Obama's Australian visit and the Australia-United States-China strategic triangle

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I last spoke to the American Australian Association eighteen months ago. Since then I've spent some of my time writing a book about President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the course of that research, I came across a wonderful story about alliances.

Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his entourage made their way to Washington to confer with Roosevelt and his advisers on the waging of the war. The visitors were accommodated at the White House. One morning, Roosevelt accidentally surprised Churchill in the middle of his morning bath. FDR apologised and made to leave, but Churchill rose like a sea monster from the bathtub and stood before him, naked, plump, pink and dripping. Unashamed, he declared: 'The prime minister of Great Britain has nothing to hide from the president of the United States.'

I am a supporter of the Australia-U.S. alliance, but any alliance can get too close. For me, that's too close.

Obama in Australia

This evening I would like to talk about another alliance interaction, this one fully clothed, which took place almost exactly 70 years later – President Barack Obama's visit to Canberra and Darwin last November.

The trip was as much a cultural event as a diplomatic one. In the Australian press, there were stories about Obama's limousine, his body man and his Blackberry. His teleprompters and exercise regimen were described in detail. Journalists revealed the wingspan of Air Force One and the number of Secret Service in the travelling party. Twitter went nuts. The hashtags of choice were #ozbama or, my preferred option, #aubama.

Meanwhile, in the American press, no Australian cliché was left behind. The Huffington Post made the first recorded reference to Crocodile Dundee, but it was not the last.

There were also more substantive reasons for excitement about Obama's visit – in my view, three of them.

First, President Obama has strengthened Australian public support for the alliance, which sagged badly during President George W. Bush's time in office.

Australians supported Obama's election in 2008 by a ratio of nearly five to one. Now that esteem has spread to the alliance more broadly.

The 2011 Lowy Institute Poll found that 82% of Australians say the alliance is very or fairly important for our security – up 19% since 2007. Fifty-nine per cent say it is very important for our security, the highest result in seven years of polling. Trust in the United States has also risen. Eighty-three per cent of Australians now say they trust America 'a great deal' or 'somewhat' to act responsibly in the world – up 23% since 2006.

Just as importantly, the atmospherics have changed. Critics no longer insist on putting the worst possible interpretation on American conduct. Alliance bashers no longer argue, as they did until recently, that the United States is 'the world's most dangerous nation' or that Australia is 'hooked on dependence'. With Bush out of the picture, we are now able to see the United States – with both its strengths and its weaknesses – more clearly.

Second, Obama is a cautious and prudent commander-in-chief – which matters to us because of our history of fighting beside the Americans.

Future historians will shake their head as to why, during a period of remarkable global change, Washington decided to invade an Arab country for no obvious reason and spend a decade occupying it. They will also wonder why Australia went along with this.

The Obama template for projecting American power has proven different, and vastly superior. For example, the bin Laden raid was a patient, intelligence-led, lightning operation against an enemy that had done America enormous harm. It was the opposite of the Iraq operation, which was an instinctive, military-led, lingering invasion of a state that had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks.

In its own way, Libya was also the opposite of Iraq. Obama must share credit here with European leaders, in particular Britain's David Cameron and France's Nicolas Sarkozy. Working together, and in synch with Arab states, NATO was able to topple the regime in Tripoli in a way that maximised Libyan ownership of the victory and minimised the risks and the costs to the West.

Finally, President Obama's Australian visit demonstrated the new premium the president is putting on alliances.

Obama's critics regularly attack his commitment to America's alliance system. It is true that that during his campaign for president, Obama de-emphasised the role of alliances. He did not always draw bright lines between allies and other states. Instead he bracketed alliances with other, less intimate relationships, writing of his intention to rebuild 'alliances, partnerships and institutions'. As the first president to come of age politically after the end of the Cold War, Obama did not seem to view alliances as special. Republican provocateur John Bolton even claimed that Obama had 'a post-alliance policy'.

In office, however, President Obama has turned out to be more well-disposed toward alliances. In fact, in the Libyan case, the opposite charge is usually levelled: that he ceded *too much* ground to allies, by allowing Britain, France and other NATO allies to take the lead. Yet it would have been risky for the United States to lead another major military operation in the Middle East at a time when it was already fighting two bloody wars nearby.

I looked at Obama's approach to Libya in a recent op-ed I published in *The Daily Beast* with Dr Steven Casey of the LSE. We argued that Obama has revived an old American tradition – exemplified by FDR's foreign policy in the early stages of the Second World War – of using European allies as proxies to wage war when the United States is unable to take the leading position.

When it comes to Asian alliances, Obama is turning into an enthusiast. He has visited three Asian treaty allies: Japan, South Korea and Australia. He got the South Korean Free Trade Agreement through Congress. And he recently hosted the first State visit by a South Korean president in a decade.

Obama's Canberra speech

I was lucky enough to be in the Australian Parliament for President Obama's speech, as well as in the Great Hall for the State Dinner.

His speech to the Parliament was not just about the alliance, or even mainly about the alliance. He certainly made strong statements about the unbreakability of the alliance, but he paid the Parliament the compliment of going beyond the usual bromides about shared military sacrifice to give a very substantial, wide-ranging speech on the U.S. role in Asia and the world.

He spoke about the decision he had taken – a 'deliberate and strategic decision' – to engage much more fully in Asia and the Pacific. 'As a Pacific nation', he said, 'the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping the region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with allies and friends.'

The president said that when it came to Asia, the United States was 'all in'. He promised that cuts to the U.S. defence budget would not come at the expense of Asia.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and many commentators have spoken about the United States 'pivoting' to Asia. I think that's a misleading term. It implies that the United States previously had its back to Asia, which is wrong; and it implies that the United States will now turn its back on the Middle East and other regions, which is also wrong. If you think for a minute of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Israel, it is clear that the United States cannot turn its back on the Middle East. I'm reminded of Michael Corleone's complaint in *Godfather III*: 'just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in'.

I think a better way to characterise the shift is as a ‘reweighting’.

Obama and his officials have been telegraphing for some months that the United States has been overly invested in Middle East. The country took a strategic detour by invading Iraq. Its global posture is out of whack: it is overinvested in the Middle East and underinvested in Asia. Now the administration is trying to extricate itself from some of its Middle East commitments in order to focus on the challenges and opportunities in Asia.

I was also struck that the second half of Obama’s speech was about human dignity and human rights, topics that Australian politicians rarely address. With their vast global power, Americans are unapologetic about making the argument for universal human rights. Obama finished his speech by saying that ‘history is on the side of the free’. He argued that in Asia, no less than in other parts of the world, human rights are universal and that America will stand up for them. Frankly, I found that refreshing.

The president also announced that by 2016, 2,500 U.S. marines will be on rotation in the north of Australia.

Obama’s Canberra speech and other elements of this reweighting have raised concerns in both the United States and Australia. Critics have argued that America is going down a containment path toward China, which sets up the risk of new bilateral tensions in Asia. I’d like to address those concerns. But first let me say a few things about China.

China’s rise and America’s response

China’s economic transformation in the last three decades has been remarkable. The country has remade its economy, driven extraordinary productivity increases, and in so doing raised hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Now this country of 1.3 billion people is achieving an economic weight befitting its huge size. In 2009, its gross domestic product (GDP) was the third largest in the world in dollar terms; if measured in terms of purchasing power parity, it was the second largest. Annual GDP growth in recent years has averaged more than 11%. The country is laying roads and high-speed rail, building airports, and expanding shipping at a frenetic pace. Last year, its hoard of foreign-exchange reserves passed the $3 trillion mark, more than double the amount of second-placed Japan. China’s economic strength is mirrored in its growing military capabilities, which boost China's ability to project power within East Asia and around the world.

China is a global player, with vast implications for the international system. China has a strong hand; how it will play that hand in the future is not so obvious. There is a notable dualism to China's approach. On the one hand, Deng Xiaoping bade his countrymen to keep their heads down and their eyes on the prize of economic development. Even as this approach has given way to the newer Chinese foreign policy doctrines of 'peaceful rise' and 'harmonious world', the Chinese leadership remains overwhelmingly focused on domestic issues.

The Chinese Communist Party's first priority is regime continuity, which rests on a stable society, a viable economy, and GDP growth sufficient to keep unemployment down. For much of the time, China's external preoccupations are to prevent other powers from trespassing on what it regards as its domestic issues, such as Taiwan and Tibet, and to secure the energy and other resources necessary to power growth. Chinese foreign policy is neither expansionist nor extreme; in many ways, China has been slow to claim the influence it clearly deserves.

On the other hand, it is impossible to miss China's rising confidence and international ambition, even though they sit alongside strains of caution and insecurity. In the past decade, China has expanded its clout in Southeast Asia; thickened its ties with U.S. treaty allies such as South Korea and Australia; and extended its influence in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and in new Asian institutions such as the East Asia Summit and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Sometimes, Chinese assertiveness spills over into bluster. Many long-time observers are pessimistic about the direction of Chinese foreign policy. In 2010-2011 there were frictions in many of China's relationships: with Europe and India, with countries in Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa, even with Russia. The United States relationship has proven bumpy. Beijing stage-managed President Obama's 2009 visit to China in a way that minimised Obama's effect on his Chinese audience and complicated things for him with his American audience. China snubbed the then Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, and dissed Obama himself at the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen. Meanwhile, the relationship with Tokyo suffered a significant setback after Japan's Coast Guard detained a Chinese trawler captain in the East China Sea near the disputed Senkaku / Diaoyu Islands. China's uncompromising response, including the suspension of ministerial talks and (reportedly) halting rare-earth exports, elevated a third-order issue to a matter that had to be resolved at the level of heads of government.

There is an uneven quality, then, to China's present foreign policy: usually quiet but occasionally strident; usually cautious but occasionally combative; always prickly; and never entirely predictable.

In this context, Obama's new concentration on the Asia-Pacific – which was evident in the Pentagon's new Strategic Guidance released in January – makes sense. Obama's Canberra speech was firmly in the groove of his developing policy toward China. During his first year in office he persistently sought to accommodate Beijing's interests. This approach was reasonable, given China's growing influence, new-found confidence and legitimate aspirations. Yet Beijing failed to clasp his outstretched hand. The president responded in kind, proceeding with arms sale to Taiwan and finally meeting the Dalai Lama.

Obama is still seeking to develop the bilateral relationship with China – but he is doing so from a position of strength. He seems to have found the right balance of openness and toughness.

Obama's policy is not directed at containing China – but nor is he prepared to vacate the field. He seeks to cooperate with China. But he also intends to renew America's presence in Asia and maintain a balance of forces in the region at a time when there is significant uncertainty about China's future behaviour.

Australia's policy

What about Australia's policy? How should we try to manage the strategic triangle formed by Washington, Beijing and Canberra?

My colleague Professor Hugh White is perhaps the most influential public voice on this question. In his recent *Quarterly Essay,* "Power Shift", he wrote of the dangers of bilateral competition, suggesting that the region needs a concert of powers, comprising China, the United States, Japan, India, Indonesia and other countries. For our part, he suggests, Australia should try to persuade the United States to award China new prerogatives. We will also need to be more circumspect about speaking our mind to China on issues such as human rights and Tibet.

Hugh has made a huge contribution to the debate, but I'm not persuaded by his argument.

The U.S. alliance is a valuable national asset for Australia. For us, it means the promise that we would be protected from a strategic threat, unlikely though that may be; the interactions with U.S. military forces and their technologies that keep the Australian Defence Force sharp; privileged access to the products of U.S. intelligence; and entrée to some of Washington's inner councils – presuming we have interesting things to say. Apart from anything else, the alliance saves us billions of dollars a year in defence expenditures we would otherwise have to make ourselves to guarantee our own security. Before downgrading such a valuable asset, we need to be clear-headed about what we hope to achieve and what we risk in doing so.

I take a conservative approach to national security. I agree with the injunction contained within the Hippocratic Oath: First, do no harm. By all means, Australia should seek to influence events and power structures in Asia. But we also need to be realistic about our ability to shape the power relations of a region of billions.

If we cool our alliance with the Americans, do we really increase ability to affect events? How likely are we to change the trajectory of the United States, even if we wanted to? How easy would it be to rig up a concert of powers in Asia? And what are the downsides of cooling the alliance?

Given the uncertainty about China's future policies, it would seem strange to pre-emptively move toward Beijing. Surely it is more sensible to balance against the risk of future Chinese recklessness by keeping the United States deeply engaged in the region and strengthening, not weakening, our alliance institutions.

I have never heard a Sinologist say that the one thing the Chinese respect is weakness. In my observation, unsolicited gifts to rising great powers are rarely reciprocated. Usually they are simply pocketed. Of course we should not try to contain China, which would be utterly impossible in any case. But neither should we back off from defending our own interests and values.

The leaders in Zhongnanhai may not have been happy with President Obama's Canberra speech. But I don't think its message, or the Darwin announcement, would have been surprised them. Beijing knows that Australia is a U.S. ally, and that we have been one for sixty years. We have fought beside the Americans in all major conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; we already host the joint facility at Pine Gap. I don't believe this latest development will have given the Chinese conniptions – at least, it shouldn't have.

In any case, just as we should not overestimate our influence, we shouldn't underestimate it either. We have a good deal to offer China, as a mature and wealthy country and a stable source for the strategic resources it requires. It is in our interest that the relationship between Canberra and Beijing should be strong, positive and cooperative. This is also in China's interest.

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Alliances are not always easy relationships to manage – especially alliances with the most powerful country on earth. Even like-minded countries sometimes see things differently. And less powerful allies often spend a lot of time worrying about the temper of their alliance – that it is close, or too distant.

But to return to the Second World War, and to paraphrase Winston Churchill: 'The only thing worse than having allies is not having them'.

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