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Why the US alliance is a good deal
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The Duke of Marlborough is supposed to have said that in every alliance one party wears the boots and the spurs while the other wears the saddle.

John Langmore (Opinion, 9/1) appears to agree – at least in relation to the alliance between the United States and Australia. In Langmore's view, Australia is being ridden: we are mere beasts, obedient carriers, with no say in the direction we take, getting nothing much from the experience but a rash.

The past week has been a good one for critics of the alliance, with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice canceling her long-planned visit here for security and climate change talks. This is not the first time Rice has withdrawn from an important Asia-Pacific event and it has caused understandable anger in Canberra.

It comes at the end of a period in which the alliance was placed under considerable strain by the Bush Administration's first term foreign policies, in particular the ill-judged Iraq war. For the first time in decades the alliance was a matter of serious domestic debate. The then opposition leader (and potential prime minister) Mark Latham diarised that it was 'the last manifestation of the White Australia policy.'

We are entering a period that will be marked by a different kind of challenge, the growing competition between the US and China. Given the clip at which the Chinese economy is currently growing, it is likely that at some point our great strategic ally will be at odds with our most important economic partner.

It's the right time, then, to enquire after the alliance's strategic value. Shared history, democratic habits, cultural tastes and all the rest of it are not sufficient weight-bearers. We should be as focused on our national interests as the Americans are on theirs.

According to that measure, the benefits of the alliance outweigh its costs – resoundingly so.

First, the alliance contains within it the promise that the United States would protect us from a major strategic threat. This would be a deterrent – or at least a significant obstacle – for any potential adversary.

Second, it provides a rare level of access to US defence technologies and, in particular, the products of its intelligence agencies. Intelligence is an easy mark these days. However the failure to find WMD in Iraq doesn't undermine the importance of intelligence so much as the folly of politicizing it. The steady flow of US intelligence estimates available to the inner alliance partners of Britain, Canada and Australia (and to a much lesser extent, New Zealand) is of substantial value to policy makers.

Third, the alliance brings us influence on – or at least access to – the global hegemon. This is particularly the case in relation to our part of the world: US approaches to Indonesia, for instance, or events in the South Pacific. As the leading historian of the alliance, Peter Edwards, notes in his recent survey *Permanent Friends?*, sometimes Australians have elbowed their way into the big Washington offices and found themselves with nothing of interest to say. But that is the fault of those leaders, not a defect of the alliance. Paul Keating's conversion of Bill Clinton to the cause of APEC leaders meetings showed the power of a good idea, presented by a good friend.

Critics say the Americans take us for granted, and some of them do. But most administrations understand the strategic value the US derives from the alliance. For Australia, the US is a powerful ally. For the US, Australia is a reliable ally: the only country to fight beside the US in every major conflict of the 20th and 21st centuries.

America's wrong-headed misadventure in Iraq does not wipe out the credit it deserves for the provision of international public goods since the close of WWII – or indeed for the security contribution it makes now. In our own region, US power – in the form of GIs deployed in South Korea and Japan and the US Navy's Pacific Fleet – keeps a lid on interstate friction. In the Middle East, it is only the threat of US force that gives the international community any chance of talking Tehran out of its nuclear weapons ambitions. By allying ourselves to the US, then, we contribute to global security as well as our own.

There are costs to the alliance, of course: anything that is valuable has a price. It complicates aspects of our diplomatic life, for example in parts of Muslim South-East Asia, though on balance it increases our prestige in most of the world's councils. It probably increases our visibility in the eyes of terrorists. There are other costs, too, but often they are overstated because critics conflate alliance management in general with the conduct of a particular federal government.

Sometimes it is awkward for a middle power to be allied to a great power, notably when the great power is acting rashly. For this reason the pursuit of a more moderate international course by Washington in the past year or so is good news for Australia. It should allow us to see the alliance relationship more clearly: if not equal, then certainly invaluable.

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