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Stirrer Bob greets the new year

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Former foreign minister Bob Carr has injected a bit of controversy into the torpor of the post-New Year holiday period with a public opinion survey timed to coincide with what we call in the journalism business the "silly season".

It's for others to judge whether the conclusions of the Carr-commissioned survey are frivolous or serious, but he and his colleagues at the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology, Sydney, have asked some pertinent questions.

These have to do with issues that go to the heart of Australia's security relationships in its own neighbourhood with its cornerstone ally, the United States and with its second-largest trading partner, Japan.

The survey's principal finding might give those in positions of responsibility pause. It is that in the event of a US request to Australia to contribute militarily to supporting Japan in conflict with China over disputed islands in the East China Sea, 68 per cent of those surveyed believe Australia should say "no".

Seventy-one per cent believe Australia should stay "neutral" in any conflict between Japan and China.

These are overwhelming numbers and reflect a common view among Coalition and Labor voters. There is little difference in the survey between the two sides of politics.

Of course, questions posed were hypothetical in a survey that lacked flesh and blood, but the results will be discomfiting for those advocates in government, media and academic circles with a reflexive view of what is entailed by a security relationship with the US.

Such a view holds that under the terms of the **ANZUS** Treaty if Washington presses for our assistance we have little choice but to respond positively, even if it may be a stretch to justify that involvement on national interest grounds.

What national interest, for example, dictated Australia's rush to war in Iraq beyond payment of a premium on the **ANZUS** Treaty?

How does Bob Carr interpret these results, and how does he respond to suggestions that his commissioning of the survey in his capacity as director of the UTS Australia-China Relations institute involves a desire to stir up controversy where none necessarily exists? Is this Bob the stirrer at play?

Carr insists that the survey is a useful measure of public sentiment about an Australian response to a potential conflict in our neighborhood, and thus should be debated.

In that regard he has a point. "It's a measure of the common sense and good judgement of the Australian public that support for the US alliance resides in our DNA, but that doesn't mean we've got to be in a scrap between Japan and China in which the US supports Japan," he tells me.

What the Carr survey does achieve is to cast a light in the direction of the **ANZUS** Treaty itself whose provisions are widely misunderstood. Contrary to these mis-perceptions, the treaty confers no obligation on either party – Australia or the United States – to come to each other's assistance in the event one or other comes under attack.

The Treaty merely calls on the parties to "consult" in the case that one or other's security is under threat. There is no absolute commitment.

Washington certainly interprets it this way. When, during heightened tensions with Indonesia in the early 1960's then Prime Minister Robert Menzies asked President Kennedy whether, in the event of an Indonesian attack on Australia, the US would become involved, he was told Washington would "consult".

As then head of the Department of External Affairs, Sir Arthur Tange observed: "The consultations with the Americans brought home to the Australian government that any US support to Australia with combat troops was neither guaranteed in advance nor unconditional."

In his diaries, Carr records that he had discussed in 2012 with then head of his department Denis Richardson (Richardson is now Secretary of Defence) the possibility of stepped-up defence exchanges with the US.

Richardson's enthusiasm for increased defence contacts beyond existing arrangements had been lukewarm: "Our interests are different from a great power's," he had advised Carr.

Hypotheticals over what Australia might – or might not – do in the event of conflict in our immediate neighborhood involving China and either Taiwan or Japan has drawn government officials into controversy from time-to-time.

In 2004, then foreign minister Alexander Downer got into trouble when he cast doubt on whether Australia would feel obliged to join the US in the defence of Taiwan in the event that China sought to use military might to force integration. He pointed out that **ANZUS** carried no further obligation than to consult.

At the time, Downer's remarks caused ructions, obliging his boss John Howard to dismiss the issue as "hypothetical".

A decade later former defence minister David Johnston cast more explicit doubt on whether **ANZUS** would oblige Australia to join the US in a military adventure in the region when he said: "I don't believe it does."

Johnston's remarks in a Lateline interview with Tony Jones caused hardly a ripple. How times have changed! These are debates we need to have. They are not silly.

