

Dear Mr President, we beg to differ over the future of Asia

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As China's power grows, the Asia we have known is passing into history, and a new and very different Asia is taking shape. Barack Obama's visit is a key moment in that transformation, because he is coming here to promote America's view of how the new Asia should work.

America has a lot at stake. For 40 years it has been the region's uncontested leader. Now China wants to lead instead, and is trying to ease America aside. That means the era of uncontested US primacy has passed. This is a big loss for America, for Australia and much of Asia, but it is the strategic price we must all pay for China's economic miracle.

There are two competing visions of Asia's future now. China's vision is that America will slowly fade as a strategic power in Asia, leaving China as the region's new uncontested leader. America's vision is that Asia will divide into two camps, with China on one side and the rest, under US leadership, on the other. It hopes that if the rest of Asia stays strong and united by America's side, China will eventually see the error of its ways and join the US-led camp as well, thus restoring America's uncontested primacy.

Of course neither Washington nor Beijing describes their vision in such blunt terms. But behind the diplomatic drapery, these are clearly the plans to which each side is working. Washington has suddenly woken up to the magnitude of China's power, and now understands that Asia, not the Middle East, is where it faces its most decisive challenge. That's why Obama is making this trip. He is here to persuade America's friends and allies to sign up to Washington's vision of Asia's future.

At APEC in Hawaii, Obama promoted the economic element of his vision. His Trans-Pacific Partnership initiative is aimed at building a new economic framework in Asia that includes America's friends and allies and excludes China. It is not clear that is a good idea. Now Obama is coming to Canberra to promote the political and strategic element of his vision. He wants to draw America's loose network of Asian allies and friends together into a more unified military coalition to confront China's growing maritime power. That will be the underlying message of his speech to Parliament tomorrow, and it is the symbolism at the heart of the announcement he will make about US military training in Darwin.

Practically and operationally, the new rotational training deployments for US marines mean very little. Symbolically and strategically they mean a great deal. They show Australia's willingness to join America's military coalition against China. And make no mistake: this is all about China. For 40 years, despite our close alliance, Australia has been careful not to line up militarily with the US against China. That is why the Darwin announcement is so significant.

More broadly, taken together with Julia Gillard's enthusiastic embrace of his Trans-Pacific Partnership, the new military arrangements signal Australia's support for Obama's overall vision for America's role in Asia's future. For Obama, this is an important win.

But is it a win for Australia? That depends on whether Obama's vision will work, and on what the alternatives are. For his vision to work, three things will have to happen. First, a lot of China's Asian neighbours will need to decide that siding with America against China is in their interests. None of them want to live under China's shadow, and all welcome US support, but none want to make China an enemy. Keeping them on side will be harder than it looks.

Second, America itself must decide whether taking China on like this is worth the cost. Economically, Obama's vision of Asia's future makes no sense, because America is as interdependent with China as everyone else. And strategically, Americans will have to decide whether they really are willing to back all their Asian friends and allies in any fight they pick with China. A small stoush in the South China Sea could become very costly and dangerous for the US.

These are issues that Americans themselves have not clearly addressed. Few of America's political leaders, pundits or the public at large have yet come to grips with the new geometry of power, and the hard choices America now faces.

Third, for America's plan to work, China will have to be persuaded to accept US leadership in Asia even as it overtakes America to become the richest, and hence ultimately the most powerful, country in the world. That seems highly unlikely. And if China pushes back rather than comes around then America's vision of Asia's future does not lead us gently back to the era of uncontested US primacy. It pushes us brutally forward towards a new era of unbridled strategic rivalry — a new Cold War, or worse.

If the only alternative to America's plan to perpetuate its primacy in Asia is China's vision of its own uncontested leadership, then we might reluctantly accept a new Cold War as the lesser of two evils. But these are not the only possibilities. A new Asia could evolve in which China exercises more power and influence than it has before, but does not dominate, and in which America no longer exercises primacy, but still plays a large and vital role. In short, an Asia in which the US and China share power.

This should be Australia's vision of Asia's future. We do not want to live under Chinese domination, but nor do we want to be squeezed by US-China rivalry. That is why, having given Obama a respectful hearing, we should explain why we take a different view. That is what good allies do.

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