

## Australia-China and the Rise of Pax-Sino: Where to Now?

Written by Strobe Driver

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Australia has sought to ensure it has long-term allies in the Asia-Pacific (A-P) region. This is due in no small part to the surprise attack on Darwin during World War Two (WWII)—an attack of ‘Pearl Harbor proportions’ which was shocking and incomprehensible to Australia [1] —and involvement in the Korean War via the United Nations. Incorporated within this came the germane, yet prevailing, belief that greater regional stability is the result of powerful regional allies. To ensure this remained ongoing, Australia entered into the ANZUS treaty, along with New Zealand (NZ) and the United States of America (US), in 1951. To be clear, the ANZUS treaty is not as strictly defined or worded as that of the treaties within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which the US helped construct in the Cold War era. NATO treaties specifically require ‘consultation and assistance’ to any signatory nation-state under attack, “including the use of armed force.” [2] The ANZUS treaty is not so rigid, and commits each country only to ‘consult’ should one be threatened and/or attacked, and does not specifically commit any country to use military force. [3] Australia, nevertheless, has shown its allegiance to its powerful ally, the US, in numerous ways since the end of the Korean War, with involvement in, and a generous commitment to, the Vietnam War; a naval commitment to the 1991 Persian Gulf War; and a ground commitment to the Afghanistan conflict as part of the International Security Assistance Force. This Force comprises a multi-national, NATO-driven, United Nations-approved assemblage of military and support forces, with the prime task of establishing an independent government in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This in turn will facilitate ‘improvements in governance and socio-economic development in order to provide a secure environment for sustainable [domestic] stability’.

There have also been other non-incursion commitments to US needs in the region, the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap, and inter-military exchanges and exercises of varying resources and degrees: the most recent being Exercise *Pitch Black* in northern Australia. [4] This is a biennial war exercise centring on offensive and counter-offensive and -air combat. The exercise is designed to bring together regional actors, such as Indonesia and Malaysian forces, including European (French and British) assets. However, at its core there is a desire by the US to ‘increase USAF [United States Air Force] interaction with regional partners and allies without significantly increasing the footprint [of] permanently-based [US] assets and personnel’, [5] which for all intents and purposes has the knock-on effect of maintaining an historic regional security apparatus. These abovementioned have contributed to creating a binding and mutually beneficial US-Australia relationship with the outcome of the US maintaining a core presence in the A-P, whether it be through mechanisms of pressuring for increased aircraft rotation through Australian bases,[6] or initiating a by proxy arrangement: using Australia as a ‘lily-pad’ for American military planning and preponderance. This is colloquially known as ‘piggybacking of an allied country’s facilities’ [7] in order to enhance their strategic footprint.

Australia in recent times has upgraded ties to the US and deliberately embarked upon a strategy of creating ever-closer bonds in order to signal to the region its position has changed; and that the US has become a more ‘valued’ ally. Since 2011, consecutive Australian governments have proactively pursued these ties with a considered urgency, due to a recognition that China is on the ‘rise’, Indonesia is increasing ties with China, and the slippage of Australia from a superior power in the region to that of an equal power is understood. Notwithstanding, the deep-seated mistrust Australian governments’ have historically shown to Australia’s near-neighbours. One of the reasons the General Dynamics F1-11 aircraft were purchased by Australia in the 1970s was that it could strike Jakarta and

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return. There also remains an omnipresent threat of an homogeneous 'yellow-peril' to the north and northwest being ready to pounce. This long term underpinning of the Australian psyche is also part of the reason Australia is seeking US munificence to allay the military 'rise of China', and moreover, this has been further exacerbated by the US having been panicked into reacting to a renewed Chinese presence in the A-P region. Hence, an upgraded presence, of US marine rotations, which was initially put in place by Defence Minister Stephen Smith [8] during the Rudd government, the continual acquiescence of the Gillard government to this program, [9] and the ongoing clambering for greater US positioning by the Abbott government has succeeded in sending signals to China in the first instance, and Indonesia in the second, that Australia remains the belligerent, non-inclusive, xenophobic, middle-power of the A-P. As insulting as this is toward China, Indonesia, and a myriad of other countries in the region, it has also allowed another message to be sent—unless you overtly side with the US, Australia will maintain a greater political distance. The shunning of North Korea (NK) due to their missile program is secondary to the US having problems with NK's 'super-note' (counterfeit US dollars) engagement. [10] This is a problem which Australia has been unable to disengage from, due to continual pressure from the US; and to step further back in history, the non-exploration of a dual initiative in the 1991 Gulf War with Indonesia, due to its ties to the Islamic world. [11]

China is rightly concerned by the actions of consecutive Australian governments, especially as it has not been recognised in the halls of government as anything beyond a successful trading partner, and a 'threat'. This is summed up in Australia being vulnerable to a 'foreign aggressor' (read: China) due to its re-emergence as Australia's greatest challenge in the twenty-first century. [12] The continued non-admission of China's renewed place in the world, which is a byproduct of 'pax' or 'peace-through-force', in the sense that 'pax' refers to periods in history marked by the absence of major wars, [13] as was the case with *pax-Britannica* (circa 1750 through to 1919), and *pax-Americana* in the post-World War Two era. The complexities of war notwithstanding, the main aspect of this argument resides in smaller powers not wishing to engage in war due to the omnipresent danger of a larger power applying major force and crushing the smaller warring parties.

The continuing state-of-affairs comprising a continual denial of its re-positioning in the region via incessant and overt acknowledgement of US's preponderance in the Asia Pacific will drive China to look elsewhere for potential allies. This will be to the detriment of Australia in the region more to the point, as China progressively embarks on a renewed geo-strategic status in the region; and begins to establish a stronger geo-strategic footprint—the current Pakistan and Myanmar bases notwithstanding—Australia will begin to be sidelined by China. The current state-of-affairs has been accepted and commented on by observers such as ex-prime minister Malcolm Fraser, who asserts, 'Other powers need to understand the time of Chinese isolation from broader international affairs has ended', [14] and Hugh White stipulates, 'It simply will not work to say that China must accept the status quo under [the current] US leadership' [15] with regard to the A-P region. However, the Abbott government has refused to neutralise ructions in the geo-political sphere by re-articulating its position toward China, other than that of China being essentially a valued 'trading partner', and in doing this is allowing an already fractious relationship to ferment. The Abbott government has further enraged the People's Republic of China's (PRC) government by offering unremitting consent toward the US, and Japan, to the point of Foreign Minister Bishop being labelled a "complete fool" by *The People's Daily*. [16] The recent and current attitudes toward the PRC—and by their expression, toward the Chinese people—will not bode well for Australia-China relations in the future, and will result in long-term suspicions toward Australian (read: US-driven) political and strategic preponderances in the region. The current attitude toward China by Australia sends signals that it is not welcome as a new and robust actor in the region and the 'Cold War eras' [17] that China alluded to in 2012 are omnipresent; and have continued. Unless Australia understands the new A-P environment and ceases elevating the US and other regional Euro-centric allies, frictions will continue and eventually elevate to a threat-of-force scenario from which the PRC will demand even stronger allegiances and/or issue an ultimatum that will be followed by a military collision.

In closing: Australia's preponderance in the region also stems from a belief that the US will step in at the first sign of conflict, and this also has its roots in Australia being 'saved' by the US in WWII. Whilst there is no doubt the US did come to the aid of Australia in WWII, it also did so for its own geo-strategic reasons. Nevertheless, it is timely to mention that Australia's rescue was not the highest strategic priority for the US at this time, 'in fact [it was, according to a secret US Army list] behind seven other priorities, beginning with maintaining Britain, keeping Russia in the war as an enemy of Germany, and maintaining the status quo in India the Middle East and China.' [18] For the Abbott, or

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following Australian governments, to believe that the US would immediately come to Australia's aid is folly, and this alone is reason to treat China with respect and dignity, as geo-strategic ructions begin to become increasingly fractious as China and the US vie for superiority in the region.

### Footnotes

[1] Tom Lewis and Peter Ingham. *Carrier Attack Darwin 1942. The complete guide to Australia's own Pearl Harbor*. South Australia: Avonmore Books, 2013, 85.

[2] Australian Broadcasting Corporation. 'Does ANZUS commit the US to come to Australia's aid, as Foreign Minister Julie Bishop claims?' *Fact check*. 23 July, 2014. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-08/does-anzus-commit-us-to-come-to-australias-aid-fact-check/5559288>

[3] *Fact check*. 23 July, 2014. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-08/does-anzus-commit-us-to-come-to-australias-aid-fact-check/5559288>

[4] Rob Taylor. 'Australia Embraces Marine Presence in Darwin.' *The Wall Street Journal*. 14 August 2014. <http://online.wsj.com/articles/australia-embraces-u-s-marine-presence-in-darwin-as-nations-gather-for-pitch-black-drills-1408035997>

[5] Mike Yeo. 'Exercise Pitch Black concludes in Darwin.' *The Diplomat*. 26 August, 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/exercise-pitch-black-concludes-in-darwin/>

[6] Jared Owns. 'US to seek to boost military presence in Darwin.' 12 August, 2014. *The Australian*. Murdoch Media. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/us-to-seek-to-boost-military-presence-in-darwin/story-e6frg8yo-1227021399220>

[7] Richard Tanter. 'The US military presence in Australia: "The Asia Pacific Pivot" and "Global NATO."' 11 November, 2013. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/us-to-seek-to-boost-military-presence-in-darwin/story-e6frg8yo-1227021399220>

[8] Commonwealth of Australia. 'Minister for Defence – Interview with Lyndal Curtis, ABC 24.' 14 June, 2014. <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2013/06/14/minister-for-defence-interview-with-lyndal-curtis-abc-24/>

[9] Ben Packham. 'China reproaches Australia over strengthened US defence ties.' *The Australian*. 17 November, 2011. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/archive/national-affairs/our-indispensable-alliance-barack-obama/story-fnb0o39u-1226197460882>

[10] Gregory Elich. 'North Korea and the Super note enigma.' *Global Research*. 7 May, 2008. <http://www.globalresearch.ca/north-korea-and-the-supernote-enigma/8919>

[11] Gary Smith. 'Australia's political relationship with Asia.' *Asia in Australia*. Edited by Mark McGillivray and Gary Smith. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997, 112.

[12] : Australian Strategic Policy Institute <https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/chinas-new-dream-how-will-australia-and-the-world-cope-with-the-re-emergence-of-china-as-a-great-power>

[13] *Dictionary.com* <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pax%20?s=t>

[14] Malcolm Fraser with Cain Roberts. *Dangerous Allies*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014, 260.

[15] Hugh White. 'China must be offered a bigger role in Asia.' *The Age*, Melbourne: Fairfax Media, 10 June, 2014,

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16.

[16] John Garnaut. 'China paper: Bishop a fool.' *The Age*, Melbourne: Fairfax Media, 15, July 2014, 5.

[17] John Garnaut. 'China warns on US-Australian ties.' *The Age*, Melbourne: Fairfax Media, 7 June, 2012. <http://www.theage.com.au/national/china-warns-on-usaustralian-ties-20120606-1zwp0.html>

[18] Bob Wurth. *1942 Australia's greatest peril*. Sydney: Macmillan, 2008, 139.

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### About the author:

**Strobe Driver** completed a PhD in War Studies in 2010 and since then has been writing on War, Conflict, Terrorism and Asia-Pacific Security. During 2018 he was awarded a year-long Taiwan, ROC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fellowship to write an independent analysis of Taiwan – China relations with a focus on when and whether a conflict would break out. The analysis is entitled 'Asia-Pacific and Cross-Strait Machinations: Challenges for Taiwan in the Nascent Phase of Pax-Sino.' All other writings by Strobe can be found on his blog.