

Diplomacy 'Down Under'

Australia should look beyond self-interest in balancing its alliance with the United States and its relationship with China By Kerry Brown



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Australia and the United States completed their annual military dialogue dubbed AUSMIN on August 12—the 29th since its establishment in 1985. The joint communiqué issued at the conclusion of the talks, held in Canberra and attended by Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel on the U.S. side and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defense Minister David Johnston on the Australian side, covered a vast range of issues from joint military exercises to concerns over climate change and terrorism in the Middle East. The document testifies to the close relations between the two countries.

So complete is the overlap between the interests of the countries that it might be permissible to wonder if they have, in fact, joined one foreign policy and wholly shared geopolitical strategies and objectives. For Australians, looking at the completeness of their mutual interests, the question might be where does Australia itself have proper autonomy? Where does it stand alone and define its own foreign policy position?

Multifaceted alliance

Australia evidently gains a huge amount from

its close alliance with the United States—and not just in terms of military issues. Australia and the United States are hugely interlinked economies. They signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) almost a decade ago, the first such agreement ever entered into by Australia, and one which many Australians feel exposed their precious agribusiness sector and investment environment to easy U.S. access. U.S. investment remains the largest, even in the face of recent excitement about rising levels of Chinese direct investment. Added to this economic interconnectedness, there are also deep people-to-people links.

Australia is very sincere when it signs up to a statement in the Communiqué that it “expressed support for the United States’ role in underpinning the region’s security, stability and prosperity.” With a force of only 60,000 active troops to defend an area almost as large as that of China’s, Australia’s sense of vulnerability to attack is well known and long standing. This is despite the fact that it is protected to some extent by the long distance it is from most other countries. In World War II, Japan only reached the northernmost part of the continent. But modern technology has made the Australian defense establishment very aware that even this form of protection is now no longer strong. This situation underlines the agreement between the United States and Australia this year to exercise closer cooperation on ballistic missile defense systems.

The practical detail of this U.S.-Australia cooperation is the implementation of the Force Posture Agreement, reached by U.S. President Barack Obama and Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott in June, setting out the legal basis for the presence of marines in Darwin. There

are 1,150 of these at present, in the third rotation since 2011. This figure will increase to 2,500 over the next few years. This deal to have marines on Australian soil was originally set up by former Prime Minister Rudd and has proved controversial, simply because it marks a steep change in military relations between the two countries.

Diverse relations

Australia has always been the United States’ closest ally in the region. But there are questions about just how well it has sold its strategic and tactical assets. Australian troops have fought bravely in Afghanistan, and were in Iraq. While they ceased combat relations in 2013, and will become advisors in Afghanistan in 2014, their discussions this year showed that they are thinking of a global situation beyond the decade-long “war on terror” and are contemplating training with each other after the planned withdrawal by all sides from Afghanistan is complete.

The diversification of their relationship is one new phenomenon. Australian tactical thinking is shaped by American priorities and concerns, as reflected in the discussions this year. They are planning to work together in space surveillance, and have started talking of a code of conduct for outer space activity. They have also discussed cooperation on C Band Space Surveillance. Cyber espionage was also placed on the agenda.

Australians generally feel they get a good deal for their close links with the United States. However, they are also under certain obligations—some explicitly stated; others implicitly. Their faithful alliance to U.S. positions in the rest of the world has been reinforced by the appear-



SECURE TIES: Australian Defense Minister Senator David Johnston, Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel (from left to right) attend a joint press conference on August 12 in Sydney, following the annual Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations

ance of Australian citizens in the Middle East fighting as part of the extreme Muslim forces now active there. Despite Australia's distance from Europe, it has tragically been dragged into the Ukrainian unrest through the shooting down of a plane carrying almost 30 Australian citizens on the Malaysia Airlines MH17 flight in late July. Australia took a leading role through its current membership of the UN Security Council in pushing through a resolution condemning this act, and Abbot has ordered over 150 police from Australia to the region to undertake an investigation. Australia may well want to leave the world alone, but the world will still come and affect it.

Despite this, Australia has to outline a stronger vision of its regional role, and at times the desire of the Abbot administration to be as close as possible to the United States is problematic. Abbot's comments late in 2013 about Japan being its "best ally" in Asia were unexpected even by the United States, and met with condemnation by some in the region, particularly China. While stressing the close economic and political alliance between Japan and Australia is standard, using phrases like "best ally" are unnecessary. Abbot made even stranger comments in July when, during Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Australia, the first for over a decade at this level between the two countries, he seemed to praise Japanese World War II soldiers. This once more puzzled and angered other

partners in the Asia-Pacific region.

For all the talk in the AUSMIN Communiqué of close economic cooperation and support for the continuation of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations, Australia has to recognize that its allegiances are now divided. For all the security benefits it gets from the excellent links with the United States, Australia's prosperity in the last few years, particularly during the great financial crisis in 2008, has been due to its links with China. Australian copper and iron ore in particular have fuelled a building and infrastructure boom in China. In the last two years, as China's growth has slowed to around 7.5 percent, this has had a tangible influence on Australian growth. For almost 24 years, Australia has had positive GDP increases, and a generation has grown up with no knowledge of what a recession looks like. This has created complacency in the country. Perhaps an FTA between China and Australia, which is something Abbot is aiming for by the end of the year, will remedy this and create a more competitive attitude.

In terms of regional security, Australia also has to recognize that being so close with the United States is sometimes a mixed blessing. In the Communiqué of August 12, both sides recognized that on the South China Sea they stood by the 2002 Declaration of the Conduct of Parties and urged self-restraint. Beyond this, however, Australia must look to its self-interest and not get dragged into disputes in the region

which do not have direct impact on it. It has neither the capacity nor the necessity to become embroiled in such issues. Australia's desire to get so close with the United States sometimes seems slavish. There are many areas where they have legitimate and understandable close links and a good alliance. But there are also key areas where Australia has to stand alone. Its role in particular in the southern East Asian region, and in the Pacific, is important here, with the imminent Fiji elections in September. In these areas, Australia has a very clear zone of interest.

Australia also needs to work out a coherent framework where it can outline the best relationship with its two key partners—China and the United States. At the moment, China appears in a somewhat restricted area, limited to that of a trade partner. This needs to be expanded to that of an intellectual partner, with deeper links to universities and knowledge communities in the two places. Rapidly upgrading knowledge and understanding of China amongst young Australians is a key part of this. The bottom line is that Australia needs to talk less of promoting self-interest in its relations with China, and more of looking for common interests. That would create a richer, more diverse basis for the relationship between these two important regional powers. ■