

PERSPECTIVES

OBAMA'S ALLIANCES

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Steven Casey

Introduction

In the age of Obama, the United States' commitment to its extensive alliance system appears, at first glance, to be shaky. America is beset by economic problems and domestic preoccupations. Its hegemonic position is under threat, especially from a rapidly growing China. It remains mired in a war on terror in which, from Washington's perspective, many allies have not done enough. And it is led by a president who talks about embracing alternative forms of international arrangements.

Barack Obama came to office as a confirmed liberal. During his campaign he won over a multilateralist Democratic base and an electorate weary of the failings of the George W. Bush years, including perceptions of Bush's excessive unilateralism. On the campaign trail, Obama's foreign policy rhetoric seemed to leave little space for America's traditional bilateral alliances. As the first President from the post-Cold War generation, Obama evinced few sentimental feelings for old arrangements that were originally formed to deter the long-gone communist threat. His pledge 'to rebuild the alliances, partnerships, and institutions necessary to confront common threats and enhance common security'¹ implied that alliances were no longer a *sui generis* type of institutional arrangement. They were set for a downgrade.

Two and a half years into Obama's presidency, however, the stocks of America's alliances have risen. True, Obama has sought to forge new relationships, sometimes at the expense of traditional allies: witness his decision to travel to Indonesia, but not Australia, in 2010. True, too, some of America's long-standing allies have not fared well. The 'special relationship' with Britain has cooled since the heady days of the Bush-Blair years, especially as Obama has looked beyond London to Paris and Berlin. The Egyptian alliance is in flux, disrupted by the Arab Spring and Obama's decision to push for the ouster of Hosni Mubarak. Even the Israeli partnership has suffered, reaching a nadir with open squabbling over the peace process.

Nevertheless, President Obama has ultimately proved much more alliance-friendly than candidate Obama. This is partly because Obama knows that he needs alliance support to wage costly fights in Afghanistan and Libya. It is also the product of his slowly evolving friendships with key leaders – especially centre-left leaders such as Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, with whom he shares an obvious

political affinity. But it is due, above all, to the changing contours of international politics, particularly in Asia and the Pacific, where China's rise has concentrated Obama's mind, prodding him to think about ways to both engage with and balance this strategic competitor.

This paper explores Obama's attitudes to, and management of, America's alliances. It places Obama's record in historical perspective, challenging the assertions that he has adopted a dangerously new approach. Obama, in fact, sits clearly within the mainstream Democratic Party position on alliances – a position that dates back to the era of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, when America emerged as a superpower and forged a global alliance network.

Why US alliances still matter to the world

It is tempting to think that US alliances are declining in importance. Most were born during the distant days of the Cold War. They came in numerous forms. Some alliances were based on shared values, while others were 'forged in blood' (as in South Korea, where the 1950-53 war turned a fragile relationship into something that has endured), and still others reflected fleeting overlapping interests.² Some were multilateral, such as NATO, while in East Asia, in particular, Washington preferred a 'hub-and-spokes system' of bilateral alliances, with itself at the centre.³ Moreover, some were formal treaty commitments, such as NATO, ANZUS, or the mutual defence treaties with Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea. But others, lacking such legal underpinnings, were more akin to 'common-law alliances', to use the phrase coined about the Anglo-American relations at the start of the Second World War – though these could still be extremely close, as with the US-Israel relationship.⁴

Whatever shape or form they came in, these alliances were mostly formed to meet a threat – Soviet-directed communism – that collapsed more than twenty years ago. Today's threats are very different. They include non-state terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy shortages, and failed states. More to the point, these new threats require more than just traditional interstate alliances; they also need a complex range of international instruments. 'Institutional density' is already a fact of global life. In 2000, the number of intergovernmental organisations had topped 6,000, and it continues to rise. According to State Department figures, America is itself the signatory of more than 700 multilateral treaties. Small wonder, then, that many on the liberal end of the political spectrum now believe that America's old alliances need to be supplemented by newer forms of international cooperation.⁵

Furthermore, even in the realm of traditional security threats, the United States' alliances tend to be found in regions that Washington once considered its 'core' but which are now, arguably, no longer as important. In the wake of 9/11, some officials in the George W. Bush administration thought that the geographical focus of America's alliances had to be recalibrated. Bush himself was not a unilateralist. He was, rather, impatient with old allies who refused to perceive the causes and magnitude of terrorist threat in the same way as he did. Rather than be constrained by, say, NATO, Bush sought to construct new arrangements – 'coalitions of the willing' – to respond to this new challenge. Some of these willing partners were trusted old allies with whom Bush established a warm personal rapport: Tony Blair in Britain or John Howard in Australia. But Bush's advisers were also convinced that, with the war on terror being fought in the Middle East and Central Asia, America's 'geopolitical centre of gravity for security interests' was shifting away from the old European core towards new regions, from Iraq to Afghanistan, Yemen to Kyrgyzstan.⁶

As well as this sense that Washington needs new coalitions to wage the war on terror, there is a belief that the United States' old alliance system is ill-fitted to the underlying power changes in the international system – and not just because Soviet Russia is no longer the central threat. During the early phase of the Cold War, the United States was clearly the global hegemon. In the late 1940s, it dominated both its anti-Communist alliance system and a host of new international organisations by dint of its raw power. But the sheer size of the American economy – at the end of the Second World War it produced perhaps half the world's output – made it a highly attractive partner for many states. In Western Europe, the United States forged what one historian has dubbed an 'empire by invitation', as political elites actively lobbied for a tighter alliance commitment in order to secure both an American security shield and much-needed US economic aid. In the Pacific, as British power waned, Australia also 'looked to America', especially in the early 1950s when Washington concluded the Japanese peace treaty and Canberra sought protection against Communist China and the possible revival of Japan.⁷

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, the situation is quite different. The United States' relative power position is under intense challenge from rising economies in Asia. In 2003 Goldman Sachs predicted that China would have a larger economy than the United States by 2041 – a prediction that has recently been brought forward to 2027. China is already the world's leading exporter. Beijing also holds a large proportion of its more than \$3 trillion reserves in US dollars.⁸ And while China booms, the United States' internal situation has only got bleaker. In the wake of the 2008 banking crisis the US economy has stalled. To make matters worse, Washington's increasingly partisan political environment threatens to gum up its intentionally decentralised political system. And its vehemently anti-tax political culture deters politicians from utilising an obvious tool for tackling the rising budget deficit. As a result, there are questions about the United States' continued ability to

mobilise its internal resources for extensive overseas commitments – questions that raise doubts about America’s continued reliability as an alliance partner.

Yet, for at least four reasons, America’s alliances do still matter. First, although the changing contours of international politics may ultimately remould US alliance structures, these changes will not suddenly consign Washington to the margins – not while America still retains the largest economy and the biggest military. In fact, as the rise of new powers creates potential new threats, the United States will remain a vital ally to those countries who share a similar perception of threats. Asia is the prime example. The rise of China troubles states such as South Korea, Japan, and Australia who have a long-standing alliance relationship with Washington, and who are likely to want to maintain and deepen this commitment as China continues to grow.⁹

Second, if the United States is itself in decline, then Washington is likely to cling even more firmly to its alliances. Indeed, it is not only global hegemons who view alliances as eminently desirable. If anything, declining powers are even more likely to seek out partners in order to share defensive burdens. This is not a new phenomenon. At the turn of twentieth century, when Britain was clearly waning relative to Germany, London slowly sought to end its ‘splendid isolation’, reaching a series of increasingly more robust agreements with France and Russia. And in the past the United States has itself been tempted in the same direction.

In retrospect, it is tempting to view America’s Cold War alliance system as a result of its preponderant power. At the time, however, not all American presidents were confident about US strength. In the 1950s, Dwight D. Eisenhower worried that the American economic and political systems would not be able to endure the open-ended and rising Cold War defence budgets. In the 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam War, Richard M. Nixon fretted that the United States no longer had the economic capacity or the political will to wage costly containment fights in distant parts of the world. Tellingly, these two Republican presidents both sought to deepen America’s alliances. Eisenhower’s response was ‘pactomania’: building on the Truman administration’s extensive new alliance networks by extending security commitments to Thailand, Pakistan, Korea, and Taiwan, in order to reduce the ‘exorbitant cost’ of America’s defence needs. Nixon’s answer was to devolve more responsibility for containing communism to selected American allies. Indeed, the Nixon Doctrine sought to identify key regional actors – states such as South Vietnam and Iran – who would be provided with the aid, and especially the weapons, to undertake the Cold War fight without direct US involvement. Thus Eisenhower sought to increase the number of US allies; Nixon tried to increase the contribution of those allies in important strategic locations. Rather than thinning out America’s alliances, both presidents sought to thicken them.¹⁰

The new alliances that emerged during these earlier periods of relative austerity were not always effective. In fact, during the Eisenhower and Nixon years Washington extended a security umbrella over states whose domestic record was decidedly grim. Yet Washington's willingness to embrace unsavoury regimes should not distract from its other, more successful partnerships. During the Cold War, America's alliance commitments worked best not only in areas where the United States felt it had core national interests and where local elites were keen to invite the United States in. With a few exceptions, they also worked best when both sides shared similar political values. Under these conditions, alliances had a dual legitimacy – not just between Washington and the alliance partner but also inside the United States, where both political parties accepted their usefulness.¹¹

This dual legitimacy relates to the third reason why America's alliances remain important: the continued attractiveness of the United States as an alliance partner, especially for those states who share both a strategic outlook and similar values.

It is easy to be critical of a hegemon. Smaller powers tend to feel neglected, even unloved, when the bigger partner has its gaze fixed elsewhere; equally, they are apt to complain of being overpowered, even bullied, when they are suddenly the subjects of its interest. Over the years, Washington has also made its fair share of mistakes, from protecting unsavoury governments to pressing other allies to help wage war on behalf of some of these authoritarian rulers. For the most part, however, Washington has tended to act as a benign hegemon, especially to those allies with which it has formed a 'special relationship' – allies such as Britain and Australia who share a common language and similar ideals, and whose strategic partnership has been reinforced by a political, cultural, and ideological affinity.

Finally, the United States has also placed a high priority on the credibility of its alliance networks and it is likely to do so in the future. In the post-war era, this concern for credibility stemmed from America's isolationist past. When the Truman administration formed the first Cold War alliances, many senior officials worried that, because the United States had been so reluctant to enter the two world wars, countries such as France might doubt Washington's commitment should the Red Army sweep through Central Europe. In Congress, moreover, bipartisan support for these first Cold War alliances extended to Western Europe. But agreement between Democrats and Republicans came to an abrupt halt in East Asia where Republicans in 1949 felt Truman had not been loyal enough in supporting friends such as Jiang Jieshi's Nationalist China or Syngman Rhee's South Korea. Largely in response to the doubts of both foreign partners and domestic opponents, Truman was determined to demonstrate America's resolve as a credible ally. His decision to intervene in the Korean War in the summer of 1950 was a case in point. Truman did not suddenly consider South Korea strategically important in its own right. Instead, he realised that if the United States failed to respond to a direct act

of aggression against its South Korean ally, then America's reputation as a viable strategic partner would be called into severe doubt throughout the world.¹²

The United States has by no means been the only state concerned with its reputation. But since the establishment of its major alliance networks at the start of the Cold War, a number of close observers have argued that America 'has worried about its reputation more than any other state'. Successive administrations have been convinced that deterring current and future enemies requires projecting an image of resolve – and indeed for almost ten years two presidents waged a costly war to defend South Vietnam for this very purpose.¹³ Successive administrations have also been worried about a home-front backlash if they appear to let down an ally – a calculation that often preoccupied Truman's Democratic successors and remained a key concern in 2008 when Republican hawks were primed to accuse Democrats of national-security softness.¹⁴

In short, then, the United States has placed enormous emphasis on its allies. On occasion, it has even seen them as a motive – rather than just the method – for action. Concerned for appearances, it has sought to rescue allies in areas that are outside its core interests. At a time when many other states view America in decline, it is likely that, if anything, Washington will be even more determined to keep up appearances, standing firmly behind allies to demonstrate to rivals that it still means business.

Obama's conception of alliances

America's alliances matter to individual presidents in different ways. Each occupant of the White House has scope to leave his own particular imprint on them, shifting the style, tone, and content to match his basic priorities and policies.

Since his sudden arrival on the national scene in 2008, Barack Obama's theme has been change. What did this mean for US alliances? To his supporters, it implied a renewed multilateral focus after the alleged unilateralism of the Bush years. To Obama's many conservative critics, however, it meant something much more dangerous and radical: supplanting America's close and enduring bilateral alliances with a new liberal multilateralism. 'Obama has embraced the foreign policy of an ideologue', insists Daniella Pletka, in a common conservative lament. 'The framework', she continues, 'seems a simple repudiation of American global leadership, a devaluation of alliances, and a penchant for paper agreements and empty dialogue that articulate grand aims but ignore the practical threats to the US that exist in the real world.'¹⁵ Bush administration stalwarts have agreed. While former Vice President Dick Cheney has accused Obama of letting down old friends in Europe, former UN Ambassador John Bolton has charged Obama with having 'a post-alliance policy' that

prioritises global organisations such as the United Nations.¹⁶ The current Republican presidential hopefuls, meanwhile, have generally focused more on the costs of foreign policy in a time of austerity, but they too have been critical of what they see as Obama's excessive deference to international organisations and other states, especially in the context of the Libyan intervention.¹⁷

Even if such heavily partisan criticisms are unwarranted, both Obama's background and his campaign comments raise important questions. What is Obama's conception of alliances? To what extent does it derive from his pre-presidential experiences? How new or liberal is it? And how has his conception been implemented during his first two-and-a-half years in power?

The case that Obama is determined to take the United States in a new direction rests on three prongs. The first is his background. Obama is not simply the first black man elected to America's highest office. He is also the first president of Kenyan ancestry, the first born in Hawaii, and the first raised partly in Indonesia. Although Herbert Hoover, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan were all, to varying degrees, Pacific-oriented in their pre-presidential years, Obama's early exposure went much deeper. 'The Pacific Rim has helped shape my view', Obama declared not long after taking office. His mental map, he thereby implied, was far removed from the Eurocentric focus of so many of his predecessors.¹⁸

In addition, Obama is also self-consciously part of a new, post-Cold War generation, which came of age after the collapse of communism and in the midst of the war on terrorism. Obama was still at college when the Berlin Wall was dismantled. Unlike either Bill Clinton or George W. Bush, he was too young to get embroiled in the divisive controversies of the Vietnam era. 'I am probably the first president', he told one interviewer in July 2010, 'who is young enough that the Vietnam War wasn't at the core of my development. So I grew up with none of the baggage that arose out of the dispute of the Vietnam War.' A lot of the Cold War 'political frames', Obama added, 'don't really connect with me generationally.'¹⁹

But then neither did Obama connect with the political frames that President George W. Bush devised to wage the so-called 'war on terror'. In 2008, of course, Obama was *the* candidate of change – the leader who would take the United States in a different direction. To win the nomination, Obama had to appeal to a Democratic Party base that was clearly committed to foreign-policy liberalism, and categorically rejected the ideas behind Bush's war on terror. At that time, only 43 per cent of Democrats, for instance, thought that peace could best be achieved through military strength, compared to 75 per cent of Republicans. As Peter Beinart argued, Democrats were also 'more optimistic than Republicans . . . about the possibility of international cooperation', focusing on multilateral institutions rather than balance-of-power alliances.²⁰

Obama's speeches were not only designed to connect with the party activists who worked and voted in the primary elections. They were also aimed at moderate voters weary of the ongoing Iraq War. As John Lewis Gaddis once observed, successful presidential candidates 'are rarely made by endorsing their predecessors.'²¹ And this truism was particularly apparent during 2007-8, when Iraq forced Bush's approval ratings ever lower, until he achieved the unenviable fate of being the least popular president since polling began.²² Clearly, Obama had a major incentive to turn the campaign into a referendum on the Bush years – albeit a caricatured version of those years.

Against this personal and political backdrop, it is scarcely surprising that Obama's 2008 conception of alliances appeared to be both new and liberal.

Obama's starting point was that the world is a complex place. It contains hard security threats to American interests, but there are other problems too. Sometimes these security threats stem from economic, social, and political instability that it is in America's interests to counteract. In a Democratic candidates' debate in December 2007, Obama spoke in expansive terms about the impact of globalisation and complex interdependence on American interests and responsibilities. 'Increasingly', he declared, 'we have to view our security in terms of common security and common prosperity with other peoples and other countries. And that means that if there are children in the Middle East who cannot read, that is a potential long-term danger to us. If China is polluting, then certainly that is going to reach our shores.'²³

Because the world is so interdependent, Obama argued for a multifaceted approach to global problems. The United States, he suggested, had to look beyond traditional tools such as security alliances. In this post-Cold War world, the new president would need to work more closely with coming powers such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia. He would have to try to improve America's relations with multilateral institutions such as ASEAN and the African Union. And he would have to create new international regimes, such as a Shared Security Partnership Program to root out global terrorist networks.²⁴

To the conservative retort that multiplying such arrangements would constrain American choices, Obama's view was clear: the advantages of playing a leading role in a complex network of bilateral and multilateral, formal and informal arrangements far outweigh any drawbacks. 'America is strongest when we act alongside strong partners', Obama declared. 'We helped create the UN – not to constrain America's influence, but to amplify it by advancing our values.' In the second presidential debate, he offered a telling variation on this theme. When asked about humanitarian intervention, Obama responded that whenever genocide or ethnic cleansing took place and the United States did nothing, 'that diminishes us'. But he was also keen to add that America had to act in such situations

alongside its friends. ‘We’re not going to be able to be everywhere all the time’, he explained. ‘That’s why it’s so important for us to be able to work in concert with our allies.’²⁵

And not just a few allies either. During the campaign, Obama was highly critical of Bush’s willingness to go to war in Iraq without the clear support of some of America’s principal long-term allies. If he won the presidency, Obama declared, he would seek to recruit the widest possible circle of friends. He would then try to manage these friends not as a domineering hegemon, but as a calm and quiet persuader. Thus, whereas Bush had sought to impose his will on others, Obama would be a humble coordinator. The result would be a foreign policy that was not only cheaper to conduct, because the burden would be shared. It would also be more legitimate, since it would be based on what a larger section of the international community wanted.²⁶

Underpinning these ideas was Obama’s belief in the efficacy of international rules. As some international relations theorists have observed, the United States has a vested interest in upholding international rules – rather than, as Bush did, challenging them. The reason is simple: hegemons tend to create rules and institutions that support its dominance, and allow it to wield power legitimately, subtly, and affordably.²⁷ Obama agreed. In his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope*, he insisted that:

it was in America’s interest to work with other countries to build up international institutions and promote international norms. Not because of a naïve assumption that international laws and treaties alone would end conflicts among nations or eliminate the need for American military action, [but] because the more international norms were enforced and the more America signalled a willingness to show restraint in the exercise of its power, the fewer the number of conflicts that would arise – and the more legitimate our actions would appear in the eyes of the world when we did have to move militarily.

Or as Obama wrote in another telling passage, ‘nobody benefits more than we do from the observance of international “rules of the road.” We can’t win converts to those rules if we act as if they apply to everyone but us. When the world’s sole superpower willingly restrains its power and abides by internationally agreed-upon standards of conduct, it sends a message that these are rules worth following.’²⁸

While Obama’s campaign rhetoric was clearly on the liberal end of the spectrum, Obama was keen to emphasise that it was not new. This was vital. His personal background is so exotic that his more extreme critics have accused him of espousing policies that are distinctly un-American – a view encapsulated in the so-called ‘birther’ conspiracy, which implies that Obama’s policies are as dubious and as alien as his birth certificate. Most Republicans have not gone this far. But even in the

mainstream Republican narrative, Obama emerges as an extreme liberal – the heir to an excessively idealistic Democratic tradition that dates back, if not to Woodrow Wilson’s attempt to remake the world in 1919, then at least to George McGovern and Jimmy Carter’s naïve liberalism, which was decisively repudiated in the elections of 1972 and 1980.²⁹

In response Obama has sought to identify himself with a more illustrious Democratic heritage. When delving into the past, he has ignored the liberal losers of the 1970s in favour of an older, more robust liberalism practised by Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy. How accurate is this claim? All three presidents obviously faced very different challenges. But his basic approach does indeed share a good deal with this particular Democratic tradition.

Take Obama’s faith in the importance and efficacy of international rules. Some critics argue that this is one of the more naïve and novel elements of Obama’s foreign-policy creed. But it is, in fact, perfectly in tune with how most Cold War era presidents viewed friends and enemies in the international system – and it has been particularly pronounced in Democratic presidential rhetoric since at least the 1930s. Indeed, Roosevelt remarked that ‘permanent friendships between nations as between men can be sustained only by a scrupulous respect for the pledged word.’ And when Hitler broke agreements FDR considered him so beyond the pale that he increasingly worked with allies to destroy his regime.³⁰ Likewise, during the 1940s Truman increasingly complained that the Soviet Union was another international rule breaker. ‘I have tried my level best to get along with the Russians’, he remarked in 1947. ‘But when I work out agreements with a government, in the name of the United States of America, and not a single one of these agreements is carried out, I have got to use other methods’ – methods that included allying with numerous friends to contain the Soviet threat.³¹

Like Obama, these earlier presidents thought that alliances empowered the United States. Roosevelt believed that if America and its allies stuck together they could achieve the most important of all international goals: a peaceful and stable order. Truman likewise felt that allies brought strength to his containment policy, and was willing to make big concessions to key partners in order to retain this vital element of his Cold War posture.

At the same time, moreover, Obama’s multifaceted view of the world also echoes the approach taken by his eminent Democratic predecessors. Liberals have long agreed that surface problems have deeper causes that can be ameliorated, perhaps even solved, by state power. Just as poverty on the home front can be tackled by addressing its educational or social roots, international aggression needs to be confronted by dealing with the underlying social, economic, and political causes.

Obama is certainly in this mould. In his acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic Convention he spoke of using the government to stop the slide of families into poverty at home, while globally he promised to build new partnerships to defeat ‘poverty and genocide; climate change and disease’.³² But such language is no different from FDR’s ‘four freedoms’, including ‘freedom from want’. Indeed, Roosevelt, like Obama, thought that only by solving economic, as well as traditional security, problems could a new, more stable international order be formed. This was also one reason why Truman and his advisers were so worried about the communist threat. In 1947 and 1948 they did not seriously think that the Soviet Red Army was about to march into Western Europe. But they did fret about what Dean Acheson dubbed ‘social *disintegration*, political *disintegration*, the loss of faith by people in leaders who have led them in the past, and a great deal of economic *disintegration*’. And the need to address social and economic causes was clearly the reason, too, why Kennedy was so keen to press for ‘modernization’ in Latin America and Southeast Asia, believing that by improving basic living standards he could eradicate support for radical, aggressive regimes.³³

Obama’s interest in multilateral arrangements to deal with these complex challenges likewise fits, to some extent, with what his Democratic forebears tried to achieve. Thus, Roosevelt not only forged the grand alliance against the Axis powers; he also worked to turn this wartime alliance into ‘a political society of nations’. Truman not only forged the NATO security alliance; he also reconstructed Western Europe through the Marshall Plan and tried to tackle poverty in the Third World through his Point Four aid program. Kennedy not only sought to deploy counterinsurgency capabilities in countries such as South Vietnam; he also tried to tackle economic and social problems in Latin America through his Alliance for Progress.³⁴

While in 2008 Obama tried to place his own conception of alliances within a prestigious liberal heritage, recently some of his supporters have attempted to inoculate him from Republican attacks by going a stage further. They have depicted Obama as a cool, rational realist: ‘George H.W. Obama’, in his former White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel’s pithy comment – likening him to the practical Bush father rather than the ideological Bush son.³⁵

Obama is certainly a cool customer. He is also a pragmatist. ‘Overall’, recalls one of his former college professors, Obama has . . . a problem-solving orientation. He seems not to be powerfully driven by an a-priori framework so what emerges is quite pragmatic and even tentative.’³⁶ These were useful traits to advertise in 2008 when many Americans believed that George W. Bush had surrounded himself with ideological zealots, in particular neoconservatives, whose advocacy of regime change had mired the United States in Iraq. But when Obama assumed office in January 2009, this pragmatic tendency would also come to the fore because, whatever his liberal inclinations, he

inherited many awkward realities that cast long shadows over what he could achieve on the international stage.

Obama and the realities of power

The first was the sudden banking crisis, which erupted in the midst of the 2008 campaign. Bush's decision to bail out the banks was taken after direct consultation with the two presidential candidates and the congressional leadership. But it clearly reinforced one of the major trends of the Bush years: the galloping budget deficit. Even before the banking crisis, a combination of massive tax cuts, costly extensions to Medicare, and two expensive wars saw American debt levels explode. Indeed, while tax cuts reduced revenue by more than \$3 trillion, spending grew at two-and-half times the rate that it had during the 1990s. In 2008, the emergency bank bailout may have staved off a depression. But it greatly added to this debt – and the economic slowdown further reduced tax revenues.³⁷

From the start of Obama's presidency, therefore, the United States faced what one commentator has called 'a frugal future'.³⁸ These budgetary realities also meant that Obama would be in a different position from his Cold War Democratic heroes, Truman and Kennedy. Both presidents had approached alliances from a position of confidence about American strength. And they were in no doubt that the United States could afford not only to mobilise its own military power but also to cement certain crucial alliances with lavish economic and military aid. Obama has no such luxury. His position is, in fact, closer to (although much worse than) the Republican administrations of Eisenhower and Nixon, who saw alliances largely as a way of sharing costly defence burdens at a time of domestic retrenchment.

Against this gloomy economic backdrop, Obama and his team soon set about managing expectations. 'We must be realistic,' Hillary Clinton stressed in her Senate confirmation hearings in January 2009. 'Even under the best of circumstances, our nation cannot solve every problem or meet every global need. We don't have unlimited time, treasure, or manpower, especially with our own economy faltering and our budget deficits growing. So, to fulfil our responsibility to our children, to protect and defend our nation, while honouring our values, we have to establish priorities.'³⁹

Once in power, these priorities would be set not only by America's chastened circumstances. They would also be driven by the other unavoidable reality Obama inherited from Bush: the so-called 'war on terror'. Obama agreed with his much-maligned predecessor to the extent that *nuclear* terrorism had to be his first focus. 'A potential game changer would be a nuclear weapon in the hands of a terrorist', he explained in one interview. 'And so when I go down the list of things I have to worry about all the

time, that is at the top because that is one area where you can't afford any mistakes.' Even when collecting the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2009, Obama was keen to remind his audience that 'we have to confront the world as we know it today' – adding that, as commander in chief of a country that faces 'a ruthless adversary that directly threatens the American people and our allies', he would have to prioritise the war on terror over challenges such as moving to a nuclear-free world or controlling climate change.⁴⁰

Allies and the war on terror

On the campaign trail, Obama often stressed that the war in Iraq (America's war of choice) had greatly distracted Washington's attention from the more important battleground in Afghanistan (America's war of necessity). Once in power, he was determined to refocus. For one thing, he wanted to reenergise America's European alliances, which had been weakened in the aftermath of the Iraq War in 2003. For another, with Bush's Iraq 'surge' somewhat stabilising the situation in the Middle East, Obama moved to redirect policy back towards Central Asia, which in turn shaped his early foreign policy, including his alliance actions, in three distinct ways.

At one level, Obama had to figure out how to interact with two governments at the very heart of the struggle: Afghanistan, where the long-standing war continued, and Pakistan, where many of the terrorist training camps had now shifted. Neither are allies in the formal sense – Washington instead uses the term 'cooperative relationship'.⁴¹ But making these relationships work was Obama's initial priority, and by the end of his first year in office he had made a number of important decisions. He sanctioned an increasing number of unmanned drone strikes against terrorist targets in the region. Even more importantly, he approved a military surge, sending 30,000 more US troops 'to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan.'⁴²

Obama knew that this strategy needed the close cooperation of the regimes in Kabul and Islamabad. Afghanistan would have to take over more of the fight against the Taliban, allowing the United States to scale down its troop commitment from the summer of 2011. Pakistan would have to confront the terrorist networks inside its borders, especially in the ungoverned tribal areas. But herein lay an acute problem. These two partners are not only domestically fragile; they also lack the dual legitimacy that has underpinned America's more successful alliances.

There is certainly little trust between Washington and Kabul – especially when Afghan President Hamid Karzai is so publicly critical of American operations inside Afghanistan. But Obama had also long been suspicious of Pakistan's ambivalent attitude towards terror cells within its borders. Even

during the 2008 campaign he promised a dual policy of carrot (potential American support in any diplomatic dialogue with India over Kashmir) and stick (insisting that Pakistan crack down on the Taliban, pursue Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants, and end its relationships with all terrorist groups).⁴³ In power, neither tool has proved effective. By the spring of 2011 Washington's frustration with Pakistan verged on outright resentment. Most notably, of course, Obama sanctioned the operation against bin Laden without informing Pakistan, because he suspected his partner would tip off his target. The fact that bin Laden was found hiding not in an inaccessible cave in the remote mountains but in a large compound near a prominent Pakistani military academy raised further American doubts about the country's reliability. And domestic US support for Pakistan duly collapsed, particularly in Congress, where legislators talked openly about scaling down American aid.

At a second level, Obama has also been keen to prod America's long-standing allies throughout the world to help share the burden in the war against the Taliban. The administration's selling pitch has been straightforward enough. 'The violent extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan', declared Clinton at the end of 2009, 'also undermines the stability of the wider region and threatens the security of our friends, allies, and interests around the world.' In the wake of Obama's decision to send 30,000 more troops, his national-security team tried to get these other allies to increase their own involvement. Clinton herself called this 'a crucial test for NATO'.⁴⁴ Significantly, though, for all his persistent popularity on the international stage, Obama was not noticeably successful. This was partly because after the Bush years many allied publics are sceptical about following Washington's lead. But Obama's own laidback style has also contributed. Distancing himself from his swaggering predecessor, Obama has not been the type of president to hector America's allies. Public charm offensives, repairing frayed relationships, rebuilding respect for America – these have instead been the hallmarks of Obama's diplomatic repertoire. And they have inevitably characterised his management of alliances. As analyst Michael O'Hanlon pointed out in a recent Lowy Institute study, Obama has been far too 'polite' to pressure allies into sending more troops to Afghanistan. A more assertive president might have used his own popularity as leverage, telling allies that if they failed to do more in Afghanistan they would damage him at home and open the way for another unilateralist Republican to win the White House. Of course, such an approach might well have failed, given the different interests on both sides and the lack of European public support for more robust action. But this type of diplomatic hardball has not been Obama's style.⁴⁵

At a third level, Obama's focus on the war on terror, alongside economic problems, inevitably distracted him from deeper structural changes in the international system, at least at first. In 2009, Obama was the biggest draw on the international diplomatic stage, creating a major splash at the summits he attended. But often his head and heart were elsewhere – on his ambitious healthcare reform or the Afghan surge. Obama's initial tendency to cancel certain international trips was just the

most overt manifestation of his preoccupation. More fundamentally, his gaze rarely seemed to be on the underlying shifts taking place in international politics. India was a case in point. After forging closer relations with Bush, culminating in the civilian nuclear deal concluded in October 2008, the Delhi government fretted that the incoming Obama administration was prone to ‘inattention and complacency’. Indian leaders certainly took note when Obama failed to mention their country in his first major speech on the region in November 2009. They were also alarmed by the possibility that Obama’s ‘AfPak’ strategy for the war on terror would mean an excessive tilt towards Pakistan, at their expense. During the campaign, Obama had suggested that he would not only push Pakistan to confront the Taliban but also ‘encourage dialogue between Pakistan and India to work towards resolving their dispute over Kashmir.’ In Indian eyes, this looked suspiciously like ‘U.S. diplomatic activism on Kashmir in return for Islamabad’s cooperation in fighting al Qaeda and the Taliban.’⁴⁶

Allies in the Middle East

While the war on terror and the deteriorating budget situation were inherited problems that occupied Obama’s attention in 2009, the Arab Spring was an unexpected shock that suddenly directed his focus to the Middle East in 2011. As the contagion of protest spread, toppling or threatening governments that had long been a fixture of the region, Obama faced the prospect of prioritising the nation’s declared support for freedom and democracy at the risk of losing stable autocratic leaders who had been steadfast allies.

If Obama had been the unalloyed liberal of the conservative imagination, his response would have been clear: he would have pushed for democracy everywhere. But following in a long tradition, he has been more pragmatic. As earlier liberal Democrats often discovered, principled diplomacy is easier to discuss than to implement. During the Cold War, Truman and Kennedy both grudgingly supported authoritarian anti-Communist regimes in Spain, Taiwan, and South Vietnam; during the 1990s, Clinton retreated from attempts to link China’s human rights record to trade benefits. All made the calculation that sometimes it was in America’s best interest to back away from its heritage of favouring democracy over dictatorship.

In the Middle East during the same period, Washington placed a particularly high premium on stability. Presidents from both parties turned a blind eye to the nature of their allies’ domestic rule. The reason was simple. Their friends in the Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian regimes either allowed oil to flow from the region or muted their populations’ widespread hostility towards Israel. Successive administrations also fretted that if they prodded these Arab governments to democratise they could

easily lose a string of valuable and stabilising supporters; worse, the resulting elections could well bring hostile Islamist parties to power through the ballot box.

In the wake of 9/11, George W. Bush migrated to the margins of this long-standing bipartisan tradition, but therein lay another reason for Obama to act pragmatically. By 2002, Bush had become convinced that promoting democracy was the best way to defeat terrorism. ‘The survival of liberty in our land’, he famously declared, ‘increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.’⁴⁷ Halfway through his presidency, Bush made some effort to push long-standing allies such as Egypt towards democracy, calling on Hosni Mubarak to free up his press and clean up his elections. Such diplomatic prodding paled next to Bush’s main democratisation effort: the invasion of Iraq, with the expressed goal of replacing Saddam’s dictatorship with an American-style democracy. And as soon as the Iraq occupation bloodily unravelled, so did the goal of democracy promotion. Indeed, the whole concept became increasingly synonymous with, and discredited by, the forceful attempt to impose regime change.⁴⁸

Having inherited this deeply flawed record, Obama’s initial approach to Middle Eastern democracy was pragmatic. Yes, he insisted, the spread of democracy was desirable. But he positioned himself in the long, but often latent, American tradition of ‘doing good by example rather than by interference’.⁴⁹ As Obama told a reporter at the start of his visit to Egypt in 2009, he was keen to deliver a message ‘that democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of religion . . . are not simply principles of the West to be hoisted on these countries, but rather what I believe to be universal principles that they can embrace and affirm as part of their national identity.’⁵⁰

As the Arab Spring unfolded, Obama was initially uncertain and clumsy. But he eventually developed a response characterised by caution and hard-headed liberalism. At first, he moved slowly. Obama waited weeks before calling on Mubarak to leave and months before unveiling his general approach to the region. Both policies, when they finally came, demonstrated Obama’s liberal inclinations. His May 2011 speech was the high point, with its emphasis on embracing the democratic change reverberating through the Middle East. At one point, Obama even suggested a new Marshall Plan for the region. The death of bin Laden, he claimed, together with the emergence of democratic movements, presented the United States with an opportunity to help the region’s reformers by extending debt relief and enterprise funds.⁵¹

Yet on close inspection, the scale of such aid will be nothing like the Marshall Plan billions of the late 1940s, not in America’s current straitened circumstances. And Obama’s liberalism had other limits, too. He has continued to emphasise American ‘humility’ – letting the peoples inside various Arab

states find their own solutions, without overt prodding from Washington. He has remained content to react to events, rather than seeking like Bush to drive the democratising process forward. Above all, his actions have been decidedly uneven. Like many of his predecessors, Obama has found it easier to get tough with states who are not friends: hence the bombing of Libya and the sanctions against Syria. But he has treated certain allies quite differently. Bahrain, for instance, which provides an important base for the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, has merely been subjected to gentle presidential pleas to open up a dialogue with its domestic opposition.

Despite this selective soft-peddalling, Obama's actions have had an unsettling impact on America's surviving allies in the region. In public, Saudi officials were clearly angry at Obama's abandonment of Mubarak, telling reporters that their government's willingness to listen to the President had now 'evaporated'.⁵² And Israel appeared equally concerned, fretting that a post-Mubarak government would be much more hostile and worrying that Obama had proven himself fundamentally flaky towards key partners. Small wonder, then, that Obama's push for a renewed dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians met with a cold response from Benjamin Netanyahu.⁵³

If the Arab Spring has had a complex – and often debilitating – impact on America's traditional allies in the Middle East, its Libyan component has shown how Obama would like his alliance relations to develop, while also making him a sporadic Atlanticist. Obama was driven to intervene on humanitarian grounds: to protect Libyan civilians from Gaddafi's marauding mercenaries. But the form of his interventionism has been shaped by a variety of familiar calculations and constraints. Unlike the Iraq War, Obama wanted to ensure that any action was legitimised by a clear UN authority. He was keen to let other states and organisations play the key role, ceding command responsibilities to NATO as a way of demonstrating that the United States was no longer the hectoring hegemon.⁵⁴ And he was animated, above all, by an acute awareness of major domestic constraints: war weariness in the wake of Afghanistan and Iraq and empty federal coffers.

In this sense, Obama has revived an old American tradition of using allies – and especially European allies – as proxies to wage war when the United States is either unwilling or unable to take the lead. In fact, Obama's stance has clear echoes in Roosevelt's attitude towards the war in Europe between 1939 and 1941. Although the scale of the two conflicts cannot be compared, both presidents recognised that their home front was not prepared to sanction a full-scale American effort. They therefore played the role of underwriter, providing material support, while Britain and France did the bulk of the fighting. Recent events indicate Obama's approach has produced results while minimising the risks and costs to the United States.

Allies in Asia

While Obama has been forced to direct most of his attention to Central Asia and the Middle East, he hopes to refocus on the Asia-Pacific region. According to one well-placed reporter, Obama and his national security adviser, Thomas E. Donilon, believe the United States needs:

*to rebuild its reputation, extricate itself from the Middle East and Afghanistan, and turn its attention toward Asia and China's unchecked influence in the region. America was 'overweighted' in the former and 'underweighted' in the latter, [according to] Donilon.... 'We've been on a little bit of a Middle East detour over the course of the last ten years', Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said. 'And our future will be dominated utterly and fundamentally by developments in Asia and the Pacific region.'*⁵⁵

Asia is the region where, at first glance, Obama seemed keenest to emphasise developing new partners and institutions, albeit not always in a manner that is a total break from past American practice. Take ASEAN. Before Obama, the United States' approach to ASEAN's Regional Forum (ARF) – ASEAN's effort to develop a regional multilateral security regime – had been standoffish.⁵⁶ After 9/11, George W. Bush had seen some value in the ARF, using it as a venue to discuss – and make public statements about – the war on terror. But for Bush, America's regional alliances were paramount. In the Pacific he prioritised his relationship with Howard. In Asia, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared, the Bush administration 'reaffirmed and modernized [America's] historic alliances with fellow democracies, Japan and South Korea.'⁵⁷ In contrast, ASEAN was increasingly neglected, as demonstrated by a string of high-profile American no-shows.⁵⁸

Obama was determined to reverse this indifference. In July 2009, while attending the ARF, Hillary Clinton stressed that 'the Obama administration will demonstrate that America is back.'⁵⁹ The president himself underlined this theme before an overseas trip that same month, stressing that his purpose was to demonstrate 'that America is a Pacific nation, [that] it understands the importance of Asia in the 21st century.' With ASEAN such an important player in this new Asia, Obama was keen to emphasise his 'aggressive role in engaging' with it.⁶⁰

As well as deepening US involvement with such institutions, Obama also seemed to prioritise the forging of new relationships with emerging powers, such as Indonesia, although here the novelty was far less pronounced.⁶¹ In the aftermath of the 2002 Bali bombing, George W. Bush had increasingly viewed Indonesia as a partner in the war on terror. In the wake of Indonesia's 2004 peaceful transition to democracy, Bush and his advisers began talking about Indonesia as a 'strategic partner', while the

Indonesian President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, went so far as to call Bush ‘one of the most pro-Indonesia Presidents in the history of our bilateral relations.’⁶²

Obama was keen to push this relationship further. His 2010 *National Security Strategy (NSS)* depicted Indonesia not simply as a friend on traditional security issues and the war on terror; rather, it was now ‘an increasingly important partner on regional and transnational issues such as climate change, counterterrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping, and disaster relief.’ ‘With tolerance, resilience, and multiculturalism as core values’, the *NSS* concluded, ‘Indonesia is uniquely positioned to help address challenges facing the developing world.’⁶³

In September 2010, the priority Obama placed on this improving relationship was vividly demonstrated by what he made time for in his busy schedule. Having cancelled two visits because of internal domestic problems, Obama carved out time to travel to Indonesia on his way from India to a G-20 summit in South Korea. He wanted to visit ‘the world’s largest Muslim-majority country’, Obama explained, ‘which binds together thousands of islands through the glue of representative government and civil society’ – and a country with which he had deep personal experience, having lived there as a boy. But it was a decision that came at a cost: Obama was unable to find time to travel to Australia.

Obama and the Australian alliance

Obama’s two non-appearances in Australia are not a major departure from past practice, for there has always been a major asymmetry in the US-Australia alliance. Peter Edwards has observed that the alliance ‘has become a political institution in its own right, comparable with a political party or the monarchy.’ As well as the security guarantee, it has conferred numerous benefits, especially ‘privileged access to the fruits of the American intelligence agencies.’⁶⁴ But Australia has always been the junior partner. This is a matter not just of raw power but also attention: Canberra spends far more time thinking about Washington than vice versa. Only when Texans have been in the White House has this attention deficit been narrowed – and only then because Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s and George W. Bush in the 2000s valued the steadfast, and fairly isolated, support the Liberal governments of the day provided to their unpopular wars in Vietnam and Iraq.

Unlike Bush, Obama has had fewer political incentives to embrace the Australian Prime Minister. Internationally acclaimed, he has not needed to cling desperately to the few leaders who have remained his friends. As we have seen, he also had very real domestic problems to contend with, as well as a global agenda crowded with tough challenges. Small wonder, then, that after the close

rapprochement of the Bush and Howard years, the US-Australia alliance initially seemed to cool under Obama. As well as the president's two no-shows, his Democratic allies in Congress seemed to lack the will to implement even the smaller legacies left over from the Bush years. The fate of Defense Trade Treaty Implementation Act was emblematic. Negotiated under Bush, the treaty remains bottled up in the Senate, despite efforts by senior Republicans to bring it to a vote.⁶⁵

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that Obama sees traditional alliances as redundant. True, his initial presidential actions often seemed to prioritise other types of international arrangement. But at a rhetorical level, at least, President Obama soon proved far more alliance-friendly than candidate Obama. 'America's treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines', he declared in November 2009, 'are not historical documents from a bygone era, but abiding commitments to each other that are fundamental to our shared security.'⁶⁶ Of course, talk is cheap. And saying nice things about long-standing allies is the basic currency of international diplomacy. But a number of developments have pushed Obama to go beyond mere statements.

In Australia's case, one development has been the two countries' eerily similar electoral politics. In 2007-8, the voters in Australia and then America decided to opt for centre-left parties after a long period of centre-right rule. In Canberra, the new Rudd government did not please all US officials. As the WikiLeaks cables suggest, private US assessments were often critical of Rudd's PR-obsessed diplomatic style, not to mention his reluctance to expand Australia's commitment to Afghanistan. But Obama – on those relatively rare occasions that he engaged with Australia in 2009-10 – clearly viewed Rudd in a much more positive light. To the new American president, Rudd was a man of a similar political outlook, whose instinct on issues such as climate change and China were akin to his own.⁶⁷

Obama has struck up a similar relationship with Gillard, especially in the wake of her trip to Washington in March 2011 – a trip that also revealed two deeper realities about the current state of the alliance. First, there was the obvious asymmetry of interest on both sides. When Gillard was invited to address the US Congress on the sixtieth anniversary of the ANZUS Treaty, the Australian media naturally gave her speech great play. Inside the United States, however, Gillard was all but anonymous. This was typical of a country that rarely pays much attention to the outside world, or even the visits of foreign leaders to their own capital.

Yet Obama clearly went out of his way to embrace Gillard, despite his own public's lack of interest in her visit. This was not simply because of their shared centre-left vision. Far more important was the changing strategic outlook in Asia-Pacific. China, in particular, cast a long shadow over Gillard's Washington trip. It explains why she was so 'enthusiastic' about the prospect of improving US-

Australian strategic cooperation. It also explains why American officials, for their part, spoke of raising Australia's status. It was notable that Gillard stopped in Hawaii on her way home, in order to meet with Admiral Bob Willard, the head of the US Pacific Command.⁶⁸

Obama has never neglected regional security concerns in Asia. Although he has championed a world without nuclear weapons, he remains committed to extended nuclear deterrence so long as other powers have nuclear weapons and the non-proliferation regime is not sufficiently robust.⁶⁹ This attitude was obvious in his early dealings with the two Koreas. In 2009 North Korean sabre rattling pushed him towards a firmer embrace of America's East Asian allies. That June, Obama pledged a 'continuing commitment of extended deterrence, including the US nuclear umbrella' to defend South Korea – a statement in response both to North Korea's second nuclear test and Japan's unease about the strength of Obama's resolve.⁷⁰

The China challenge is of a different order and type, however. It is plainly much greater than the threat posed by North Korea. Seen in a broader historical context, it is also much subtler than the danger posed by the Soviet Union, the last major power threat to Washington's interests. During the Cold War, Washington agreed with its allies that the Soviet Union posed a clear danger on at least two different levels. One was its communist ideology, which held an attraction to many newly independent countries as they pushed for rapid modernisation. The other was its hard military power, both its large conventional forces situated in the heart of Europe and its growing nuclear arsenal. At the same time Washington could often rely on the Soviet Union's bluster and clumsiness to help it through tough patches. For instance, whenever the Truman administration was struggling to gain domestic support for measures that would strengthen its alliances, Moscow seemed to come to its rescue – from the Marshall Plan, which sailed through Congress in the wake of Czech coup in 1948, to the expensive military aid programs, which only gathered congressional approval in the aftermath of the Korean War two years later.

Compared to the Soviet Union at the start of the Cold War, the current China problem is much more complex. Unlike the Soviet Union, whose autarkic economy kept out overt Western penetration, China is now firmly embedded in the global economic order. In fact, the Chinese and American economies are so entwined that, as Hugh White observes, 'there is an economic "balance of terror" between them: neither side can do anything that damages the other's economy without doing at least as much harm to its own', although the United States is increasingly in the more vulnerable position of the two.⁷¹ Moreover, unlike the Soviet Union, whose leaders and diplomats seemed to revel in antagonising the West, Chinese diplomacy has been comparatively restrained. Indeed, although China lacks the soft-power attractiveness of the United States – or even the Soviet Union at certain points of the Cold War – in the period before the financial crisis China even showed signs of adopting

‘constructive’ policies toward problems such as North Korea, the Sudan, and Somali piracy.⁷² Finally, unlike the Cold War, where many allies in Western Europe and East Asia shared Washington’s hard-line anti-communism, now these same partners are not always keen to get caught in the middle of a bout of intense competition between the United States and China.

All of these developments have pushed in the direction of continued engagement. As Hillary Clinton declared in Melbourne last November, ‘We’re actually working to build a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship with China.’ Nonetheless, Washington is concerned. ‘China is developing and fielding large numbers of advanced medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles’, concluded the United States’ 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, ‘new attack submarines equipped with advanced weapons, increasingly capable long-range air defense systems, electronic warfare and computer network attack capabilities, advanced fighter aircraft, and counterspace systems.’ More specifically, Washington analysts have started to worry about China’s ability to impose and sustain ‘a blockade against Taiwan, barring US and allied intervention.’⁷³

As well as these growing capabilities, Washington has also become concerned by Beijing’s actions. In the economic sphere, Obama’s spokesmen have become increasingly vocal about what they see as Beijing’s artificial devaluing of its currency. On the diplomatic stage, Beijing stage-managed Obama’s 2009 visit ‘in a way that minimized Obama’s effect on his Chinese audience and complicated things for him with his American audience.’ Off China’s coasts, the United States has grown worried about the way China comports itself in the South China Sea. China snubbed former Defense Secretary Robert Gates and has been excessively touchy about matters such as meetings with the Dalai Lama and Taiwan arms sales. Perhaps most troubling from Washington’s perspective is China’s refusal to take a broad view of its relationship with North Korea, exemplified by its decision to shield Pyongyang from criticism in the UN Security Council last year over the sinking of the South Korean corvette the *Cheonan*.⁷⁴

Given its concern over such incidents, Washington has also moved to strengthen its old Asian alliance commitments. Obama has now made two major trips to Asia, which included significant stopovers in Seoul and Tokyo.

Seen in this light, Gillard’s meeting with the US Pacific Commander is only one piece of a larger mosaic. American thinking about Pacific defence is clearly changing. Although still keen to emphasise that the United States hopes to work with China, senior Pentagon officials are now stating openly that the PRC’s ‘military modernization efforts, its opaquely defined long-term strategic intentions, and questions about the development of its anti-access and area-denial capabilities’ are all causes for ‘concern’. The US ‘defence posture in Asia is shifting’, Gates declared in June 2010, ‘to

one that is more geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable’ – a statement with implications for the US-Australia alliance.⁷⁵

Indeed, although still at an early stage, Australia is clearly starting to loom larger in the Pentagon’s new mental map. In November 2010 the Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) decided to establish a force posture working group to explore ‘options for enhanced joint defence cooperation on Australian soil.’ As more US naval ships cruise the region, they will inevitably conduct more exercises with Australia. As the US military ‘pre-positions’ supplies in areas such as Darwin, it will use Australia as a base to provide speedier disaster relief and for other purposes. In public, both Washington and Canberra deny they are seeking to balance against China. But off the record, officials admit that the US-Australian discussions now revolve around ‘the rise of China and, as China rises, what sort of force it is going to be in the world.’⁷⁶

Many Australians seem comfortable with these plans to strengthen the alliance. Recent Lowy Institute polling has found that more than 80 per cent of Australians think the US alliance is very or fairly important for Australia’s security, with almost 60 per cent saying it is very important. With discussions underway between Canberra and Washington for ‘more U.S. force training on Australian soil, more port visits, disaster relief cooperation, and a greater U.S. regional naval presence’, Australians also seem happy with an enhanced American presence. According to the same survey, 55 per cent of Australians are even in favour of ‘Australia allowing the United States to base US military forces here in Australia.’⁷⁷

In short, then, Obama now places a far greater emphasis on alliances, including the Australian alliance. Despite his campaign liberalism, Obama has always been a pragmatist. In power, his views have slowly evolved, just as his attention has gradually shifted. When his secretary of state proclaims that the ‘relationship between Australia and China, between the US and China, and among the three of us is one of the most consequential that we have’, she is speaking on his behalf. This triangular relationship is of course unequal, both in terms of raw power and threat perceptions. At present, neither Washington nor Canberra is willing to use their alliance simply to balance against Beijing; instead, they both talk optimistically about working with the new China. But while hoping for the best, the United States and Australia are also tentatively starting to prepare for the worst.

It is a trend that is likely to continue. Optimists, it is true, can point to countervailing trends. They stress the lessening of tension between mainland China and Taiwan, defusing what had long been the most likely spark of a major confrontation between the United States and China. And they emphasise the economic interdependence between America and China, not to mention the ‘institutionalised cooperation’ between Washington and Beijing. Yet both states also have militaries geared towards

thinking in terms of a traditional security dilemma. When faced with threats, Americans have a tendency to see the worst in an opponent. In such situations, presidents who try to embrace complexity are invariably accused of lacking a strategy. Democratic presidents, in particular, are vulnerable to charges of softness and appeasement. Few American leaders win kudos by trying to understand the dilemmas of their opponent – in this case, China’s defensive motives or its desire to wield power commensurate with its size. American elites are likely to equate China’s growth with a looming threat – helped along, of course, by a Chinese leadership which tacks constantly between uncertainty and arrogance. If so, then Obama, for all his early coolness towards alliances, will seek to develop even greater ties with Canberra. This gloomy prospect for the region therefore promises a bright future for the US-Australia alliance as it enters its seventh decade.

Conclusion

The founders of America’s modern alliance system were hard-headed liberals. Like Obama, Roosevelt and Truman recognised the importance of alliances to meet international threats. Indeed, just as the US-Australia alliance is currently being reenergised by a shared sense of the looming Chinese challenge, so the original relationship forged by Roosevelt and Curtin and then Truman and Menzies was based on mutual self-interest. In the 1940s and 1950s, while the Australians wanted American help to protect them against Japan in the wake of Britain’s decline, the Americans needed Australia as a base in the Pacific War and then the Cold War.

Like Obama, these hard-headed liberals often had a crowded policy agenda. With their ambitious domestic agendas, Roosevelt, Truman, and now Obama have each been vulnerable to the charge of giving insufficient attention to certain parts of the world. Australia, for instance, found it just as hard to get Roosevelt and Truman to focus on its security concerns in 1942-43 and 1950-51 as it has to lure Obama to its shores in 2009-11.

Yet, ultimately, overriding security threats drove these presidents towards forging and maintaining strong alliance networks. Although this in turn often meant giving a lower priority to issues closer to their heart, such as economic modernisation, their liberalism also left them well placed to manage alliances. True, they might often be distracted. They might also pursue certain policies that make their allies uncomfortable. But with their basic belief that alliances empower rather than constrain, and their willingness to listen as well as lead, they have all left America’s alliances in a stronger position. Obama fits snugly in this tradition.

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