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Adapt or atrophy? The Australia-U.S. alliance in an age of power transition

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ABSTRACT



This article explores the Cold War history of the Australia-U.S. alliance, and then uses this knowledge to contextualise more recent developments in the bilateral relationship. At several crucial moments in the first half of the Cold War, Australia disagreed with the U.S. about the wisdom of its policy toward China, and worked to moderate Washington's aggressive impulses. However, from the 1960s onwards, Australian leaders began to internalise a schema of alliance loyalty: they believed that only loyalty to the U.S. would ensure reciprocal loyalty from Washington. Although events have challenged the validity of this hypothesis, it became a powerful and pervasive influence which led, over time, to Canberra thinking less carefully about the costs and benefits of prospective alliance action. This intellectual lethargy explains why Canberra has found it difficult to adapt to a period of more intense strategic competition between China and the U.S. today.

KEYWORDS

Alliances; security; Australia

Australia's security relationship with the United States of America has, at key moments of decision, been predicated on the idea of reciprocal loyalty. Though Australian leaders have often been at pains to deny this dynamic, for fear of being seen as subservient to Washington, Canberra has regularly participated in U.S.-led coalitions in order to maintain its credentials as a reliable ally, whose loyalty should be repaid if the need ever arises. However, China's ascendancy – and Washington's response – are placing this strategy under pressure: the possible hope of future U.S. loyalty can be outweighed by more immediate considerations, such as the potential consequences of displeasing China. Though Australian leaders continue to emphasise the reliability and importance of the U.S., in reality Canberra has demonstrated a growing awareness of the need to carefully and simultaneously manage its relationships with both Washington and Beijing.

This paper begins with a brief history of how the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) alliance was negotiated and became, from 1951 onwards, the centrepiece of Australian strategic policy. Second, I describe how Canberra assesses the value of this alliance: beyond its deterrent value, the alliance is also perceived as enabling privileged access to U.S. defence technology and intelligence. Third, I explain how Australia has managed the

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alliance, with an emphasis on how Australian leaders have conceived of loyalty within the security relationship. Fourth and fifth, an analysis of Australia's perceptions of U.S. commitment, power and leadership under Presidents Obama and Trump will show that many of the issues present in the relationship today are not attributable solely to President Trump's mercurial temperament. Finally, the paper concludes by considering Australia's current attitude towards ANZUS, and arguing that Canberra should adapt to new strategic realities by managing the alliance in a different way.

The creation of the Australia-New Zealand-United States alliance

After World War II, Australia doubted the reliability of the United States. State Department officials assessed that 'Australia is anxious to see the U.S. military position in the Western Pacific strengthened' (Green, 1949). Canberra was not alone in this anxiety: the Republics of Korea, China and the Philippines were all considering the feasibility of various forms of alliance (See Dobbs, 1984; Park, 2015). However, at this time the U.S. was unwilling to commit to a multilateral alliance in Asia, and this hesitance limited Australia's enthusiasm for a 'Pacific Pact' modelled on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Jarman, 1950).

Through the North Atlantic Treaty, Washington had clearly signalled its intent to defend Western Europe against Communist attack, but America's Asia policy remained in a state of flux. Some clarity was provided in January 1950 when the Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, finally publicly articulated America's interests in Asia. Acheson announced America's interest in a 'defensive perimeter [which] runs along the Aleutians to Japan and then goes to the Ryukyus ... to the Philippine Islands' (Acheson, 1950). Two anti-Communist entities – the Republic of Korea, and the Republic of China – were on the wrong side of Acheson's line.

This 'defensive perimeter' lasted only a few months. When North Korea invaded the South in June 1950, it was immediately perceived – both in Washington and abroad – as a litmus test of U.S. willingness to defend 'Free World' states against Communist attack. President Truman's decision to defend South Korea was applauded in Australia, and changed the nature of Australia's hope for a greater U.S. role in Asia. Australia's Foreign Minister, Percy Spender, encouraged a strong Australian contribution in the expectation that the U.S. 'will repay us in the future one hundred fold' (O'Neill, 1981, p. 65).

As the Korean War progressed, the need to formally conclude World War II – and secure some basis for the ongoing presence of U.S. troops in Japan – prompted President Truman to appoint John Foster Dulles as an Ambassador, and give him responsibility to negotiate a peace treaty with Japan and a 'mutual assistance arrangement among the Pacific island nations (Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Japan, the United States, and perhaps Indonesia)' (Acheson, 1951). With Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines reluctant to countenance a lenient peace treaty for Japan, and irked that Tokyo was receiving greater security guarantees than former war-time allies, U.S. decision-makers knew that some form of security assurance would be required. In the words of John Allison, then an assistant to Dulles, the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty was 'bait to get Australia and New Zealand to sign the [San Francisco Peace] treaty' (Allison, 1969).

Signed on 1 September 1951, the ANZUS Treaty did not immediately create the intimate military relationship that exists today. Notably, the U.S. Department of Defense – already overstretched by commitments in Europe – was wary of creating elaborate

planning machinery that might require the allocation of U.S. troops to fixed positions in Asia (Brands, 1987). Further, the United Kingdom and France still played substantial roles in Asian security matters, first through their colonies and later through the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). However, as the Cold War progressed, ANZUS took on increasing prominence for Australian strategic policy.

How does Canberra value the alliance? What role does it play in Australian strategy?

The most obvious purpose of the alliance is to serve states with notice that should they attack Australian ‘territory ... armed forces, public vessels or aircraft’ in the Pacific, then the United States, New Zealand and Australia would ‘act to meet the common danger’ (ANZUS Treaty, 1951). Though it has been a low likelihood since 1945, and remains so today, any potential aggressor against Australia would have to consider the possibility that an attack on Australian soil or assets would provoke a military response from the U.S. At times, Australia has sought more specific assurances, though these efforts have not always yielded the results desired by Canberra. When, in the early 1960s, Australia contributed troops to defend the new Malayan Federation, Canberra enquired as to what support it might receive from the U.S. if Australian forces should come into contact with Indonesian troops. Washington’s pledge of assistance was carefully caveated, and nowhere near the level of support desired by Canberra (see Curran, 2015).

A similar dynamic played out in September 1999, when Australia led a UN-sponsored peacekeeping force in East Timor. Canberra requested not only a security guarantee, but a contribution of U.S. ground forces. When President Bill Clinton explained his decision to not send ground forces due to America’s commitments in the Balkans, this sent shockwaves through Canberra’s policy-making community. The Australian Defence Minister, John Moore, asked the U.S. Secretary of Defense for ‘a ship, a plane, at the very least’, in order to signal that the U.S. was firmly committed to the operation. When this request was rebuffed, Moore retorted: ‘well, so much for the ANZUS treaty’ (Henry, 2013, p. 106). Bitterly disappointed in this outcome, Australia reframed its request for a more limited commitment of logistical and intelligence support, to which Washington quickly agreed. Though the U.S. did, eventually, provide military support and a security guarantee, these events again demonstrated that Canberra’s expectations within ANZUS might not always be fully met.

Though it is not mentioned in the text of the treaty – and actually predates it – Australia’s intelligence relationship with the U.S. is often considered as a benefit of the alliance relationship. Wartime signals intelligence (SIGINT) cooperation persisted after 1945, and in time ‘Australia found itself in the inner sanctum of the post-war U.S. intelligence network’ (Wesley, 2016, p. 151). While other Asian allies – especially Japan – contributed to regional security through the hosting of U.S. military forces, during the Cold War Australia sought to contribute through hosting U.S. SIGINT facilities, such as those located at Pine Gap, in central Australia (see Ball, 1980). Though Australia’s contributions to the ‘five eyes’ intelligence network are important, Canberra receives far more material than it contributes. Australia treasures this access, and the mid-1980s ‘ANZUS Crisis’ – in which the U.S. reacted to an alliance disagreement by suspending its security commitments to New Zealand, and drastically curtailing intelligence cooperation with Wellington – served to remind Canberra

that Washington's displeasure could have significant security implications (see Hensley, 2013).

The third key benefit associated with the alliance is Australia's privileged access to cutting-edge defence technology and research. Though Australia, in the first part of the Cold War, continued to 'buy British', Canberra soon realised the benefits of being able to access American military technology. Australia's former Chief Defence Scientist has written that although 'there are exceptions', 'Australia is drawn to the United States as the source of much of its strategically critical, high-technology equipment' (Brabin-Smith, 2016, p. 184).¹ This privileged access extends beyond merely the platforms and assets, but to munitions as well. In the event of a high-intensity conflict, Australia's advanced munitions resupply could come only from the United States.

How has Canberra managed the alliance?

Australia is often perceived as America's most faithful ally, but this assessment overlooks the instances when divergent interests prevented a joint approach to security issues. In the first decade of the alliance, Australia's policies often diverged from Washington's preferred approaches: Canberra regularly worked with London to restrain Washington, and reduce the likelihood of conflict in Asia. But as the UK's presence in Asia diminished, Australia's relations with Indonesia worsened, and the Communist threat seemed to move South, Australia's management of the alliance evolved to place a greater emphasis on expectations of reciprocal loyalty.

When the U.S. was considering intervention in Indochina in 1954, Australia was torn between supporting Washington and London (see Edwards, 1992). The U.S. wanted its allies to commit to 'United Action': a vague concept, never explicitly defined, but often interpreted to mean a military intervention effort to save the French stronghold at Dien Bien Phu. Some U.S. decision-makers advocated military intervention before the Geneva Conference discussed the issue of Indochina, in May, and this eagerness for confrontation led many allied officials to speculate about Washington's true goals: was it trying to stabilise the situation, or provoke Communist China into a showdown (see Logevall, 2013)? Canberra was wary of explicitly refusing Washington's requests for assistance, especially given that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles hinted that a lack of allied support for U.S. policy in Asia might prompt Washington to rethink its role in the region.

The convenient timing of a national election meant that Australia had, for a short time, a reasonable excuse to not offer strong support, but when this passed Washington was disappointed that Canberra cleaved to the United Kingdom's position of deferring any action until after the Geneva Conference. Canberra suggested that these talks could create a new diplomatic status quo, which could then be defended by a collective defence organisation. Though Dulles was unable to secure allied support for his concept of United Action, U.S. allies like Australia quickly moved to defend the post-Geneva status quo through the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). Working with like-minded allies like the United Kingdom and New Zealand, in this instance Canberra encouraged U.S. restraint, and Australia's decision to not support intervention before the Geneva Conference may have been the final factor that led Washington to abandon the idea: once news of Canberra's decision 'reached the White House, the Eisenhower administration began to sing a

different tune' (Logevall, 2013, p. 570). Canberra's conduct wasn't disloyal, but it certainly wasn't the enthusiastic support the U.S. desired.

A similar dynamic played out only a few months later, in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (Accinelli, 1996; Woodard, 1991). When Communist China attacked several of the 'off-shore islands' occupied by Chinese Nationalist troops, Washington believed that its reputation as a loyal ally was on the line. Eisenhower, Dulles and others worried that if the U.S. did not support the Nationalists, and the islands fell to Communist Chinese assault, then other U.S. allies would conclude that their treaties with the U.S. were worthless. But most of Washington's allies, including Canberra, felt that the U.S. was being too aggressive and that a defence of the off-shore islands would risk an unnecessary war. Again working with the United Kingdom and New Zealand, Australia encouraged the U.S. to coerce the Chinese Nationalists into withdrawing from the off-shore islands.

Thus, in the first five years of the ANZUS alliance, Canberra and Washington often found themselves in broad agreement on the need to contain Communism in Asia, but they disagreed on where the defensive line should be drawn, and under what circumstances military action was wise. Australia regularly worried that Washington was too aggressive, and suggested alternate policies. However, as the United Kingdom's role in Asia diminished, Canberra became less willing to disagree with Washington, and more often encouraged pro-intervention policies in an effort to keep the U.S. engaged in the region.

By 1961, when President Kennedy considered intervention in Laos to fight the Communist Pathet Lao, Australia had grown more concerned about its own security. Specifically, it worried that the U.S. might not support Australia in any territorial dispute with Indonesia. Thus, in March 1961 the Australian Cabinet decided that it was prepared to assist a U.S. intervention in Laos. Barwick, the Acting Minister for External Affairs, argued that a failure to participate

would have grave repercussions on general Australia-American relations and would certainly not improve the United States attitude towards the Australian position in Netherlands New Guinea. ANZUS, on which we must increasingly depend if United Kingdom interest and involvement in the security of the region diminishes, would be seriously undermined. (Edwards, 1990, p. 13)

Believing that Washington's future inclination to help Australia would be contingent upon Australia's support for the U.S. in Indochina, Canberra decided that it was willing to contribute forces to a U.S. intervention in Laos. Loyalty – and the hope of reciprocal loyalty – had begun to exercise a greater influence on Australian thinking.

When the Laotian crisis flared again in late April, the UK was unwilling to contribute forces to defend Laos itself: it suggested that SEATO instead focus on protecting Thailand. Australia regarded this as insufficient, preferring instead deploying a sizeable force to Laos. Canberra was in an unfortunate position: its two great power allies advocated different solutions to the crisis, but Canberra prioritised the need demonstrate loyalty to Washington. The Government concluded 'that Australia must follow the lead of the United States ... Anything less could put at risk the desire of the United States to assist in our security in case of need' (Edwards, 1990, p. 17). Ultimately, the crisis receded and ended without SEATO intervention into Laos, but Canberra's deliberations reveal that a new habit of alliance management was being formed: decision-makers believed that Australia must

demonstrate loyalty to Washington, because Australian disloyalty would only beget American disloyalty in the future.

Canberra soon had to again consider the prospect of supporting a U.S.-led intervention in Indochina. In 1962, External Affairs Minister Barwick was concerned about the 'degree of resolution underlaying American policies in South Vietnam', and he encouraged Secretary of State Rusk to unequivocally confirm that the U.S. would defend Vietnam (Cox & O'Connor, 2012, p. 175). 'Despite these doubts about US resolve, or perhaps because of them', Australia contributed military advisers to Vietnam in May (Cox & O'Connor, 2012, p. 177). Wary about the further spread of Communism in Asia, and doubting London's willingness to aid Australian security, Canberra now encouraged Washington to take a more aggressive posture in Southeast Asia. In November 1964, Australia's Foreign and Defence Ministers visited Washington and advocated escalation in Vietnam. One month later, the Australian Government decided that it was willing, if requested, to contribute a battalion of ground troops. This early in-principle commitment was, as explained by Cox and O'Connor, an effort to encourage U.S. escalation. The Defence Minister conceived of Australia's early commitment as designed 'to remove any hesitation on the Part of the Americans ... [Australia wanted] to go with them but not to rush out in front' (Cox & O'Connor, 2012, p. 177). The rationale for this approach is neatly captured in the words of an Australian diplomat then serving in Washington: Australia wanted to 'achieve such a habitual closeness of relations with the United States ... that in our time of need ... the United States would have little option but to respond as we would want' (Cox & O'Connor, 2012, p. 178). Such beliefs about loyalty were an important motivation for Australia to contribute significant forces in the Vietnam War.

Thus, a clear and distinct shift can be observed between the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s, ANZUS was one of several key relationships for Canberra, and given Washington's bellicose policies, Australia was usually more concerned about entrapment than abandonment. In these circumstances, Canberra worked with other like-minded U.S. allies to moderate Washington's preferences and policies: it did not feel the need to always demonstrate loyalty to the U.S. But in the 1960s, with the British interest in Asia declining and the Communist threat increasing, Australia's options narrowed and its fear of abandonment prevailed. Canberra began to conceive of ANZUS differently: alliance dues had to be paid, because only loyalty to Washington would guarantee U.S. loyalty to Australia.

Given Asia's stability after the Nixon Doctrine of 1969, and Sino-U.S. *rapprochement* in the 1970s, alliance tests became less frequent and, with threat perceptions in decline, Australia readopted a more measured approach to alliance management. As Foreign Minister Bill Hayden put it at an ANZUS Council meeting in the 1980s, Australians wanted to be 'Allies but not acolytes' (Hawke, 1994, p. 227). The focus of Australian leaders shifted to preserving day-to-day alliance cooperation through the signals intelligence 'Joint Facilities'. Prime Minister Bob Hawke defended such installations as playing an important role in arms control verification, and thus global stability, but also avoided U.S. initiatives he regarded as unwise and destabilising, such as Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.

After the Cold War ended, Australia's response to U.S. military campaigns reinvigorated the alliance loyalty schema. Australia was quick to support U.S. operations in the First Gulf War, and also in Afghanistan in late 2001, despite having no direct strategic stake in the outcomes. When Prime Minister John Howard committed Australian troops to the 2003 war in Iraq, his primary justification was that of the danger posed by weapons of mass

destruction. But Howard ‘also stressed the alliance dimensions’, saying that ‘another reason’ for the deployment

is our close security alliance with the United States. The Americans have helped us in the past and the United States is very important to Australia’s long-term security. It is critical that we maintain the involvement of the United States in our region. (Howard, 2010, p. 447)

Al Palazzo, who wrote with access to classified Government documents, concluded that ‘Australia joined the coalition against Iraq in order to improve its relations with the United States’ (Palazzo, 2011, p. 521). More specifically, as David McLean assesses, ‘Howard believed that Australia had always been loyal to the United States ... and that as long as Australia kept American goodwill ... the United States could be relied upon to come to Australia’s assistance when required’ (McLean, 2013, p. 255).

Howard’s comments support the concept of an alliance loyalty schema influencing Australia’s management of ANZUS, but Howard also has admitted that ANZUS did not function along these lines during the 1999 East Timor crisis. After leaving office, Howard candidly described President Bill Clinton’s decision to not contribute ground forces to this peacekeeping operation as a ‘poor repayment of past loyalties and support’ (Howard, 2011). One lesson that could be drawn from this experience is that alliance loyalty doesn’t work like loyalty between friends, but it seems that Howard’s conclusion was that a ‘poor repayment of past loyalties’ was better than no repayment at all, and thus it was still in Australia’s interest to demonstrate loyalty to Washington.

Given the high levels of Australian public support that ANZUS has enjoyed, and the uncontested primacy enjoyed by the U.S. during the unipolar moment, it is unsurprising that since the end of the Cold War Australia’s political class has institutionalised a form of reflexive enthusiasm for the alliance (see Scappatura, 2019). This is not to say that Canberra has slavishly followed directions from the United States: Australia has been careful in *how* it has displayed loyalty, and has calibrated its military commitments in an effort to avoid causalities (see McLean, 2013; Palazzo, 2011). But this analysis shows that loyalty to the alliance – because it is believed to increase the likelihood of reciprocal loyalty from Washington – is usually regarded as a core national interest by Canberra. Though this influence can be seen in examples from the 1960s, it became only more entrenched in the post-Cold War period.

However, the rise of China has challenged this approach to alliance management. Though Australian politicians still occasionally compete to be seen as better managers of the alliance, there is a slowly growing awareness that Australia’s national interests now sometimes require Canberra to distance itself from U.S. policy. Three examples examined in the next section show that Canberra is now more willing to conceive of Australia’s national interest as discrete from that of the United States. Practically, if not yet rhetorically, the schema of reflexive alliance loyalty is slowly being rewritten.

Canberra’s perceptions of U.S. power, and international order, under President Obama

As I will explain later, since the election of President Donald Trump it has become obvious that differing approaches to China have stressed the alliance. But such divergences were also observable, though less stark, during President Barack Obama’s administration.

Australia was initially an enthusiastic supporter of his 'pivot to Asia', which was later rebadged as a 'rebalance'. As part of the policy's announcement, Canberra agreed that a Marine Air-Ground Task Force could be based in Darwin. Though some doubts about American reliability had emerged by the time that the 2013 Defence White Paper was published, the Australian Government claimed that 'the United States is shifting its strategic posture to support a peaceful region where sovereign states can enjoy continued security and prosperity' (Australian Department of Defence, 2013, p. 10).

Over time, however, Australia proved unwilling to fully support Washington's policies in the region. The likely cause of this is that Canberra began to doubt the Obama administration's commitment to the rebalance. Washington's ineffective responses to Chinese actions – such as the 2012 seizure of the Scarborough Shoal – demonstrated the reluctance of the Obama administration to jeopardise the U.S.-China relationship for anything less than vital U.S. interests, and cast doubt on whether the rebalance would protect the interests of Asian allies. There are hints that some U.S. military officers advocated a more assertive response, but Washington ultimately acquiesced to China's occupation of the Shoal (though some authors argue that the U.S. has successfully deterred China from building on it) (Cooper, 2016; Cooper & Douglas, 2016). These developments were closely watched by Australian Government officials, who were disturbed by the display of Chinese aggression and U.S. inaction.

When the Obama Administration decided to target its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) at Chinese claims in the South China Sea, this precipitated a more intense debate in Australia. Though the FONOPs were intended to 'reassure allies ... that the United States would stand up to China's efforts to unilaterally change facts on the ground', there is little evidence to suggest they changed Chinese behaviour or assuaged allied concerns (Cooper & Perlez, 2015). Nevertheless, in early 2016 U.S. Defense officials privately encouraged Australia to do its own FONOP, and in late 2016 Admiral Harry Harris, Commander-in-Chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific, made the suggestion publicly (Beazley, 2016; Nicholson, 2016; Wroe, 2016). Many of Australia's defence commentators, and a few parliamentarians, also called for Canberra to conduct its own FONOP (see Riordan, 2017). Some shadow ministers in the Australian Labor Party, then in opposition, tried to criticize the Coalition Government for not following America's lead, but the Government attacked this advocacy as 'urging an escalation of tensions ... that's a highly irresponsible call at this point' (Conroy, 2016; Karp, 2016). At the close of 2016, the Coalition Government's policy was confused: it lambasted the Labor opposition for suggesting that Australia emulate U.S. FONOPs – conducted within 12 nautical miles of disputed features – but continued to insist that 'Australian vessels and aircrafts will continue to exercise their rights of passage and overflight under international law in the South China Sea' (Bishop, 2016).

Though, during the Obama years, Australian leaders talked as if there was no daylight between Australian and U.S. interests, Canberra's unwillingness to fulfil Washington's request for a FONOP was an important break in reflexive thinking about alliance loyalty. However, one year earlier, in 2015, two other decisions suggested that Canberra was becoming more willing to delineate between American preferences and Australia's national interest. The decision to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – despite reports that the U.S. 'lobbied Australia to steer clear' – reflected China's enormous economic importance to Australia, as did a decision to lease the port of Darwin, for 99

years, to a Chinese firm (SBS News, 2014). This decision caused a minor public rupture in ANZUS: when President Obama suggested that Australia had not consulted adequately with the U.S., the Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, dismissed this complaint on the grounds that the deal ‘was not a secret’ (Kelly, 2015).

The rise of China, and its economic importance to Australia, had begun to exercise an important influence on Australian thinking. Slowly but surely, leaders in Canberra were more becoming more willing to refuse U.S. requests, distance Australia from U.S. policies, and adopt positions known to displease Washington. These decisions demonstrate that by the end of 2016 – before President Trump’s inauguration – new tensions existed in the alliance. In the past, Canberra had often concluded that supporting U.S. policies in Asia was in Australia’s national interest and carried little cost or risk, and so had acted accordingly. But now, Canberra’s decisions were less reflexive. When it came to decisions involving trade-offs between China and the U.S., Washington was growing disappointed that Australia seemed to no longer be an ever-reliable ally. For its part, Canberra’s actions and inaction demonstrated the competing influences on Australian policy: Australia worried about the consequences of China’s rise, but declined to fully support the Obama Administration’s policy responses. Though Canberra continued to publicly affirm the importance of the U.S. presence in Asia, Australia’s policy choices suggested that Canberra had begun to doubt U.S. constancy and reliability.

Canberra’s perceptions of U.S. power, and international order, under President Trump

In seeking to understand how Australia has reacted to U.S. policy under President Trump, it is necessary to examine how Canberra perceived the world immediately prior to his election. Australia’s 2013 Defence White Paper mentioned, on only nine occasions, the concept of a rules-based global order (RBGO). But the 2016 Defence White Paper used the concept – mentioned 56 times – to comprehensively frame Australia’s assessment of the region and the world.

The 2016 Defence White Paper states that the RBGO is a ‘shared commitment by all countries to conduct their activities in accordance with agreed rules which evolve over time’, which is underpinned by ‘a broad architecture of international governance which has developed since the end of the Second World War ... including the United Nations, international laws and conventions and regional security architectures’ (Australian Department of Defence, 2016, p. 45). This official depiction of the concept is notable for its suggestion that the RBGO is not immutable: the order involves ‘agreed rules which evolve over time’ (Australian Department of Defence, 2016, p. 15). But this nuance appears to have little or no influence on how Australian leaders have since talked about order. Instead, Australian politicians – most notably Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers – have usually doubled down on their advocacy for an unchanged regional hierarchy with the U.S. at its apex. There is little sense in their comments that Australian politicians have any idea of how the RBGO might evolve in a way that maximises stability. Instead, it seems that the RBGO can exist only if China remains subordinate to the United States.

The election of President Trump thus came as an unwelcome surprise for almost all Australian observers: Trump’s disdainful rhetoric on alliances and multilateral institutions sparked new and frank discussions about the possible risks posed by ANZUS. Uncertainty

over the direction of Washington's policies – especially its policy towards China – worried Canberra. It was not clear, from events in 2017, whether the U.S.-China relationship would improve or worsen. President Trump's phone call to Tsai Ing-wen, Rex Tillerson's intimation of a possible naval blockade, Steve Bannon's prediction of an inevitable U.S.-China war, and disagreements over North Korea illustrated the absence of a consistent policy towards China and the Asian region. At this time, Washington also laid the groundwork for escalation on issues of fair trade, intellectual property, and economic espionage, though it was, in 2017, uncertain as to whether these would be escalated (see Lynch, 2017). Generating further anxiety, Trump's well-known dislike of alliance commitments raised the prospect that he would not consider allied reactions before making significant policy decisions.

Though the potential for escalating Sino-U.S. tensions existed, in 2017 the greater danger seemed to be that the U.S. was no longer interested in playing a significant global role. President Trump's antipathy toward the 'postwar international order' was well known: he believed this order was 'not working at all' (Landler, 2017). Canberra feared abandonment, rather than entrapment, but this was not the usual worry of bilateral abandonment: this fear of U.S. global retreat, perhaps accompanied by the cutting of deals with adversaries like China, had not been felt in Canberra for decades. There was even concern in some quarters that the world had irrevocably changed: one former Australian Prime Minister assessed 'The U.S. is rejecting its own globalism ... You can't pawn the crown and then expect to repurchase it at full value' (Sheridan, 2017). There seemed to be some not inconsiderable risk that Washington would abandon the order it had underwritten since 1945.

In response to fears that Washington might abandon its global and regional leadership roles, in 2017 Australian leaders emphasised two positions. The first was a critique of China: because it is illiberal and non-democratic, the region would not accept it usurping American leadership. The second was a plea to the U.S., signalling that if Washington did decide to defend its regional leadership, then Asian allies would share the burdens and risks of doing so. Thus, Australian language on China got noticeably sharper and confrontational. In March 2017 Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, lectured China, proclaiming that 'democracy and democratic institutions are essential for nations if they are to reach their economic potential' (Bishop, 2017). When she launched the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper in November, Bishop enunciated Australia's aspirations even more bluntly: 'We want to work with like-minded democracies to shape China' (Tillet, 2017).

This confrontational rhetoric was accompanied by Australian efforts to reassure Washington that if it did decide to confront China, and preserve global order, then allies would share the burdens. In June 2017, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull gave the keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. After acknowledging that 'we want to see China fill the leadership role it desires in a way which strengthens the regional order that has served us all so well', Turnbull emphasised that 'we understand President Trump's request that those who benefit from the peace America secures do more militarily and financially to contribute'. In the same speech, Turnbull promised that 'Australia will pull its weight in an increasingly multipolar region' (Turnbull, 2017). Implicit in these comments is an acknowledgement that because U.S. power was declining relative to China's, U.S. allies would need to assume greater security burdens.

Unsurprisingly, tensions in the Australia-China relationship intensified. In the second half of 2017, Australian media reported on Chinese attempts to influence Australian domestic politics. A major investigation found that Australia's security intelligence organisation had warned the two main political parties about taking donations from businessmen linked to the PRC, and that such a donation had been withheld following comments critical of China's conduct in the South China Sea (Sydney Morning Herald and ABC News, 2017). In response, laws designed to make foreign-funded or -directed lobbying more transparent were quickly presented to Parliament.² Though Prime Minister Turnbull insisted that the laws were not directed at any one country, he spoke in halting Mandarin to assert that 'the Australian people have stood up' (Gribbin, 2017). Displeased – perhaps more by Turnbull's words, than the legislation itself – China put diplomatic relations with Australia in the 'deep freeze' (Shanahan & Riordan, 2018).

As 2017 drew to a close, Australia had responded to President Trump's election by articulating its desired order – a U.S.-anchored, rules-based system which preserved American primacy – and pledging its willingness to work towards this goal. In doing so, it had implicitly acknowledged the relative decline of U.S. power, and promised to increase Australia's own security efforts. But in 2018, both U.S. and Chinese actions tested Canberra's position. The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), issued in December 2017, contained the promise of a more confrontational outlook in Washington. China and Russia were depicted as revisionist, thieving competitors of the United States, inherently hostile to U.S. interests and values. To respond, the NSS noted that Washington would have to rely on 'close cooperation with allies and partners because ... [they] magnify U.S. power and extend U.S. influence' (U.S. Government, 2017, p. 45).

At first glance, it seemed that the NSS might fulfil Australian hopes for a firmer U.S. policy in Asia. But Australian leaders found themselves unwilling to wholeheartedly support the document's idea of great power competition. Australia's then-Defence Minister, Marise Payne, seemed to endorse the NSS when she said that Australia 'shares similar concerns' to the U.S. (Maley, 2018). But within a couple of days she backed down, clarifying that 'Australia doesn't see a threat in the region and we certainly don't see China as a threat'. The Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, claimed that Australia had 'a different perspective on Russia and China, clearly', and Prime Minister Turnbull also played down Payne's earlier comments (SBS News, 2018). Despite all of Canberra's sharp language in 2017, when presented with the opportunity to endorse a more confrontational U.S. posture towards China, these same leaders balked.

As 2018 progressed the deep freeze in Sino-Australian relations grew more problematic. Ministerial visits to China were delayed until their inevitable cancellation, and when Australia's Trade Minister was able to secure a rare visa approval, he did not meet with his Chinese counterpart. He did, however, offer a conciliatory speech on trade, which seemed to cast both Australia and China as struggling to deal with a 'storm' caused by unnamed actors threatening free trade (Needham, 2018). The deep freeze extended beyond governmental circles: increased scrutiny was applied to imports from Australia, resulting in some delays at the border, and Australian universities were unable to confirm meetings in China. In August, in a speech attended by the Chinese Ambassador, Prime Minister Turnbull attempted to restore some warmth to the relationship. He explicitly rejected Cold War analogies, warning it was 'a mistake to assume ... that the United States and its allies would or should seek to contain China' (Coorey, 2018).

Just as Canberra was talking down the prospects of Cold War-like competition, however, Washington was talking them up. In October 2018, Vice President Mike Pence delivered a speech which may, in time, be seen as a significant historical marker. Pence's speech contained what, in Beijing, could be viewed as glaring inaccuracies at best, or offensive insults at worst. In more detail and with greater colour than the NSS, Pence's speech presented China as a significant and growing threat to the U.S.: an implacable foe determined to 'push the United States of America from the Western Pacific'. Pence vowed: 'We will not be intimidated and we will not stand down' (Pence, 2018). After Sino-U.S. trade tensions had intensified in the first half of 2018, Pence's speech seemed to throw the gauntlet down.

In Australia, most commentators saw the Pence speech as proof that the United States was finally serious about competition with China. One described it as 'Cold War 2.0', while another assessed its 'key message' was that Australia needed to 'get our own China thinking in order, reduce our dependence on Beijing's money and set some realistic strategic policy goals' (Dupont, 2018; Jennings, 2018). However few commentators – even those considered as 'hawks' on China – offered absolute endorsement of the speech. One said that 'Australia is broadly comfortable with the Pence approach', another said it was time to 'build up our strike capabilities', while others concluded that Australia needed to adjust its strategy in response to the new era of Sino-U.S. competition (Dibb, 2018; Perlez, 2018; Sheridan, 2018). Though Pence's speech did not receive strong endorsement, only one high-profile commentator clearly encouraged Australia to 'stand aloof from many of Trump's emerging disastrous global policies, notably his campaign to weaken China and its economy' (Kelly, 2018).

In 2017, Australia adopted a tough tone on China and hoped that the U.S. would demonstrate its desire to defend the postwar order. In the NSS and Pence speech, Washington had essentially answered – but perhaps gone beyond – Australia's desire for a firmer U.S. policy towards China. While it is too early to say whether Australia will ultimately support a hard-edged and confrontational posture towards China, the initial signs are not promising. Given that Australian leaders had spent much of 2017 encouraging Washington to defend the rules-based global order, Canberra's official reactions might seem perplexing. Prime Minister Scott Morrison gave an interview to the Chinese *Caixin* magazine only a few days after the Pence speech, noting that Australia has 'independent relationships with both' the U.S. and China, and would 'always seek to de-escalate tensions ... from a position of friendship with both countries' (Li & Ke, 2018). Three months later, then-Defence Minister Pyne rejected the idea of a second Cold War and said that it was 'critical that US–China relations do not come to be defined in wholly adversarial terms' (Pyne, 2019). This trend has continued: no Australian leader has yet commented on the Pence speech, nor on Secretary of State Pompeo's assertion, in October 2019, that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue countries will work to ensure 'that China retains only its proper place in the world' (Pompeo, 2019).

Although some Australian commentators encouraged Washington to push back more firmly against China, the approach flagged in the Pence speech seems to have caused disquiet in Canberra. Washington appears less concerned about upholding an order which could peacefully incorporate China as a superpower, and more preoccupied with reasserting its place as a regional hegemon. If the Obama pivot was too conciliatory, then the new era of competition flagged by Pence and Pompeo may be too confrontational. This raises

interesting parallels with the events of the 1950s, discussed earlier. Perhaps Australia, over the next few years, will again find itself encouraging a less aggressive U.S. posture towards China. Another possibility is that President Trump will, again, abruptly reverse course, and conclude some kind of grand bargain with Beijing (see Donnan, 2018). Perhaps this possibility, too, is encouraging Canberra's hesitance.

None of this is to suggest that Australia is paralysed and unwilling or unable to push back against Beijing in any way. Canberra has passed new foreign interference legislation, vetoed Chinese efforts to purchase critical infrastructure, and excluded Chinese companies from participating in Australia's 5G telecommunications networks. It has also worked to limit Chinese expansion in Canberra's own 'sphere of influence' – the Southwest Pacific – by offering alternatives to Chinese investment (Wroe, 2018). This is what John Garnaut and Rory Medcalf have argued is a 'reset', 'reality check' or 'recalibration', which establishes a new baseline in Australia-China relations (see Garnaut, 2018; Medcalf, 2018).³ Though generally correct, this argument is sometimes exaggerated: it is important to note that Australia's push-back has clear geographic limits and Canberra has, at times, carefully disassociated its own actions from Washington's desires. In mid-2019, when there was intense interest in the possibility of Pacific nations switching diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC, Prime Minister Morrison sought to distance Australia's initiatives from U.S. concerns. He acknowledged that the U.S. has 'interests in the region, as do others', but insisted that Australia's 'relationship with the Pacific transcends all that' (Dziedzic, 2019).

Australia is countering Chinese influence on its own soil, and in the South-West Pacific, but has demonstrated no appetite to confront Chinese actions further afield. This is critical: to most accurately assess the current state of the Australia-U.S. alliance it is necessary to examine not only what Australia has done to confront China, but also what it has chosen to *not* do – sometimes despite strong encouragement from Washington. For now, it seems that Australia is prioritising the reset with China, rather than endorsing and supporting Washington's new attitude of eagerly embracing great-power competition.

In an effort to conceal these policy divergences, Canberra has attempted to advance the alliance during the Trump presidency by doubling down on rhetorical support for the relationship. The Australian Ambassador in Washington, Joe Hockey, has orchestrated a campaign extolling '100 Years' of 'Mateship', with grand appeals to emotion, shared values, and history (Embassy of Australia, 2018). This was accompanied by such trinkets as an official beer ('mateship ale') and song (Curran, 2018; kixcountry.com.au, 2017). A gala dinner in New York, on the decommissioned *USS Intrepid* aircraft carrier, was arranged to impress President Trump with tales of battlefield courage, celebrity guests, and business deal sweeteners (Stewart, 2019). Despite the pressures and tensions described earlier, an Australian Embassy publication proclaimed 'There is no doubt that the mateship between Australia and the United States will further develop and strengthen over the next hundred years' (Embassy of Australia, 2018, p. 1).

In such propaganda efforts, the risk is that divergent interests are not identified, discussed and debated, but are instead overshadowed by lofty rhetoric, wistful reminiscence, and perhaps a few too many mateship ales. As Walt notes, the real 'litmus test' of an alliance comes not at meetings 'designed for the ritual incantation of unifying rhetoric – but when member-states are called upon to do something for each other' (Walt, 1997, p. 170).

Given the Australian Government's assertive rhetoric of 2017, Canberra's reluctance to unambiguously support the Trump Administration's characterisation of China as a 'growing threat', and escalating Sino-U.S. tensions, it is likely that invocations of mateship will soon be challenged by hard questions about what interests are actually shared between the allies, and whether Washington's expectations of security cooperation against China can be realised (Pence, 2018).

Will the alliance adapt as power shifts, or will it atrophy?

Since its signing in 1951, Australia has derived immense benefit from its alliance with the United States. In the 1950s, Australia's leaders were adroit in handling the ANZUS alliance within triangular diplomacy: when U.S. instincts were too aggressive, Canberra worked with other allies like the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, to restrain Washington. In the 1960s, as the United Kingdom's ability to provide security in Asia declined, Australia became more reliant on the U.S. for security, and this prompted a new approach to alliance management. Australian leaders internalised a schema of alliance loyalty: only fealty to the United States would ensure reciprocal treatment when Australia required security assistance. On these grounds, as well as its own strategic imperatives, Australia was willing to contribute forces to defend both Laos and South Vietnam. Once established, this schema of alliance loyalty proved remarkably sticky. It informed Australian approaches to post-Cold War conflicts in the Middle East, and seems to have survived an obvious challenge when the U.S. did not provide the support desired by Canberra in the 1999 East Timor crisis.

But escalating Sino-U.S. competition is slowly forcing Australia to abandon this method of alliance management. Canberra was disconcerted by President Obama's unwillingness to accept risk to the U.S.-China relationship, and was rattled further by President Trump's contempt for solemn alliance commitments and the international order. In 2017, Australia responded to these trends by enthusiastically advocating a defence of the U.S.-anchored global order: Canberra encouraged Washington to step up and warned Beijing to step back. But in 2018 neither power responded in the way Australia had hoped. Beijing put relations with Canberra on ice, while the United States quickly moved to a rhetorical position of sustained, vigorous, and aggressive competition. Seemingly unwilling to countenance such a belligerent posture, and keen to mend ties with China, Australia has refrained from endorsing the Pence approach, and has attempted to conciliate Beijing.

Events of the last few years have proven that the alliance loyalty schema, which has regularly influenced Canberra's thinking since the 1960s, is no longer fit-for-purpose. Invocations of perpetual mateship and appeals to emotion risk confusing the core issues at the centre of any alliance: what interests are shared, and how can allies cooperate to achieve them? Even before President Trump, Australia was demonstrating a willingness to sometimes prioritise its own interests vis-à-vis China over Washington's preferences.

It might seem, then, that the death of ANZUS is a fast-approaching inevitability. This is not so: as the examples of the 1950s show, the alliance offers Australia opportunities to not only discern American thinking, but to influence it. The Pence speech, and growing Sino-U.S. tensions, could yet be circuit-breakers which force Australia to reconceptualize how it manages the ANZUS alliance. Walt warned that if allies do not realise 'the extent to which their interests have diverged', there is a risk that an 'alliance may be dead long before

anyone notices'. To avoid 'discovery of the [alliance] corpse ... at a very inconvenient moment', Australia should adapt its alliance management practices (Walt, 1997, p. 167). By thinking more carefully about where Australian interests might diverge from those of the United States, jettisoning rhetoric of mateship, and subjecting alliance loyalty instincts to careful analysis, Canberra can protect the alliance from risks of atrophy.

Notes

1. In the source cited, Brabin-Smith also notes several instances where the U.S. declined to share certain sensitive technologies with Australia.
2. The laws were enacted, with little fanfare, in June 2018.
3. The cited works are reasonable reflections of the mainstream policy analyst/commentator consensus in Australia.

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