

Risks of US alliance rising as value falls

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In San Francisco this week, Australian and American leaders are marking the 60th anniversary of the US alliance. For Australia, they have been good decades. Indeed, the US alliance has served Australia so well, for so long, that it has come to be seen by many as an irreducible feature of Australian strategic policy.

Yet this is a dangerous assumption. As Canberra and Washington celebrate their historic partnership, it's important to remember that the origin of the alliance lies in the disastrous failure of Australia's earlier alliance, with Britain, which was also seen at the time as a permanent and unlimited security blanket.

The analogy is telling. In 1920s and '30s, Canberra's unwillingness to reckon with the decline of Britain and the rise of Japan — in particular, its failure to bolster Australia's navy and air force to account for Britain's diminished power — brought about the most acute crisis Australia has faced to this day. By 1942, Japanese forces had overrun Singapore and commenced bombing operations on the Australian mainland.

The episode should have served as a sobering lesson for Canberra about the dangers of over-relying on another country. But that lesson was never learnt. Instead, Australia got lucky. The US arrived, vanquished Japan and resumed where Britain left off.

Australia, meanwhile, spared from reckoning with the consequences of its own shortsightedness, settled quickly back into the comfortable habits of dependence that have defined its strategic policy ever since.

Today, as Asia goes through its next upheaval, Australia's instincts are unchanged. After more than 60 years, Canberra remains devoted to its smallpower mentality, clinging to a great and powerful friend and hoping for the best.

New US military bases in Australia, which are to be announced this week, are symptomatic of this approach. For many Australians, an enhanced US presence in Australia is a beguiling prospect. Not only is it seen as a welcome symbol of Washington's enduring strength and resolve, but also as a more tangible expression of US strategic commitment.

The reality is somewhat different. In fact, Washington's sudden interest in Australian real estate says less about its resilience than its relative decline. In particular, the quest for new bases reflects the way in which China's growing power has already begun hollowing out US military dominance, pushing back the boundaries of US primacy.

The logic is straightforward. Since US bases further north — in Japan, South Korea and Guam — face an increasing risk from Chinese missiles, these bases no longer constitute an indefinitely reliable sanctuary from which the US can project power.

The countries of south-east Asia offer no viable alternative. They also lie within China's military reach, and in any case are too shrewd to be prematurely enlisted in America's strategic plans at the risk of upsetting China.

So Washington is now looking to Australia, especially to the north and west of the country, to consolidate US dominance in the Indian Ocean as a way of offsetting the shifting military balance in the Pacific.

Yet this is not necessarily cost or risk-free for Australia, and Canberra needs to be attuned to the potential dangers. Because such bases are likely to feature prominently in US contingencies aimed at throttling China's energy supply from the Indian Ocean, they will inevitably beckon Chinese attention. In this regard, they may create an incentive for Beijing, however muted at first, to target Australia's own neighbourhood or territory, even if that takes a decade or so to happen. This would involve Beijing either expanding the number and range of its missiles or deploying them further afield and within range of US bases in Australia, much as it already does with other US bases across the region.

US military basing entails political risks as well. While Australia already hosts a small number of joint facilities, a more extensive basing arrangement risks imposing further strictures on Canberra's ability to avoid becoming entangled in any crisis between the US and China, including one in which Australia has potentially no direct interest and which its fortuitous geography — remote from north-east Asia, beyond an archipelagic screen — might otherwise allow it to avoid.

In this regard, Washington is being clever. It is taking full advantage of Australia's current strategic dependence, locking in Canberra's political and military support early, thereby minimising the possibility of any future Australian realignment.

In short, Australia today finds itself in an uncomfortably familiar situation, though one it would prefer to ignore. The costs and risks of Australia's alliance are going up as the value of the alliance is coming down.

Meanwhile, there are faint echoes of the 1930s: a more adversarial system is taking shape in our region, and Canberra, preoccupied with its alliance, is badly neglecting preparations for contingencies in which it may have to go it alone.

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