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National obsession with change belies our position

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We cannot choose to ignore the realities of our region, writes Allan Gyngell.

Since the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 and in Bali a year later, a number of different debates have taken place about Australia's position in the world. One relates to whether we should seek preferential agreements with our main trading partners or throw our weight behind the multilateral system.

Another is the way our defence force should be structured; for the defence of Australia or to facilitate participation in future coalitions of the willing. A third is the importance and relevance of international law and institutions such as the United Nations. A fourth is the relative importance of Asia and the United States in our foreign policy.

For the most part, these debates are played out in different arenas, drawing on different teams of players, and with different crowds applauding or heckling from the sidelines. On the surface little ties them together but each has emerged from the same sense that the world is now profoundly different. After the Bali bombings, Australian foreign and security policy had "changed utterly", proclaimed one academic commentator in this newspaper recently. Even the normally cautious prime minister has been in on the act. "Nobody should underestimate how much the world changed on September 11, 2001," he has said.

Anyone familiar with the rhetoric of Australian foreign policy is entitled to be a bit sceptical about such claims. It is hard to find a time over the past 50 years when we haven't stepped out onto the national front veranda, narrowed our eyes against the glare and detected great uncertainty.

This propensity to see change rather than continuity in the international environment is a striking feature of our approach to foreign policy. It seems to stem from something in our national character beyond any simple fear of dispossession held by a small population occupying a large landmass.

The international situation is always fluid and unpredictable. Even during periods of relative stability in the central balance, such as we saw during the Cold War, developments as transformative as European decolonisation or as unexpected as the oil price shocks of the 1970s keep reshaping the international environment.

Yet it is hard to deny that something genuinely big is happening now. The emergence of the US as the sole superpower, the technological and economic transformation that we lump together as globalisation, and the galvanising political impact of terrorism mark this out as a particularly critical period. More than at any time since the Vietnam War, foreign policy seems to have inserted itself into the political consciousness of the nation.

But acknowledging that change is happening isn't enough. We need to ask how it affects the way Australia needs to act. Should we stick like a limpet to the global hegemon? Strike out in an independent way?

At the core of the answer lies the question of geography. We have already heard mutterings that the old debates about where Australia fits into the world are no longer relevant. That the familiar narrative we have been telling ourselves for decades now about Australia's slow coming to terms with the countries of its own region has become stale and irrelevant. Or, even more starkly, that it was never much more than an ideological construct imposed by a narrow elite.

The argument goes that technology is eating away at the importance of geography. That the various things technology has made possible from economic globalisation to stand-off weapons to transnational terrorism have catapulted Australia into a new era in which proximity is no longer paramount. Some of the arguments used for our involvement in the Iraq war drew upon such thinking.

And it is true that technology has radically changed many aspects of international relations and the way Australia must act in the world to protect its security and ensure its prosperity. But it has no more sidelined geography than it has ended business cycles.

Australia is not powerful enough to impose its will on the world or even on its own region. Anyone who doubts that should look again at the scale of the diplomatic effort we had to put into the successful Timor operation or the intensive preparations for our recent action in the Solomon Islands.

Our success or failure in shaping the world will always depend heavily on our ability to leverage our influence through diplomacy. And, in the way these things go, the places where our diplomacy will always have most clout are in the region around us. However dramatic the changes in the global environment may be, the realities of our place in the world frustrating, difficult and complex continue to impose themselves upon us.