

Should we fight to save Taiwan like the Anzacs saved France?

By **Peter Leahy**

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Australia's former Chief of the Army says we must avoid a future situation where a PM might say the US is at war and as a result, Australia is also at war.

One of my proudest moments in the uniform of the Australian Army was during a ceremony around ANZAC Day where I stood in the courtyard of the school at Villers Bretonneux with the mayor of that small village in France. During the ceremony he turned to me and said, 'We Frenchmen do not understand why you Australians came here in 1915, but you helped save our democracy.'

I wonder if at some time in the future, a mayor of a small village in [Taiwan](#) might say the same thing to a future chief of the Australian Army.

Australia's relationship with China has significantly deteriorated. Our prime minister and foreign minister have spoken of how our values are different to those of China. China is seen as an authoritarian, communist state with an increasingly abrasive and assertive approach. Some compare current events to those prior to World War II.

Then, Australia went to war because Germany invaded Poland. At the time our prime minister said that Great Britain is at war and as a result, Australia is also at war.

As a soldier, I often wondered what compels men and women to fight for their country. In 1939, the answer was for God, King and Country. In our more complicated globalised world, it is more often explained through questions of sovereignty and values.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has defined Australia's sovereignty as "what we believe as Australians, what we value, and hold most dear, our principles, our way of doing things".

He further said "Our sovereignty is measured in our capacity and freedom to live our lives as we choose in a free, open and democratic society".

Foreign Minister Marise Payne has said the Australian government will not turn a blind eye to human rights violations in China, and Australian values will be at the forefront of the nation's efforts to shape the international order.

The Department of Home Affairs says Australian values as being based on freedom, respect, fairness and equality of opportunity. The department says our democratic institutions and shared Australian values have created our peaceful and stable society.

Australia's relationship with the US is often said to be based on shared interests and values. Does sharing interests and values merit automatically following the US into war? Our values might be similar, but their national interests, strategic culture and strategic judgement are different to ours. In the end it is Australian sovereignty, Australian values and Australian interests we must honour.

If we are to fight under the banner of sovereignty and values, they should be well defined and accepted as the basis of a cohesive and united Australia.

It is the job of a political leader to make public opinion. The soldier in me is compelled to ask, if as a nation we found ourselves at a war, who would step forward to fight?

Some residents may not respect our sovereignty or share our values. Over the two world wars more than 16,000 people of German, Italian and Japanese descent were held in internment camps in Australia.

Australia has repeatedly stood against oppression in the form of fascism, totalitarianism, or communism. We should be proud of our record. Will we be asked to step forward again and in what circumstances? The most likely scenario is a Chinese invasion and occupation of Taiwan.

The pursuit and defence of sovereignty and values do not come easy. As the names on the walls of the Australian War Memorial remind us, they come at a high price in blood and treasure.

If we are to talk about war, we should also think carefully about war. Afghanistan and Iraq have left us with many good lessons. Are we clever enough to learn them? There are many issues to consider.

Why are we going to war and who makes the decision to go to war?

Will our government exhaust all other elements of national power before resorting to military power?

Will the end state and exit strategy be defined? Will the mission be clear and direct?

How will we know if we have won or lost? How often and in what manner would we review our decision to go to war?

As the risk of conflict increases, we must ensure that we are pursuing Australian sovereignty and values rather than following someone else's interests, values and strategy.

Let us avoid a situation where a future Australian prime minister might say that the United States is at war and as a result, Australia is also at war? We are a sovereign independent nation and must make our own clear and considered decisions.

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