

Calm assessment of U.S. alliance needed

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Australia's alliance with the US is again becoming controversial. The arrival of the first US marines to be rotated through Darwin and speculation about the development of a base in the Cocos Islands have been interpreted by former prime ministers, retired diplomats and defence officials, academics and members of parliament as moving Australia too close to the US while antagonising China and Indonesia.

Meanwhile, Lowy Institute polling reveals strong support for the alliance with the US and a solid majority in favour of American bases on Australian soil.

If past debates on the alliance are anything to go by, there is a real danger in the coming debate that either side will gravitate towards absolute positions, with the resulting argument generating more heat than light.

Advocates of the alliance are too quick to accuse their opponents of disloyalty and even appeasement of China. Sceptics, on the other hand, are all too willing to accuse alliance proponents of craven surrender to Washington's whims and wishes.

There is a worrying tendency to allow our discussion of the alliance to be carried away by emotions -- either excessively positive, as in Julia Gillard's address to congress in March last year, or excessively negative, such as the hysterical anti-Americanism of many protesters against the Iraq war.

Australia's alliance with the US is too important to allow debate to be overwhelmed by emotional argument. Our strategic environment is evolving faster than we realise, and the choices we make about how we are affected by the power shifts to our north, and how we should best respond, will be critical for this country's safety and prosperity.

Whether we can ensure that the discussion of Australia's alliance with the US remains calm, rational and hard-headed is an important test of the maturity of our national debate.

The first question a rational debate must centre on is: where does the alliance sit in Australian foreign policy? Is it a means or an end? Is the alliance one part of an array of instruments and levers we use to prosecute our interests, or is it an ideal state of affairs that we seek to maintain and build using the other foreign policy instruments at our disposal? If it is but one component among several foreign policy instruments, where does it sit in order of importance and priority? If it is an end we seek to maintain, where does it sit in relation to the other ends of our foreign policy? Would we, for example, be prepared to jeopardise our trading and investment links in Asia to support the US in a confrontation with China?

The next question is whether the alliance is about the narrow goal of defending Australia from attack or coercion, or the more ambitious objective of maintaining stability and an order we are comfortable with in our region.

If it is the former, is it the best, most cost-effective way to defend ourselves against possible coercion? If it is the latter, how far are we prepared to invest in maintaining stability and order in our own region? Moreover, how should we define that order and share the responsibility for its maintenance?

An orderly neighbourhood can mean many things, each with different implications for those who want to maintain it. Whether an orderly region means an absence of conflict or coercion, or rules of open trade and investment, or respected frameworks of interaction, from international law to cyber-security, or all of these, will lead to different commitments and expectations for us and our American allies.

Through what means do we, and should we, reach agreement on what regional order means, and who is responsible for its maintenance, with the US and the other countries in our region?

What happens if Australia and the US disagree on the extent to which an orderly neighbourhood should include the wishes of the rising powers in Asia?

In the past, we've had the luxury to avoid debate on these difficult questions because we've been able to maintain the alliance at minimal cost. We've been able to give the Americans what they've asked without having to make tough, either-or choices that pit core Australian interests and values against each other.

It's unlikely this happy state will continue. China's growing military power, particularly in missiles and submarines, now constitutes a direct challenge to the ability of the US navy to operate with an acceptable margin of safety in the western Pacific.

What a cash-strapped and war-weary US chooses to do about this will inevitably involve Pacific allies such as Australia. How allies such as Australia respond, in turn, will have a major impact on regional, and global, security dynamics in the years to come.

We haven't even begun to have a national discussion that can prepare us for making these choices.

Our starting point must be a calm, balanced and hard-headed consideration of Australia's alliance with the US, the likes of which we've not had yet.

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