# Richard Tanter, ‘Trump chaos to our north? Where do we stand at the end of US hegemony in Asia?’, *Arena Magazine*, 146, March/April 2017, pp. 7-9,

at <http://nautilus.org/network/associates/richard-tanter/publications/>

Through a chaotic mélange of intent, incompetence and cultural prejudice, the new Trump administration will overturn the post-war system of US hegemony in Asia. Of course, that hegemonic regime has been creaking for decades, most obviously in the case of the rise of China, and in light of China’s clear determination to have a say in making the rules of the global order. Whatever else Trump does or does not do, his incumbency will dramatically accelerate those geopolitical and system-structural processes.

Never before has this kind of geopolitical transformation taken place in a conjuncture characterised by a violent globalised economic and class framework, an anachronistic state system of often dysfunctional, nominally sovereign nation states, high levels of global militarisation, widespread possession of nuclear weapons, and, above all, the climate-change impact of the Anthropocene unfolding in what will increasingly be abrupt non-linear form.

Welcome though the decline of the American imperium may be, all of this poses great danger globally and locally, and, at a minimum, points to a human interest in prudence in international policy. Australian governments cheered on the results of its absence in the years of Bush the Younger, and we are likely to see a great many more in what, optimistically, though not probably, might be the Trump interregnum.

All of this is now vitally important in Australia, where my colleague Allan Patience has been channelling Donald Horne, saying (*pace* Horne) that Australia is now an unlucky country, run by third-rate people. The Turnbull government’s response to Trump is providing plenty of evidence for Patience’s case—think of the delusional calls by Malcolm Turnbull to save the Trans Pacific Partnership from Trump, even as the axe finally swung. In a US speech, Julie Bishop pandered to ‘the indispensable power’ to stay and preserve what this government calls, entirely without irony, the ‘rules-based order’—think Iraq. Bishop was presumably unaware that this much-bruited ‘indispensability’ is a standard American trope of self-congratulation for bearing the burden of empire.[[1]](#footnote-1) (Compare Bishop’s robo-speech with the bracing clarity of arch-realist Stephen Walt’s ‘America’s New President Is not a Rational Actor’, *Foreign Policy*, 27 January 2017.) [[2]](#footnote-2)

David Wroe pointed to the level of panic and delusion in Canberra when reporting Bishop’s speech, saying ‘it is widely felt in government circles that Australia has a significant opportunity to influence the Trump administration at a crucial time’. These are the same circles, Liberal and Labor, that have long justified the alliance by claiming it comes with a seat at the table in Washington. The problem with that is that the seat does not come with a speaking role, mainly by Australian choice. Professionally, Patience is best known for his iconoclastic approach to so-called middle-power theory, in which he characterises Australia as a dependent middle power, stressing the structural embedding of the US alliance in Australian politics and culture. In fact, Australia can indeed have agency in international affairs, but only when the United States either agrees with what Australia wants to say or doesn’t care. [[3]](#footnote-3) Malcolm Fraser used to say that he longed to live in an independent country, but never had.

For Australia, the locus of the threat stemming from Trump is going to concern China, most immediately over the East China Sea (the Senkakus/Diaoyutai territorial dispute) and the South China Sea (China’s nine-dash line of maritime claims), and China’s industrial process of island construction. In fact, Turnbull has been less hairy-chested over the South China Sea than both Tony Abbott and the now happily former Labor defence spokesman Stephen Conroy, who last year was calling for Australian naval patrols within twelve nautical miles of Chinese-claimed territory. [[4]](#footnote-4) But the government’s smidgeon of caution within its default setting of identifying Australian interests with US ones is now under pressure amid the chaos of Trump’s policy formulation.

During his Senate confirmation hearing on 12 January,Rex Tillerson, Trump’s nominee for Secretary of State, called for a US blockade of China’s facilities on the islands/reefs it occupies in the South China Sea. It is best to be clear on these matters: a naval blockade is one step away from the outbreak of war, in this case between two nuclear-armed powers. Several years ago Des Ball and Rob Ayson pointed out that the assumption of most that a potential conflict between China and Japan could be prevented from escalating into major armed conflict is implausible. [[5]](#footnote-5) Their argument, which originally focused on East China Sea issues, carries even more weight in the even more complex setting of the South China Sea, where time for ambiguity in Australian policy is running out.

The Tillerson stream of Trump thinking has plans for Australia. Confirming Tillerson’s intent, a senior Trump transition adviser

told Reuters about specifics under consideration, such as basing a second aircraft carrier in the region, deploying more destroyers, attack submarines and missile defense batteries and expanding or adding new bases in Japan and Australia. [[6]](#footnote-6)

This view sits well with those in the Pentagon who have been nudging Canberra into still closer alignment with US operational planning. On 23 January Republican Senator John McCain, often identified as irretrievably hostile to Trump, called for US$7.5 billion of new US military spending for an Asia-Pacific Stability Initiative. Reuters reported that

A US military official, who did not want to be identified, said the funds could go to construct new military runways in countries such as Australia and the Philippines. [[7]](#footnote-7)

The South China Sea issue is the immediate expression of a general urgent need for an independent Australian foreign and defence policy, for which two primary requirements are a policy framework sufficiently disentangled from the American alliance that government can discern where Australian interests and American interests diverge, and the resolution to articulate that policy. The problem is general, but Trump’s China policy makes it urgent.

In defence policy, a starting point is to think deeply about the relevance today of three remarkable works from the 1980s and early 1990s. The first is David Martin’s *Armed Neutrality for Australia* (1984), perhaps the most original book on Australian defence policy. Our first task is to apply Martin’s thinking about neutrality in a bipolar Cold War world to the developing contemporary multipolar situation. What would neutrality mean in relation to China and the United States? If not neutrality, then what?

The other works are Paul Dibb’s March 1986 *Review of Australia’s Defence Capabilities*— the only truly transformational Australian government statement of post-war defensive planning—and, even more important, his 1992 monograph *The Conceptual Basis of Australia’s Defence Planning and Force Structure Development*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The thinking in these documents about self-reliance in what Dibb regarded as an almost uniquely defensible country gave rise to the territorial focus of his ‘Defence of Australia’ doctrine, turning its back on the forward-defence doctrines of the 1960s that since 2001 have been catastrophically revenant in Canberra.

Ironically, given Dibb’s close involvement in fostering the alliance he regards as ‘priceless’, this month the CIA released thirteen million documents, including a February 1987 report to the president stating that drafts of the Australian Defence White Paper that appeared later that year showed the gratifying influence of PM Hawke and Defence Minister Beazley in rectifying the Dibb report’s expounding of ‘a more limited, regional defense role for Australia’. [[9]](#footnote-9)

Labelling Tillerson’s remark as ‘simply ludicrous’, Paul Keating sounded the tocsin:

When the US secretary of state-designate threatens to involve Australia in war with China, the Australian people need to take note. That is the only way Rex Tillerson’s testimony that a ‘signal’ should be sent to China that ‘access to these islands is not going to be allowed’, and that US allies in the region should be there ‘to show back-up’, can be read. [[10]](#footnote-10)

Keating is right in saying that we need a firm line from Canberra that, ally or no, Australia wants no truck with this kind of high-risk bravado in a part of the world in which we, unlike the United States, have to live. This is not just a matter of risk avoidance but of rethinking the deep settler-colonial mindset of Australian foreign-policy discourse, which, as Henry Reynolds’ *Forgotten War* reminds us, extends back to the Australia and the Boer War of a century ago.

China’s island constructions need careful consideration, in terms of both law and strategy, but we would be on a sounder footing if we could take a firm line on Japan’s concrete emplacements on the western Pacific reef speck of Okinotori-shima[[11]](#footnote-11), or—dare we say it in this not quite postcolonial world—the deeply militarised US occupation of the island of Guam. Consistency isn’t everything, but it is a useful reminder of when we are in the grip of the political unconscious.

And, rather than contemplating acquiescing to suggestions for new US bases or homeporting an aircraft-carrier task group in Fremantle, we need to start setting limits on the activities the United States can conduct from Australian bases to which it has access, including requiring an end to the violations of international law in Pine Gap’s contribution to targeting of US drone strikes in countries with which neither Australia nor the U.S. are at war.

1. Henry Belot, ‘Julie Bishop calls on US to increase role in region, raises concerns over South China Sea’, ABC News, 27 January at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-27/bishop-calls-on-us-to-increase-role-in-region/8216704>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen Walt, ‘America’s new president is not a rational actor’, *Voice* [blog], *Foreign Policy*, 27 January 2017, at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/25/americas-new-president-is-not-a-rational-actor/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Allan Patience, ‘The Two Streams of Australia's Middle Power Imagining and their Sources’, *Australian Journal of Politics &* History, Volume 60, Issue 3 (2014) Volume 60, Issue 3, pp. 449–465. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Wroe, ‘South China Sea dispute: Labor's Stephen Conroy calls for Australia to challenge “bullying” China’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 July 2016, at <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/south-china-sea-dispute-labors-stephen-conroy-calls-for-australia-to-challenge-bullying-china-20160713-gq4m5v.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Ayson and Desmond Ball, ‘Can a Sino-Japanese War Be Controlled?’ *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56:6, 135-166, (2014); and Desmond Ball and Richard Tanter, [*The Tools of Owatatsumi: Japan’s Ocean Surveillance and Coastal Defence Capabilities*](http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/the-tools-of-owatatsumi/), Canberra, ANU Press, pp. 103-4, at <http://press.anu.edu.au/publications/tools-owatatsumi/download>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. David Brunnstrom and Matt Spetalnick, ‘Trump team struggles for cohesion on tougher China policy’, Reuters, 14 January 2017, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-china-analysis-idUSKBN14X2LM>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David Brunnstrom, ‘McCain proposes $7.5 billion of new U.S. military funding for Asia-Pacific’, Reuters, 23 January 2017, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-asia-mccain-idUSKBN15802T>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1986 Review of Australia’s Defence Capabilities [The Dibb Report], Department of Defence, 1986, at <http://www.defence.gov.au/spi/publications/defreview/1986/Review-of-Australias-Defence-Capabilities-1986.pdf>; and Paul Dibb, *The conceptual basis of Australia's defence planning and force structure development*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 88, 1992, at <http://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/3155/conceptual-basis-australias-defence-planning-and-force>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘[National Intelligence Daily, 13 February 1987](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88T00091R000400020008-4.pdf)’, Central Intelligence Agency, Declassified in Part – Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/11/09: CIA-RDP88T00091 R000400020008-4. The 13 million documents released in January 1987 make up the CIA’s *CREST: 25-Year Program Archive*, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/crest-25-year-program-archive>. Ironically, Dibb criticised Paul Keating’s attack on the alliance, by emphasizing how technologically dependent on the United States the ADF has become: ‘Has he [Keating] got any idea of just how dependent on the Americans we are now regarding American support for ADF operations, weapons and targeting since his time as Prime Minister over 20 years ago? For example, the combat system and weapons for the Collins and the future submarine will be entirely American.’ Paul Dibb, ‘Dangerous platitudes about Trump’, *The Strategist*, 17 November 2016, at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/dangerous-platitudes-trump/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Henry Belot, ‘South China Sea: Paul Keating says Rex Tillerson threatening to involve Australia in war’, *ABC News*, 13 January 2017, at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-13/paul-keating-accuses-us-of-threatening-australia-with-war/8181160> . [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robin Harding, ‘Japan grows an island to check China’s territorial ambitions’, *Financial Times*, 27 December 2015, at <https://www.ft.com/content/e31054d8-9c88-11e5-b45d-4812f209f861>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)