Owen Harries
Don’t get too close to the US
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Australia should not wholeheartedly associate itself with Washington's ambitious global strategy, warns **Owen Harries**

QUESTION: What do Billy Conn, Archie Moore, Sugar Ray Robinson and Alexander Downer have in common? Answer: All four have subscribed to the view that punching above one's weight is a smart idea.

Believing that, the first three -- all world champion boxers who dominated their division -- decided to go up a weight class to take on bigger opponents. Each was promptly beaten.

Last year, Downer expressed the view that it was admirable that Australia -- a country that was spending under 2 per cent of its gross domestic product on defence, that possessed an army of only 25,000 and that had a large continent to defend in an increasingly unstable part of the world -- was punching above its weight by sending a force to fight a pre-emptive war outside its region.

In sending that force, the Australian Government was honouring the open-ended commitment that John Howard had made in Washington in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks: "Australia will provide all the support that might be requested of us by the US in relation to any action that might be taken."

Given its unqualified nature (note in particular the words all and any), that pledge might have been interpreted as a generous and emotional expression of sympathy in a highly charged atmosphere. But what followed indicates that the Prime Minister meant what he said.

It will be some time before the ultimate verdict is in on the wisdom of the decision to follow the US lead and to participate so wholeheartedly in its Iraq venture.

In the meantime, we would do well to reflect on the changing character and future prospects of our alliance with the US.

In doing so, it is useful to recall a distinction that had wide currency 50 years ago: the distinction, that is, between status quo states and revisionist states.

Back then, these terms figured prominently in the work of leading analysts of international politics such as E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, but they are not much in vogue today. It is time to resurrect them.

In essence they were value-neutral terms, merely denoting attitudes towards stability, continuity and change, irrespective of what was being preserved or altered.

But because the leading revisionist states of the mid-20th century -- Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany, a militarist Japan, Stalin's Russia -- were a very unsavoury bunch, while the leading status quo states -- Britain, the US and France -- were democratic, the terms tended to acquire a moral dimension.

It is worth remembering, however, that most leading powers have a record of moving from one category to the other as their circumstances have changed.

Since its founding as an independent state, Australia has been, and remains, a status quo state -- a satisfied, well-endowed country, without any desire (or the means) to drastically change the international order.

Indeed, with limited power, a modest population and a generous share of the world's wealth, Australia has had every reason to assume that any substantial disturbance of the status quo would be more likely to worsen than to improve its condition.

Sensibly, therefore, the central principle of Australian foreign policy has been to cleave closely to the main status quo powers, Britain and the US. By the early 20th century, they were essentially satisfied states and the guarantors of world order, concerned to resist efforts at radical change by other powers or to limit its pace and scope.

There was a natural affinity between Australia and the US -- often described in ideological and cultural terms but, in the language of geopolitics, better described as a mutual interest in the status quo.

What has happened in the past few years -- starting before September 11 but accelerated since then -- is that this natural affinity has been undermined. Although Australia remains a status quo country, if the Bush administration is to be believed the US has ceased to be one. Instead it has become the greatest revisionist force, the greatest agent of change, in the world.

That alteration has become very evident since September 11 and the US response to it in the form of the Bush doctrine.

But it had begun well before then. Almost as soon as the Cold War ended, leading commentators -- leading conservative commentators -- were impatiently dismissing the importance of stability.

Thus William Safire of The New York Times headed one column Hail to Unpredictability, while George Will of The Washington Post wrote dismissively: "Enough of the worship of stability and of `gradual' progress towards justice long denied."

As early as 1997, one of America's most distinguished and insightful elder statesmen, James Schlesinger -- ex-secretary of defence, secretary of energy and CIA director in the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations -- observed the change and identified its principal cause: "From the standpoint of US foreign policy, the good news is that there is no major challenge out there and few are in prospect. But the bad news comes from the same source. Without any serious challenge, both our ambitions and illusions have tended to grow. With no external check, a set of demands, frequently peremptory, is made on others."

Schlesinger went on to identify "a growing condition of national hubris", a compulsion "to instruct others on how to behave", to "hector", to impose unilateral sanctions and attempt to give US law extra-territorial reach.

Initially in the 1990s, however, there were also strong countervailing forces in the US, including habits of realism and prudence acquired during the Cold War, and a strong desire to attend to long-neglected domestic matters.

What happened after September 11 was that the balance was tipped decisively in favour of those who advocated boldness and the forceful use of US power to create a world in its own image, with institutions and rules determined by Washington.

Such a world -- a liberal, democratic, free market one -- would be a great improvement on the one that now exists.

But a serious attempt to bring it into being, rapidly and by the assertion of US will and power, must inevitably generate enormous strife, conflict and upheaval.

For a country such as Australia, with its vested interest in international (and, especially regional) stability, to associate itself closely and conspicuously with such an enterprise would be inappropriate and dangerous.

On the other hand, there can be no question of withdrawing from the alliance. Its collateral benefits are too great and it is too firmly embedded in Australia's political culture for that to be an option.

What is needed is a less compliant and ingratiating posture within the alliance. Australia's political leaders should be prepared to be less well-liked (and less taken for granted) in Washington.

They should realise that being a significant presence on the (presently uncrowded) US bandwagon does not necessarily involve supporting a heavy foot on the accelerator. It can provide an opportunity to press for careful steering, a judicious use of brakes and good road manners.

Now, as always, there are competing positions in the US foreign policy debate and even within the Bush administration.

Declining to support the one prevailing at any given moment and advocating something different is not evidence of anti-Americanism. It is what tends to happen in, and between, democracies.

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