

**Address by Lieutenant General Peter Leahy AC
At the Battle for Australia Commemoration Martin Place, Sydney
7 September 2022**

Today we commemorate what Prime Minister Curtin called the Battle for Australia.

With the war raging in Europe, Japan, in December 1941, launched coordinated attacks against Pearl Harbour, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines and British Malaya.

On 15 February 1942 Singapore fell to Japanese forces.

In the three months following this defeat, Darwin and other Australian cities were bombed and midget submarines attacked Sydney. The Japanese occupied the Solomon Islands and landed in Papua New Guinea.

Australia anticipated a Japanese invasion and feared for its security and sovereignty. It was an eventful and worrying time.

The country was not prepared for a war in the Pacific and Prime Minister Curtin assed the threat as Australia's 'darkest hour'.

It may have been the darkest hour, but Australia, Australians and our allies shone brightly as they responded to tyranny and oppression in the Pacific.

On many levels the times are not so different now. There is a conflict in Europe and a looming threat in the Pacific. Are we experiencing the dawn of a new Battle for Australia?

How will we as a Nation and as a people respond?

Today, as we face what may yet be another threat, we would do well to recall our forebears and how they stood fast in the face of tyranny and oppression.

Australia, as we know it today, is their legacy to us.

One way we can honour their sacrifices in the Battle for Australia is to defend the Nation, our way of life and our values today.

Theirs is an example that sets the standard for how we should aspire to respond in the face of new threats and the possibility of new battles. President Biden has characterised our present circumstances as a battle between democracy and autocracy. He has warned Americans to prepare for a long-term fight with costs.

We must also be prepared for a long fight at significant cost.

Along with many other like-minded nations Australia has chosen the path of defending democracy against autocracy. We seek peace and security. But today, peace and security are not assured as the level of strategic uncertainty seems to be increasing on a daily basis. This applies to Ukraine and Russia, but also the greater threat, to Australia, which is from China's unlawful, assertive and aggressive actions in the Pacific.

In recent opinion polls more Australians than ever are concerned about the threat from China.

We are entitled to ask if this is the beginning of a new Battle for Australia?

Let us compare the times.

There is a broad conviction that as a liberal democracy we are facing autocratic powers who are opposed to our way of life. The threat comes primarily from China, Russia, North Korea and Iran. More broadly across the globe there are other threats to democracy. Don't forget the fundamental Islamists who have their own aspirations for a global Caliphate and the application of Sharia Law.

As a nation and a defence force we should be better equipped and prepared for the potential battles to come.

Without the United States we would be almost defenceless against the rapidly growing and unquestioned military power of China.

Thankfully now Japan is a strong ally to Australia. They are taking robust and positive steps to alter their domestic and regional approach to defence and security.

A web of alliances is building with the Quad and AUKUS showing great promise. Littoral nations of the China Seas are pushing back against China and India has their own disputes with China. These developments are important as multilateral security measures have all but failed.

While a threat to Australia's territorial integrity and sovereignty is not immediate there are threats to our neighbours, friends and allies. Their survival, sovereignty, values and way of life are at risk. Australia is not obliged to defend these places. They will be wars of choice with the most dangerous being what do we do if China invades Taiwan.

In this regard, I recall being in Villiers Bretonneux in 1993 when the Mayor said to me, "We French do not understand why you Australians came here in 1916, but you helped save our democracy."

This is what I would expect of Australians. We are people of principle and values and historically we have stood up for the oppressed and the underdog.

So far, we have considered the problem in a geopolitical context. There is another context. Prime Minister Curtin, in his 1942 speeches, spoke of the need for men and women to serve Australia. He spoke of the need for courage, physical and mental ability, and an inflexible determination so that we as a nation of free people shall survive.

Are we, as a people, ready to fight for Australia in the battles to come and honour those who fought in the first battle for Australia?