

Peter Edwards
US alliance in regular need of assessment
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The Australian attitude to the American alliance is like the old British joke about the weather; everyone complains but no one does anything about it.

We all think we are expert critics of the US and the American alliance, but we are reluctant to put the hard work into understanding the Americans and ensuring that the alliance works in our interests.

As a historian, I think the best way to understand where we are and where we are likely to go is to take a careful look at where we have been. A fresh look at Australia's strategic relationship with the US since president Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet visited in 1908 shows that some important episodes have been misunderstood or overlooked.

For instance, we are often told of the relationship between prime minister John Curtin and Douglas MacArthur during the Pacific war, but we seldom hear of the occasion when the general bluntly told Curtin that the American attitude to Australia in 1942 was similar to the American attitude to Kyrgyzstan today.

Australia, MacArthur said, was simply a convenient location for a US operational base, from which the Americans would move on when military circumstances permitted.

We often hear about Robert Menzies committing Australian forces to Vietnam and Harold Holt saying that he was "all the way with LBJ", but we seldom hear about the sharp differences between two successive foreign ministers of that era, Garfield Barwick and Paul Hasluck, over the management of the American alliance.

For an alliance between two democratic nations to endure for more than a half-century, it must have the support of governments and public opinion in both countries. Since the ANZUS Treaty was signed in 1951, the US government and American public opinion generally have been supportive, with the exception of some delicate moments in the 1970s.

Australian governments have always wanted to maintain the alliance, whatever their leaders may say in private or may have said when in Opposition.

The potentially weak link in the chain has usually been Australian public opinion.

There has always been one element of Australian public opinion that believes no price is too high for the American alliance because it is a sort of magical talisman that can save us from fearful evils, as it did in the 1940s.

On the other side, there is an element that believes all Americans are imperialistic warmongers, with whom we should have no dealings.

After years of argument, most Australians reject those extremes. They want to keep the alliance in place, but they also want to be assured that our leaders are managing it in Australia's national interests, not merely offering obsequious support as the premium for a strategic insurance policy.

During the past 50 years, Australian governments have used five main arguments to convince the Australian public that the alliance should be maintained. Four have been used for decades, the fifth is relatively new.

The most important is the strategic guarantee, the idea that in the event of serious challenge the two nations will stand side by side.

The other arguments all relate to privileged access.

Deeply embedded in our strategic culture is the idea that the alliance gives us access to key policy-makers, so that we can influence American policies while those policies are still being formed. We have also been told that we are granted exceptional access to the highest levels of American intelligence, as well as to American defence science and technology, by far the most advanced in the world.

And in the past year or so we have been told that, as a reward for our alliance loyalty, we have been granted special access to the American market under the free trade agreement.

According to the politics of the time, these arguments have waxed and waned in prominence in official statements. All are strong arguments, but none should be accepted at face value. They need to be debated openly and frankly.

Where could this debate take place? Remarkably, we do not have an institution dedicated to serious analysis of the Australian-US alliance and the broader bilateral relationship. Governments have established bodies such as the Australia-China Council and the Australia-Indonesia Institute to promote bilateral relations with about a half-dozen of our main Asian partners, but nothing comparable on the American relationship.

Universities in the 1990s competed to establish research institutes on Asia and Australian-Asian relations, but the only institute on Australian-American relations was allowed to founder. Institutions such as the Australian-American Leadership Dialogue and the Australian-American Association play useful roles, but none tackles some crucially important tasks.

No one, for instance, commissions substantial analyses of potential challenges to the Australian-American relationship. Nor is there an annual state of the alliance assessment. The country would benefit from a regular conference, similar to the annual shareholders' meeting of a corporation, in which the managers of the alliance — the relevant agencies of government — would report to the shareholders (the electorate) on the performance of the Australian political capital that has been invested in the alliance.

Perhaps some new institution may be formed or an existing institution — a university, a think tank, a non-governmental organisation or a parliamentary committee — may see something in those ideas and use them as the basis for some constructive action.

We should get beyond treating the Australian-American relationship as if it were an instrument of unmitigated good or evil. We should see it as a continuing political institution whose past performance and future challenges must constantly be reassessed. That would be the best way of ensuring that it serves Australia's interests for the next 50 years.

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