



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 31, 2022

Australia Considers Giving MPs Say in War Matters Amid Worsening Regional Security

SINGAPORE — Amid deteriorating regional security, Australia is dealing with the tough question of whether future decisions to go to war should be within the purview of the prime minister or Parliament.

The ruling Labor Party started an inquiry into how Australia makes the decision to dispatch troops to war after pressure by some party members who think such power should not rest totally — as it does now — with the prime minister and Cabinet.

Instead, these members want Parliament to be able to authorize or evaluate future deployments.



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However, the Defense Department vehemently objects to any amendments, claiming that there is a growing risk of war in the region and that permitting the prime minister and Cabinet to determine deployments facilitates swifter and more flexible decisions according to sensitive security and intelligence assessments.

Without mentioning China, the department mentioned in a submission to the inquiry that the country has to ensure that it can respond effectively in the face of “Australia’s complex and more challenging security environment.”

“Australia’s immediate region is markedly different from the relatively more benign one of recent years, with the prospect of high-intensity military conflict in the Indo-Pacific now less remote than in the past,” the department said. “Any shift in these decision-making powers to the Parliament would risk significant adverse consequences for Australia’s national security.”

The submission, which was drafted after consultation with Australia’s lead intelligence agency, comes amid worries in Canberra about the risk of war due to China’s growing military pugilism.

Australia, a close ally of the United States, has experienced rising tensions with China in recent years, although relations have displayed signs of improvement since Labor was elected in May. Recently, Foreign Minister Penny Wong visited Beijing — the first Australian minister to be invited for a visit since 2019.

Although members of Parliament (MPs) are often asked to support the decision of the prime minister and Cabinet, as did former leader John Howard at the start of the Iraq war in 2003, they cannot override the prime minister in war-related matters.

In September, Defense Minister Richard Marles asked the Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade to hold the war decisions inquiry. Nonetheless, he has said that he believes the present system should remain unaltered, justifying that it assures that quick decisions over whether to go to war can be made.



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An international security specialist, Professor Clinton Fernandes from the University of New South Wales, said Parliament could be involved in authorizing “wars of choice,” or deployments that do not directly entail self-defense. These deployments could encompass humanitarian operations, peacekeeping missions, or operations to back allies such as the United States.

During a committee hearing, Fernandes proposed that Australia’s potential participation in a war with its allies against China over territorial disputes in the South China Sea should also be considered a “war of choice.”

“We are currently in the South China Sea pretending that we’re doing freedom-of-navigation operations,” he added. “We are actually dropping sonobuoys and targeting China ... in order to destroy their submarines at the first sign of hostilities. Parliament can and should debate that.”

An opinion survey last year, conducted by proponents of involving Parliament in decisions to go to war, found 87 percent of Australians think that Parliament should authorize such decisions in all cases or unless there is an immediate threat to the nation.

Only 13 percent think only the prime minister and Cabinet should decide. The current prime minister, Anthony Albanese, has hinted that he is open to a change of procedure, proposing that MPs should “at the very least” be invited to debate whether to go to war, though they would not necessarily be able to override the decision. “We can’t ask people to put their lives on the line if we as legislators are too afraid to put our arguments on the line,” he said. “If democracy has real meaning, it is in moments like this.”

Earlier in 2022, Australia announced its first review of the country’s military in ten years, warning that escalating geopolitical tensions around the world were swiftly making its strategic outlook more complex.

Albanese announced the review in Canberra on August 3, saying the country would examine how to best position the military “to meet the nation’s security challenges over the next decade and beyond.” He appointed former Defense Minister Stephen Smith and former Defense Force chief Angus Houston to direct the project.

Since Australia last commissioned a review of its armed forces in 2012, relations with China have swiftly plummeted, resulting in military encounters between Australian and Chinese armed forces in the South China Sea and off Australia’s coastline.

“The world is undergoing significant strategic realignment,” the government declared in the terms of reference for the review. “Military modernization, technological disruption and the risk of state-on-state conflict are complicating Australia’s strategic circumstances.”

There have also been issues with new procurements of military equipment by the Australian government in recent years. Reports in local media have pointed out expensive problems with new frigates and armored vehicles, which could potentially escalate the cost of the projects while hampering their delivery.

The 2022 review will be the first since Australia inked the AUKUS agreement with Britain and the U.S., an agreement that could enable Canberra to field its own fleet of nuclear submarines by 2040. Examining how the Australian military can best work with U.S. and British armed forces, as well as other major allies, will be a key focus of the latest review, Marles said.

The inquiry has completed receiving submissions and is slated to report on its findings early next year,



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with a final deadline of March 2023.



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