

Ties to the US are worth cherishing

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Yesterday the US Left won an important victory. This is a good time, then, to examine the Australian Left's approach to the US and to our alliance with that country.

Sometimes it seems the alliance does not need defending, except from a few on the Right who are in danger of loving it to death. Generally, left-wing critics stop short of advocating its junking altogether. In his diary Mark Latham described the alliance as "the last manifestation of the White Australia mentality" (a conclusion that must have surprised Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice). However, Latham was an outlier: usually the alliance's opponents are too timid to follow their arguments through to their logical conclusion.

Usually they say, "I'm not opposed to the alliance, but ...", then they suggest an alternative approach that doesn't sound like an alliance at all but the kind of polite, arm's-length relationship that two states might have if they were not mixed up with each other: say, Switzerland and Solomon Islands.

An alliance denotes more than that. It requires that you support your ally on the hard cases, as Australia did by helping the Americans eject Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991 and the Taliban from Afghanistan in 2002, over the opposition in both cases of much of the Australian Left. It does not require that we follow our ally reflexively, and indeed sometimes the best assistance we can provide is to counsel caution. Our alliance with Washington would certainly have survived had we opted out of the witless blunder of the Iraq war. Nevertheless, an alliance is a serious matter and carries obligations not only for policy-makers but for citizens, who should avoid the temptation to put the worst possible interpretation on American conduct. Our attitude need not be "my ally, right or wrong", but neither should it be "anyone but my ally".

Why, then, is the alliance in Australia's national interest? The usual rationales include the promise we will be protected from a strategic threat, unlikely though that may be; the interactions with US military forces and their technologies that keep the Australian Defence Force sharp; and the intelligence that helps Australian leaders make sense of the world. All these are important but they are hardly sufficient to explain a half-century of consistent practice.

The larger benefit is that through our alliance we have access to, and sometimes the ability to influence, the sole superpower and thereby contribute to global security. Even after its Iraq folly the US has extraordinary reach: it is the only country with a truly global foreign policy. Each day every foreign minister in the world wonders at least once: "What does Washington think about this?" Solutions to the world's pressing problems involve the Americans. All Australian prime ministers have sought to use the privileged access afforded by the alliance to affect US policy on issues that matter to us.

In recent years these advantages have been obscured for many progressives by the Bush administration's emphasis on unilateralism, pre-emption and regime change. However, despite the predictions of most commentators, US policy has been moderated in the past three years, as seen by Washington's offer to negotiate directly with Iran and its UN diplomacy on North Korea. In any case the policies of a particular president should not be conflated with the merits of an established alliance. The public understands this distinction: this year's Lowy Institute poll reveals that although 69 per cent of Australians believe we take too much notice of the US in our foreign policy, 70 per cent believe the alliance is very or fairly important for our security.

If the alliance serves the general national interest, it also deserves the support of progressives, who value international institutions, believe in human rights and champion Australian activism in foreign policy.

The US played the leading role in the establishment of most of the institutions of global order and it remains critical to their success. When President George W. Bush turned away from the UN, the Left demanded that Washington operate multilaterally, not unilaterally. Now it is doing just that on the most difficult security issues. If we want the US to value its alliances, we must be valuable allies. If we want the US to work through multilateral means, we must ensure multilateralism works, which means engaging the US, not opposing it at every turn.

The US has surely committed its share of sins against human rights. Abu Ghraib and Camp X-Ray, for example, involved unacceptable violations of individual liberties (as well as offences against American self-interest). But to focus disproportionately on these transgressions -- or to compare them with the gulags that the US helped close when it defeated the murderous Soviet regime -- is bloody-mindedness. How many countries have done more than the US to promote human rights? Before you answer, think of Washington's direct human rights advocacy (a category of diplomacy that Australia seems not to go in for these days), the operations it has led to protect innocent populations (such as the 1999 Kosovo war), and its provision of a global umbrella of security and prosperity under which rights have a chance of being protected.

Finally, an alliance with a like-minded superpower is a pragmatic move for a middle power such as Australia that is intent on improving the world. This helps to explain why the alliance has always featured in Labor foreign policy: why every Labor prime minister since John Curtin has supported it and tried to use it to Australia's advantage.

Unlike Britain, Australia is not a member of the Security Council, the Group of Eight, the nuclear weapons club or NATO. To influence events, we need to use all the means at our disposal, including working closely with our neighbours and international institutions, but also dealing skillfully with the Americans. The alternative is to turn away from the compromises of global politics, but those of us who want to make progress on issues such as climate change and non-proliferation should be the last ones to advocate that.

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