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REVIEW ARTICLE

Australia's war in Vietnam: debate without end

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ABSTRACT

Australia's commitment in Vietnam can be interpreted as a small ally drawing its superpower partner into war for its own ends. Two studies by eminent Australian authors throw light on the role of human agency, and in so doing bring Australian historiography of the war closer to the trend in the United States. Peter Edwards's history just about describes Vietnam as 'Menzies War'. However, he finds no new sources on Menzies's mindset, and diminishes the roles of his foreign ministers, Garfield Barwick and Paul Hasluck. The late Geoffrey Bolton's intimate biography of Hasluck shows him as an active minister and also that his private papers are thin on Vietnam, the part of his distinguished career on which he never wrote. The Cabinet meeting of 17 December 1964 reveals much more about Australian decision-making on going to war than can be gleaned from Edwards's cursory treatment and Bolton's second-hand account. Barwick's different approach, and even Hasluck's last-minute caution, show Australia had a choice. Barwick, if he had remained Foreign Minister, might have kept Australia out of the Vietnam war, so freeing it to continue to play a leading regional political role.

KEYWORDS

ANZUS; SEATO; Menzies; Barwick; Hasluck; Kennedy; Johnson; Vietnam war; confrontation

Vietnam's continuing relevance

In the almost endless debate about the decision to go to war in Vietnam, explanations have moved from predetermination to human agency. In Australia, decision-making in relation to the war in Iraq brought home that the decision rests with the Prime Minister, with antecedents in the Divine Right of Kings (Woodard 2007). The coincidence of the centenary of the First World War with contemporary disasters in the Middle East have focused attention on the pity of war, and its unforeseen consequences, applicable also to Vietnam.

The role of human agency

The lively American historiography of the Vietnam War now tends to focus on the role of human agency rather than the larger forces of Cold War geopolitics and decolonisation, to explain how the US was drawn into a disastrous ground war. The hold of Camelot has focused attention on President John F. Kennedy's (JFK) private remarks and the views of his brother Robert and people who worked for him. Their interpretation is that JFK

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had no intention of getting into a major ground war in Vietnam, believed that only the South Vietnamese could win their war, and, contrary to public protestations, would have devised an exit strategy in his second term. Leading historian Fredrik Logevall was a new face when he wrote a counterfactual in 1998 on the theme of if Lee Harvey Oswald had missed (Logevall 1998). The following year he published a ground-breaking study of how JFK's successor Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) chose war and lost the chance of peace (Logevall 1999). Logevall continues to express puzzlement that LBJ did not opt for peace, a course urged on him by his vice-president, Hubert Humphrey.

The book under review by Peter Edwards is a skilful distillation and update of his magisterial two-volume official history of the Southeast Asian wars: two chapters deal with the five-year period leading up to Australia sending a ground force to South Vietnam. Edwards offers 'some final reflections' on his earlier work (Edwards with Pemberton 1992). In parallel with American interpretations, he moves away from the longer term historical thrust of his earlier work to asking whether Australian leaders had choices (in what was a war of choice). His conclusion comes close to describing Vietnam as 'Menzies's War', in the way that many Americans classify Vietnam as 'Johnson's War'. His judgement that my counterfactual—Australia could have avoided going to war in Vietnam had Garfield Barwick had still been foreign minister—'seems a little remote', rests on 'the determination of Menzies to push the commitment forward with all the authority he possessed' (Edwards 2014).

Edwards acknowledges flaws in the decision-making. He conveys a commonly held perception of Menzies's intellectual laziness in his descriptions of the Prime Minister's acceptance without questioning of time-honoured 'lessons of history', his supreme over-confidence, and reliance on yes-men. But surely there was more to Menzies's mindset than Edwards offers from his 'statements and actions'.

An essential cog in the machinery of policy-making then as now was the Foreign Minister. Paul Hasluck, who took up the portfolio on 24 April 1964, was essentially a functionary, but he provided the initial stimulus and the intellectual framework for Australia's involvement in war. Edwards portrays him as doing Menzies's bidding. However, confident that he would have Menzies's backing, he initiated the elevation of Vietnam to a 'vital' interest for Australia and then added the strategic dimension by asserting that behind North Vietnam (and indeed any threat situation in Southeast Asia) was the rising superpower, China. Hasluck's biographer, the late Geoffrey Bolton, properly claims credit for him for his policies, but then defensively argues that they represented no change in substance from the policies of his powerful predecessor, Garfield Barwick.

Bolton has drawn on a long personal friendship and privileged access to Hasluck's papers to paint compelling portraits of a basically private man and of a marriage between two talented people united by pursuit of separate literary interests, the Antipodean equivalents of Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West. However, he has been able to add only a little on the subject on which Hasluck chose never to publish, his role in Australia's decision to go to war in Vietnam, which he deals with, along with other aspects of Hasluck's five years as Foreign Minister, in two chapters.

Disappointingly for an historian of Bolton's eminence, his biography throws little light on the long relationship between Hasluck and Menzies, about which Hasluck also wrote little, beyond emphasising the importance of their first meeting and the deep impression Menzies's capacity for detachment and his vision had on Hasluck the historian (Bunting

1988). Bolton could have said more about Hasluck's fealty to Menzies, his model, the favourable portrait in his official histories, and his omission of Menzies from the portraits of colleagues published posthumously in *The Chance of Politics*. The instances he cites of Hasluck taking independent positions when he first entered Parliament accorded with Menzies's own views.

Menzies of course became Hasluck's patron, bringing him into politics, appointing him to a wilderness ministry, and acting as his protector (an affecting letter to Alexandra describes Hasluck's despair on one occasion when he was left isolated in Cabinet, with Barwick being the prosecutor). Yet Menzies did not promote him out of his unenviable portfolio for 12 years, so that Hasluck considered resignation and even asking for the ambassadorship in Rome when he was passed over on two occasions for promotion to Foreign Minister.

Bolton's chapters on the Vietnam era nevertheless repay close attention, not least because he does not always agree with Edwards, although Edwards was apparently one of the fellow historians to whom Bolton addressed enquiries or draft chapters during the biography's ten-year gestation.

The several dimensions of 'strengthen(ing) the alliance'

'Strengthen the alliance with the United States' leaps off the page as a damp description of the end-play of Menzies's career-long focus on managing 'great and powerful friends' (Edwards 2014, 285). He had spent considerable time and effort trying to keep them in harness, communing with them, politician to politician, directly though this was very challenging (Waller 1974). The commitment of troops to Vietnam meant something more than building on sentiment. 'Strengthening the alliance' can have multiple dimensions.

The simplest explanation given for Australian policy on Vietnam is that it was 'a satellite' of its ally (McLean 2006). There was clear recognition that the United States was Australia's vital ally, which emerged from Britain's humiliation in the 1956 Suez crisis. In the previous three years, Australia had differed from the United States on China, on making concessions to resolve the offshore islands crisis between China and Taiwan, and on avoiding conflict in Indochina. When the US wished to intervene at Dien Bien Phu, the Cabinet records show Menzies and Foreign Minister Richard Casey criticising the Americans in similar terms. Casey said they did not 'have a defined objective in war. The US has never done so'. Menzies lamented that 'we are being asked to participate in a forlorn hope … the Americans are not incapable of unreality'. On 4 June 1954, Cabinet decided that the US should be restrained from military action without identifying the political and military aims. Australia's decision has been judged influential by Pemberton (1989) and Logevall (2012). However, Menzies took six months to reply to Kennedy's request for a training team for Vietnam, and agreed only after American Secretary of State Dean Rusk had been put through a searching cross-examination by Barwick about the depth of the American commitment to Asia.

A second explanation is that Australia recognised (as it has continued to do) the necessity to pay an insurance premium on the alliance, in order to ensure that a never wholly predictable United States would come to Australia's military support in its hour of need. This is the way Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew saw it when he wondered in 1965 how high the premium could go, correctly analysing that as an ally Australia could be parsimonious as

well as being very willing. Amongst Australian ministers in 1964–5, Deputy Prime Minister John McEwen saw in the simplest terms the necessity to pay the premium, likening it to the farmer aiding his neighbour in a bushfire or, more prosaically, putting out his rubbish bins if he was away.

A more refined version of 'the insurance premium' argument is that Australia was seeking a tangible quid pro quo, being 'acutely conscious of the need for American support over Confrontation' (Edwards 2014). Australia could have been aiming higher: was Vietnam an instance of a small power aiming to influence a great power to do its bidding? Only political leaders can decide how to press their case effectively in order to dictate outcomes without impugning counter-productively the sacred sovereignty of the superpower. It will be argued that Australia's leaders Menzies and Hasluck developed such an ambitious agenda.

To do this, we first examine whether Barwick was capable of changing Menzies's mind and whether there were substantive policy differences between him and Hasluck, which Bolton denies. We then move on to Hasluck's ministry, the escalation of prominence for Vietnam from May 1964 and linkage to the threat from China from June, the submission of the Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy to Cabinet and the decisions taken on it in November 1964, and the decision of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of Cabinet (FADC) on 17 December 1964. Examination of the record of this decision which was released in 2012 marks the culmination of my argument that an alternative course was possible for Australia if its Foreign Minister had not changed in April. A final section shows how the subsequent course of events would have provided justification for the alternative and a productive regional role.

Barwick's influence on Menzies

A relationship of mutual respect existed between the eloquent advocate and consummate politician used to winning, Menzies, and 'the Bradman of the Bar', but political neophyte, Garfield Barwick. Barwick told me in 1996 that 'You could always talk to Bob. He had the gift of rationality'. Barwick was iconoclastic and idiosyncratic. In expressing doubts during the Laos crises of 1959 and 1961, he urged sensitivity to regional opinion, and that the US should take account of the ineluctable facts of Australia's geography.

Barwick's first decision on becoming Foreign Minister was to change policy on Dutch New Guinea, where Menzies had boxed himself into a corner. Barwick, presumably keeping Menzies informed, then influenced a negotiated settlement to strengthen Australia's relations with the Americans, who provided the mediator, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, and to inhibit Indonesian resort to force. The outcome was accepted *faute de mieux* by Cabinet, except Hasluck. Faced within months by Indonesia's Confrontation of a proposed Federation of Malaysia, an exercise in decolonisation, Barwick took unilateral decisions after consulting his officials to ensure that the British would be primarily responsible for military support of the members of the new Federation. He implemented the position he had taken in Cabinet in 1962 refuting Menzies's belief that if Britain was at war Australia must be at war. He avoided 'the Vietnam trap' of being sucked into a decolonisation contest. The wisdom of his approach was confirmed when at a meeting in Washington convened at British request the Americans stated that support of the new Federation was the primary responsibility of the British, and then of other Commonwealth

countries, and they in effect laid down a division of labour in which Indochina was America's primary responsibility.

Holding to a policy which required refusing numerous British requests for a force contribution, maintaining a dialogue with President Sukarno in the general interests of the West, despite his provocations, and advocating a more sympathetic understanding of the roots of Indonesia's nationalism was not easy for Menzies to stomach, but the policy was successful, and economical. There was only one confrontation, a private one in Melbourne after Barwick received a letter from Menzies. On his own account, Barwick emerged successful and got Menzies to accept that Britain could leave Southeast Asia but Australia would be there forever (Woodard 2004). After his 1963 election victory the British and others expected Menzies to agree to put a battalion into Borneo, but Barwick nipped this in the bud and handled communications with London.

Other instances of Barwick changing Menzies's mind relate to white rule in Southern Africa, which now might seem remote from Australian interests, but were very close to Menzies's heart and impacted on his loyalty to friends. An early instance is of Menzies changing his mind at the 1961 Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference (CPM), presumably after telephoning 'the new boy', as he disparagingly described Barwick, about instructions he had given as acting Foreign Minister (Bunting 1988). 1963 provided an even more striking instance, with Barwick feeling he had to expound why Australia must avoid any taint of racism (Woodard 2004). Barwick could approach Menzies, including on matters which had been regarded as within the Prime Minister's personal preserve, and could influence his thinking.

It can be conceded that Barwick's successful activism and securing Menzies's concurrence was facilitated by the Menzies government's precarious majority from 1961 to 1963 and by the amazing run of setbacks Menzies suffered at the hands of his 'great and powerful friends' while he held the External Affairs portfolio. These were in the United Nations General Assembly; in the CPM on South Africa and Rhodesia; close to home the replacement of the Dutch by Indonesia West New Guinea, which Kennedy thought Australia might oppose by force; in Laos where Kennedy preferred a negotiated solution to force; and, above all, Britain's opting, backed by the US, for the European Community over the old Commonwealth (Woodard 2004). Menzies had shown that he could not keep up with 'the winds of change' and the New Frontier. Kennedy gave singularly little consideration to Menzies's feelings, even telling Australian journalist Rupert Murdoch that he did not care who won the 1961 election, which was evenly poised (Suich 2010).

After Menzies's decisive election victory and Kennedy's death in November 1963, Macmillan's resignation, and their replacement by an untried Lyndon Johnson and an even older friend, Alec Douglas-Home, Menzies could enter 1964 hoping for brighter things. He gave Hasluck his first promotion, to the Defence portfolio, overlapping his rival Barwick's time at External Affairs. Barwick's policy towards Indonesia was not eroded, but his management of relations with the United States was. Insecurities about ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and the United States Security Treaty) and reciprocal obligations intruded to affect the agreed division of labour. A key element was US definition, in the Kennedy-Barwick 'agreement' of 17 October, of what the US would do under ANZUS if Australian troops got into difficulties with Indonesia. Kennedy was determined to have no ambiguity: the 'agreement' specified that American assistance would be limited to sea and air. Ruling

out American 'boots on the ground' was consistent with Kennedy's determination not to commit major ground forces to a new war in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam was on Kennedy's mind, the decision to draw down troops having just been taken. Over the following fortnight, he was to express to confidants his determination to get out of Vietnam once he was re-elected (Clarke 2013). He took Barwick beyond the recording equipment in the Oval Office to the balcony where, according to Barwick, he said he wished he could be as confident about his re-election in 1964 as Barwick was about the outcome of the 1963 Australian election. This conversation could have contributed to Barwick's determination not to increase the Australian military commitment to Vietnam.

Barwick thought that getting ANZUS to apply in a warlike, non-Communist, decolonisation situation was a significant advance. He told me in 1996 that when he rang Menzies on his return to Australia on 20 October Menzies was 'pathetically grateful'. The agreement ran into flak from two frequent critics of Barwick and his department, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (JCSC) Air Marshal Sir Frederick Scherger and adviser in the Prime Minister's Department Allan Griffith, who criticised the agreement as derogating from ANZUS protection for Australian territory. This line fitted in with the view of new Minister for Defence Hasluck that the US was not doing enough to maintain the balance in Asia, and appears to have prevailed with Menzies. Rusk added a gloss in July 1964 when he told Hasluck that the prerequisite to military support for Australia under the 'agreement' would be that it had introduced conscription (Tange 2008).

The divide between Barwick and Hasluck

In April 1964 Menzies replaced Barwick, who become Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, but would have preferred to retain his portfolio for another year, with Hasluck. Barwick had tried to make use of his 'agreement' with Kennedy to convey a stern warning to Indonesian leaders, as Confrontation was about to escalate with new British tactics which would take the war 10,000 m into Indonesian territory in Kalimantan. Although Rusk later cleared Barwick's remarks, they were apparently seen by zealous White House staff as impugning it as an institution as well as threatening embarrassment to a new president already beleaguered by a deteriorating situation in South Vietnam (Neustadt 1964). One cannot but be discomfited by Menzies's statement to the House that he would not have Washington believing that 'we are trying in a rather cheap way to involve the United States in something'.

Hasluck hewed faithfully to Menzies's line that 'it is a great mistake to talk dogmatically about what the United States of America will do' (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, vol.H. or R. 42, 1280), and that the ANZUS treaty was based on the utmost trust. James Curran (2015) describes Hasluck's discomfort in 1967 when he had to request a public ANZUS guarantee of Australian forces in Malaysia. It was brutally rejected by a middle level State Department official some months later.

Bolton's opening gambit is that Hasluck's arrival at the Department of External Affairs marked a significant shift away from the direction taken by his predecessor, Barwick. If so, it was a shift in style rather than basic policy. Bolton does not really engage with the extensive analysis of differences between Barwick, the robust pragmatist, who welcomed advice

and argument, and Hasluck, the reclusive and pedantic maximal realist, whose philosophical framework had long been set (Woodard 2004; Woodard and Beaumont 1992). Bolton says Hasluck's belief in the balance of power predated the writings of Henry Kissinger. Bolton's (2014) acute perception of Hasluck is of 'a loner relying on his own judgment', in a context of intellectual insecurities about contemporary thought. Style in any case affects substance in foreign policy, where communication and accessibility are essential. Hasluck, in contrast to Barwick, preferred official intercourse to be 'on the papers'. His physical isolation is illustrated by Bolton's account of him sitting in his office for a weekend in September 1964 monitoring a crisis during Confrontation, which not only carried a risk of war but engaged Menzies's reputation with the US and the UK, whereas it would have been more efficient to have monitored it from his departmental suite, which he refused to use. Bolton cites Hasluck's reserved style and dislike of personal confrontation, but concedes that the situation was 'almost unworkable', producing organisational atrophy.

Barwick and Hasluck took contrasting positions on the use of force in foreign policy generally and in Vietnam in particular. In April 1964 Barwick told *London Times* resident correspondent in Canberra, Stewart Harris,

> 'Power unexercised is powerful, but once power is exercised (particularly by a smaller power) it loses much of its impact. Australia as a middle power needed to consider very carefully when it applied the power it possessed, in the military sense, to a situation. Meanwhile, the non-exercise of this power, the holding in reserve of its potential, could have important psychological effects'.

Hasluck expressed a contrary approach of using preponderant (and so American) force when he succeeded Barwick, laying down that 'our main purpose is concerting all friendly forces in checking aggression through the whole Southeast Asian region' (Woodard 2004). This was consistent with Menzies's 'holy grail' of four power planning, to which Hasluck gave encouragement, although his department regarded it as a pipedream. In June Hasluck wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* appealing to America to maintain its credibility 'worldwide'. His private vision was of dominoes toppling to China in Latin America and Africa. In the same month Menzies struck similar notes in a luncheon address at the White House, where the contrast between his apparently off-the-cuff eloquence and Johnson's speech from a lectern was uncomfortably obvious.

The change in policy on military commitments in Vietnam between April and May provided immediate evidence of the real differences of substance between two strong-minded men (Woodard 2004). It is most strikingly demonstrated by a comparison of two telegrams sent from Washington by Charge Alan Renouf. The first, on 29 April, stated the Barwick line in which he was instructed as a member of the delegation to the SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation) conference in Manila earlier in the month where Rusk unsuccessfully appealed for more flags, and Barwick decided there would be no additional military commitment, instead opting for a major aid project which the State Department readily accepted (Woodard 2004). The second, in May, demonstrated that Renouf had been made aware of what Hasluck wanted. In response to a further round robin from the White House it was decided that Australia would increase the AATTV (Australian Army Training Team Vietnam) from 30 to 100 and retrospectively approved it having a fighting role, acknowledging that there would be casualties. Menzies took the precaution of having the decision ratified by full Cabinet on 29 May, which also boosted the position of the new Minister.

Hasluck visited South Vietnam in June, was confirmed in his view that American policy needed stiffening, and changed Australian priorities, declaring that Vietnam was a 'vital' interest. His communication of this directly to Menzies, and then to his ministerial colleagues, was in effect a diktat. His conclusion that the situation was a case of Communist aggression and that China was behind it, also went uncontested in Canberra and, as Bolton notes, Hasluck was deaf to different views about China when he was to encounter them in Washington and in Europe (367, 426; Woodard 2015). Menzies perceived the potential in the context of the superpower's credibility, and slipped into a speech in New York on Confrontation the notion of 'some smashing victory by Communist China in South-east Asia' (CNIA 1964).

Bolton writes that 'Hasluck gave no credence to suggestions that the Department of External Affairs was divided over the Vietnam issue' (345). However, he quotes in support an extract from a transcript of an interview between Hasluck and Edwards, who has always rejected the view of critics like Michael Sexton and Evan Whitton that the diplomats were 'the guilty men'. External Affairs Secretary Sir Arthur Tange, who worked well with Barwick (Tange 1999) but not Hasluck, would claim that Hasluck's modus operandi made it impossible to express dissent. A widely circulated reprimand to Australian Ambassador to South Vietnam David Anderson for showing insufficient zeal for victory also played a part. Nevertheless, Deputy Secretary Patrick Shaw and First Assistant Secretary Gordon Jockel did put two studies to Hasluck, from the first of which Tange dissented, setting out the increasingly parlous situation in South Vietnam.

In October 1964, Admiral Ulysses Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINPAC), visited Canberra. He expressed the understanding that Australia had to concentrate on handling Indonesia, thus reaffirming the division of labour, but he hoped Australia would be able to do something in Vietnam. Hasluck said Vietnam was Australia's priority. This clearly surprised the experienced political adviser to CINCPAC. Tange was given a peg and cause to change his mind and come back in line with the advisers he valued most when the draft of the Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy came before the Defence Committee (DC): it reaffirmed that Indonesia was the only direct threat to Australia, that China did not pose a direct threat, and predicted that the war in South Vietnam could be lost. Cabinet acted on the DC appreciation, including by introducing conscription. However, later events showed that it chose to ignore the gloomy assessment of South Vietnam's future and preferred to stick to its rhetoric about the threat from China. Hasluck was overseas at the time and on leaving Washington issued a press release in which the threat from China occupied the first four paragraphs (CNIA 1964).

An integral part of Hasluck's maximal realism was that nuclear war might have to be waged on China. He first canvassed this in London in July 1964 and repeated it until 1967. This was another issue on which Barwick took the opposite view, including in bilateral discussions at the time of the ANZUS Council meeting in Canberra in 1962 (Woodard 2004). These differences of substance and emphasis greatly weaken Bolton's claim that 'both gave priority to the containment of an unpredictable China' (339).

The Cabinet decision of 17 December 1964

The FADC met on 17 December 1964 to consider the response to a request from President Johnson on 14 December for various forms of military assistance in Vietnam, including

additional advisers, but excluding ground forces. Bolton judges that 'historians have agreed in identifying this as the moment when Australia's traumatic involvement in the Vietnam conflict became virtually inevitable' (370). The lead up to the decision, as well as the decision itself, had many unusual aspects. Australian planning in the preceding fortnight was based on an informal indication by Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, without higher authority, to the Australian and New Zealand ambassadors that the US government might ask for troop contributions for Vietnam. It was done in the Joint Planning Committee and would normally have gone on to the DC. However, the government asked for advice only from its military advisers, the JCSC. There was informal discussion in the DC on 15 December, about which we know only from notes made by Tange. They show the Chiefs of Naval and Air Staffs expressing reservations about sending a battalion, but being overridden by Scherger. Heads of departments did not anticipate that there would be a recommendation to commit a force.

What went to Cabinet was what Tange described as a 'not very good' or 'low quality' paper, reflecting a Maginot Line mentality about the containment of Communism. It apparently gave what Scherger understood Cabinet wanted, though Cabinet was to make no mention of it. It is unclear why civilian members of the DC acquiesced in this procedure and did not insist on submitting a strategic assessment. Although Tange later blamed the chairman, Department of Defence Secretary Ted Hicks, the procedure was not well established. Australia went to its next major war, in Iraq, without a strategic assessment.

The Departments of Defence and of External Affairs advised caution and were against taking an immediate decision. Bolton describes the latter's frustrating experience. *Asian Alternatives* (Woodard 2004) adds that Tange sought to see Hasluck to offer advice but was rebuffed. He immediately sent a paper written by Jockel, to which he made additions. Hasluck made no attempt to discuss it, but he probably read it before going into Cabinet, where the record of the discussion suggests he was somewhat subdued; the only mark on it when he returned it queried the assessment that victory could not be achieved through airpower. Bolton offers a lame defence of Hasluck that he was entitled to sift advice, but he refused to receive it orally, or to react and offer guidance (371).

Until the full record of the Cabinet discussion was released to researchers in 2014 the only record which they had of the Cabinet meeting was, unlike the official historian, an eight-point summary on a Prime Minister's Department file, which must have been prepared by the acting Cabinet Secretary Peter Lawler for the Secretary, John Bunting, when he returned from leave. Having seen the full record, the author acknowledges two errors in *Asian Alternatives*, in ascribing a remark of McEwen's to Menzies, and in endorsing Alan Marten's view in his biography of Menzies that at this time Menzies, Hasluck, and Paltridge formed a triumvirate which represented power (Woodard 2004). Menzies could take these two men for granted. Indeed, as with Howard, an imperial prime minister is advantaged by having the Defence and Foreign Affairs portfolios filled by Ministers from the same small state. Edwards (2004, 285) writes that:

> policy debates and consultation were narrowed when they most needed to be broadened; in the mind of Menzies and of the few to whom he entrusted crucial decisions and discussions, the complexities of the challenge were simplified. Menzies listened only to those who agreed with him, and excluded knowledgeable advisers who recommended caution. As far as can be discerned from his statements and actions, Menzies believed that in making the commitment

> he was simply repeating a winning formula that would achieve military success in Southeast Asia, strengthen the alliance with the United States, and divide the Labour Party's right and left wings.

All Menzies's assumptions were flawed, and susceptible to challenge. There had not been a winning formula in Southeast Asian or Asian wars since 1945. The inconclusive and stalemated outcome of the Korean War left a bad taste amongst Americans, and Menzies had drawn the conclusion that they would fight no more Asian land wars.

Sticking with friends was ingrained in Menzies, but one must wonder about the effects of the buffeting he had received at the hands of the great and powerful. On the other hand, Tange was on the mark in his parting shot at Hasluck: 'I am strongly opposed to the extension of Australian participation in Vietnam in the form of Army units, simply for the purpose of improving our case for having a voice in policy' (373). Menzies also understood and respected the aura and institutional power of the White House. Menzies asked why his palms so sweaty whenever he was driving to the White House but never when he went to the Palace (Waller 1974). Even here he was to be disappointed. In 1977 Menzies criticised Nixon, his friend of 25 years, for breaking a confidence by revealing to David Frost that Menzies had written to support him in 1973, after Nixon's second nationwide address denying that he knew about the Watergate break-in: the embarrassment for Menzies was less that he had been caught out supporting a crook than that he had written injudiciously that Nixon's speech had done proper honour not only to him as an individual 'but also to the great office you occupy' (Curran 2015).

The strength and effect of American pressure can be exaggerated. Edwards (2014) cites American pressure on New Zealand, but it held out until May, by which time Waller assessed that President Johnson was prepared to go ahead on his own. Arguably more important were Australian representations in Wellington, and strong internal pressure from ambassadors in Washington and New York and from some ministers (the Minister for Defence flushed down the toilet his department's advice against involvement). Domestic political considerations were rarely absent from Menzies's foreign policy decisions, but his position was never more secure. Bolton gives age, and Edwards over-confidence, as contributing to Menzies's apparent inflexibility. There was also his health. He was not particularly well, felt exhausted, and his doctor was prescribing a holiday. His intellectual powers appeared unimpaired, but in August 1965 there was evidence of deterioration; it is doubtful whether he could have sustained a vigorous and protracted Cabinet debate.

Decision-making

The Cabinet discussion was lacking in rigour and surprisingly brief: when I quoted to Peter Lawler Menzies's estimate of lasting 'not five minutes' in an oral history for the LBJ Presidential Library, he said 'ten to fifteen'. Lawler remembered that Menzies and McEwen had caucused beforehand. The Cabinet proceedings can be summarised as follows. Hasluck opened with a lacklustre introduction, and suggested that the reply to President Johnson's letter should indicate that Australia fully understood the significance of phase two (involving the introduction of ground forces, which Johnson did not want discussed, and had reprimanded William Bundy for mentioning), and would do what it could. He

then asked whether the battalion, recommended by the JCSC, should be mentioned. Hasluck listed seven points about American war aims which could be raised at the political level, but this found no favour with Menzies or McEwen. Menzies introduced the subject of third-party forces, seeming to think it would be a SEATO operation, Hasluck could not say why it would not be, and it was left to McEwen, the only minister who could do so, to close this off by dismissing SEATO as a paper outfit. Specific questions about Thailand and Taiwan (Holt) were inconclusive. Menzies said that everything we put alongside the Americans is good in the common interest, and favoured providing a battalion, if available; there were no reservations or dissent, except for McEwen's cautionary few words ('but we would be in'), the significance of which, that one battalion would be only the start, was also the view of Holt. McEwen gave the only indication, then or later, of the importance of understanding the true nature of the conflict in Vietnam, and the problem of war weariness, observing that 'the real problem will be if we fight against the will of the people of South Vietnam' (ACSN 1964). Menzies instructed that the reply to Johnson, which Hasluck and Paltridge were assigned to draft, must be 'forthcoming, with no foot dragging' (ACSN 1964).

Cabinet did not consider the implications of the uncertainties in American policy, including why Johnson's letter asking for additional advisers ruled out ground forces, which was a significant pointer to his thinking at the time. Surprisingly, although it was at the forefront of the political rhetoric, the military advice, and the later public justification, China was not discussed at all nor was the role of an Australian ground force, which it was implicitly accepted would be expanded. Equally, how Australia's commitment to Malaysia, under an agreed division of labour with the US, affected what it should do in Vietnam was not a matter for consideration, which we may agree with academics Tom Millar (1978) and Gordon Greenwood (1974) was fundamental.

What if Barwick had been present?

This counterfactual, which makes up the final chapter of *Asian Alternatives*, is not considered by Bolton, but has been commented on by Edwards (2005) in a review, and in his book. I shall, while trying to avoid repetition, develop the hypothesis in the light of the FADC record, and taking account of Edwards's reservations.

Barwick would have followed his usual custom of seeking a private meeting with Menzies. His record of success in persuading Menzies to change his mind was remarkable. Barwick had the card of resignation, made more powerful by the habitual secrecy of going to war. He could have won the battle at the outset. If not, and if Barwick had been at the FADC, he would have spoken from conviction. He would have drawn on discussions as well as the briefing paper from Tange. Barwick would have pressed his department's recommendation that the decision on committing a battalion should not be taken at this time. Barwick would have known that the Defence Department's recommendation was similar, weakening the weak military case, and putting Hasluck in a difficult position. Barwick might have won the support of McEwen. There was strong mutual respect between the two men, they were Asia-savvy and often supported each other, beginning with the Dutch New Guinea settlement and on trade with China, and there was a private relationship involving legal advice. Barwick would have been able to point out the flaw in McEwen's homely argument that you supported your neighbour in a bushfire in the

hope that he would reciprocate one day: the Vietnam bushfire would only become a full-blown bushfire if your neighbour, i.e. America, made it so. Menzies, had he remained adamant, might have found himself supported only by Holt.

Barwick had a strong procedural argument to make too. He would have wanted the opportunity to table what Tange described as 'the customary External Affairs estimate of the likelihood of effective government with popular support' (Tange 2008, 14). It would have provided discouraging answers to questions put to Hasluck that he was unable, or unwilling, to answer.

On Tange's advice, Barwick could have called for a strategic assessment from the DC: it would have been unlikely to change the DC's assessment of Australia's priorities it had made a few months earlier. The claim for meeting the assessed threat from Indonesia would have had to be debated. Menzies could not have quashed Barwick, as he was to do to Hasluck in April.

Barwick would have repeated his themes which argued for delay: Australia should not be 'unduly quick' to commit its forces, it should first assure itself that it would be in good Asian company and have regional support; if it found itself to be America's only ally, the Americans should be asked to ponder the long-term implications for Australia as a country in the Asian region. Australia should not be perceived as America's deputy sheriff.

Everything pointed to a decision to delay, to sending a temporising reply to Johnson, and to sending the recommendation for a battalion back for re-examination, taking note that Johnson was specifically not asking for it. Johnson would have been satisfied by advice that his requests were under study. Increasing the AATTV would have been inconvenient but was possible. LBJ's inclination at this time was to fight a controlled, basically counterinsurgency ground war in South Vietnam. That could have given Australia access to his thinking, which it was never able to attain in an escalating conventional war. Increasing, the AATTV also would have been attractive to Congress.

Foisting the battalion on Johnson was obviously problematic. The gamble could only be justified if Australia was playing for the highest stakes, to draw the US into a commitment on the Southeast Asian mainland on a sufficient scale to draw new lines of containment against China and to reverse the thaw in the Cold War, both of which misjudged the tides of history.

The Southeast Asian alternative

There were also preferable ways to respond to fast-changing regional scenarios. Within two months the buildup of Indonesian forces in Borneo forced Australia to at last commit a battalion there. Concentration of forces made good military sense. Often in the DC Scherger criticised Australian forces being scattered 'in penny packets' (as recounted to me by Tange). When he went to Singapore to discuss the Borneo deployment he told the British the arrangements Australia wanted should be agreed quickly or they could lose the battalion. There were also increasing political and diplomatic demands on Australia, as Indonesia lived more dangerously. The Federation of Malaysia came under increasing pressure, as Lee sought a role for his People's Action Party in peninsular Malaysia. In August the dam broke and the Tunku drove Singapore out of the Federation. Lee, who had been an invited guest of the Australian government and had sought Menzies's backing, panicked and lashed out, including at diplomat Tom Critchley, who was

in enough trouble with his own government for not having forewarned it. According to Jockel, who was called to the Cabinet room, ministers' initial reaction was to see the breakup of the Federation as potentially disastrous for Australia's forward defence policy, highly destabilising, and a victory for Indonesia (which it was claiming). Cabinet came round accepting that Lee was reliably anti-Communist and anti-Sukarno and dedicated to maintaining Singapore's international orientation. This made possible the government's reassuring public reaction (Greenwood 1968). Jockel said that nevertheless Menzies faltered in his summing up, in which he was usually masterly, and had to be gently redirected by Hasluck. This was surely a sign of the deterioration in Menzies to which he poignantly referred in explaining his resignation in January 1966.

Edwards suggests that giving priority to Borneo would have required a different Prime Minister. Partnership with Harold Wilson's Labour government and with New Zealand Prime Minister Keith Holyoake, who had made play with the White Australia policy at the 1964 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference in front of the Africans, might not have attracted Menzies. However, such considerations would not have been wholly rational. Britain might be a diminishing long-term asset, but this did not apply to the immediate threat, from Indonesia, against which Britain had fought a long, skilful, and costly campaign, employing significant numbers of Gurkhas. The party faithful would have been concerned if they had known that in London Hasluck had summarily dismissed pious sentiments about Australia's security and ruled out Britain as a long-term partner.

Menzies's (and Hasluck's) aim to exploit fear of China could have been accommodated because the Chinese and Indonesian Foreign Ministers had paid reciprocal visits in November and January and the West's propaganda machine went to work on the new 'axis', with claims of a map showing the two countries had divided up Southeast Asia.

Afterword

The most clear indication of their actual options about whether or not to go to war is that Hasluck himself raised the possibility of deferral in April. It was not too serious a challenge for, as Bolton states, he was still in favour of the commitment and was easily quashed by Menzies. But delay could have set in train a course leading to reconsideration. American policy remained uncertain. Making use of three alarming assessments by letter from Anderson, Department of External Affairs (DEA) representatives, backed by Prime Ministers Department Secretary Sir John Bunting, unsuccessfully sought in the DC to cap Australia's force at one battalion, with the condition that it could be withdrawn if required elsewhere. That had become even more logical when Australia, after committing its two battalions, asked the UK and the US for assurances of support against an Indonesian threat to Papua New Guinea. The British were negative and the Americans pointed to the Kennedy-Barwick 'agreement', so proving that its critics had been justified in interpreting it as ruling out American 'boots on the ground' for the defence of Australian territory. The principle was restated in 1969 by Richard Nixon's Guam doctrine, and again during the Australian-led intervention in East Timor, and probably has not been changed by the training rotations of US Marines in Darwin under Obama's pivot to Asia.

Menzies's prediction that Australia's commitment would prove phenomenally valuable was not borne out when he went to Washington in June: Johnson took elaborate precautions to preclude him from repeating his public relations success of a year earlier and to

avoid discussing Vietnam while he was wrestling with what to do there. Foreign intervention did not turn around the adverse course of events in Vietnam. It became clear that there would be no easy victory. A DEA study in September of a possible negotiated solution was highly pessimistic, suggesting that it might be necessary to aim for partition further south, and that the Communist side would win the peace.

Australia had been granted its wish—American boots on the ground in Asia—but they would not form a Maginot Line against the 184 divisions MacNamara had told Menzies in June that China could deploy. In October, Rusk asked Waller whether in the event of a settlement it was Prime Minister Menzies's view that the US would have to remain in Vietnam; Waller replied that Menzies's view was that the presence would need to be only in the region. Meanwhile Australia had got itself on the back of the tiger and growth in its force in Vietnam was inevitable.

The incubus of Vietnam prevented Australia playing a role in what became the fashionable defence of the war that it gave Southeast Asian countries space and confidence to form a regional organisation. Many Australian diplomats consider that Australia could have been a founder member of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

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