

Frederick Watson Fellowship paper

Asian alternatives: Going to war in the 1960s

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I shall not waste the time available repeating what is common ground amongst historians. I will try to confine myself to what is *new* about how and when we got into the Vietnam War.

Major aspects are the relations between the government and its officials and relations between the Minister and Department of External Affairs.

I will put Australian policy in the broader and not unusual context of the uncomfortable relationship between American secrecy and Australian dependency, which can now be seen more clearly in the light of recent American historiography on the decision-making period, especially December 1964 to January 1965.

Second I will enter a defence to the almost universal allegation that Vietnam was the 'diplomat's war', and I hope you won't prejudge it a la Maggie Thatcher as 'well, he would, wouldn't he'.

These are the two subjects to which my research on 150 odd files has been particularly directed.

Then I want to ask whether things could have been different. To do this I will ask whether the Australian decision to enter the war was predetermined, or whether we could have acted differently.

That will lead into my final topic, which is a counterfactual, based not on recent research, but on longstanding interest in Garfield Barwick as Foreign Minister.

I won't have time to deal with all the reasons why Ministers backed the United States or theories and analogies like Munich, the domino theory, and the Malaysian experience. I am not going to go out of my way to draw parallels between the period of history I'm dealing with and recent history – but I hope the parallels will be apparent, and I hope participants in recent history will comment on them from their special knowledge. That should be the special feature of talks at the National Archives of Australia in Canberra.

My first conclusion is that the decision to go to war in Vietnam was made on 17 December 1964 and not, as is generally accepted, four months later when the decision to send a battalion was announced (on 29 April 1965). The Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of Cabinet (hereafter called 'Cabinet' or 'FADC') was meeting that evening to consider a letter from President Johnson (hereafter called 'LBJ') requesting 200 more combat advisers, but not at that stage, it said, combat troops.

Incidentally the FADC invariably met in the evening. On this occasion there would have been a question about how they'd pulled up after a convivial celebration the night before of Prime Minister Menzies' 70th birthday, 15 years as Prime Minister and win in a half-Senate election. There would certainly have been a heightened sense of history. Geoffrey Blainey lists atmosphere as one of his *Causes of War*.

For my conclusion, I rely on a *note* of the Cabinet meeting, which sets out eight points. Normally such notes do not survive, and minutes of Cabinet meetings are embargoed for 50 years. In this case my guess is that as the Cabinet Secretary, John Bunting, was away, the note was kept for him to see on his return and then got on to the Cabinet file. The eight points appear to have been made by the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies. They are:

- 1) Our military people - paragraph 11(f) - suggest battalion.
- 2) The government of South Vietnam would have to ask us.
- 3) We need to broaden our participation with the U.S.
- 4) We begin by showing willing - every bit of assistance put beside U.S. is good in common interest.
- 5) Where does this touch the battalion.
- 6) If we can provide a battalion we have to think hard before we refuse.
- 7) *I would go with it - but we would be in.*
- 8) We would want to have advice but it might be in our capacity to provide battalion.¹

Point 7 is of course the key one. Said by Menzies, that represents a decision.

From the time he came into office in late April 1964, Paul Hasluck was fanatical about Australian involvement alongside the United States in Vietnam, while his predecessor, Garfield Barwick, had been extremely cautious. He had therefore been a significant contributor to this decision. There is not time to go into the interesting reasons for his fixation relating to his creed and personality.

Another spin-off of Hasluck's personality was that there was a breakdown of the intimate communication between Minister and Department that had existed in the Barwick years. I will give one example, which represents the height of absurdity and occurred in June 1964. There had been no face-to-face

¹ NAA A4940/1 C3811.

meeting to that time between Hasluck and Tange in the two months since he became Minister. Tange had to take overseas, to their joint attendance at a Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference, urgent staffing matters he had not been able to get to see Hasluck about in Canberra. He was instructed to send them back to Canberra for decision by the acting Minister. At the end of the Conference he suggested he should travel in Hasluck's car to Heathrow Airport. He was given the 'jump seat', not easy for a man of his imposing bulk to fit into, and Hasluck and his secretary, Ellestan Dusing, sat together and did not address a word to him. Such pettiness was ludicrous, but it would have dire results.

Vietnam was a Hasluck policy, not a joint policy of him and his officials. Politically it was an orthodox policy in the Liberal tradition, backed by Menzies, and much preferred by the rank and file Liberal to the unorthodox policies of Barwick, the self-styled 'Radical Tory'.

In November Hasluck (and, as it happened, a junior Minister with ambitions who trailed him around, Peter Howson) were in Washington, knowing United States officials were preparing advice for the newly elected LBJ about what to do about the Vietnam War, which was close to lost.

The options the United States was considering did not include accepting that or looking for a face-saving way out. They involved three approaches from slight to dynamic escalation with of course a preference for the middle path of a 'gradual squeeze' on North Vietnam, for purposes which were not agreed but variously defined from achieving a negotiated solution to forcing Hanoi to desist. The gradual squeeze involved air attacks and a build-up of ground forces, but the latter was much more sensitive and problematic than air attacks. There was to be a 30-day phase one, of air attacks against the routes through which North Vietnam infiltrated men and supplies to the Viet Cong in the South, who were still predominantly self-sustaining, and winning. Then, subject to Presidential approval, there would be a phase two of gradually building up air attacks, but stopping short of targets that would bring China into the war. In phase two there would also be a build-up of ground forces along the border, in which Keith Waller and his New Zealand colleague George Laking were told on 4 December Australian and New Zealand forces would be welcome participants. Our attention focussed on that window of opportunity (though we also were pressing for our RAAF Sabres in Thailand to get involved in the air war). New Zealand tried to close their window almost immediately, saying they wouldn't be in it and the tactic could not succeed.

Recent American historiography has shown that in fact in the first three days of December LBJ had taken in principle the decision to send in whatever ground forces necessary to win the war without invading the North, but we didn't know that, nor did most of his advisers, nor did the American people suspect it until July 1965. We'll come back to LBJ's style.

When LBJ's request was received, the Defence Committee – the government's top advisers – met. Usually they would make recommendations to Cabinet

but this time they didn't do so. We know only from Tange's notes that they had an interesting discussion in which the Chiefs of Staff, except for its Chairman, ACM Sir Frederick Scherger, all expressed great reservations about United States ground forces plans, as told to Waller. The Chiefs then went away to prepare their own assessment, which, most unusually, was to go straight to Cabinet. It showed no signs of the reservations they'd just expressed in the Defence Committee, but was totally gung-ho. It was pure Scherger.

The Department of External Affairs and Gordon Blakers in Defence were agreed that no decision should be taken on ground forces, which weren't being asked for anyway. The Chiefs recommended a battalion. Civilian officials did not get a chance to comment on it.

In fact Hasluck prevented the Department of External Affairs from commenting, and the External Affairs and joint External Affairs/Defence papers that went to Cabinet were for information, although that information was depressing enough, and did not address policy.

Thirty years later Tange still seethed over what he considered Hasluck's worst transgression of good and proper governance. He wrote to me:

Hasluck needs to be judged not simply on what he did but also on what he did not do. I always remember his failure to ensure that Departmental opinion accompanied the Chiefs of Staff paper – of low quality – in late 1964 giving military judgments on what was essentially a strategic question – long recognised by all previous Cabinets as requiring an overlay of external political advice.²

The only possible conclusion is that the Ministers, Menzies, McEwen, Holt, Hasluck and Paltridge, went into Cabinet to make the most important decision in their political lives with their minds made up. It was a decision made by a few men, subservient to their leader, with the agreed aim to *'broaden cooperation with the US'*.

Also there is no other instance in Australian diplomatic history of a Foreign Minister censoring the areas, including arguments for delay, on which his department could (and could be expected to) offer advice to Cabinet. This marked a quantum jump from imposing personal views and ideology on it, as Hasluck had been doing for eight months.

Cabinet decided that the reply to LBJ 'should be forthcoming and robust and demonstrate a willingness to support the US in South Vietnam with as much assistance as lies within our capabilities'. It was drafted by Hasluck and Paltridge. It did not specifically mention the battalion, but proposed immediate staff talks about the proposal for ground forces under phase two. A wink was as good as a nod.

² Letter to the author 26 August 1995 (Tange's emphases).

There were numerous statements and factors in the first four months of 1965 to show that Cabinet's choice on 17 December of offering a battalion was no Clayton's decision. Amongst the former were Hasluck's minute to the Department in early January that the Prime Minister might 'want to go further in the way we express our commitment'; his advice to the Minister for Defence in early February that 'our purpose is...to go with' (the United States); his warning to the Prime Minister later that month that 'diplomatic moves...could change a situation in which we ourselves are committed'; and possibly a direct statement by him to United States official Michael Forrestal in Canberra offering the battalion. At the Defence Committee meeting on 5 April to consider Scherger's report on the military staff talks, which had at last been held, Bunting observed that if the United States were increasing its land forces 'and letting us know that they wanted a contribution from Australia, we should advise the government to give effect to our earlier decision to make a battalion available'³.

As important as these statements, and the United States' understanding of Australia's commitment, is the consistent course of events from 17 December 1964. No alternative to committing a battalion was considered. And the United States government never had any doubt about Australian willingness.

The near-insouciance with which Ministers decided to offer the United States a battalion for Vietnam on 17 December quickly changed to concern when it appeared that Australia had put its money on a horse that wouldn't run. It had thought staff talks would be held almost immediately, and this had been the assumption in the State Department too.

Australian eagerness caused it much embarrassment. LBJ had his own secret agenda, he was not going to endanger his domestic program, and there were genuine problems to be resolved about South Vietnamese political instability and inevitable delays in military planning and logistic pre-buildup. Australia was just not in the loop. For four months it was left swinging in the wind.

American historians have now closely analysed this period, during which, in January, LBJ gave the go-ahead for implementation of phase two ie to win the war, but kept almost everyone in the dark. The Australian experience adds something to their historiography, and shows that even on a subject so well turned over in the United States as the Vietnam War someone should have made the long trek to Canberra and the National Archives of Australia.

Ministers did not reassess the military decision of 17 December in the light of the delay, or of continuing evidence that the United States was more interested in advisers than in a battalion, or of changes in the role of ground forces from the semi-static one of sealing the border to active pacification and search and destroy. They did not insist on the Chairman and the Chiefs of Staff answering questions put to them. They regarded with equanimity foreigners involving themselves in and taking control of a civil war. They did

³ NAA A1838/276 TS3014/2/1 pt7.

not want to know about South Vietnam and the deep-seated reasons for the adverse correlation of forces there.

As the announcement approached in April, Cabinet discussion on the issues was not really joined in the face of Menzies' clear and consistent view.

In the face of these obstacles, and of the overwhelming constraint of having to accept and implement policy that had been established, External Affairs did what it could to help the government and its Minister to appreciate the ramifications of the decision to commit a battalion. There is no time to trace the details of External Affairs' policy advice or of its constant attempts to insert itself into Scherger's domain, the military staff talks. I must move on to the allegations that Vietnam was the Department of External Affairs', or the diplomats', war.

The role of External Affairs: Warmongers or good public servants?

Graham Freudenberg was the first to allege that:

Australia's war in Vietnam was very much the war of the Department of External Affairs...Anyone who reads the record must gain the overwhelming impression that, apart from the politicians, the guilty Australians were in External Affairs. As far as Australia's involvement was concerned, this was not a general's war, but a diplomat's war.⁴

On the contrary, the important decision, to commit the battalion in December, was made by the politicians on the military's recommendation.

Freudenberg rests his judgment on a post-decision period, the inexorable build-up of Australian forces once the first battalion had been committed. After examination of the files while working for Whitlam, he compared External Affairs unfavourably with Defence, but without citing files or giving details. In the vital period December 1964 to April 1965, the Minister and Department of Defence were responsible for controlling Scherger, and they did not do so. Scherger, 'a politician in uniform',⁵ ran rings around a slow-thinking Minister and a tough but journeyman head of department, which was of course the reverse of the situation in McNamara's Pentagon.⁶ Nevertheless, the words of McNamara's successor as United States Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to Australia:

The President and his senior civilian advisers, especially those in the Defense Department, should have been more persistent in questioning the American military. The respect the military deserves for its

⁴ Graham Freudenberg, *A Certain Grandeur: Gough Whitlam in Politics*, South Melbourne: Macmillan 1977, p42.

⁵ Gorton, quoted in Peter Edwards (with Gregory Pemberton), *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts, 1948-1965*, Allen & Unwin, in association with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1992, p375.

⁶ HR McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, NY: Harper Collins, 1997; Ellsberg, pp35-79.

patriotism and courage should not blind civilian leaders to the biases and vested interests which are part of the military system and style.⁷

Michael Sexton followed up in 1981 in a book which quoted the first and third sentences of Freudenberg. Sexton's hypothesis that the initiative for the battalion came from 'the Minister or the Department of External Affairs or both'⁸ is the opposite of the truth as far as the Department is concerned.

From United States sources, Sexton provided groundbreaking evidence of the development of Australian policy on Vietnam, including the role of External Affairs and reporting from missions. His reasoning is the most detailed published and deserves the serious examination it has not yet been given. However, his case is not enhanced by his failure to add to it or demonstrate more archival research before bringing out after an interval of 21 years a revised edition at the end of 2002. There is now far more in the public domain, including most of the Australian official documents, of which his second edition takes no account. Sexton gets around this hardly responsible historiography disarmingly by writing:

Many of the documents used in the book are now available for examination in the Australian Archives Office, although little use appears to have been made of them to date by academics and researchers, except for the official war history of this period.⁹

He is being unfair to the National Archives of Australia as well as the paying public in not doing his research.

This is Sexton's only acknowledgement of Peter Edwards' official history and does not address his judgments. Edwards describes the facts as more complex than Freudenberg and Sexton suggest. On the basis of full and privileged access to official documents and interviews with Ministers and officials, including Tange, he gives an accurate picture of External Affairs officers taking different positions at different times, without there being 'a distinctive departmental view'.¹⁰

Both on Indonesia and on Vietnam there was a subtle relationship between senior officers in which at some times Tange would be more influential and at others Jockel and sometimes Shaw would get the Minister's ear.

For both schools the problems of access and exerting influence were almost insuperable on Vietnam in the eight months of 1964 that Hasluck was Foreign Minister – Tange because he was unacceptable to Hasluck, and Shaw and Jockel when their *advice* was unacceptable.

⁷ Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, New York: Random House, 1991, p407.

⁸ Michael Sexton, *War for the Asking*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1981 p64.

⁹ Sexton, p8.

¹⁰ Edwards, pp383–4.

Unfortunately, at another point Edwards writes much more categorically, giving credence to the critics from which he is apparently distancing himself, that the Department of External Affairs, along with its Minister (which is indubitably true), were 'the principal "hawks"', in 1964, and in the first quarter of 1965.¹¹

In this period the Department of External Affairs was a different and livelier place, and far less hawkish, than it was to become after Tange, or than it had been prior to Barwick becoming Minister.

On the basis of reading the External Affairs files, while Edwards relies more on Cabinet files, I reach a different view from him.

Let me give one example of the two different approaches, which occurred around the beginning of September. Because Hasluck admonished him for it, it has been well publicised that Hasluck took exception to Anderson's excellent reporting which, disingenuously, he said was aloof and detached rather than defeatist as some might call it.

Just before this comment Shaw had sent an appreciation drafted by Jockel to Hasluck that the war was going badly.

On the bottom of Shaw's submission to Hasluck Tange added in handwriting:

In my view a result in South Vietnam which looked like a "victory" for North Vietnam and the two Communist supporters (China and the USSR) would be a grave setback to Australian interests, not only because of the loss of some territory to Communist control but chiefly because of an American defeat in South East Asia. In Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia it would be said "What use is the Seventh Fleet, with its nuclear weapons, against insurrection"?

It is not clear when Shaw became aware of Tange's words but in any case it would have been after the submission went forward.

Shaw, a stubborn liberal, sent another pessimistic paper to Hasluck on 3 September, after the ministerial admonishing of Anderson had been received, but this time he sent it direct and only copied it to Tange.

Sexton singles the Department of External Affairs out for blame because it was at the centre of the decision-making process. That is not quite true, especially on 17 December, but it did not relent in its efforts to achieve that status and make the process of decision-making a considered one.

Sexton makes a shrewd judgment about the unwillingness of the Washington Embassy to go beyond the majority view amongst American officials and to ferret out information uncongenial to Australian policy-makers. But Sexton is in error in conflating the Washington Embassy with the Department of External Affairs. Washington's tunnel-vision reporting, in contrast to

¹¹ Edwards, p359.

Anderson's from Saigon, did affect the ability of the Department in Canberra to fulfil the high expectations Sexton has of it.

Sexton acknowledges the defence (he interviewed Waller and Renouf) that this was in accord with ministerial instructions. In the Department the weight of ministerial instruction, delivered from on high, was felt far more sharply. As good Westminster public servants, departmental officers had to obey and implement policy, but their approach was predominantly measured and responsible.

Specifically, Sexton accuses the Department of External Affairs of making 'the error of judgment...that a military solution could be imposed on Vietnam despite the limited nature of the war that could be fought by the Americans'. The Department argued for the limited war. It was less confident than Ministers about a military solution, although some internal departmental documents, as distinct from submissions to Cabinet, and some reporting from missions express the view that Vietnam could be brought to 'desist' by varying forms of United States military action. Basically, however, External Affairs was thwarted - by ministerial indifference and military non-cooperation - in its efforts to have the question of whether there could be a military solution properly examined.

Sexton sees three consequences. One of these was essentially political, *viz.* that the Department of External Affairs failed to assess 'how Congress and the American people would react to a Vietnam war that was substantially escalated and possibly not immediately successful'. Since a significant reaction against the war was not 'immediate' but took two years to set in and start to affect United States policy, other political issues naturally seemed to have priority for attention and assessment. Also, to mount such a study, the Department would have needed to have close control of the Washington Embassy, which was unattainable in the circumstances of Hasluck's known policy, and individual officers' attachments to Hasluck as well as his policy. This alleged failure falls outside the time frame of decision-making on introducing ground forces.

The predominant element of Sexton's other two subjects is military. Sexton first alleges that External Affairs failed to consider 'the long term or even medium term consequences of the American military effort in Vietnam or accepted the myopic view of ministers'. Such assessments were really for the JIC and most of them were short-term, but that's what Ministers wanted. Exactly the same situation existed in Washington. The one exception was the long-range intelligence input into the Strategic Basis paper, which went to Ministers in November 1964. Its prediction of a neutralist government in Saigon, which would be taken over by Hanoi, presumably only hardened Ministers' resolve to urge new policies on the United States.

Sexton also believes that a crucial omission was to overlook that the United States could lose the war: External Affairs failed to raise 'the possibility of military failure by the American and South Vietnamese forces'. This is not accurate. Ministers, and a number of their advisers, took it for granted, like

their United States counterparts, that 'no sensible enemy would continue the unequal battle once the United States had committed its enormous power and shown its willingness to escalate'.¹² Amongst advisers, Tange and Renouf (with whom Waller would have agreed) are on record that the Americans would win. Others including Anderson only went as far as saying they could not lose (which did indeed beg the questions of whether they would stay the course, and of disproportionate collateral damage, in both the United States and Vietnam). However, a number of External Affairs assessments envisaged military failure through political failure in the South.

A Policy Planning paper on Neutralisation, though without status, noted that

the essential thing for Australia...is that the American commitment in South East Asia should not weaken or lose its credibility: it is therefore especially important to Australia that America should not over-commit its military strength in South Vietnam or against North Vietnam and then still find itself with no alternative but to retreat in defeat and humiliation, a circumstance which would have domestic repercussions on the scale that followed the American defeat in China and could bring strong pressures on the United States to withdraw altogether from mainland South East Asia.

Holt said late in the day, on 7 April, that we should be with the Americans and 'make the maximum contribution possible' regardless of whether they won or lost. There was no one to take Holt up on his no doubt off-hand remark (except just possibly his friend McMahan, who lacked the knowledge to do so). However, Holt had unwittingly raised a serious question, whether Australia had been right in 1954 and 1955 in working to avoid defeat for the United States at Dien Bien Phu and over the Offshore Islands. The Department should have had the historical memory to bring these instances in a reflective way to the attention of Hasluck, who was traumatised by United States 'credibility'.

Sexton comments that it would have been 'cynical' for 'Australia's senior Ministers and bureaucrats' to take 'the view that even if the war was to be lost, Australia would still earn the gratitude of the United States for its participation'. By remaining silent on Holt's remark, Ministers are open to that charge. The only evidence of consideration of a somewhat similar scenario by officials appeared in one of Anderson's informative letters to Jockel in March:

It is also arguable from the viewpoint of Australian national interest that any move calculated to engage the United States more heavily in South Vietnam, even if the final outcome proves to be a ragged stalemate for an indefinite period, and even if some of our own small and precious forces have to be

¹² Robert W Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: US Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1986, p15.

expended, is preferable to half-measures which, if not immediately successful, could lead to American disengagement’.

In External Affairs, Shaw and Jockel accepted that a price had to be paid to keep open options to recommend moderation, particularly within a context in which Ministers had already decided basic policy. These two men were amongst those most anxious to retain credibility with Hasluck in order to be able to influence him on Indonesia. It would also be true of these two men, as Ellsberg writes of McNamara, that ‘his written memos...might misrepresent his most private thinking’.¹³

External Affairs, without encouragement, tried to find a way into the military assessment area, despite the fact that policy had been set. It is hard to see what more External Affairs could have done in that regard. It was hampered by musical chairs at the Secretary level. It was left little room to manoeuvre and given little incentive to be imaginative by its Minister. The effect of Hasluck was described to newly appointed Minister for External Affairs McMahan by Secretary of Defence-designate Tange on 16 December, 1969:

Men who for years had been encouraged to apply freshness of thought to problems created by Australia’s environment, and who happily gave up more leisure than most in order to do it, found themselves shut off, discouraged from expressing themselves and frequently rebuked...The result was that the concept of the Department being its Minister’s strong right arm went out the window. They were not allowed to be.¹⁴

Within the Department and in its overseas missions, there was an overwhelming majority of true believers in the ‘domino theory’, very many supporters of containment and holding the line, and of forward defence, some strong admirers of the Hasluck line, and some sympathisers with the assessed majority wish in South Vietnam to be free to choose a non-communist future. Yet, through the disciplined esprit de corps which had been engendered by Tange and the assiduity of Jockel, the Department consistently came down on the side of a coolly analytical, non-ideological, and even sceptical approach when it was given the opportunity to address Hasluck and contribute to his policy recommendations.

By and large External Affairs set a reasonably high professional standard, though not achieving the skill or flexibility that essentially the same very senior officers demonstrated in applying policy which had initially been developed under and *in cooperation with* a different Minister in the Indonesia-Malaysia conflict. External Affairs’ performance on Vietnam up to April 1965 compares favourably with that achieved elsewhere in the government.

¹³ Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, NY: Viking, 2002, p55.

¹⁴ NAA A6804 (in DFAT).

Were there alternatives for Australia?

Was the decision predetermined?

Many American authors have argued that the decision to take over the war in Vietnam was structurally predetermined – though Fredrik Logevall in 2000 made what American scholars have conceded is a powerful case to the contrary. In his view, LBJ had a choice.

In his judicious summing up – ‘Reflections’, in his official history – Peter Edwards saw a high degree of inevitability in Australia’s decision to enter the war, because of the weight of policies over a long period to build security and to maintain forward defence in Southeast Asia and to work with the United States in this endeavour, and a keen sense of obligation to the United States for having carried most of the load. ‘The momentum of established policy was powerful, making some degree of involvement inevitable’. There were no ‘guilty men’, although Edwards does single out Scherger as carrying special responsibility.

Fair enough, but if the Vietnam commitment was predetermined by events, and there was no choice, it would not have been necessary to freeze out officials in December. These officials were cautioning that an unhurried and deliberate approach should be taken, because there was no need for an immediate decision, the issues involved in putting ground forces into Vietnam were grave, and Australia needed to decide its strategic priorities.

There were in fact two alternatives.

Giving priority to Indonesia-Malaysia

There was a long-standing agreement on a division of labour under which Australia and New Zealand backed the United Kingdom in Indonesia-Malaysia, and the US assumed responsibility for Vietnam.

CINCPAC, Admiral Sharp, had acknowledged on a visit to Canberra in October 1964 that Australia’s commitment to Indonesia-Malaysia might preclude it from deploying troops further north. Hasluck replied that Vietnam was more important.

Contrary to the position he took with Sharp, and often expressed to the Americans,¹⁵ Hasluck reported to Menzies on 25 November from Washington that the United States readily understood that Malaysia would have to take priority if a major response to significant attack was required. He also told Harriman Indonesia would have to be ‘finally checked’ before the United States could take political initiatives towards it. Two months later Indonesia appeared more threatening, yet far from aiming to ‘finally check’ it the United States had significant political initiatives towards it under consideration.

¹⁵ On 11 February Hasluck told the American Embassy the Vietnam conflict was all-important and the Malaysian-Indonesian one still peripheral, although this did not jibe with his instruction to Waller to emphasise that both situations were grim.

The Strategic Basis paper emphasised the problem of Indonesia and, in regard to any wider regional threat, assumed Australian deployments would be to Thailand, not Vietnam. When William Bundy raised the possibility of Australia and New Zealand contributing ground forces under a possible phase two on 4 December, Waller and Laking 'responded that Malaysia commitments (were) increasingly onerous but that they would pass suggestion on for comment'.¹⁶

The Chiefs of Staffs' recommendation, and the government's acceptance, ignored the agreed division of labour, Sharp's recent acknowledgment of it, and the even more recent official strategic assessment. Had External Affairs, or the Defence Committee, been allowed to inject what Tange called 'the strategic view', it would have ensured that these factors were addressed and that there would be consideration by Ministers of priorities. This is clear from his note to Gorton on the Strategic Basis paper in which he said the External Affairs view was that Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and Australia should have priority.

Within the context of possible priority for close defence, External Affairs would have emphasised Papua New Guinea, as it had given a lot of thought to an Indonesian threat through subversion and infiltration from early in Confrontation. As regards infiltration it pointed out to Barwick in December 1963 Indonesia's advantage from occupying towns and villages close to the border, while on the Australian side there were few inhabitants and no adjacent administrative centres. Jockel on 30 March, 1965 instructed his officers that

when the Scherger report on the Honolulu talks is being examined, we should ensure that there is a careful examination of the effect of the deployment of, say, a battalion in Vietnam upon our capacity in other directions. I have in mind in particular New Guinea.¹⁷

Events in Indonesia-Malaysia in January-February gave Cabinet justification for reconsideration. The long put off decision to put the battalion into Borneo became inevitable in January 1965. Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Razak asked Paltridge for a second battalion. This could have been used as a reason to reverse the decision to send a battalion to Vietnam, which could have been sweetened if desired by some smaller contribution to Vietnam.

Two battalions in Borneo would have been defensible in Washington. Two battalions might indeed have been very acceptable to the Americans in permitting them to increase the pressure on the British, who were far more important to the United States than Australia, to provide token forces for Vietnam. It is unlikely that the United States could have succeeded, because the British saw where making a force contribution would lead, as well as advancing the excuses of the political difficulties for the Labor Party, its large

¹⁶ *FRUS Vietnam 1964*, Vol 1, Doc 437.

¹⁷ NAA A1838/276 TS696/8/4 pt7.

and disproportionate commitment in Malaysia, and the incompatibility with its Geneva Co-Chairman role. But Rusk did not give up hope of getting British troops until April, and he never ceased to regret his failure.

The Australian government would have had to stand on its own feet and be prepared to withstand intense presidential pressures if it had decided to refuse American requests for military aid altogether in December. That was the course chosen by Holyoake then.

Within Australia public opinion instinctively agreed with the Prime Minister that it was desirable to support the United States so that the United States would support Australia in time of need, but he was helped by the fact that there was no debate before the decision was made public.

A respected academic commentator with a military background, Tom Millar, criticised the decision as 'militarily speaking, a regrettable division of a small ground force'.¹⁸ He considered that the government, particularly the Prime Minister, had not met the responsibilities of office by ignoring South Vietnam's political failings and military brutality and by taking an inflexible view of communism as a monolith and of pursuing a military solution. The co-editor of the leading commentary on Australian foreign policy, Gordon Greenwood, endorsed Millar's view that Australia should have rested on the agreed division of responsibility for Southeast Asian security. He also thought on the basis of extended talks in the United States that providing a battalion was an unnecessary decision in the context of influencing Washington, and he judged the government's scenario of connection between the conflicts in Malaysia and Vietnam and 'a pattern of communist pressure extending from Vietnam to India improbable'.¹⁹

In the debate on the parliamentary announcement, Calwell made some pointed criticisms and uncanny predictions, including that the 'government dangerously denudes Australia and its immediate environs of effective defence power', it was sending troops into 'a bottomless pit of jungle warfare', and that Australia's ultimate commitment could be 8000, but to no avail. The Opposition was on the back foot on Vietnam for years.²⁰

The option of increasing the AATTV

Although there was clearly a genuine Army difficulty about providing more advisers when the decision had already been made to introduce conscription, it was not insoluble. One course being advocated by backbenchers, and which was implemented by the Minister for the Army in July 1965, was to provide Australian Citizen Military Forces (CMF) officers and NCOs for the AATTV

¹⁸ TB Millar, 'Problems of Australian Foreign Policy January-June 1965', in *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol X1, pp272-4.

¹⁹ Gordon Greenwood, 'Australian Foreign Policy in Action', in Greenwood & Norman Harper (eds), *Australia in World Affairs, 1961-1965*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1968, pp116-18.

²⁰ Freudenberg, pp50-6.

(and also for the Australian Army Force in Vietnam (AAFV)). When this suggestion had been put forward in June 1964, the Army was of course opposed. However, Blakers notated that the difficulties in using CMF personnel were not insuperable:

If the Government really wishes to associate the CMF with the Australian effort in Vietnam, Dep Sec(A) considers that in the present atmosphere conditions could be settled over-night if necessary. It depends on how strongly the Government feels'.²¹

The choice of more advisers would have had many advantages and it would have served Australia's interests better.

If the government had agreed to Johnson's request and opted for additional advisers on 17 December, it would have had some clarity about Australia's future military role. In preferring a battalion, it bought a pig in a poke which only got porkier, as military contacts over the ensuing four months failed to definitively establish its role or the larger scheme of things militarily. However, there was a plain implication in the changes in the latter of open-ended further requirements as the Americans took over the war.

Additional advisers would have built on the high reputation that the AATTV had built up and would have enhanced the Australian reputation for military professionalism. Both the Americans, consistently, and the South Vietnamese asked for them for that reason.

When Waller on instructions informed William Bundy on 21 January of Australia's great concerns he replied that if this was the case LBJ would ask why Australia could not provide 50 more instructors.²² He pointed out the beneficial psychological impact it would have, impliedly on Congress, always an important consideration for Australia too in regard to the reliability of United States commitments under ANZUS.

As Edwards notes, as late as 5 April 1965 Australia was 'formally asked to provide 150 instructors, while a possible request for a battalion had only been foreshadowed'.²³ The request was to establish a centre for the training of the provincial militia in South Vietnam. That would have been much preferred by the South Vietnamese government. It was rejected on 9 April in the form of reaffirming what Paltridge had said to McNamara and Bundy in February, thus indicating it had been given no serious reconsideration. The request arose out of recommendations by Army Chief of Staff General Harold Johnson after a visit to Saigon in early March.²⁴ Thus it was seen by the United States as additional to the battalion. However, if there had been any

²¹ NAA A1945/42 248/4/85.

²² NAA A1838/276 TS3014/2/1 pt4; Renouf, p256.

²³ Edwards, p361.

²⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, III. pp94-6.

disposition to review the battalion, eg at the Cabinet meeting on 7 April, this request could have been seized on.

The assignment of professional officers and NCOs to Vietnam would have aroused few qualms amongst the Australian people, who favoured involvement in the war by a 2:1 majority. Policy-makers should however have been aware from the information from Australians on the ground that Vietnam was no place for conscripts. However, to recognise this would have looked like making a concession to Opposition leader Arthur Calwell, who was from the start a trenchant critic of conscription.

A case for opting for more advisers went by default, for both political and military reasons.

The choice of additional advisers would probably have given Australia better entrée into the Washington official debate. It could have been invoked by those who believed the war had to be won in the South (this approach allowing for reprisal bombings in the North).

A cautious Australian approach, more in line with the United Kingdom and New Zealand,²⁵ would have recalled a crucial influence on American policy-making at the time of Dien Bien Phu, which the chief in-house dissident, Under (and acting) Secretary of State George Ball, argued was a relevant analogy.²⁶ It could have lent support to Ball's compromise proposal of 18 June 1965 for 'controlled commitment', a monitored trial of a modestly increased American ground force for a limited period.

Further, it would have opened up the way for Anglo-Australian cooperation, which was never explored. The British told LBJ on 8 December that 'they wanted to help the United States in ways that could be publicized - training Vietnamese troops in jungle warfare, providing medics, putting police in Saigon. And publicizing these actions would in fact step up the British commitment'.²⁷

Commonwealth cooperation, had it been seriously examined, would have been seen to serve Australian interests in strengthening the influence of third countries over the United States, increasing pressure on the South Vietnamese to accept their responsibilities, putting external assistance to Vietnam more firmly into a regional context, and improving prospects of quadrilateral planning. But the military would have been opposed, and Ministers never appeared to be in a mood to consider fundamental questions.

²⁵ Subritzky, p144; Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961-1965: Britain, the United States and the Creation of Malaysia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p278.

²⁶ Yuen Foon Kong notes to little avail, Johnson and the majority of his advisers preferring other analogies. Yuen Foon Kong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992.

²⁷ *FRUS Vietnam*, I Doc 441.

Summation

A decision not to send ground combat forces to Vietnam because of higher priorities and the existence of an agreed division of labour was an option for Australia, not the less real for not being considered in the rush to decision. Australia could have stood on solid American statements and the facts of the military situation in Borneo and, privately, on justified apprehensions of United States appeasement of Sukarno.

The option of providing more advisers was very real, but again ignored in Ministers' unquestioning acceptance of the convenient peg of military advice. It would have satisfied the South Vietnamese and, for the time being, the United States. Nevertheless it would have had a different effect on the Washington debate, giving Australia the image of a thinking partner and not an indiscriminating acolyte. It would have been largely controversy-free, it would have been approved in most of non-communist Asia, and it would have preserved options that were cut off by the choice of the battalion.

Because there were other options for Australia than the fateful one it chose on 17 December, can we envisage how a different choice might have come about? Edwards discounts the possibility of standing aside, but says 'it is possible to imagine that another Australian government...could have chosen to send a smaller and less politically sensitive force than the battalion – for example the 150 advisers'.²⁸ Can we 'imagine [such] another Australian government'? It could hardly be the deeply divided opposition. But it is worth speculating whether a conservative government in which Barwick was still Foreign Minister would have been such another Australian government and if so how things might have worked out differently.

Counterfactual

The great counterfactual, which still goes on, is what would have happened in 1964–65 if Kennedy had been President and not Johnson.

Can we build an equally interesting counterfactual around if Barwick had been Foreign Minister and not Hasluck?

Barwick resigned his portfolio to become Chief Justice. He wanted to defer taking up his appointment and to continue as Foreign Minister for another year. How might history have been different if Barwick had had his wish granted, and if Hasluck's first year as Foreign Minister is removed from the equation? What *might* Barwick have done differently?

Barwick's final thoughts

Counterfactuals can only be approached with an open mind. In Barwick's case this requires getting over, or around, the substantial hurdle of what he wrote about Vietnam in his 90s supporting the Vietnam War.

²⁸ Edwards, p384.

In an unpublished memoir of Barwick, written between 1998 and 2000, which I have only read since his death, Tange regards those words as definitive:

While sharing with allies concern at the Communist successes in Vietnam against the feeble and venal Diem government, and the breaches of agreements earlier reached in Laos [Barwick] was reluctant to commit Australian fighting forces. While I believed his despatch of military advisers to help provide security for villagers in the South carried no obligation to meet any request for ground forces for a combat role his papers reveal that he thought otherwise.²⁹

In earlier conversations I had with him in retirement, Tange had been adamant that Barwick would not have agreed to the despatch of a battalion to Vietnam. He justified this in words almost identical to those quoted. He said the conventional picture of Barwick as a Vietnam 'hawk' was a wrong inference to draw from the only significant Vietnam decision with which Barwick had been associated, to provide advisory soldiers to train Vietnamese to defend their villages. Contrary to the allegations made by David Marr in his prize-winning biography-cum-hatchet job on Barwick of connivance in the AATTV having a combat role from the outset, which rest on the flimsiest of foundations, Barwick was determinedly against the AATTV having a combat role and it did not have one while he was Minister. The decision to give it one was made a month later, in May 1964.

It would have gone against the grain for Barwick, in writing a response to what he described as 'a terrible book', to condemn the most important foreign policy decision his colleagues were to make after his departure or to break solidarity with them. It would not have been in his nature to make a similar recantation to that which appears in Howard Beale's biography.³⁰

Barwick also makes plain the influences on him at the time he was writing of the victorious end of the Cold War and of revisionist history, which argued that the main aims of the war had been achieved:

The Vietnamese [sic] war...was not lost, as is so frequently said. I think it was in substance won, but the Americans, under pressure of the demonstrations, withdrew from the conflict before the result was clear.

It would have been useful to historians if Barwick had taken pains to make the record clear, and so correct Marr. Either Barwick did not bother, or he did not want to dignify Marr's book with a specific refutation on this issue, in which he had not been fully in step with his colleagues, or he may have felt that the historical record did not jibe with the robust message he wished to leave. But perhaps it was just that his memory was not clear, and in some respects it was obviously faulty. Because of failing eyesight he was incapable

²⁹ Tange, Memoir.

³⁰ Howard Beale, *This Inch of Time: Memoirs of Politics and Diplomacy*, South Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1977.

of research, or indeed, as he explained in his book, of handling any records 'either to stimulate or to verify recollection'.³¹ Nor did he bother to contact his old officials. In the circumstances, it seems reasonable to base oneself on the historical record of Barwick in office and in interacting with officials, and the inferences that can be drawn from it.

April to November 1964

The outstanding feature of this period is Hasluck's dominance, dominance of policy to reshape it in accordance with his fully formed realist philosophy, for which United States movement towards escalation of war in Vietnam was an ideal centrepiece, and dominance of his department, from a distance. The effects were to be measured in geometrical progression. To wipe the slate clean demands a leap of the imagination.

In mid-April 1964, Tange directed that policy towards Vietnam should be evolved more slowly – and by the *Minister for External Affairs*. Tange's stress on the last words indicates that he envisaged Barwick making decisions in consultation with his officials, just as he had done in January 1963 about Confrontation. The officials would have been the same – Tange, Waller and Jockel, plus Shaw, who had much more Asian experience. In January 1963 his knowledgeable officials had persuaded Barwick – or given him the arguments – to avoid going to war against Indonesia. Australia adopted a politico-diplomatic policy, and not a military approach putting troops alongside a great and powerful friend.

Further, Tange envisaged Barwick making the policy in his own time. Hasluck leapt smartly in May to meeting a United States request for more advisers in Vietnam and he agreed to them changing to a combat role. Barwick would have deferred decisions on the United States request until he returned from overseas in early June. By then it was clear that the United States appeal to other countries for more flags had been a failure. Australia could have got away with doing nothing.

However Barwick might well have agreed to double the size of the 30-man AATTV, but not to change its role to a combat one.

In response to the United States request the Army wanted to do two things: first, to increase the numbers of the AATTV, and second, to change its role in order to provide it with combat experience, which was contrary to its initial purpose. Increasing numbers was more relevant to the United States purpose, which was political. Australian military doctrine, which had been reiterated in the Confrontation context in March 1964, was that 'it would be a wrong use of our forces to employ them for political purposes which were not sound militarily' and that they should 'serve a clear military purpose'.³² The other

³¹ Barwick, Acknowledgments, pv.

³² NAA A1945/40 245/3/9.

purpose was to give a psychological boost to the South Vietnamese, who preferred training personnel to combat troops.

Barwick would have thought increasing the numbers was enough. Giving the AATTV a combat role represented a reversal of a major policy with which Barwick was particularly identified, and for which he had been criticised by his perennial gadfly, former Minister Wilfrid Kent-Hughes.

The historian of the AATTV, Ian McNeill, notes that a distinguishing feature of Australian advisers was that they 'saw themselves as helping the South Vietnamese to win *their* war'.³³ This is exactly the role Barwick envisaged. He would have emphasised it, then, and surely later. It did not preclude AATTV members getting into combat situations with the Vietnamese they were training. It did not preclude fighting alongside Americans, but with the proviso that Australia's distinctive national identity and Australian soldiers' right to make decisions should be as far as possible preserved.

Barwick would not have agreed to the assignment of 20 advisers to a combat role in I Corps. That was for the United States, and further it raised United States expectations in regard to future combat commitments.

Between June and November, Barwick would not have done what Hasluck did. He would not have given priority to Vietnam over Indonesia and Indonesia's confrontation of Malaysia. He would not have talked of Vietnam as our war and identified himself with the militant wing of American advisers who believed Hanoi must be attacked and forced to give up its support for the Viet Cong. He would not have alienated and pressured and stultified his advisers. He would not have talked with equanimity, as Hasluck did in London in June, about nuclear war with China. He would not have shared Hasluck's world view in which containing China was the centrepiece.

Against this background, the United States would not have felt the same certainty of an Australian commitment to escalation in Vietnam at the beginning of December as it had as result of Hasluck's advice and actions.

Nor would Australia have had the same sense of obligation. Indeed, it would still have been open to it to take the position it had taken up to April 1964, that it would give the United States full political backing, provide civil aid, but limit military involvement to training the South Vietnamese.

17 December

If Barwick had been present at the 17 December Cabinet, procedures for deciding a response to Johnson would have been quite different. In the first place it is most unlikely that the decision would have been taken on that day. Barwick would have demanded an orderly and normal approach, with the Defence Committee's views being before Cabinet. He would have pointed out

³³ Ian McNeill, 'Australian Army Advisers: Perceptions of Enemies and Allies', in Kenneth Maddock and Barry Wright, *WAR: Australia and Vietnam*, Artarmon: Harper & Row, 1987, p39.

the need for departmental comments on the Chiefs of Staffs' paper, which was full of holes. All this would of course have required standing up to Menzies, in private and in the FADC. However, Barwick would have insisted that the issues raised by the sending of ground combat forces were too important to be decided summarily in the context of the American alliance, or the Prime Minister's relations with the United States President, or convenience.

December to April

By 22 December it was apparent that implementation of the phase of escalation for which foreign assistance had been sought by the United States had been delayed indefinitely. For many weeks Australia was under no pressure to do anything about committing forces. There would have been ample time to consider all aspects of the question of sending troops to Vietnam. Menzies was away until February. When it came to discussing the substance of troops for Vietnam, Barwick would have come at the various aspects of the matter from almost the opposite angle from his colleagues, who showed themselves, rather uncharacteristically, it must be said, keen to rush in.

His whole record showed that Barwick was cautious about *Australia resorting to force*. No doubt because of his legal background, he believed, as he told Rusk in 1962, that one of the great ends of policy was to avoid warfare.

Barwick told Stewart Harris, the *London Times* correspondent in Canberra, on 9 April 1964 that 'power unexercised is powerful, but that once power is exercised (particularly by a smaller power) it loses much of its impact'. Barwick said that Australia as a middle power needed to consider very carefully when it applied the power it possessed, in the military sense, to a situation.

Barwick was no more a respecter of what he called 'the military wallahs' than he was of anyone else because of rank and status. Barwick would have demanded answers to all the military questions that were raised and swept under the rug. Hasluck said his sympathies were with the service commanders, which Barwick would have thought odd. Once they realised air attacks on North Vietnam were not going to win the war, Menzies and Hasluck advocated killing more Viet Cong. Menzies told Averell Harriman in January 1966 that this should be done 'even at the cost of more casualties. The Australian people are prepared for losses and fully support the government'. Five days later, little sir echo Hasluck told his department that the Viet Cong must be 'smashed decisively and more quickly than appears to be planned at present'.

Barwick would have deplored such simplistic views. He would have reiterated what he had said so many times, that the war had to be won in the villages, and by the South Vietnamese. It was a struggle to win hearts and minds.

Barwick would have argued through the implications in Menzies' words on 17 December 'but we'd be in', suggesting a long-term and expanding commitment. Cabinet, on the other hand, was insouciant about how Australia's military involvement in Vietnam would grow and how long it would last, and Menzies ignored Bunting's advice about the need to address an exit strategy.

Barwick always argued that Australia had different interests from the United Kingdom and the United States because of its *geographical situation in Asia*. This had a number of implications.

In December 1963 Barwick wrote reiterating to Menzies his constant theme that Australia because of the permanent implications of its geographical position must endeavour to be in good Asian company, especially before going to war. It should not be 'unduly quick to become militarily involved'.³⁴

As Acting Minister during the Laos crises of 1959 and 1961, Barwick had *first* expressed these views which were heretical to the hawks of the day.

In 1959 he said that Australia 'needs to stand in the right light in South East Asia'. In 1961 he said Australia should ask the United States to 'seriously to ponder the long-term implications for Australia' in Asia if it proved to be 'the only Ally' in going to war there. In other words, to be viewed as America's 'Deputy Sheriff' would not be in Australia's long-term interests.

Though Menzies hoped for British and New Zealand participation in Vietnam, he obviously took the opposite view that a coalition of the willing of two would have a favourable impact in the United States, on government, Congress and public opinion. Barwick, however, would have argued that Australia was entitled to defer decisions on ground combat forces until the United States could demonstrate that it could put together a credible (particularly to Asians) international task force.

Barwick's position would have been that set out in the External Affairs draft of Menzies' reply to Johnson, bowdlerised by Hasluck, *viz.* 'it is important for both of us to widen the field of participation by other nations and to remove any appearance of intervening in Asian affairs without substantial support from Asian countries'.³⁵ That was far from the case in December 1964 and succeeding months. America's only other supporter in committing combat troops was Park Chung-hee's South Korea. Barwick would have asked whether Park's autocratic government supplying mercenaries was the Asian company that Australia wanted to be in.

Barwick would have drawn attention to the significance of the lack of genuine Asian support for United States policy and the reasons for it. The point was strikingly made by Robert Thompson of BRIAM in sketching to London in late November 1964 the scenario that 'America loses in South Vietnam and

³⁴ NAA M2576/1 7.

³⁵ NAA A4940/1 C4643 pt1.

leaves Asia looking like a mad dog in the eyes of the world'.³⁶ Barwick would have given salience to the ills of South Vietnam, which alienated Asians and which Hasluck was able to sweep under the rug. Barwick was in favour of assisting the South Vietnamese, providing they were willing to fight, but he was opposed to, and would have opposed, fighting their war for them, as appeared increasingly likely in 1964–65. There were so many reports of Vietnamese xenophobia, and so many predictions that Vietnamese would do less of the fighting in proportion to foreigners doing more, that he would have made a very strong case against the battalion on this score alone.

Although he made the case more often and more strongly that the United Kingdom would go from east of Suez, from the outset of Confrontation he included the United States as not necessarily having the same long-term interests as Australia in regard to Indonesia and Southeast Asia. While the focus of the government was on tying the Americans down on the mainland of Southeast Asia, Barwick would have asked how one could be sure that would succeed. The notion that it could achieve this by fighting alongside the Americans in Vietnam was over-simplistic. By the end of 1965 neither the United States nor Australia viewed South Vietnam as an essential piece of military real estate.

Barwick would have raised whether a further implication of geography was that the Vietnamese could afford to wait the Americans out, a scenario debated within every concerned government but Australia's.

Barwick, having warned that European theories like 'the lessons of Munich' should not be applied automatically and unthinkingly to Asia, could have asked for practical scrutiny of 'the domino theory'. He could have asked what the countries assigned to be dominoes, and the other Southeast Asian countries, thought about the theory, as shown by their words and actions in response to the Vietnam situation. The equivocal Lee Kuan Yew could have been cross-examined on this score when he was a guest of the government in March. Lee was privately critical of the Australian decision on the battalion. Publicly he espoused an Asian-initiated neutralisation of the South. He commented on the Australian decision that he was hard put to say whether it was just a reckless gamble or a calculated act of courage. He added 'whatever it is, it is one of the major turning points in Australia's defence and foreign policies. Militarily it won't achieve anything'.³⁷ The cartoonist for *The Australian*, Bruce Petty, drew the bridges between Australia and Southeast Asia falling down.

Barwick would have reiterated the view that he had taken at the outset of Confrontation that Australia did not need automatically to commit combat forces to *shore up its alliances*. In 1962 he had shocked Menzies by rejecting his

³⁶ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p277.

³⁷ NAA A1838/280 3014/10/15/3 pt1.

statement in Cabinet that if Britain were at war, Australia would of course be at war, although one might have expected that this traditional view would have been shaken in the previous three years when it was shown that Australia could go to war over Laos without the British.³⁸

He had made his approach stick so that – though it could have been expected to be predetermined – Australia did not go to war alongside Britain at the outset of Confrontation or play a subordinate role. In doing so, Barwick turned back the tide of structure – deep distrust of Indonesia and Sukarno personally, compounded by the relationship with the Soviet Union – and contingency – a new Sukarnoist adventure which offered the opportunity for effective counter-action in good alliance company.

Barwick took the position that Australia had no treaty obligation to Malaysia, although as regards Malaya that was debatable and certainly its political obligation was strong and its national interest was deeply engaged in Malayan bases. Its political obligations to South Vietnam were nil and its moral obligations were far weaker than to Malaysia. Further they did not arise out of and were not seen to be associated with treaties – either SEATO or ANZUS.

Barwick would have regarded as simplistic his colleagues' notion that they could 're-grow' ANZUS so that it would provide an automatic commitment to Australia and Australian forces overseas by putting troops into Vietnam. Hasluck agreed with Menzies the line that Australia should rest on the United States assurance that it would honour the ANZUS Treaty and 'obtain...as many endorsements as we can of this general confidence'.

Tange thought Ministers were deluding themselves, and Barwick would have entirely agreed. The United States honouring of ANZUS would be shaped by its perception of its own interests in any particular contingency. In fact the real cement of ANZUS henceforth would be the United States monitoring, interception and communications facilities on Australian territory, which Barwick had agreed with Rusk outside the 1962 ANZUS Council meeting should be brought under the Treaty.

In the prolonged gestation period before decisions became necessary, it would have been possible to put all ministerial comfort blankets under scrutiny. Barwick would have been less euphoric about quadripartite planning machinery, the prospect of which entranced Menzies and his advisers and consistently encouraged their disposition to involvement in Vietnam. The desire to achieve it, through bringing the Indonesia-Malaysia and Vietnam situations together, was, I think, the second most important influence on Ministers after concern to strengthen the American tie, and both sprang from a deep sense of insecurity about alliances.

It is unlikely that Barwick would have shared this insecurity. He was much more robust and optimistic about Australia's regional future. It would have

³⁸ Information from Sir Walter Crocker.

been open to Barwick to express the view that Australia should give up its long-held aspirations for an Anglo-Saxon directorate for Asia and that it should adopt a contemporary policy working with both allies and Asian countries to develop national resilience and regional cooperation.

Barwick would have queried whether Australia needed to go as far as providing troops to 'a force which is not a military requirement' but politically 'would demonstrate resolve and also give us a major bargaining counter in negotiations'³⁹, 'us' being of course the United States, which would make its own high policy. But at the same time he would have reminded his colleagues that the purpose of applying new forms of military pressure on North Vietnam and the Viet Cong was not to conquer or destroy, which would be impossible, but to influence them to a certain course, either of desisting or of accepting a negotiated solution in the long term.

Barwick would not have allowed Australia to get into the position it quickly adopted of opposing *negotiations*, because his view would have been the opposite, and because he would have seen its political untenability over time. Australia's precipitate opposition to negotiations prevented it making objective evaluations of all the Vietnamese parties.

The question of *choosing between regional security priorities* was before the government from September 1964. Concern about Indonesia was at its height, causing Hasluck in January 1965 to elevate it to parity with Vietnam as 'equally grim'. It could have got grimmer if Sukarno had played his political cards better with the United States and not gone to extremes in withdrawing from the UN and moving towards Asian communist countries.

Barwick would have insisted that the political and security implications for the Indonesia-Malaysia conflict of putting combat troops into Vietnam should be thoroughly examined and debated. Barwick would likely have concluded (backed by his department) that priority for the former argued decisively against the latter.

There had, after all, been an agreed division of labour since the beginning of Confrontation, albeit with some conflicting statements. Australia was about to share the military burden of opposing Indonesia in Borneo. It was also accepting a new responsibility, consequent upon the exclusion clauses (indirect aggression and guerrilla warfare, ground forces) of the Kennedy-Barwick agreement of October 1963. Mutual acceptance that if a Confrontation-like Indonesian threat developed against Papua New Guinea, as it threatened to do, Australia would have to handle it on its own, marked a change from the understandings Australia had had from the United States that the territory would be regarded as part of the Australian homeland. The exclusion clauses of the Kennedy-Barwick agreement were a potential, if provocative, asset for Australia if it wanted to avoid the grave consequences of sending ground forces to Vietnam.

³⁹ *FRUS Vietnam I* Doc 418.

Barwick would have argued for priority to be given to the Indonesia-Malaysia situation over Vietnam, and for the issue of putting combat troops into Vietnam to be examined in that context. In doing so he would have been working in tandem with his department.

If he was unsuccessful in arguing against the battalion and for priority for handling the Indonesian threat, Barwick would likely have argued for meeting Johnson's specific request, and subsequent proposals, for *more advisers* as his fall-back position. The April 1965 United States request, for Australia and New Zealand to accept responsibility for training regional forces, would have particularly appealed. It would have been a distinctive national (or ANZAC) contribution. It would not have required a combat role. It would have been a case of Australia doing what it did best, providing professional instruction. There would have been no problem about securing a South Vietnamese request. It also would not have harmed Australia's reputation with regional countries, and indeed would have enhanced it with most.

Could Barwick have won the argument? He lost no big battle in Cabinet, and only a few small ones (eg, over internationalising Portuguese Timor and on non-aggression pacts between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines). No battle would have been more significant than this one. He would have delighted in starting off, with his Department, in a minority of one. External Affairs' usual ally in Defence, Blakers, would have been constrained because Hasluck would have been his Minister. Bunting, Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, who was not present at the 17 December Cabinet, on later evidence would seem not to have been a lost cause. But essentially Barwick himself would have had to persuade the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

On the record, the Prime Minister was the vital and totally consistent factor in the decision in favour of committing ground forces to Vietnam. However he was never exposed to proper strategic argument, or to a forceful personality like Barwick putting forward alternative views or demanding that Ministers examine the consistency of their assumptions. Menzies and McEwen were at one in their conviction that backing the United States in South Vietnam was a good insurance policy for Australia. However, this was speculative, and only down the track. In Australia's immediate circumstances, required to commit forces against Indonesia in Malaysia with incalculable consequences, including for Australian territory, a commitment of ground troops to Vietnam was no help. Indeed, McEwen acknowledged that it was a dissipation of military resources, which was not in Australia's military interest. McMahan took the same view when he joined the FADC. Even Hasluck moved towards it, and he might have done so earlier if he had still been in the Defence portfolio, because he would not have been tolerant (as Paltridge was) of shoddy thinking amongst his military advisers.

It is easy to conceive of a very different outcome to the decision-making on whether to send Australian ground troops to Vietnam if Barwick had still been in the Cabinet in the year to April 1965.

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