

## **It's our chance to align with the US pivot point**

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The Australian

15 November 2011

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``Pivot point"-- expect to hear these words more than once during US President Barack Obama's speeches in Australia.

It's more than a catchy diplomatic mantra. This is the week we will see the US declare unequivocally it is turning to face its Asian future.

The words Obama chooses for saying this will carry meaning of deep importance to Australia's destiny as an Indo-Pacific nation.

A pivot signifies change -- a shift of strategic direction. But the word conveys continuity too. Australia's major ally is not disruptively leaping towards some faddish, unconsidered vision -- it is shifting focus in ways that make efficient use of its existing advantages.

As the economic and military rise of China and India brings new strategic uncertainty to Asia, the biggest global power is reorienting its still-formidable military and diplomatic weight. From the muddles of Afghanistan and Iraq, Washington is fixing its attention on maritime Asian powers that are succeeding only too well in accumulating economic heft, military might and security tensions.

As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has lately made plain, the US is bracing for an Asian or Asia-Pacific century.

But within this familiar Asia story there is a second, more sophisticated geographic pivot in play. Obama's speech to parliament on Thursday may well prove its defining moment.

This is the recognition of Asia as a grand Indo-Pacific strategic system. Such a transformed way of seeing the world is mapped in large measure by China's understandable need for energy, resources and trade across the Indian Ocean, along with India's equally legitimate emergence as a Pacific power. It links the power of the East Asian economies with the Indian Ocean region's resources, shipping routes and problems, from piracy to political and environmental fragility.

Australia is an Indo-Pacific nation and has barely begun to test its capacity within this frame. A window now exists to redefine our external policies, in step with Washington's pivot and the wider changes in how the world is seen by Asian capitals.

These are not only Beijing and New Delhi, but also Jakarta, Tokyo, Seoul, Hanoi and Singapore, all of which are building ties with India, in some instances more convincingly than Canberra. Kevin Rudd may well encounter frustrations in his ambitious efforts at Indian Ocean regional diplomacy, especially at the all-too-inclusive Indian Ocean Rim Association meeting he is attending this week in Bangalore. This is more reason to begin building an Indian Ocean order with the US, India and a few other select partners: those with interests, capability and willingness to contribute.

This definition need not exclude China, although the relationship between political values and willingness to contribute needs prudent study.

With the mere mention of China, the matter of military posture -- Obama's third and most tangible pivot -- comes into play. As plenty of headlines have screamed, it seems the US Marines are bound for Darwin, at least for training and provisioning. And Australian government voices, notably that of

Defence Minister Stephen Smith, have long been trying to prime the public for the idea of more access and more regular visits by US ships and planes.

Whatever the details of Obama's announcement in Darwin, it is clear Australia will be part of a changing US distribution of forces, probably in stabilisation, disaster relief and humanitarian roles, where US and Australian troops may well find themselves working alongside their Chinese, Indian and other Asian counterparts.

But part of US thinking is about balancing China's growing military power and reassuring Washington's Asian allies it will help them deter forceful change to the regional order. Some observers reject this as containment, even while correctly lauding the idea of a regional balance of forces where no player can coerce at will. They suggest that adjusting the alliance -- and showing readiness to contribute more -- will necessarily be bad for Australia, as if future strife in Asia were something we could otherwise avoid.

The reality is more subtle. China's growing capabilities are on track to giving it preponderant power along its contested maritime periphery -- so by definition the reaction to this is balancing, not containment. And Australia cannot wash its hands of a balancing strategy while maintaining a credible US alliance that already hosts communications facilities far more consequential to a China scenario than any number of US Marines.

After all, in recent years trade relations between Australia and China have boomed even while the strategic differences have become plainer. Whoever may be surprised by what Obama says this week, it won't be the leaders in Beijing.

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