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No Hedging in Canberra: The Australia-US Alliance in the “Asian Century”

BY NICK BISLEY

US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell has just completed a lightning visit to Australia for formal discussions with newly installed Foreign Minister Bob Carr. In spite of the political turmoil that brought Carr to office, the Australia-US alliance is in the best shape of its 60-year history. Having begun as a Cold War convenience, about which the United States was not enthusiastic, it has become a key part of Washington’s regional role and a cornerstone not only of Australia’s defense and security policy, but of its broader engagement with the world. The arrival in early April of the US Marine Corps to begin six-month training rotations in Darwin is emblematic of the alliance’s standing and its evolution.

Nick Bisley, Professor of International Relations at La Trobe University, Australia, and Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Australia has made up its mind about its strategic policy: it has bound itself to the United States and will do all that it can to support America’s conception of regional and global order.”

When Prime Minister Julia Gillard addressed the US Congress in March 2011 she made the striking claim that Australia “is an ally for all the years to come.” And she meant it. Among Australian political and policy elites—and in public opinion more broadly—attitudes toward the alliance are extremely positive and deeply rooted. While there has been wider debate in Australia about how to respond to China’s rise and the changing regional setting, judging by government action, Australia has made up its mind about its strategic policy: it has bound itself to the United States and will do all that it can to support America’s conception of regional and global order.

Getting Closer

This phase in the relationship began after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, in response to which the Australia-US alliance treaty, ANZUS, was invoked for the first time. During the intervening period, the working relationship between elites of whatever political party has become extremely close. Deriving from a shared policy sensibility and converging interests, former Australian Prime Minister John Howard and US President George W. Bush forged a famously good relationship. Similarly, the current slightly left of center US President Barack Obama has developed an excellent rapport with Ms. Gillard. Bureaucratic relations have also been increasingly well-connected and it is telling that the first senior foreign official that Minister Carr welcomed was from the United States. A key part of this has been the alliance’s active operational component. Australia’s involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has reinforced the sense of shared interests and values that has helped knit together the attitudes of many policy-makers.

During this time the alliance has taken on a much wider remit. Where in the past it was focused on narrow mutual security concerns, Australian elites now see the alliance as having two functions: it provides defense and security benefits that Australia could not otherwise acquire and it plays a key part in the American alliance system that underpins Asia’s stability. The 60th anniversary ministerial meeting held in September 2011 illustrated clearly the alliance’s current standing. The meeting signaled a further expansion of mutual commitments foreshadowing the rotation of troops through Darwin,



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developing new areas of cooperation—most notably in the cyber domain—and linking the alliance to broader areas of policy such as trade and development. It also spelled out the vision of the alliance’s regional role, publicly declaring it to be “indispensable” to Asia’s peace, stability, and prosperity.

During President Obama’s visit in November 2011 it was announced that from 2012 US Marines would deploy for a six-month training rotation through Darwin, and US Air Force aircraft would also increase their presence. The United States and its allies continue to think that American military dominance is the best way of maintaining regional stability in the face of recent change, but that some subtle shift in US force disposition is necessary. Australia’s agreement to host the rotation reflects close Australia-US operational links, its geographic proximity to the increasingly important maritime Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean, and its desire to signal to the region that it is strongly committed to a conception of regional order in which US dominance keeps the peace. They are also discussing the future use of Australian-administered Cocos Islands as a possible base for drone aircraft and the use of Australian naval bases to improve US maritime operations in the Indian Ocean. All this makes plain that Canberra is not hedging its bets about its strategic future.

Strong Public Support

The alliance is also strongly supported by Australian public opinion. According to the Lowy Institute, between 2005 and 2011, support for the alliance has been between 72 and 83 percent in its annual polling—except in 2007 when it was 63 percent. A broad ranging analysis of public opinion between 1993 and 2004 found that between 77 to 88 percent of Australians believed the alliance to be important to Australia. Indeed, in the 2011 Lowy poll, 77 percent disagreed with the proposition that Australia can defend itself without the help of the United States and even in that most controversial of policies, hosting a permanent American military base, a clear majority, 55 percent, were in favor. The Darwin agreement has been striking by the almost complete lack of public concern about the decision.

Implications

The Australia-US alliance has been politically tightened, operationally engaged for over a decade, and subtly adjusted to respond to the changing international environment. The political foundations in Australia are very robust and the alliance is likely to retain its current centrality over the longer-term. Australia has hitched its strategic wagon very firmly to the United States. But such a close commitment has knock-on consequences for the rest of Australia’s foreign policy. Whether in its dealings at the United Nations or its relationship with China, managing the externalities of its close relationship with the United States will be a central, and at times difficult, task for Australia’s diplomats in the future.

Australia, the United States, and other regional allies, must also recognize the risk that placing such an emphasis on continued American military predominance is likely to increase regional friction, particularly with China, and steps should be taken to establish mechanisms for minimizing these risks. Given the strength of its commitment, Australia must also be mindful not to be taken for granted by the United States. Historically, junior partners are able to manage alliance politics by playing hard to get, but there is a risk—albeit small—that Australia’s enthusiasm for the United States ultimately reduces its influence because it has become too dependable.

Finally, Australia should expect that the United States is likely to expect it to do and pay for more in the future. While Australian policy elites may like this idea in principle, there is no political appetite for large capital outlays. This is the only likely source of policy friction between Canberra and Washington in the foreseeable future.

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