korea, the war on terror, and general regional stability reflect established, common strategic interests for those two countries as well. As a result, the Howard government has strengthened the U.S. alliance in recent years, while broadening and deepening its strategic dialogue with Beijing.⁴⁶ Regional cooperation through fora such as ASEAN or economic integration through agreements such as a Sino-Australian FTA may help to curb political rivalries in the region, just as the European Union mitigated historical hostilities between Germany and France.

The Howard Formula⁴⁷

The past four years of Howard's term have been important in establishing his government's foreign policy objectives, affording the prime minister a unique opportunity to translate his policies into action. Under the Howard

government, ties between the United States and Australia have reached a higher plane.⁴⁸ The Bush administration views Australia as one of the United States' most loyal allies. Howard, in turn, has cashed in by strengthening diplomatic ties between Canberra and Washington, particularly on trade and defense matters. The reinvigoration of the U.S.-Australia relationship can be ascribed to consensual strategic behavior in response to a changing global security environment.

At the same time, the reshaping of the ANZUS alliance has tested the boundaries of bipartisan support for security priorities within Australia. Events since 2001 have prompted serious debate about strategic priorities and planning for Australia, in developing a new framework for Australia's defensive future. For all the criticisms of ANZUS, including the fear that undue concentration on ANZUS would distract policymakers from the vital regional concerns, public support for the U.S. connection remains high, even during periods of controversy. Not even the considerable criticism aimed at Bush's handling of the war in Iraq has made a dent. The Australian public, while in no way desiring to be the fifty-first state of the Union, has clearly enjoyed the status and benefits of being a U.S. ally, without great cost. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Australians seem relatively comfortable with the arrangement. After more than a decade in office, Howard has successfully balanced regionalism and traditional security alliances while maintaining a distinct Australian identity. ■

NOTES

* The author would like to thank his research assistant, Simon M. Smith, in the School of International and Community Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne. Needless to say, the author alone is responsible for any errors contained in the text.

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⁶ Siracusa and Cheong, *America's Australia*, 17.

⁷ Roddy Lyon and William Tow, *The Future of the US-Australian Security Relationship*, Strategic Studies Institute Monographs (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2003).

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⁹ *Ibid.*

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