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**In friendship's sphere**  
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Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, the British prime minister Winston Churchill visited the United States to confer with his new ally, President Franklin D. Roosevelt. While in Washington, he stayed at the White House (the twentieth century equivalent of bunking at the ranch in Crawford, Texas).

The two countries were preparing to sign the document pitting the Allies against the Axis, and they needed a name for the alliance. On New Year's Day 1942, FDR had a stroke of inspiration: they would call it the "United Nations". People sometimes forget this: before the UN was an organisation, it was an alliance.

Roosevelt was keen to share his idea with Churchill. Wheeling himself into the PM's bedroom, however, he was shocked to find Churchill in the bathtub. "Oh, I'm sorry Winston, I'll come back later", he said. Churchill rose like a sea monster from the bathtub and stood before FDR, naked, pink, plump and dripping. "Please stay", he replied. "The prime minister of Great Britain has nothing to hide from the president of the United States!"

This moment in the Second World War probably marked the apogee of the Anglo-American relationship. Today there is a determined movement among some Anglophone sentimentalists to revive this union and extend it into an "Anglosphere".

The Anglosphere argument is put forward by a number of prominent people, notably Conrad Black, the Canadian-born peer and former media magnate; Robert Conquest, the distinguished Anglo-American historian; and James Bennett, an internet entrepreneur. It goes something like this: there is a group of countries which have so much in common – language, culture and values, democratic traditions, political and legal institutions, even a developed spirit of entrepreneurialism – that they should form some sort of closer association.

The details of the Anglosphere are a little fuzzy. Which countries should it include? Its advocates are careful not to define it exclusively as the white bits of the old British empire, but there is little doubt that such countries would be at its core. For Bennett, for example, the United States and United Kingdom are the Anglosphere's "nodes"; the Anglophone regions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and South Africa are its "outliers"; and the educated English-speaking populations of the Caribbean, Oceania, Africa and India constitute its "frontiers".

What form of association should it take? Different Anglospherists have different takes on this. Conquest suggests it should be "weaker than a federation, but stronger than an alliance". Bennett envisages an open and non-exclusive arrangement that he calls a "Network Commonwealth", which may incorporate co-operative institutions, coalitions of the willing, and even sojourner provisions in national immigration laws making it easier for residents to travel and live throughout the Anglosphere. Black has a more modest proposal: that Britain decline to sign up to the European political and juridical union and join NAFTA instead.

This sort of clubby thinking is not new, of course. It motivated Victorians such as Cecil Rhodes, and indeed the chief theme of Churchill's public life was the need for what he called a "fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples". It has re-emerged now because of the lack of an agreed organising principle for the international system in the aftermath of the Cold War. As Michael Ignatieff puts it: "For fifty years the West defined itself against the Rest. Now that the Cold War is over, what remains of the West?" The anvil on which this question has been beaten most recently is, of course, the war in Iraq.

As a Western country located in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia is regarded as something of a test case for the Anglosphere. Our movements are watched with interest, although not always with accuracy. In 1996, for example, the noted commentator Samuel P. Huntington claimed that Australia had decided to "defect from the West, redefine itself as an Asian

society, and cultivate close ties with its geographical neighbours.” Late last year, in the aftermath of Iraq, a former assistant to and biographer of President George W. Bush reached an entirely different conclusion. David Frum wrote in the London *Daily Telegraph* that “the Anglo-Australian-American alliance can guarantee not only the peace of the world, but also liberty and human rights.” This is an extraordinary shift over the course of a single decade! Of course, both statements are equally wrong – but they emphasise the need for Australians to think critically about the concept.

The fact is the Anglosphere is flawed as a foreign policy tool, for at least three reasons.

First, history tells us that states make decisions primarily on the basis of their national interests, and cultural and historical factors are only of secondary importance. Iraq provides a modern example of this. While the US drew significant support for its actions from Britain and Australia, the countries bringing up the rear were not sorted by civilisation: Anglospheric countries such as Canada and New Zealand failed to fall into line while Spain and Poland marched in lockstep, at least initially.

In this context, the Second World War example is, in my view, overplayed by advocates of Anglospherism. It is true, of course, that during the war British and American affairs were thoroughly entangled: high policy was relatively well co-ordinated, and joint committees and combined boards regulated many everyday activities. Nevertheless, significant differences existed on vital issues such as the timing and location of the cross-Channel invasion, the role of China, free trade versus imperial preferences, and the fate of the colonial empires. Moreover, the Anglo-American condominium declined markedly in the aftermath of the war. Owen Harries has reminded us, for example, of the Suez Crisis of 1956, in which the US publicly denounced Britain and France for trying to seize the Canal back from Gamal Abdel Nasser. This was only a decade after the end of the war – and the people who had run the Allied war effort still ran the world!

There are, of course, many other instances of interests trumping civilisational or ideological sentiment, for example the execrable 1939 pact between German fascism and Russian communism and Nixon’s 1972 recognition of Beijing at the expense of Taipei. Another example from within the Anglosphere was Britain’s decision – much to the consternation of Commonwealth politicians who had grown used to a special economic relationship with the mother country – to join the European Economic Community in 1973.

There is no reason to think that Anglospheric ties would have greater salience now – particularly given the changes to the makeup of the populations of countries within its borders. This is the second weakness in this rather dusty argument. The post-war waves of immigration to countries such as the United States, Britain and Australia have diluted their Anglocentric cultures even as they have enlivened cultural ties to other parts of the world. In other words, it may not seem intuitive for a Mexican-American in California or for a Vietnamese-Australian in Cabramatta to gaze towards Whitehall for political succour.

And this foreshadows the final flaw in the Anglospherist thesis: it ignores the gravitational pull of regionalism. Each of the US, Britain and Australia is located on the edge of a region which is occupying a greater share of the national mind. The US is being pulled southwards towards Mexico; the UK is being pulled eastwards towards Europe; and Australia is being pulled northwards towards Asia and the Pacific. It is entirely appropriate that these countries should put a priority on improving relations with the region in which they are located – and this regional push will properly affect the strength of extra-regional ties.

For these reasons, the Anglosphere is not a useful organising principle for the world – or for Australian foreign policy. That is not to say, of course, that the triangular relationship between the US, Britain and Australia is not valuable, and for all points of the triangle. It is hugely important. In the realms of defence, intelligence and foreign policy, these relationships are significant for all parties. ANZUS and the UK-USA intelligence-sharing agreement are two of the fruits of the trilateral vine and both constitute major national assets for this country.

However, there are different roles that a small country such as Australia can play even within the context of a strong triangular relationship. A persuasive argument can be made that urging prudence and restraint on a hegemonic ally is sometimes in the interest of all parties – including the hegemon. Even while seated on a bandwagon, Harries has reminded us, one can “perform the valuable function of urging the need for careful steering and a judicious use of brakes.”

Furthermore, it is important that in focusing our foreign policy binoculars on our long-distance Anglospheric partners, we don’t miss developments in the near distance. Engagement with our own Asia-Pacific region has been a great, decades-long, bipartisan national enterprise – and it is critical to maintain it. If the Anglosphere is ever seen as a strategic alternative to regional engagement, we are in trouble.

Finally, on a hopeful note: the triangular relationship is long-lasting and strong, and transcends personalities and political parties. Of course, it is true that the appeal of what Robert Menzies called “our great and powerful friends” is fixed more firmly in the DNA of the conservative side of politics. However, the initial shift in emphasis from Britain to the United States in December 1941 was, of course, engineered by a Labor prime minister, John Curtin, and his successors have put a high premium on our traditional alliances. Regardless of the outcome of elections this year in the US and Australia, and in Britain in 2005 or 2006 – irrespective of the various combinations of the Rubik’s cube of leadership that exists in the three countries – close relations will endure. The reason lies in their value. As Churchill is reputed to have said: “the only thing worse than having allies is not having them.”

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