

NATIONAL WINNER
AUSTRALIA'S WARTIME
EXPERIENCES



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WWII AND AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES– Australia’s Wartime Experiences

This essay will discuss Australia’s involvement in the Second World War through the lens of foreign policy. It will analyse the causes of change in Australian military and diplomatic relations, particularly relating to the events of the Pacific War, and will discuss the immediate and later consequences of these shifts in foreign policy for Australia.

To what extent was the war a turning-point for Australia's overseas relations and strategic alliances?

The Second World War was a truly destructive conflict, raging from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. For Australia, the war was much closer to home than World War One, fighting against the assault of Japan in their own territory. The war caused a significant shift in Australia’s foreign policy, seeing the establishment of its first independent diplomatic relations and the transition from the UK to the USA as its main defence partner. Australia’s pre-war reliance on Britain for diplomacy and defence was greatly challenged by the events of the Pacific War. In response, Australia sought a closer military relationship with the USA and established its own independent diplomatic relations. The experiences of the war informed Australia’s post-war foreign policy, consequentially manifesting in the ANZUS treaty and greater diplomatic involvement in Asia.

The events of the Pacific War greatly challenged Australia’s reliance on Britain for foreign policy. To counter the perceived threat of Japan sparked by the conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1923, the British developed the “Main Fleet to Singapore” strategy (Callahan, 1974), where in the event of an attack, Britain would send their main fleet from Europe to the base at Singapore. Australia was highly dependent on this strategy in the event of an attack (Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2021). However, when Japan advanced on Singapore in 1942, as American historian Raymond Callahan explained, “Given a war in Europe... no British government could have followed a line of policy fundamentally different from Churchill's [in not sending the fleet to Singapore].” (Callahan, 1974). Callahan illustrates that the Fall of Singapore exposed Britain’s inability to simultaneously defend herself and the Pacific. This is useful in demonstrating how the early events of the Pacific War nullified Australia’s defence strategy. Australian historian Michael McKernan held a similar sentiment, explaining, “Worse was the realisation that the key to Australian defence had toppled so completely and so quickly... Having placed such faith in Singapore and Britain's ability to secure south-east Asia, Australia seemed, suddenly, defenceless and alone.” (McKernan,

1980). The explicit nature of McKernan's comments make them highly useful: they directly outline how the Fall of Singapore meant the complete failure of Australia's defence strategy which was so reliant on a Britain who could not defend them. After the Fall of Singapore, Prime Minister Churchill ordered the diversion of the homebound 7th A.I.F. Division to defend Burma. In a telegram conversation with Churchill, Prime Minister Curtin stated that, "After most anxious consideration Government has decided that it can not agree to the proposal that the 7th A.I.F. Division should be diverted to Burma." However, Churchill overrode this decision (Churchill & Curtin, 1942, as cited in Mason, 2014). These telegram conversations imply a divergence in Anglo-Australian defence objectives after the Fall of Singapore. Churchill and Curtin provide significant perspectives on their differing defence priorities as they dictate the foreign policy of their nations. As direct and private communication between two heads of state, this telegram conversation has no purpose of being misleading or indirect, becoming more reliable. The ineffectiveness of reliance on Britain in the Pacific War would cause Australia to seek new foreign relations and military alliances.

The early events of the Pacific War caused Australia to re-evaluate its foreign policy, establishing independent diplomatic relations and seeking a greater military relationship with the United States. At the outbreak of WWII, Australia had all its non-trade foreign relations managed by Westminster (Key, 1945). However, in the face of waning imperial power in the Pacific, Australia adopted the Statute of Westminster in 1942, which gave them, "full power to make laws having extra-territorial operation," and meant new British laws would not affect Australia (Statute of Westminster 1931). Australia's adoption of this act illustrates its desire for creating international relations independent of the United Kingdom in the face of the Pacific War. As the direct determiner of Australia's power to establish foreign relations, the Statute of Westminster is highly significant, and is made more credible by its unambiguity as a legal act. The pattern of increased Australian autonomy in the Pacific is reinforced by a speech by Prime Minister Robert Menzies (1939), which states in the Pacific, Australia must provide "her own information and... [maintain] her own diplomatic contacts with foreign powers." (Menzies, 1939). Menzies' speech was made to inform Australians of the path Australia would take in the Pacific at the outbreak of war and is clear that Australia would maintain its own diplomatic contacts and intelligence in the Pacific. The direct knowledge of the nation's foreign policy held by Menzies is highly significant and increases its reliability. Australia's shift in military strategy towards the USA is highlighted by K. J. Mason, a writer for Cengage Australia, stating that as Imperial power faded in the Pacific, "the United States alone had the power and capacity

to assist Australia.” (Mason, 2014). Mason implies the Japanese advance pressured Australia to seek the support of the only power capable of defending them: America. These comments are useful in understanding Australia’s transition to partnering with the United States. Australia’s new diplomatic autonomy and military relationship with America would continue to influence its foreign policy after the war concluded.

In the post-war world, Australia’s responses to the challenges of the Pacific War would continue to have consequences in its relationships with America, Japan, and the greater Asia-Pacific. American economic analyst and historian Clinton Grattan (1975) explained that after WWII, “Australians had to redefine their relation to Asia... [and] had, to defend their particularistic national interest, to get in there among the Asians. The reliance on British Imperial power was no longer a feasible alternative.” (Grattan, 1975). Grattan implies that having learnt from WWII that absolute reliance on Britain was infeasible, Australia created its own foreign relations in Asia, and defended its interests. Grattan’s over 40 years of study of Australian history brings a more knowledgeable perspective to his judgements. With the rise of Communism in Asia, Australia sought a mutual defence treaty with the United States, manifesting as the ANZUS Treaty in 1951. The treaty outlined that any, “armed attack in the Pacific area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that [any member state] would act to meet the common danger.” (Department of External Affairs, 1951). The treaty, intended by Australia to secure their military position in the face of Communism in Asia, is useful in understanding how Australia’s military experiences in WWII informed its policy afterwards. The treaty implies that Australian policymakers learnt from WWII that they had to be active in creating their defence strategies. ANZUS, as well as being informed by the rise of Communism in South-East Asia, was signed shortly after the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco with Japan. Australian historian Thomas Millar explained that, “Fear of Japan survived the war. The soft peace treaty with Japan in 1951, acknowledging Japan’s “inherent right of self-defence,” was one of the major elements in Australia’s successful bid for a security treaty [with America].” (Millar, 1985). Millar’s comments detail that Australia’s experiences in war against Japan caused them to seek military support from the United States pre-emptively, being useful in explaining the motives behind the ANZUS treaty. Overall, the experiences of WWII influenced Australian policymakers in the signing of the ANZUS Treaty and how to diplomatically act in Asia.

The Second World War had challenged Australia much more directly than the first. Australia’s Dominion foreign policy and defence strategies had been shattered by the outbreak of the

Pacific War and the Fall of Singapore. Consequently, new defence initiatives with the USA had been formed and independent diplomatic relations established. Ultimately, the lessons of the war and the transitions they caused would inform Australia's continued relationship with the USA and redefine Australia's outlook on Asia.

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The ANZUS Treaty, signed in 1951, was a defence treaty between the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Australia was a main advocate for the treaty because of defence concerns from the rise of Communism in Asia and the Treaty of San Francisco. Australia's desire for a mutual defence pact with the United States reflects its desire to establish effective military support structures, unlike the Singapore Strategy.

Menzies, R. G. (1939). Ministry's policy. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17578971/1172374>

This address from Prime Minister Menzies was made to outline the policy that Australia would follow in the face of conflict. Of particular interest is that Menzies indicates that Australian policy in the Pacific would be autonomous of Britain. Menzies directly outlines that Australia needs to prioritise its own national interests in the Pacific above British objectives.

Statute of Westminster 1931 (UK)

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1931/4/pdfs/ukpga_19310004_en.pdf

The Statute of Westminster is an act of British Parliament (1931) which outlined new relationships between the UK and dominions in the Commonwealth. It meant that any dominion (if its respective parliament adopted the act) was exempt from any new British laws and was able to enact their own laws which operated externally of the dominion. Australia adopted this act in 1942; therefore this act directly outlines Australia's desires for greater autonomy from Britain.

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