Robert Menzies INSTITUTE

More Than Dominoes:
Cold-War Strategic Defence Before Vietnam

Presentation by Dr Zachary Gorman, Academic Coordinator at the Robert Menzies Institute to the HTAV VCE Teacher's Workshop, February 2023

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As Australia's longest serving prime minister who played a central role in both the Second World War and the Cold War, topics related to Robert Menzies are scattered throughout the VCE history curriculum. Today we are going to focus on the Cold War aspect, which is its own area of study for Year 11 modern history, and which also features in the Year 12 topics titled 'transformations' and 'war and upheaval'.

Some of the central issues we have with the popular memory of the Cold War is that it tends to often be stereotyped in black and white terms, our perspective is very much dominated by the American experience of the period and the use of American sources, and the Vietnam War looms very large and tends to distort what came before it. So, the aim for today is to overcome those shortcomings, providing context and nuance to balance the stereotypes, really putting Australia front and centre, and looking in detail at what happened before the Cold War's most famous conflict, at least for the Asia Pacific region.

All of this I think is epitomised by the concept of the 'domino theory', the idea that if one country fell to communism its neighbours were likely to follow quite rapidly. This is now often seen as sort of conspiratorial, and having been debunked by Vietnam both because the Vietnamese Communist Party proved to be a somewhat grassroots nationalist movement rather than a puppet of the Soviets or Chinese Communist Party, and because their victory did not lead to any kind of tidal wave of communist revolutions.

However, looked at in context the domino idea did seem a lot more reasonable at the time it was first suggested. German Blitzkrieg and the rapid advances of the Japanese in World War Two seemed to prove that in modern warfare nations could fall rapidly to an enemy advance. A key part of that was the psychological factor, the impact of seeing awe-inspiring defeats inflicted on your allies such that you felt like you would inevitably meet the same fate. And this was very much central to the way that the domino theory was envisaged, that one communist victory would both boost the morale of revolutionaries in other countries and depress the morale of those who were trying to resist them.

A second aspect of the domino theory was that communism as a political philosophy was deliberately expansionist. This had its basis partly in the theories of Marx and his call for a proletarian revolution that would not be restricted by national boundaries. But it was also made tangible by the descent of the iron curtain after WW2, and just how rapidly the countries of Eastern Europe were drawn into the Soviet sphere. Even in places like Czechoslovakia where a fledgling democracy had been set up, this was destroyed by a Soviet backed coup, which to outsiders stood out as a clear demonstration of aggressive intent.

With the victory of the Mao's Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War in late 1949, it very much seemed as though that scramble to control countries experienced in Europe would come to the Asia-Pacific, and this appeared to be confirmed by the Korean War of 1950-1953. In the 1950s a large number Asian countries were subject to communist disturbances, not just the obvious ones that will come up in this presentation, but also places like Thailand and the Philippines. There was even a famous meeting of Communist Party Leaders in Calcutta in 1948 where they were alleged to have planned coordinated action, and Australia's own outspoken communist Lance Sharkey was in attendance.

It is worth noting that Australia had its own sizeable Communist Party, and that the Communism issue loomed very large in Australian domestic politics alongside the international situation. Indeed, the government's attempt to ban the communist party was framed on the basis that the party would act as a 'fifth column' should Australia be involved in a large conflict.

Time would prove one aspect of the domino theory entirely correct, in that communist movements fared far better when they could be supplied and aided by friendly neighbours. When they were isolated, as in Malaya, it was far harder to gain any significant traction.

With all those caveats having been explained, the last thing to add is that although it did come into popular usage in Australia, the 'domino theory' was an Americanism coined by President Eisenhower and building off of President Truman's earlier policy of 'containment'. Australian planners talked more about what they dubbed 'forward defence' which was the simpler military strategy that you are better off dealing with potential threats before they are able to get close to you. This was obviously linked to domino theories of one nation falling after another, but throughout this period Australia would often be frustrated that America's simplistic adherence to the idea that the dominoes were all stacked up from China outward, made them blind to threats that did not fit neatly into the chain.

So what did forward defence entail? It was an attempt at a solution to Australia's long standing dilemma, which is how to defend a sparsely populated continent located in an area which is culturally distinct and potentially hostile. The conclusion the planners drew was that Australia simply could not afford to defend itself on its own, it had to pick its battles and cultivate alliances with powerful nations who shared similar values, namely Britain and the United States of America. But they were also aware that such 'great and powerful friends', which is the term Menzies used to describe Australia's major allies, had their own interests that would not always align with Australia's, and so they needed to be encouraged to align as much as possible.

All of this fed into the policies of forward defence. Limited resources meant that you would only deal with threats in Australia's immediate region, the days of sending the AIF to the Middle East, where it had gone in both world wars, were numbered, although the original planning for a potential 'World War Three' scenario did initially entail this happening again.

Secondly, you would only act in conjunction with a 'great and powerful friend' since they were the cornerstone of everything. Preferably, you'd be acting with both friends but this rarely proved to be the case as British and American interests were so divergent in Asia during this period.

You would work with a friend on a threat you both perceived, but there was some give and take which is where the 'insurance policy' metaphor comes in, the idea that Australia would make a token commitment to a conflict to uphold and reinforce the alliance. This was never at the explicit levels of quid pro quo that occurred during Howard's Iraq War, but it certainly happened during the Cold War. Australia's commitments were often quite tokenistic and small, and we were often accused by our allies of 'talking a good war', that is to say that we provided great diplomatic coverage but little else.

Next, because our powerful allies could not always be trusted to have the same interests as our own, it was best to act as part of an international coalition where there'd be joint planning. As a middle power, Australia has always had a great interest in 'upholding a rules based international order', but likewise acting as part of an international coalition provided cover and was less likely to provoke the hostility of our neighbours.

The final limitation of forward defence, is that although Australia very much bought into the Cold War mindset that all communist countries were potential threats, we'd never be so brash as to try to directly topple a regime once in place. Australia would only intervene in a country when asked by that country's government, hence the focus was akin to containment.

So what was the context which brought forth the policy of forward defence? Well it was an Asia Pacific region that was greatly destabilised by both the Second World War, and the withdrawal/ attempted reimposition of colonial regimes. Much like Europe a few decades prior, the map of Asia was very arbitrary and subject to historical contingency. There were places where disparate cultures were forced to unite as in the Dutch East Indies, which became a unified Indonesia, others where islands had been artificially sliced in half like New Guinea, and also disturbances from the migration which had gone on within Empires, and this was perhaps most evident in Malaya and Singapore.

You had issues with colonial governments who had been ousted by the Japanese trying to reassert themselves, such as the French in Indochina, but even in places where colonial regimes were trying to foster a path to independence, which was mostly the case with Britain, they faced all sorts of difficulties which led to highly controversial decisions like the partition of India.

With so much of Asia essentially up for grabs, you had the emergence of nationalist movements trying to assert local sovereignty, and communist movements trying to set up somewhat utopian regimes. There was a certain irony that both these intellectual traditions were western in origin but were now often directed against the West.

But the thing to remember is that it was always a complex picture, where different groups would lay claim to being the authentic voice for the nation, and it was incredibly difficult to identify who was legitimate. In Indonesia for example, you had secular nationalists competing with communists and Islamists, and it was never quite clear who had popular support, or who might win out through more Machiavellian means. Another contrast is say Vietnam, where the communists were able to utilise nationalism to attract a lot of grassroots support, while the government of South Vietnam was associated with a Catholic minority, whereas in Malaya the situation was reversed and it was the Communists who were associated with a Chinese ethnic minority.

So how did Australia react to all this? Well we were acutely aware of our vulnerability having gone through the Second World War. The fall of Singapore had revealed the limitations of relying on a great protector, yet at the same time there was a widespread acknowledgement that Australia had not been able to defend herself and that it was ultimately American intervention that had saved us, so it ended up reinforcing the same strategy.

You might think that because of Singapore, Australia would be sceptical of Britain and more reliant on America, and John Curtin had given that famous speech in late 1941 where he said that 'Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.'

But in the years after the war there was bipartisan support for the idea that Britain remained vital to Australia, and indeed one of the reasons why Ben Chifley lost the 1949 election to Menzies was that he maintained petrol rationing that was in the interests of Britain's Labour Government.

There were a couple of reasons for this. Australians still thought of themselves as culturally British and that despite some shared values Americans were essentially foreigners. Also, despite the 'Gallipoli' stereotype of British generals sending Australian soldiers callously off to die, by the 1950s Britain gave Australia far more say in joint strategic decisions and even important military leadership positions, whereas America did things very much on its own terms.

Secondly, America did not actually seem that interested in sticking around after the war. It had a long political tradition of isolationism that stretched back to George Washinton, which as prime minister early in WW2 Menzies had had to deal with this with firsthand. An ominous sign of a reversion to this stance occurred when Chifley attempted to get the Americans to maintain a military base at Manus Island that they had set up during the war, but they declined.

Being aware of its weakness and vulnerability, Australia had steered clear of many of the events happening around it. Despite having some shared strategic interests with the Dutch, the Chifley Government had supported Indonesian independence and had even refused a British request to reinforce Hong Kong, which was thought to be vulnerable after the Communist Party victory in China.

Once elected in 1949, Menzies would maintain this approach. He was very reluctant to commit Australian troops to Korea and Malaya, he frequently cautioned America to not escalate the Taiwan Strait Crises of the 1950s in which nuclear war was threatened over Taiwan in circumstances eerily similar to today, and there's even considerable evidence that Menzies considered recognising the Chinese Communist Government decades before Whitlam, but political circumstances meant that this never occurred.

Australia also knew that it needed to ingratiate itself with its neighbours, and that preventing the spread of communism involved improving economic conditions more-so than winning battles, and this was the impetus behind the Colombo Plan which was said to be the brainchild of Menzies's Minister for External Affairs Percy Spender. In brief, Colombo was a large scale program of foreign aid, backed by multiple nations, which included an extensive university student exchange program that helped to erode the White Australia Policy.

So let's take a quick look at the Korean War, which is where many of these policies and approaches really began to crystallise. As I suggested earlier, North Korea's invasion of the South seemed to confirm that communism in Asia was expansionist like its European counterpart, and that the main power behind that expansion would be communist China.

Menzies was not initially going to commit Australian troops to the conflict, and indeed it was not him who made the final decision to do so. Korea did not seem to fit into the framework of forward defence, as it was too far north to really be considered Australia's backyard. Cabinet decided that North Korea's invasion 'represented only one phase of Russian aggression and that Australia's primary [objective] in the matter of opposing Communism was located in Malaya'.

However, Percy Spender thought that backing America in the conflict might be a good way to get her to commit to a formal alliance with Australia, and he convinced acting Prime Minister Arthur Fadden to make the announcement of an Australian commitment while Menzies was out of contact on a boat travelling between Britain and America. Menzies found out shortly before landing, but owned the decision in front of the awaiting American pressmen and was subsequently treated with much popularity during his visit.

Apart from being too far north, Korea was the prototypical example for the framework of forward defence as both of Australia's great and powerful friends were involved, and it was backed by the most respected multi-national coalition you could get in the United Nations.

owever, there were two more negative fallouts of the Korean War. One was that General MacArthur's aggressive move towards the Chinese border, an action that provoked China's entry into the war, seemed to confirm Australia's fears that the Americans were reckless and could not be trusted to be a global leader in the manner that Britain could. MacArthur ultimately got fired by Truman for his actions, but this was only a small consolation.

And secondly, the Korean War proved to be very expensive, not just in terms of upfront costs, but because the purchase of wool for army uniforms created a wool boom which prompted an acute bout of inflation. In response, Menzies introduced a deflationary budget aimed at cutting spending which capped the defence budget. This cap would be maintained in the coming years, meaning that defence spending became an ever-smaller percentage of GDP, and this very much wedded Australia to the 'insurance premium' idea.

On the back of Korea Australia got the strategic agreement with America that Spender had been seeking. This was also off the back of Australia agreeing to a controversial 'soft' peace treaty with Japan which would allow her to rebuild within the safe embrace of the democratic west, as it was thought harsher recriminations may see her fall into the Soviet sphere. ANZUS was a reassurance that Australia would be kept safe from Japan, and it allowed her to commit troops to the Middle East in the case of World War 3 which remained the plan until about 1953.

However, ANZUS was very limited. While it is now often held up as the cornerstone of the Australian American alliance, Menzies was acutely aware that it fell short of the definition of an alliance. Its commitments were loose and open to interpretation, and it involved no joint strategic planning in the manner of NATO. Menzies is alleged to have dubbed it a 'superstructure built on a foundation of jelly'.

After Korea, America in the 1950s was very reluctant to commit itself to Asia because its commitments to Europe were already so large and because it felt that a new world war would be won or lost in that theatre. Instead, America preferred to quite brazenly use the nuclear deterrent to deal with threats in Asia, which was considered the cheaper option by the Eisenhower administration. Hence the circumstances surrounding ANZUS were not indicative of a large American commitment to the defence of Australia.

Because of all this, ANZUS ironically reinforced Australia's belief that it needed Britain to be an active force in the Asia-Pacific.

By this stage, Britain had already granted independence to several of its imperial Asian territories, but being extremely poor after the war it tended to keep a hold of the profitable ones like Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaya.

From 1948 Malaya was subject to a campaign led by so called 'communist terrorists' who wanted to get rid of the British and establish a communist regime. These Communists tended to have the backing of Malaya's Chinese ethnic minority, and were heavily opposed by the Malay majority, not least of all because Muslim Malays were intractably opposed to an explicitly godless ideology.

Australia was concerned about Malaya falling to communism, indeed far more so than Korea, but Menzies thought Australia engaging in a militaristic policy would be unpopular both domestically and with the neighbours in our region, so he only offered Britain the aid of Australian aircraft until 1955, when ground troops were belatedly committed.

There was also Australian concern that Britain didn't know how to conduct warfare in the jungle nor use tactics specifically designed for counterinsurgency, but they would be proven wrong, and indeed Malaya became a model for how to conduct such an operation which is still studied in many military colleges around the world. Britain was very successful in isolating the Communists and winning hearts and minds, they offered independence to Malaya thus undercutting the Communist's platform, they gave secure property rights to the Chinese minority, and also gave them access to important amenities and education. This success was a large part of the reason why people later believed that the intervention in Vietnam would work, though there were many major differences between the two scenarios.

It's worth noting that even at this early-stage, America and Britain had conflicting priorities. America was very focused on Indochina and did not really care about Malaya, whereas Britain sought diplomatic resolutions on Indochina as it did not want to upset China when Hong Kong was so vulnerable.

There was an attempt to unite the interests of Britain and America with the formation of SEATO in the aftermath of the Geneva accords. Like Colombo, this provided significant foreign aid to developing countries.

But once again it fell short of what was hoped, with fewer Asian countries signing on than expected, France uninterested in returning to the location of their humiliation in Indochina, and America committed to its nuclear deterrent approach over conventional forces.

Australia believed that the nuclear deterrent actually increased the likelihood of small-scale conflicts, and they adopted an alternate a 'fire brigade' approach aimed at putting out nascent conflicts as they arose. While President Kennedy would later adopt a similar policy leading to a rise in American interventionism in the Asia-Pacific in the 1960s, for the moment Australia and America were still not on the same page.

This became particularly concerning after the Suez Crisis of 1956, which proved that Britain was no longer a global power, and prompted discussion about potentially withdrawing all her military forces from east of the Suez Canal.

So Australia felt itself to be very much isolated when in the latter half of the decade it had to deal with the West New Guinea Dispute and the possibility of war with Indonesia.

West New Guinea had been left in the hands of the Dutch after the creation of Indonesia, and Australia thought that it was a vital buffer zone in securing our safety. Billy Hughes had once described the Island as a 'dagger aimed at the heart of Australia' for example. But in the late 1950s an expansionist Indonesia made it clear that it was determined to seize the last of the Dutch territories – no matter how physically and culturally distant they were from Jakarta.

Indonesia played off of Cold War tensions to achieve its aims, receiving submarines and bombers from the Soviets to use in a potential invasion, and putting America in a position where it wanted the Netherlands and Australia to give in to Indonesia to keep her from fully joining the Soviet bloc. It is important to note that at this time the Indonesian regime was not explicitly communist, but the country had the third largest communist party in the world which was then very much tolerated by the regime, and which could easily have been embraced by it.

In the end, Australia felt compelled to give in and make a public statement where they backed an Indonesian takeover of West New Guinea provided it was done peacefully. This was highly controversial, and met with howls of 'appeasement' by the Australian press. Indeed, the issue was so contentious that it arguably played an important role in Menzies coming extremely close to losing the 1961 election.

So dire was the situation that Australia's strategic planners even began thinking the previously unthinkable, that Australia might have to be prepared to defend itself without the assistance of a 'great and powerful friend'. In particular, they began developing a special Papua New Guinea force to help patrol the border.

Indonesia's success in the dispute very much emboldened it, and led into the policy of Konfrontasi. This was Indonesia's response to the suggestion of Malaya's Prime Minister Tunkul Abdul Rahman, that the former British territories of Malaya, Singapore and Northern Borneo should merge into one country to be known as Malaysia.

Indonesia viewed this proposition as a threat and labelled it as a colonialist conspiracy orchestrated by Britain, but they also saw that it might be an opportunity to seize Northern Borneo and further expand. Confrontation would be an undeclared war, where Indonesian troops fought clandestine battles against Malaysian and Commonwealth forces. Britain was determined to stop Indonesia, and openly started comparing Indonesian leader Sukarno to Hitler for his grandiose territorial ambitions.

But Australia remained highly cautious, not only because it had had to contemplate the possibility of fighting a solo war against Indonesia quite recently, but also because when they sought a reassurance from America that ANZUS could be invoked should Indonesia attack, they were given a very conditional answer that excluded any ground troops. President Kennedy said that 'People have forgotten ANZUS and are not at the moment prepared for a situation which would involve the United States'.

So Australia adopted an approach known as graduated response, where they let Indonesia know that they disapproved of Konfrontasi and were determined to thwart it, but at the same time offered as many olive branches as possible and made it clear that they did not want an open conflict. The policy seems to have worked, for when Britain's embassy was attacked by rioters in Jakarta, Australia's was left unscathed, indicating that Indonesia appreciated the distinctive nature of our position.

Australia did eventually commit troops to the Confrontation, but this was done in a highly gradual fashion and only as circumstances demanded it. So first they refused requests, then they offered to relieve Malaysian troops stationed elsewhere in the country to allow them to fight the Confrontation, and finally they agreed to take part in the clandestine operations but only as the 'eyes and ears'. Australia's involvement in the conflict would remain a public secret for many years and this is perhaps why it does not loom large in the popular memory.

By late 1964 and into 1965 the situation seemed to be rapidly deteriorating. Sukarno was openly courting Beijing and talking of a communist axis spanning across Asia. America recognised that the threat was escalating, but it was still not prepared to fully commit to the defence of Australia and began chiding us for our limited military spending. Australian defence spending as a percentage of GDP had declined to 2.8%, compared to America's 10.25%, the UK's 7%, and even Canada's 4.3%.

In response, Australia committed to increasing its standing army by 5000 men, embarking on a major upgrade of its air force, and committing to the introduction of conscription if they could not find the number of soldiers they wanted, which seemed likely given the Menzies Government maintained a policy of full employment.

The infamous conscription policy so intimately associated in the public mind with Vietnam would be introduced in November 1964 with an explicit view towards conflict with Indonesia. Australia also enthusiastically committed troops to Vietnam in late April 1965, in a situation where they were desperate to sure up their relationship with America because of the direct threat of war with Indonesia.

But then, on the night of 30 September 1965 everything began to change. A botched coup led to genocidal recriminations against the Indonesian Communist Party which essentially ceased to exist, and military leader Suharto began to take power off of Sukarno. For quite a while the situation in Indonesia was obscure, and indeed in the immediate aftermath it looked like if anything the possibility of conflict had risen. But eventually, Indonesia's new regime backed down from Konfrontasi, officially ending the policy in August 1966. This led to Britain's complete military withdrawal from Asia, which had been postponed by the confrontation.

So in summary, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Australia's policy of forward defence had been largely successful, and we had avoided the full-scale war that had repeatedly appeared on the horizon. But circumstances seemed to conspire towards a full scale commitment in Vietnam, which became significantly less necessary almost immediately after it had been made, but which was politically and diplomatically difficult to back out of. The caution Menzies had shown in committing Australian troops to Korea, Malaya, and Malaysia was not there, partly because he had less options as Britain withdrew from the region but primarily because this was a moment of acute and heightened danger, even if the danger rapidly dissipated shortly after Menzies retired from the Prime Ministership in January 1966.