

News from Under the Southern Cross (Edition 63): Australia's Response to the Situation in Ukraine

8 March 2022

The situation in Ukraine needs an urgent response. I've been asked about Australia's response to the situation in Ukraine by a number of regular readers of my newsletter in Japan. So in this edition, rather than present the timeline of Australia's responses in a typical bureaucratic manner, I've decided to introduce my own opinion and raise three points that have left a strong impression on me.

1. Sharp analysis

The first point that struck me was the quality of analysis of the situation coming from Australian experts. As per usual, there were a number of predictions being bandied about among members of Canberra's foreign policy community before Russia launched its invasion.

Whilst there were some who predicted invasion, there was also a widely held view that "the build-up of Russian troops along the border is a bluff. Russian troops would never advance into the territory of its brother nation that is Ukraine".

Then there were some in Canberra at key positions both within and outside the Australian Government, who remained cool-headed in their analysis of the situation and in predicting Putin's options and continued to sound the alarm about his intention to invade. Of course, Ukraine is a long way from Australia, and compared with the Ukrainian populations in the US and Canada, the Ukrainian diaspora in Australia (made up of around 13,000 people) is relatively small in scale. The number of Russia experts is also comparatively limited.

Yet, among intelligence experts, it is common knowledge that the Joint US-Australia Communication Facility located at Pine Gap in central Australia played an indispensable role during the Cold War in intelligence collection. There are also the links that exist between the Five Eyes partners. Speaking from my experience as Director-General of the Intelligence and Analysis Service in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the contribution that Australia has made and continues to make to intelligence spans a broad and diverse field.



The Joint US-Australia Communications Facility at Pine Gap, located in the Northern Territory
(Source: Google Maps)

Actually, even when all the eyes of the world were on Taiwan, there was one person in Australia who continued to voice his deep concerns about developments in the situation surrounding Ukraine. I am talking about Paul Dibb, Emeritus Professor at the ANU (and former Deputy Secretary at the Department of Defence), a good friend of mine (one of the most recent op-eds by Emeritus Professor Dibb can be read [here](#)).



Emeritus Professor Paul Dibb (Source: ANU website)

2. Speed and Decisiveness

The second point that left an impression on me was both the speed and decisiveness with which the Australian Government imposed sanctions and other measures on Russia. For example, the decision to support the expulsion of some Russian banks from the SWIFT network, itself a fiscal measure of unprecedented severity, and the decision to provide lethal weapons to assist Ukraine (total AU\$70 million), and include ammunition and missiles, were made with lightning speed.

In Canberra, I often hear people say “what does Ukraine need right now?” These conversations usually go... “They need neither slow-going regular assistance nor seminars on preventing cyber-attacks. What they need are anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles that they can use right away”.



Prime Minister Morrison announcing the provision of lethal aid to Ukraine

(Source: ABC News (online version))

Such decisiveness is probably written into the DNA of this “land of warriors”. Ever since WWI at the start of the 20th century, Australia has stood side-by-side with US troops with guns in hand in every major conflict the US has been involved in. You may also recall that Australian troops provided escort protection to Japan’s SDF at the time of the Iraq War.

3. Concern over spill-over effect on the Indo-Pacific

What impressed me when listening to Prime Minister Morrison and Defence Minister Dutton’s speeches and statements is their strong resolve to prevent any attempt to change the status quo by force in the Indo-Pacific, especially the Taiwan Strait, as has occurred in Ukraine. Their messages to this effect are absolutely powerful.

PM Morrison and Minister Dutton have repeatedly stated that “The country which can stop Russia is China” and “Why doesn’t China raise its voice to blatant violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity?” These points have been voiced not only within the ruling conservative Coalition, but have also been made abundantly clear by Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong of the opposition Australian Labor Party.

4. Messaging from the Quad

Bearing in mind these aspects of Australia’s actions, you can better appreciate the logic and dynamics that lay behind the statement released after the recent Quad Leaders’ Meeting (that statement can be read [here](#)).

By the way, the next in-person Quad Leaders' Meeting is scheduled to take place in Japan in the first half of this year. The importance of linking up with Australia to tackle various strategic issues continues to grow.

In Canberra, one often bumps into macroscopic and long-term discussions. In one of those big-picture discussions in Canberra, a person said "When we look back on history in 10 or so years' time, we will recall that 2022 was the year in which Russia lost Ukraine forever". True, Australia is separated from Ukraine by great distance. However, this distance is maybe what allows Australia to calmly and rationally observe events from afar.



Prime Minister KISHIDA attending the Quad Leaders' Virtual Meeting on 3 March (Source: Cabinet Public Relations Office)

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