

# Anzac Day, Memorial Day and the Geopolitics of a Friendship

by George Friedman - April 27, 2021

In history, and in the history of my family, Memorial Day and Anzac Day are intimately bound. On Memorial Day, which comes next month, we remember Americans who died in war. On Anzac Day, which fell on April 25, we do likewise of Australians and New Zealanders.

I will remember friends I've lost, as my wife, who grew up Australian, will remember her grandfather, who spent two years in the trenches of France in World War I, and her mother's closest cousin, who was shot down during a recon flight over France. Our daughter, while serving in Iraq, would head over to the Australian camps to share cups of tea, vegemite and rugby. So the day intermingles our countries and families in joint sadness, pride and camaraderie.

For those who may not know, Anzac is short for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. The English were pressed hard in World War I and asked that a force be raised to join them. The Australians had a song (sort of) that said, "If England needs a hand, well here it is." A couple of years later, the United States decided to lend a hand as well. Since then, the Aussies and Americans have fought side by side in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Desert Storm, Afghanistan and Iraq. Some of these were desperate and necessary wars, others reckless and careless. In hindsight, we all know which was which.

Anzac Day is still remembered for the historic mission the group was given at Gallipoli. To break the impasse in WWI, Winston Churchill, the first lord of the Admiralty, decided that a flank attack on Turkey was needed. Turkey was allied with Germany, and knocking Turkey out would, in Churchill's mind, change the dynamics of the war. We will never know if it would have changed everything. Churchill envisioned an amphibious assault on Gallipoli. There were more British troops there, but the Australian and New Zealand troops were a large percentage of their force. Gallipoli was a disaster, and those contemplating amphibious assaults should study Gallipoli for all that could go wrong. The irony was that the remaining Anzacs and Americans were safer in the trenches of France. That's how bad Gallipoli was.

I have neglected New Zealand to this point in part to irritate my brother-in-law, who lives in Auckland, but also as the door to understanding the geopolitical imperatives of Australia and New

Zealand. New Zealand participated in all of the wars that Australia participated in but inevitably with smaller forces commensurate to a smaller country. Over time, however, there was increased reluctance to participate. New Zealand was more cautious of the United States and also eager to show its independence. In the 1980s, New Zealand announced that it would not allow U.S. warships with nuclear weapons to enter New Zealand ports. Wellington knew that U.S. policy was to never indicate whether a ship did or didn't have nuclear weapons on board. The New Zealand government did this for domestic political reasons, and because it was competing with Australia as to which country was better protecting its national sovereignty. And since the need for nuclear weapons in the region was practically nonexistent, it was a low-cost way for Wellington to assert itself and show that it's not just Australia's little nephew.

We are seeing a different and somewhat more serious divergence today. The Australians have aligned with the United States over China, with which Australia has poor relations. New Zealand, on the other hand, has adopted the opposite policy by openly maintaining close relations with Beijing. Its prime minister has made the point that if Australia followed New Zealand it too would be able to benefit economically and politically from the relationship.

To understand why this is perhaps more than just a policy disagreement, we have to understand why Anzac was willing to lend Britain a hand in WWI. Both Australia and New Zealand are exporting countries, Australia of minerals and food, New Zealand primarily of food. But both countries have a major strategic problem. They do not have the ability to guarantee access to their trade routes. If they lose those routes, they could lose their ability to export. Therefore, they need to have a relationship with the major maritime power. Until World War II, that power was Britain. When the war began, it was the Japanese, and then it rapidly became the Americans. After World War II, the Australians and New Zealanders shifted to a relationship with the United States.

It was vital to both countries that the U.S. see the protection of their sea lanes – and possibly their territory – as being in its strategic interest. There was a great deal of sentiment connecting them to Britain, and though that helps to explain why they came to London's aid in World War I, they needed to make it abundantly clear that there was much in it for London through its guardianship.

The same was true with the United States. Securing the Pacific was important to American strategic interests, but protecting Australia's and New Zealand's interests might not be. Australia's participation in U.S. wars and its support of the U.S. against China provides the U.S. with political and military benefits in a difficult situation and creates an American dependency on Australia.

And if the U.S. is protecting Australia against any potential threat, it is also inevitably protecting New

Zealand. New Zealand does not have to pay for this because Australia does. New Zealand might think that China will become a dominant naval power in time. But it will still hedge its bets. For example, it recently chose to remain in the Five Eyes, an intelligence-sharing program that it likely contributes more to than it gets in return.

Indeed, history connects the Five Eyes – the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It connects them through wars, literature, music and all the things that make us who we are. All are different, but all are linked. However, each has interests and fears, and as with a loving family, they can become vicious over the will of a dearly departed. The price Australia and New Zealand paid on Britain's behalf at Gallipoli was great, and as the British Empire declined, they had to instead pay the U.S. for the benefits they gained.

The geopolitical benefits and necessities are all there, but the memories of Anzac Day and Memorial Day are there as well, blending them together as much as their history and culture does. The profound sadness of what was lost mixes always with the hard realities of how to survive. Sentiment is a powerful addition to necessity.

**Author: George Friedman**

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](https://geopoliticalfutures.com)