

A Time for Change - The US Alliance and Australian Foreign Policy

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(Address to the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Canberra Branch, on the occasion of the author becoming a Fellow of the Institute, Canberra, 9 June 2011.)

In this address I look forward well into the future. I will be painting with a broad brush. If I over-simplify and make some unusual connections it is to distinguish the wood from its trees.

Paradoxically, while the end of the Cold War diminished credible potential threats to national security, successive governments elevated ANZUS, to use Graeme Dobell's phrase, from 'vital to sacred'. The reality today is that we are unlikely to face a serious direct, conventional security threat except as a consequence of the American alliance. Having regard to our geo-political situation I argue that it is time to begin to move toward a policy of true self-reliance and eventual neutrality, a policy that will provide distinctly better long-term security insurance than the notional ANZUS alternative.

Harold Holt's 'All the way with LBJ' call and John Howard's nomination of us as US 'Deputy Sheriff' symbolised the deepening of our commitment. Julia Gillard has continued the tradition.

Her address to the US Congress a few months ago reflects more explicitly than ever the centrality of the alliance. Flattery of the Americans was designed to make her listeners as sympathetic as possible to her message, repeatedly hammered home like the beat in pop music: 'you have an ally in Australia'; 'you have a true friend downunder'; 'an ally for war and peace'; an 'ally for hardship and prosperity'; an 'ally for the sixty years past...and an ally for all the years to come', etc.

The speech was based on the assumption that United States policy toward Australia is rooted in sentiment. Yes the American audience was left with warm feelings toward Australia. Their lurking fear of American eclipse was assuaged by telling them all the things they want to hear. But American elites are very sophisticated. The New York Times did not report her speech and the Washington Post's coverage was brief but did find space to note

that attendance by House and Senate members was low. It added, that to give the impression of a full chamber, 'pages and staff filled many of the empty seats'.

The British were masters at what they described as the 'duchessing' of colonial and dominion leaders. British Labour Party MPs were similarly treated. They 'get patted on the back by dukes and are lost for evermore', to quote George Orwell.

The Americans are no less skilled. Thus Howard basked in Bush's description of him as a 'man of iron'. Obama's invitation to Gillard to accompany him on a school visit was similarly calculated, a more subtle form of flattery perhaps than her address. The Americans of course value our unstinting commitment which serves their national interest. The question to answer is, does it serve ours?

As has been pointed out many times ANZUS is not a military alliance like NATO. It obliges each party to do no more than consult with one another in the event of an attack. The 1981 US/Israel Memorandum of Understanding on Strategic Cooperation embodies a more explicit commitment to Israel's security than does ANZUS to ours. Interestingly, the US media, when referring to US allies usually lists NATO, Japan and Israel, the latter often described as 'our closest ally'. Australia is not mentioned.

Our leaders conflate ANZUS with a less precise term, namely the American alliance. This creates the impression that the security relationship is more substantive than it really is. The conflation also gives the impression that our diplomatic support for US foreign policies that have little or no bearing on Australian security, irrespective of their possible adverse consequences for our national interests, somehow flows from the ANZUS treaty.

Nowhere is this clearer than in relation to Israel, where I began my foreign service in 1950. In 2008 the Australian Parliament took the extraordinary step of holding a special session to congratulate Israel on the 60th anniversary of its independence. To my knowledge this was not done for any of our neighbours in Asia.

Prime Minister Gillard told the US Congress of our complete commitment to Washington's support for Israel just a few days after the United States had vetoed a Security Council resolution, supported by all other members, which called on Israel to desist from building further settlements on the West Bank. Not only in this instance but on many occasions Australia has gone out of its way to show support for Israel, more so than other US allies. Our leaders do not seem to realise that the embassies of Islamic countries report to their capitals on what we do and say about Israel.

Israeli policy and actions in relation to the Palestine issue and US support for Israel certainly have been important factors in the creation of radical Islamism. Our government sees Australia as under threat from Islamic terrorism, yet it increases the risk to our citizens through gratuitous expressions of support for Israel and American policy. Why this is in Australia's national interest is never explained. It is certainly not a requirement of ANZUS.

Equally the involvement of our defence forces in support of the Iraq invasion and in Afghanistan helps further ensure that we are linked in the minds of extreme Islamists, and more broadly in the Middle East and Pakistan, with what Muslims see as United States imperialism. Moreover, there is substantial expert agreement in the United States and elsewhere that the Afghan war is not an appropriate response to the terrorist threat which is best dealt with through other means.

Our leaders proudly trumpet that we alone have involved our armed forces in all of America's wars since World War II. The implication is that thereby the United States is deeply in our moral debt and that accordingly its armed support can be relied on in all circumstances. However history shows that Great Powers, no matter how close the relationship may seem, are unreliable. We found that to be so when Britain joined the European Community, to give just one example from my personal experience. With nations blood is definitely not thicker than water.

Not surprisingly, public opinion views ANZUS favourably. The Lowy 2010 Public Opinion Poll reported that 86% of Australians considered the American alliance either 'very important' (56%) or 'fairly important' (30%). Government and people are united on this critical issue.

Since the Cold War ended more than 20 years ago we have not faced any threat to national security. Indeed it is arguable that has been so since the Vietnam War ended nearly forty years ago. Today there is no credible threat to national security. Yet our government binds us ever more tightly to Washington as revealed by secret US embassy Wikileaks reports. Those same leaks reveal that our leaders, including Kevin Rudd, make extraordinarily ill-judged, indiscreet comments to ingratiate themselves with American leaders. Such indiscretions could be considered disloyal if made to another power.

Recently I gave a talk to a local club in which I questioned in passing our dependence on America. Afterwards I was asked, 'but who will protect us?'

Emotionally, it seems, we have yet to fully escape the mindset of our origins as a sparsely populated British dependency settled in the heyday of the Empire. From the beginning of settlement we feared attack by a succession of Great Powers threatening Britain's global hegemony, first France, later Russia, then Germany and above all Japan. With a small population distant from our mother country, still thought of as 'home' by a majority, we never felt able to provide for our own security in the face of those perceived threats to the Empire.

Old fears die hard. The total defeat of Japan did not end our feeling of insecurity. Even when the Cold War had ended some of our leading foreign policy experts still saw Japan as potentially a long-term threat (Anderson). Though recognising that ANZUS 'would lose its central place in consideration of matters affecting our destiny', they continued to value it as 'an insurance policy of sorts'.

I suspect that our atavistic fears reflect continuing guilt at our luck in having this relatively bountiful country, still the most sparsely populated of all nations, all to ourselves. The intensity of popular opposition to a relative trickle of boat people perhaps suggests that despite our seeming embrace of multi-culturalism a residue of the 'yellow peril' mentality remains.

It is true of course that unlike all other Western countries we and New Zealand are geographically and culturally on our own. In an uncertain world that is understandably a source of unacknowledged anxiety.

But there is I believe a more important element in our embrace of America than fear.

We have been fortunate in our British heritage and that we speak English. But it means that more than Europeans we see the world as a whole through American eyes and events in Europe through British and American eyes. The Australian media sources most of its foreign reporting from the US and UK. American popular culture is pervasive. Our media, military and intelligence communities are profoundly influenced by their American counterparts as are our politicians.

As Walter Russel Meade argues, we feel part of an Anglosphere, where 'English is the native language of a substantial majority of the population and where social values and culture are largely shaped by Anglo-Saxon values'. As Meade contends, the Anglo-Saxons have been global top dogs for 300 years, defeating all challengers. The liberal, capitalist world system as it is today is an Anglo-American creation.

America's victory in the Cold War was supposedly the 'end of history'. The Anglosphere had once again disposed of its enemies. Our intensified embrace of the American alliance flows, I believe, from our emotional identification with the triumphant victors. In an era of American hegemony we seem to feel that more than ever our national interest is advanced by building an intimate, dependent relationship with the US.

Our government and media glorify our military history as a matter of deliberate policy. While not the intent, the fact that all the wars we have fought in have been as auxiliaries to Britain or America must reinforce feelings that we will, as a matter of course, do all we can to help ensure that if there is war our, i.e. the Western or Anglosphere, side wins. It never seems to occur to us that the national interest might be best served by keeping us out of future wars.

Being part of the Anglosphere undoubtedly makes us feel more important than we really are. Vanity tempts our leaders to reach far beyond our region pontificating on issues where they would be wise, having regard to Australia's modest importance, to mind their own business.

One of the surprises of heading a major UN agency, as I did, is the revelation of how your own country is seen through the eyes of others. Most developing countries know little about us beyond the perception that we are wealthy and solidly in the American camp. Our continuing attachment to the British monarch is puzzling to many, suggesting that we are somehow less than fully sovereign. Though surprisingly not seen as former colonialists we are regarded, along with other Western countries, as gravely underestimating the bitterness left by colonialism; and as self-righteous and condescending toward developing countries. That we join enthusiastically in pressing for the adoption of Western social and economic norms with little respect for other cultures is seen as arrogant.

In relation to global issues we are not seen as much more influential than say the Netherlands and certainly much less than Canada. We tend to confuse respect for our high professional competence with recognition of our importance.

Our subservience to America, though demeaning to our self-respect as a nation, would not matter much if not for the rise of China. China's replacement of Japan as the second largest national economy, its high rate of economic growth, its resilience in the face of the global financial crisis and the rapid enhancement of its military capabilities have led to much speculation about the consequences that the rise of China presents for Australia. Professor Hugh White is one of many analysts who argue that ultimately China may challenge America's hegemony. In a recent extended essay he concluded that if Australia remained America's ally we could be drawn into any resulting conflict.

Both government and people regard China as a threat. In the 2010 Lowy poll 69% of respondents agreed China's aim is to dominate Asia, almost half (46%) said it was likely China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years. In its 2009 Defence White Paper it was clear that the Rudd government saw China as a potential military adversary. That has been confirmed by Kevin Rudd's remarks to American officials in WikiLeaks cables.

Australia is far away from Asian centres of power that could conceivably threaten us. The closest is Indonesia. The centre of Indonesian power is Java. Darwin is 2724 kms from Jakarta nearly as far as Darwin is from Sydney which Sydneysiders don't think of as next door.

Separating us from China is the whole of South East Asia and the Indonesian archipelago with a population of 600 million. More than any other potential target of Chinese aggression Australia is far away and hard to access. Hong Kong is 4286 kms from Darwin, almost as far as distant Teheran is from London (4403 kms).

Geographically Australia is not part of Asia. We are an island continent, to the south of an Eastern Hemisphere centred on East Asia, in the same way as Argentina is in the USA centred Western Hemisphere. However, unlike Argentina we are ethnically and culturally

different from the nations of our Hemisphere. Nevertheless that should not be seen as a reason for feelings of national insecurity. Instead we should recognise that our geographical isolation brings one important advantage. Seen from the perspective of our Asian neighbours our location is not strategically important.

Thus we do not lie astride China's lines of communication.

We also lack the necessary population and economic capacity to threaten China in our own right. Whether a 'big' or small Australia that will remain so.

If it were not for our alliance with the US, China's national interest in Australia would be economic. So long as trade and investment between us is not seriously impeded that should remain so. In any event China's economy is far more dependent on oil from the Middle East than on our iron ore, coal and natural gas for which there are alternative sources. China is investing heavily in African mining. Minerals sourced from Africa traverse Indonesian waters, which further increases Indonesia's strategic importance to China

The age of imperial expansion through territorial annexation is probably over. In an age of overwhelming and increasing urbanisation the acquisition of land for settling rapidly diminishing peasant populations no longer makes sense. On the other hand global warming and urbanisation will make assured market access to our food surpluses increasingly important to net food importers like China.

The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan led to a revival of indirect imperial rule at very high cost to the United States. Similar endeavours are unlikely to be repeated by the US or any successor hegemon except in very exceptional circumstances. Globalisation's multiplying web of interrelationships means that future great power hegemony is more likely to be exercised through sanctions and other pressures.

Thus there is no reason why China would want to attack Australia unless it is allied with a United States itself in military conflict with China.

While the signs currently point in the opposite direction, if Indonesia became infected with a radical Islamism, especially if Samuel Huntington's clash of civilisations materialised, Indonesia could threaten our security. In that eventuality China would be a potential ally, more so than the United States.

Hostile control of the north Indian Ocean, the Malaccan straits and the South China Sea would impact adversely on China's security. It is in no way surprising that China is building a navy able to exert power in the South China Sea and the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Indeed China's geographic situation makes for fear of encirclement by hostile powers in alliance with the United States. Countries on the perimeter of the South China Sea are understandably nervous about China's ultimate intentions. However, though wanting the US to remain 'engaged' with the region, they are not seeking an alliance with the US.

At this early stage the United States appears to be encouraging China to play a positive role in maintaining a peaceful regional and global order, albeit one in which the United States remains predominant. But it is also hedging its bets by laying the foundations for the containment of China. Its close relationship with India is a step in this direction. Australia is tacitly supporting that strategy.

Both China and the United States see themselves as exceptional nations destined for greatness. China's sense of its historical importance and cultural superiority, its continuing resentment of its humiliation by the West for much of the last few centuries, the strength of popular nationalism verging at times on xenophobia, are all indicators of exceptionalism. Wars are made by men. They don't just happen as a result of inexorable forces. If China remains undemocratic, as the leaders of the Communist Party clearly intend, eventually they may well do what dictators commonly do, namely whip up nationalist sentiment to sustain their power. Contemporary discourse on international relations seems to me to give insufficient weight to extreme nationalism as a driver of war. The Chinese popular reaction to the destruction by the Americans of their Belgrade embassy a few years ago, and subsequent incidents, showed the existence of a latent xenophobia.

The Chinese governmental system fits well with the Chinese capacity to think in the long term. Their phenomenal economic growth is likely to be sustained. In a few years their national output may be greater than America's. The Chinese will surely become as scientifically and technically sophisticated as the US. China's leaders send many of their children to the great American universities because they know they provide the world's best education. Many of the best doctoral students in technical fields in the US are Chinese.

As with China nationalism can be an important factor influencing US foreign policy. The United States is the embodiment of the exceptional nation: 'a light unto the world', it truly believes. Thus President Obama was recently sharply criticised for suggesting that all countries see themselves as exceptional, i.e. for implying that America was no more exceptional than any other. Obama has learnt his lesson. In his recent ringing speech before the British Parliament he committed himself to continuing American global leadership.

United States defence policy and the accompanying expenditure by successive administrations, including the current one, show a determination to remain the predominant global military power. Its commitment to missile defence reflects a determination to make the national territory as impregnable as possible.

Both American and Chinese defence and foreign policies are conceived in terms of 'realist' doctrine that sees national security as dependent in the last resort on military power. Realist doctrine is both a description of how states behave and a prescription of how they ought to conduct their foreign and defence policies. There lies the risk. A bipolar balance of power as we had during the Cold War did not result in war between the US and USSR and war between China and America is certainly not inevitable. So far America in its dealings with

China has sought to engage rather than oppose it; but it also shows no willingness to contemplate sharing power with it.

Thus the realist school of American international relations scholars expect, to quote Robert D Kaplan, that the 'United States, the hegemon of the Western hemisphere, will try to prevent China from becoming the hegemon of much of the Eastern Hemisphere'. Kaplan describes elaborate scenarios for preventing Chinese hegemony over the island chain stretching from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines to Indonesia. Some depend on access to Australian territory and so risk direct Chinese attack on our country. In his just issued, Brookings Institute paper on Australian defence policy, US Army Colonel Angevine develops a sophisticated analysis that points in this direction. According to recent press reports the possibility of hosting American forces on our soil is already under consideration. Angevine recommends a number, including basing here US F-22 Raptors as part of 'US flexible deterrent options'.

China's foreign policy is purely realist. American policy is also influenced by a conviction that it must spread democracy and human rights. This ideological element probably increases the risk of Chinese-American conflict although in practice on important issues the US usually acts in accord with realist doctrine.

Bill Clinton has summed up the choice before America well:

We have two choices about how we use the great and overwhelming military and economic power we now possess. We can use it to stay top dog on the global block in perpetuity. Or we can use it to try to create a world in which we will be comfortable living when we are no longer top dog on the global block

No one can predict the future and it is not my intention to speculate. It is sufficient for my argument to recognise that there is a real possibility of the worst case scenario happening, namely war between China and the US which involves Australia as America's close ally.

Current policy of an ever closer alliance could therefore have devastating consequences for us: potentially heavy loss of life to our soldiers and civilians and a damaged economy. If China emerged victorious we would certainly pay a further price. On the other hand if the US did so a Western centred global hegemony committed to free markets and democracy would continue.

Our government recognises that the rise of China will create a challenge for our diplomacy. The relationship with China will need to be 'managed', it is said, to avoid having to choose between China and America. This seems to me to be so much wishful thinking.

The fact is that, by intensifying our alliance with the US, in Chinese eyes we have already effectively chosen.

In considering what should be Australia's response to a possible future confrontation between Washington and Beijing Hugh White has identified several options including neutrality on the Swiss, Swedish or Finnish models. Similarly the 2009 Defence White Paper includes armed neutrality as a possibility but it does not examine its appropriateness. Instead it takes as given a posture that it calls self-reliance but which contains many caveats that necessitate a continuing dependent relationship with the United States. It is assumed, for example, that the US would come to our aid if we were under threat from a major power, treating a nuclear threat to Australia as if it were a nuclear threat to itself.

In my view a policy of eventual explicit neutrality might best serve the national interest by recognising the reality that we are an isolated Western nation, distant from mainland Asia, whose location is not strategically significant and having no historical enemies. Neutrality would mean that we could avoid involvement in conflict between the United States and China while increasing our capacity to help diminish the risk of such conflict.

Movement to neutrality is best done in stages over time.

First, current rhetoric about the centrality of the American alliance should be dropped.

Second, all policies should be decided in the light of a hard-headed assessment of our national interest. Decision makers must break from the 'Anglosphere' assumption at the root of current policy, namely the congruence of Australian and American political and strategic goals. Specifically, we should stand aside from American balance of power initiatives to contain China.

Third, we must refrain from new defence commitments.

A next and difficult step is to extricate ourselves from existing military and intelligence links with the United States, for example Pine Gap.

Eventually, withdrawal from ANZUS and adoption of a foreign policy based on an explicit declaration of neutrality could be appropriate.

A policy of true self-reliance need not affect good relations with the US though of course there would be a loss of intimacy and doubtless some friction. However, it is also possible to envisage circumstances in which the US would give greater weight than now to our views, for example if we were on the Security Council.

On the other hand we would no longer have the same access to American intelligence or to the newest American weapons. Our armed forces would have a different relationship with their American colleagues.

The worth of intimacy is vastly exaggerated. When would its loss since the end of the Vietnam War have made a difference to our national security? I would suggest, never. So much intelligence is ephemeral, little more than gossip. And as we have seen it is often

wrong and may lead to disastrous consequences, e.g. Iraq. It must be very hard for our analysts not to be caught up in Anglosphere 'group think'. I believe it would be no great loss to have to become self-reliant in the gathering and interpretation of foreign intelligence. Where there are common interests with the United States and others, for example counter-terrorism and other unconventional threats, intelligence would continue to be shared.

White and others argue that the best way to prevent conflict between America and China is to build an Asian order based on shared power between the two. That may be the idea behind our various endeavours to create broad-based institutions for Asian and Pacific cooperation which involve both China and America. However, as an American proxy we lack credibility with China as an intermediary. That could change if we moved away from our embrace of the United States.

The foundations exist to enable a self-reliant Australia to be a more influential player in the maintenance of peace in our region, if we choose to take that path. Since World War II our diplomats never wavered in their conviction that a central pillar of our foreign policy should be the development and maintenance of the closest relations with our northern neighbours. Gradually we have accepted our responsibilities toward the small nations of the South Pacific. We have opened our doors to immigrants no matter what their racial, religious or national identities. By and large, our bilateral aid has been used wisely in support of our diplomatic goals.

Since 1945 Australia has worked constructively, but intermittently, with others in multilateral organisations, within and outside the United Nations system, to create legal norms to regulate our increasingly inter-dependent world, though never with the conviction and influence of Evatt in the UN's formative years. As a power independent of the United States we would be far better placed to regain comparable influence.

Major conflict between China and America is less likely if both powers are tied closely into the global legal order as envisaged by Clinton. Subservience to the US undermines our credibility to promote stronger norms in multilateral organisations. To give one current example, though we have signed the 2009 Convention prohibiting the use of Cluster Munitions, the proposed ratifying legislation will allow the United States, which is not a signatory, to base cluster bombs here or transit them through Australian territory. In contrast New Zealand has already legislated in strict compliance with the letter of the Convention.

My agenda will be dismissed as hopelessly unrealistic, which of course it is in current circumstances. Foreign and defence policies are driven by elites who will be reluctant to recognise the need for radical change. Influential organisations like the Murdoch press and other beneficiaries from the status quo will strongly resist. The United States will do all it can to prevent movement.

In the present state of our politics, neither main party will give leadership unless public opinion shifts. For that to happen we need a credible, strong, well-funded NGO to begin the education of parliamentarians and the public.

The calculus for a change to neutrality is a bit like that for climate change. Over the next 15-20 years the impact of climate change is not likely to be serious. Equally, United States predominance will continue for some years yet and the risk of armed conflict with China will remain low.

In both cases the consequences of procrastination will become apparent only when it is too late to escape them. To continue to put all our security chips, as we do now, on the US alliance is to bet that the Anglosphere will continue to stay on top. But is it prudent to do so? I think not. Australia's military involvement in support of the United States is most unlikely to tip the balance in any conflict; but it would expose our country to possibly devastating consequences.

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