

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Bilateral talks offer chance to set record straight

The Australian Financial Review

November 18, 2013

Rory Medcalf

p. 51.

Australia must endeavour to seek clarity from the US about the superpower's intentions and expectations for the Indo-Pacific Asia region. Rory Medcalf

The Abbott government faces a crucial foreign and defence policy test this week when the Australia-US Ministerial Consultations, or AUSMIN, take place in Washington DC.

The talks, due to start on Tuesday 19 November, are a chance for Australia to take the initiative in helping galvanise and shape the strategy for America's rebalance to our region of Indo-Pacific Asia, while managing expectations about Australia's part.

The newness of their government should be no bar to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop or Defence Minister David Johnston being forthright in presenting a case for a reaffirmation, even a reframing, of the rebalance.

It is not as if their interlocutors, Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel, are especially experienced in the job.

Kerry in particular has so far failed to match the achievement of his predecessor Hillary Clinton in convincing allies and partners about America's enduring commitment to be a resident power in the Indo-Pacific. Eyes off Asia

Domestic political dysfunction, defence spending cuts, the Middle East and controversy over intelligence leaks have all this year distracted America's top external policymakers from focusing on Asia, even as it becomes the world's centre of gravity. President Obama's absence last month from the East Asia Summit sent a bad signal. Thankfully, the United States is starting to repair that self-inflicted diplomatic harm. The rapid humanitarian response by the United States' Pacific Command to the devastation of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines is a sign America has not forgotten Asia, and remains hugely capable in a crisis.

This week's AUSMIN will be a timely chance to build on that practical step by explaining how such contributions to the common good fit a wider strategy to ensure stability and peace.

The challenge for Australia will be to use AUSMIN to press the second Obama administration for a clear explanation of what American power is seeking to achieve in the region and what it expects of its friends.

This will help the Abbott government better understand – and if need be moderate – Washington's expectations of Australia's own role, including on the military front. Mixed signals

There have been mixed signals about those expectations and Australia's response to them ever since President Obama addressed parliament in Canberra in November 2011 and announced the deployment of US Marines to Darwin.

Obama's choice of Canberra for his landmark speech on the rebalance or "pivo" left the impression that Australia was America's key partner in coping with rising Chinese power. It would be a mistake for either side to use this AUSMIN to reinforce any view that the pivot is just about China or that Australia is the only partner that matters.

After all, the material steps here so far have been largely modest. The "rotational deployment" of a few hundred marines for training during the dry season each year in Darwin is strategically trivial, and will remain so for years until the full complement of 2500 plus aircraft is reached.

More significant have been agreements to move a US space-tracking radar to Western Australia and to deepen links in cyber security.

Progress towards increasing US air and naval access to facilities in Australia's north and west has been slow, not least because of questions about the cost of upgrading facilities, and who pays. Clarity is needed on that. The government could declare Australia's willingness to modernise the Cocos Islands runway so that new kinds of aircraft can use it for surveillance of critical sea lanes.

Another factor is how China and some other countries might perceive all this. The Abbott government will likely not make Chinese sensitivities its first priority as it tries to regain momentum on the alliance. It has hailed Japan as Australia's best friend in Asia, and strong language warned against potential Chinese coercion in the Beijing-Tokyo maritime dispute. At the same time, a self-respecting Australian government will want this country integrated into American planning for possible future military confrontations only to the degree that three conditions are fulfilled. Underpinned by realistic strategy

We need to be convinced that Washington's thinking about force is embedded in a realistic strategy. We need to be confident that its effects will be stabilising. And we need to be sure that any Australian role has at least the strong prospect of public understanding and acceptance.

By all means, Ms Bishop and Senator Johnston should revitalise the discussion about how Australian can support America's strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific. In some areas, such as co-operation on ballistic missile defence, there is scope to begin a process previously stifled by Labor's ideological reservations.

But one of the best things our representatives can do in Washington this week will be to explain how the government will fulfil its promise to boost Australia's flagging defence spending. Being a stronger Australia will make us a more credible ally and in turn, increase our chances of influencing America's strategy in Asia so that it keeps serving our interests too.

Rory Medcalf is Director of the International Security Program at the **Lowy Institute**