

Relying on a great power for defence is foolhardy

Raoul Heinrichs
Canberra Times
19 February 2011
P. 23

This week, in 1942, Australia found itself in the most perilous situation it has ever faced. Britain, our great-power ally, had been overrun in Singapore, leaving Japanese forces arrayed against Australia's northern approaches and free to commence bombing raids on the Australian mainland.

The preceding decades had been frivolous ones in Canberra. Some officials pinned their hopes on the ill-fated League of Nations. Most preferred hewing closer to Britain, either blind or indifferent to the fact that British power, already diminished, was eroding further in the face of a rising Japan.

When Singapore fell the true inadequacy of Canberra's preparations became clear. The Navy and Air-force had not been properly built up. The army was on the other side of the world, supporting British operations in the hope that the favour could and would be returned if the need arose. As it happened, Egypt was spared. Darwin looked like it might have to fend for itself.

The whole episode should have served as a sobering lesson in the dangers of over-reliance on another country. But history had other plans and that lesson was never learned.

Instead, the United States arrived, vanquished Japan and picked up where the British left off. Australia, meanwhile, was spared from reckoning with its own short-sightedness and settled quickly back into the comfortable habits of dependence that have defined Australian strategic policy ever since.

Today, as Asia goes through its next major upheaval, Australia's instincts are unchanged. Sixty-nine years after Singapore fell, Canberra is still to clinging at all costs to a great and powerful friend.

Last November, in response to China's growing military power, Australia finalised two major agreements with the US – one on defence cooperation in space, another granting the US military access to an Australian submarine communications station. These agreements signal the beginning of a new discussion among Australia's strategic community on the merits of an even tighter alliance, including more integrated war-planning, greater technical interoperability and more extensive US basing on Australian soil.

This may feel like the natural path to take given our history and culture, but it's an approach which contains a number of hidden dangers. By tying our fortunes to the US we risk repeating the mistakes of 1942: relying too heavily on an ally whose star is fading fast.

While Australia's alliance has served us well for decades, the rise of China and the decline of American power is profoundly changing Asia's security environment. Though US primacy may have some way to go yet, Washington's ability to preserve its own dominance, fulfil its commitments and underwrite regional stability to the extent that Australians expect is already in rapid decline.

Exactly how the US will respond to this remains uncertain. Washington could challenge China or it could turn a blind-eye. Whatever the choice, both options spell trouble for Australia.

If the US does confront China, Australia is likely to find itself drawn into escalating competition, perhaps even war, against our most important economic partner.

This is not something to be taken lightly. Any conflict between the US and China would entail enormous economic costs. More importantly, Australia would be unlikely to fulfill American expectations with the limited military contributions it has used to demonstrate its loyalty to the alliance in Iraq and Afghanistan. The scale of any military commitment would have to be greater and more multi-faceted, and would necessarily involve serious risks to large numbers of Australian lives.

On the other hand, if the US does nothing, if it remains distracted or allows itself to be eclipsed, the unchecked growth of Chinese power is likely to result in the kind of unforgiving strategic environment that Australia has always feared, one where Canberra could be left alone at the foot of Asia to fend for itself against a potentially hostile and dominant China.

Between emerging risks of being drawn into conflict and old fears of being left alone, Australia needs to hedge against both unpleasant possibilities. The only way to do this is to continue a large-scale build-up of Australia's independent military capabilities – submarines, fighter-jets and cruise missiles. In no way should this mean prematurely abandoning the US alliance, which remains too valuable to discard. But it does mean relegating the alliance to a lesser role in Australia's strategic planning, recognising that the cost of the alliance is going up even as its value is coming down.

Of course, the cultural importance of 'great and powerful friends' means that any attempt at a more independent strategic posture will be as much a psychological challenge for Australia as a practical one. Even baby steps away from the alliance will meet powerful political and ideological resistance. However, it's high-time for Canberra to internalise the most important lesson of 1942, and this step, though painful, is the only responsible way.

Raoul Heinrichs is a Research Associate at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.