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Chapter 2
Down Under and in Between: Australian Security Perspectives in the ‘Asian Century’

Danielle Chubb

This chapter will provide an overview of Australian perspectives on the US alliance in light of ongoing and emerging challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. After a brief discussion of the motivations behind the signing of the ANZUS treaty, the first part of the chapter examines the historical context of the alliance, with a particular focus on the long-standing and ongoing tussle in Australia between independence in foreign policy making vis-à-vis broader structural constraints. While this debate has been a constant feature of the political scene in Australia, it has come into particular focus since the US withdrawal from Vietnam, which marked a turning point in Australian perspectives with regard to its own role in Asia. The collision of ideas surrounding Australian identity and Australian national interest has been reflected in policy approaches as successive governments have sought to strike a balance between the two exigencies and thus, most optimally ensure Australia’s strategic future. The chapter concludes by examining current perspectives through the lens of an ongoing debate taking place in Australian academic circles about what the rise of China means for Australia and its commitment to the US alliance, and considers options for caucus-style cooperation with fellow US allies beyond the hub-and-spokes model.

ANZUS and Australian Security Perceptions

Debate over the relative merits of relying on ‘great and powerful friends’ in Australia’s foreign and defense affairs is not unique to the contemporary strategic environment. The very negotiations that culminated in the ANZUS security alliance came on the back of a decade of discussion about the desirable direction of Australia’s loyalties. The war in the Pacific had left Australians anxious and the question of how to deal with a defeated Japan spoke intimately to Australian disquiet over the new geopolitical reality of post-war Asia. The existential nature of these fears, prompted by a sense of isolation created by Australia’s antipodean location far from its powerful wartime allies, led to a desire to dismantle Japan’s military potential completely and impose severe restrictions to prevent any future resurgence. The US, on the other hand, was keen to expedite normalization of relations with Japan, motivated by a desire to have Japanese bases available to US forces for use in the Korean War. The decision adopted unanimously by the UK and US in early 1941 (almost a year before Japanese strikes on Australia) to prioritize the European/Atlantic area over the Pacific arena, in the case of war in the latter, provided a sharp reminder to Australia that the protection of its security in the region could not be left to foreign powers, who defined Western interests to be best achieved through security in Europe and the Atlantic, rather than the Pacific. Trevor Reese, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States: A Survey of International Relations. 1941-1968. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.
Concerns about the level of US commitment to Australia’s national interests in the Pacific region accompanied the effort to create a regional security agreement in the 1950s, known then as a *Pacific Pact*. In the end, however, it became clear that Australia was not adequately able to provide for its own security needs. Acquiescence with the Japanese peace treaty was widely seen as a price for what became known as the Australia, New Zealand, US (ANZUS) Security Treaty, which was signed into effect in San Francisco Sept. 1, 1951.

Just as the onset of the Cold War served as a motivation for the formalization of the Australia-US alliance, so too did a series of events contribute to debate surrounding the alliance’s purpose and future. No event was more influential in this regard than the Vietnam War. Australia’s involvement in Vietnam was justified in terms of ANZUS and both the Australian Embassy in Washington, along with Canberra’s Department of External Affairs, argued that ‘showing our flags’ in Vietnam would directly contribute to Australia’s national interest. The security calculations of such a decision are evident in the advice given to Canberra in May 1964 by Australia’s ambassador to Washington:

> [O]ur objective should be...to achieve such an habitual closeness of relations with the United States and sense of mutual alliance that in our time of need ... the United States would have little option but to respond as we would want. The problem of Vietnam is one ... where we could without disproportionate expenditure pick up a lot of credit with the United States [by picking up] not so much the physical load the bulk of which the United States is prepared to bear, as the moral load.³

Despite the bipartisan foundations of this commitment, the Vietnam War increasingly became an electoral liability. In the face of growing dissatisfaction and public unrest, frequent changes in strategies and tactics on behalf of the US left the Gorton and McMahon governments open to the accusation that they no longer had any independence vis-à-vis their foreign policy and were merely at the beck and call of strategic policy decisions made by the United States in an entirely unilateral manner.⁴ Australia’s reasons for involvement in the war became even more obscure in 1969; the newly elected Nixon administration announced its intention to extricate its troops from Vietnam and from Southeast Asia, warning its allies that the days of forward defense in Southeast Asia were drawing to a close. As the Whitlam Labor government was swept into power in 1972 after more than 16 years of conservative rule on the back of a promise to enact a complete withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam, serious debate about the value of the ANZUS alliance in a post-Vietnam world had begun.

It is thus evident that the debate today about Australian identity and security in the 21st century has been underway since Nixon’s 1969 announcement, referred to widely as the ‘Guam Doctrine.’ This new, apparently ‘hands-off’ approach to Asia by the US significantly shaped Australian perspectives regarding its own security future. Australia was not alone in this re-evaluation; then, as now, fears of instability following a partial

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disengagement of US commitment to the region led to a rekindling of debate among the Asia-Pacific allies about where their individual and collective strategic destinies lay.

We now know that fears in the 1960s and 1970s that a re-adjusted US approach to the region would lead to a diminishing of its influence and a shift in the values and ideas governing the international relations of the Asia Pacific countries were in large part unfounded. Predictions of stability through greater interdependence have proven to instead have more merit. Rather than a fundamental balance of power shift, we have witnessed the creation of a new and complex security order in which states are bound together by a global market system. Survival of all states depends on the avoidance of conflict and the management of rivalries, which has allowed for the continuation of US leadership in the region. The US is closely tied to this system, as is China, even as it grows in both size and influence.

In Australia, this new reality has shaped perspectives dramatically and called for a reassessment of alliance obligations vis-à-vis a regional economic and political focus. The fundamental challenge facing governments from both sides of the political spectrum has been how to avoid stumbling when walking the fine line between historical security allegiances and economic and security futures. Different governments have displayed varying degrees of coordination of this balancing act. The overall result has been an approach to Asia that has been characterized as at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical. This is in large part a mischaracterization: the apparent incoherence is simply a reflection of the difficult – and at times impossible – choices that policy makers have attempted and continue to attempt to make. In some respects, it seems to be Australia’s destiny that it will continue for some time to develop a somewhat Janus-faced approach to its own security. While the impossibility of the choices faced by Australian policy makers in the complex interplay between Australia’s alliance obligations and a commitment to a stronger regional role is largely acknowledged by analysts, some today worry that, in the face of shifting regional power balances, Australia will one day be forced to rectify this approach and choose between its economic relationship with an increasingly powerful and potentially belligerent China or its political relationship with a United States whose security primacy appears to be waning.

The 1990s saw two very different types of political leadership in Australia struggle to fine-tune the balance. While the legacies of the Keating and Howard governments with regard to Australia’s relationship with Asia remain disputed, the striking dissimilarity in the rhetoric employed, first by the Keating Labor government, followed by the conservative Howard Coalition government speaks volumes about the struggle to define Australia’s identity and, in turn, national security interests.

The decision by Prime Minister Paul Keating’s predecessor, Bob Hawke, to provide troops for the US-led 1991 Gulf War without consulting his Cabinet was one in a series of missteps that led to a great deal of public debate over whether the Australian government was taking seriously its newly conceived role as an independent-minded, Asia-Pacific power committed to nuclear disarmament and multilateralism. In response, Keating took up the question of where Australia’s foreign policy options lay and sought to redefine the national interest in the last decade of the 20th century, one that revolved...
around an identification of Australia as an Asian power. His ultimate failure to capture the imagination of Australians and garner their whole-hearted support for his enthusiasm for this vision is multi-faceted. What is clear is that Keating had misread at least one element of the public mood: while Australians had been critical of Hawke’s mismanagement of alliance relations and demanded more transparency with regard to basing agreements and nuclear issues, these concerns did not amount to a rejection of old fears and dependencies.

Instead, Australia responded to the challenges of nuclear proliferation by clinging ever more closely to the familiar US nuclear umbrella. While Australian business turned inexorably toward Asia and the economy became increasingly regionally interconnected, Australian mindsets remained firmly embedded in their Western identity. The mid-1990s saw a surge in anti-Asian, anti-immigration attitudes, illustrated most distinctly by the electoral success of right wing Queensland politician Pauline Hanson, who was brought into Parliament on a platform that harked back to the days of the White Australia Policy. Amid this resurgence of fears about Australia’s tenuous place in a globalizing world, the conservative Howard government claimed electoral victory, promising to halt what was posited by the new government as a wholehearted embrace of an Asian identity under Keating.

In a symbolic move, the Howard government immediately reconfirmed Australia’s commitment to ANZUS. A traditionalist and a monarchist, John Howard represented all that Keating had promised to overcome: a white, Western Australian identity closely tied with ideas of kinship and historical allegiances. In the aftermath of the crisis between China and Taiwan, Howard had moved to secure US strategic commitment to the region and secured a joint statement out of the 1996 AUSMIN consultations that became known as the Sydney Statement. The Sydney Statement affirmed the upgrading of US bases and the intensification of cooperation between the two countries on regional security issues. Analyst William Tow argues that Howard “thus believed he had acted quickly and forcefully during his first months in office to restore the regional-global balance in Australian foreign policy,” a perception that revealed itself in the ensuing years to have been chimerical.5

Howard was to learn early on of the limitations of the ANZUS agreement and how closely Australia’s national security was tied to its independent role in the Asia-Pacific region. While Australia had wholeheartedly embraced the ‘deputy sheriff’ idea, it was to prove problematic in the Howard government’s early days. In particular, the ANZUS treaty was put to a real test in the context of East Timor. Since its invasion by Indonesia in 1975, Australian governments had been under an increasing amount of domestic pressure to step in and restore East Timor’s self-determination. Australia’s eventual peacekeeping efforts spoke volumes of the future for ANZUS and the role of both Australia and the US within it. While the US, under Clinton, was prepared to provide diplomatic assistance, it was unwilling to provide forces for a conflict that it would have difficulty justifying domestically in terms of its national interest. As such, while Washington provided diplomatic pressure to help persuade Indonesia to withdraw its army (and associated

militia) from East Timor, Australian and New Zealand peace-keeping forces were deployed in the ground.\(^6\) Tow argues that the unfolding of the East Timor crisis highlighted the “gap between Western and Asian political and security approaches:”

The Howard government’s initial difficulty in getting the Clinton administration to commit to playing a viable supporting role in [the East Timor] operation reflected its misreading of how much the United States was prepared to link the Sydney Statement’s rhetoric to any real American propensity to view Southeast Asia as a US strategic priority.\(^7\)

**In the Middle Down Under?**

As the US ‘pivots’ toward Asia, debate in Australia has been portrayed as revolving around a choice between history and geography. This is a dilemma Australians have faced before, but never has it been so pressing. The urgency of the question is directly related to the rise of China, which most pundits argue is not only substantive, but also both ongoing and meaningful. The central question driving contemporary debate is: how can Australia continue to benefit from China’s economic rise and simultaneously secure its own national interests? A range of responses have arisen about where Australia’s national interests lie and which mechanisms will best achieve them. On one side of the spectrum is the argument that, in light of the inevitable decline in US influence in Asia, Australia (along with other regional powers) needs to dramatically reassess its alliance obligations to take stock of the shifting power balance, away from the US-centered order to one that is increasingly multipolar. On the other side is the argument that, in fact, the close economic interdependence of all states, including the US and China, actually leads to an increased likelihood that cooperation, rather than conflict, will become the new default order in Asia.

It is however between these two extremes that most debate lies. This debate revolves around competing visions of the future of Australia and Australian identity in what has been dubbed the ‘Asian Century.’ Here, the febrile nature of the security arena is acknowledged to have created the exigency for the careful management of Australia’s relationship with China, which in turn paints the backdrop for considerations of how the Australia-US alliance can continue to shape Australia’s future. It is the apparent incompatibility of these goals, and the clumsy manner in which Australian governments have dealt with this difficult scenario, that has led to the accusations of incoherence that are outlined above. The most recent announcement regarding an increased US presence in Australia (discussed below) is a case in point: widely seen as an effort to consolidate America’s influence in the Western Pacific in response to China’s growing influence, both Australian and US policy makers fumbled publicly as they sought to make assurances, in press conferences and official statements, that this was not intended as a containment of China.

Since 2008, the Rudd/Gillard government has put in place a number of initiatives, in response to accusations that Australia has been slow to come to terms with the national

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\(^6\) In September 1999, under the command of Australian Maj. Gen. Peter Cosgrove, a UN-mandated, multinational peacekeeping force (INTERFET – International Force for East Timor) made up primarily of Australian and New Zealand forces was deployed in East Timor tasked with restoring peace and security.

\(^7\) Tow, pp. 197-216.
security implications of China’s rise. Most recent of these is the commissioning of the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*, released in October 2012. The White Paper’s central goal is to provide a set of recommendations for how Australia should adjust its horizons to prepare itself in face of the global shift of economic and strategic weight to Asia. Whatever the findings of the White Paper – and its ambit is wide, as it seeks to provide a whole-of-government approach to the variety of challenges facing Australia – it is clear that the US alliance will remain the cornerstone of future policy initiatives. Calls by some within the academic and policy communities to respond to the shifting balance of power through acknowledging that the ANZUS treaty is ‘out of date’ notwithstanding, the current Labor government has reinforced the centrality of this alliance to Australia’s national security interests. The November 2011 announcement of an increased US presence in Australia has served to further strengthen the country’s political commitment to this alliance. Under the bilateral, US-Australia agreement, US Marines – totaling 2,500 by 2017 – will rotate through Darwin and the Northern Territory. It is in this context that Australian policy makers must grapple with the implications of the ‘Asian Century.’

Long involved as a key instigator and supporter of regional multilateralism, it is through the establishment of cooperative institutions that Australia hopes to play a role in molding the coming new order in Asia. In the context of the US alliance, a number of opportunities are open to Australia in this regard. The US-centered alliance system in Asia incorporates a wide range of stakeholders, such as the Philippines, Thailand, the ROK, and Japan. At present, a hub-and-spokes model paints the backdrop against which Asian allies each work individually with the United States in the context of other domestic and regional pressures. Where cooperation between the allies – the spokes – is evident, this usually takes place under the leadership of the US – the hub. While this bilateral (and limited multilateral) approach to security is likely to remain valuable, key players in Canberra are keen to expand cooperative efforts in new and innovative ways.

While budgetary concerns currently constrain a move in this direction, and while it is clear that Australia’s capacity to significantly alter the regional order is limited by its relative size and influence, the White Paper highlights the importance of these types of interactions. It is increasingly acknowledged in circles that extend wider than the Canberra-centric policy and academic arenas that have traditionally hosted such discussions, that rivalry among Australia’s regional neighbors will inexorably lead to an increased potential for instability and conflict, brought about by a rapidly changing strategic environment. As such, moves to increase cooperation between the US’s regional allies in some manner of a ‘spokes-joining’ exercise speaks to the dilemmas posed by the competing pressures weighing upon Australia’s policy makers; while increasing the diplomatic weight of neighbors who, by virtue of the US alliance system, share some of Australia’s values, and at the same time reinforcing the value of US presence. This is seen as one mechanism through which Australia may be able to make real inroads in achieving its own national security goals without significantly increasing the material cost.

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How would a more flexible cooperative institution, which moves beyond the current hub-and-spokes model, be beneficial to Australia and what would this institution look like? Informal platforms for cooperation, based on existing institutions such as the US alliance system, would allow Australia to participate in diplomatic initiatives that are more responsive to the dynamic nature of the current strategic environment, and thus, are more responsive to the needs of its participants, which are in a constant state of flux. Rather than replace or add to existing regional security architecture (with which the region is replete), the alliance network would provide the basis from which allies could caucus and create leverage. Diplomatic initiatives that take place within such a ‘caucus’ model would allow states to move beyond traditional conceptions of the bilateral-multilateral nexus that seem to be failing to deal with the complexity of the Asian security environment. The most exciting aspect of such a model is the potential for it to allow a more dynamic alignment of interests among states. As I discuss below, policy makers now widely acknowledge that states’ security interests are wide and deep in their complexity. No longer will simple calculations of strategic strength allow for the fulfillment of national interests, according to this broader definition of security. From the perspective of Australia, which sits somewhat outside Asia in terms of culture and history, and yet simultaneously shares with it a range of common strategic choices, the time has come to look beyond the status quo and re-imagine a brave new world of cooperative partnerships with its neighbors who share the common dilemma of increased economic ties with China and a reliance upon the United States, whose influence is perceived to be waning, for their security needs.

A further question is worth exploring; given the centrality of the US alliance to Australia’s strategic planning, what – if anything – would cause the alliance to end? Right now, it is very difficult to imagine such an occurrence. Even those hard-headed realists who suggest it may be out-of-date (or for that matter, those extremely optimistic liberals who place all their faith in the market), do not intimate in the same breath that Australia should abandon its most important strategic partner any time soon. At the very most, they are calling for Australia to reassess its strategic alliances and develop more flexibility in its foreign policy making. It is in this latter purpose that a ‘caucus’ forum would serve Australia’s interests, allowing the allies to develop symbiotic partnerships in ways that would better allow for an assessment of their individual, and regionally-focused, security needs.

Any talk of such cooperation, among US allies, raises questions about the need to exercise caution in light of potential accusations that they are aimed at containing China. However, while perceptions are important, these questions hold within them a set of assumptions about the very nature of the regional order. That is, accusations that caucusing among US allies could only be aimed at consolidating the balance of power in Asia, in favor of the US (and against the rise of China), are predicated on an understanding that it is ‘hard’ military power that is, and will remain, responsible for maintaining order in the Asia Pacific. Thus, the easiest response to accusations of containment is to reject the very premise of the question: the US alliance system should not be seen as simply a mechanism for helping maintain the balance of power system in Asia.9

The US alliance system is fundamentally responsible for assisting its stakeholders in meeting the security needs of their populations. Security, in this sense, is conceived more broadly than narrow conceptions of military dominance. It speaks to a wide range of what are commonly referred to as ‘human security’ needs – from transnational crime and climate change, to economic justice, poverty, and natural disaster relief. This reality was thrown in stark perspective in 2011; the US played a central role assisting the Japan Self-Defense Forces in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake and tsunami. The idea of a caucus forum is thus predicated on the understanding that a greater integration of US allies would allow them to individually and collectively develop more independence in meeting their own security needs. As such, while this type of informal caucusing among US allies on the sidelines of existing regional groupings (such as ASEAN, APEC, or the EAS) is in itself valuable. It also has the potential to provide a launching pad for greater regional cooperation on more prickly issues such as energy security.

Conclusion

Australia has much to gain from the US alliance and it is likely that it will remain the centerpiece in strategic planning. It is in this context that Australia must grapple with the competing demands posed by the shifting dynamics of the regional order and an increasingly strong reliance upon China’s wealth for national prosperity. The interplay between Australia’s sense of identity, its stake in the current regional order predicated on US primacy, and the changing nature of its economic and security futures, is not a new one. It is, however, a dynamic that has come into recent focus with the announcement of a new basing agreement with the US and the release of a White Paper on Australia’s place in the Asian Century. Australia has an established reputation for relying on cooperative mechanisms for its diplomatic efforts in the Asia Pacific. Moving forward, the establishment of an informal caucus forum, which met alongside institutionalized meetings such as ASEAN or APEC, and drew on the strengths of the already established US-centered alliance system, would allow countries with common interests and challenges to overcome the bilateral-multilateral cooperation trend that is proving increasingly problematic in light of the emerging multipolar order. Australia has a lot to gain from such a grouping, and while it would not allay the fears of those within the country who predict that conflict in the region is inevitable, it helps answer the concerns of those who argue that America’s Asian allies are mired in unhelpful patterns that have served to provoke fears of containment and are predicated on an understanding of the strategic environment that misreads the US alliance system as one that is singly focused on the projection of hard military power. The reality is much more complex and conceptualizations of Australia’s strategic future rely on a firm understanding that the security interests served by the US alliance are much more broadly defined and require innovative and flexible informal forums for the cultivation of dialogue that seeks to assure stakeholders that security in the Asia-Pacific is not a zero-sum game.