

# The US - Australia Alliance: A Prospect of Change?

---

## Recommended Citation

"The US - Australia Alliance: A Prospect of Change?", APSNet Policy Forum, March 29, 2007, <https://nautilus.org/apsnet/the-us-australia-alliance-a-prospect-of-change/>

---

## Contents

1. [Introduction](#)
2. Essay - [The US - Australia Alliance: A Prospect of Change?](#)
3. [Nautilus invites your response](#)

## Introduction

Coral Bell from the Australian National University writes that Australian Opposition leader Kevin Rudd's foreign policy approach is not likely

"to do serious damage to the relationship with Washington, but the alliance might be challenged within the foreseeable future by quite a different factor in world politics."

"The next landscape of world politics" she argues,

"which might be with us as early as 2010, will see six great powers share a central balance of power. And even perhaps a Concert of Powers. US strategic priorities will certainly continue to evolve, in line with the changing balance of power in the world. There does not seem to me much in that picture to threaten Australian security."

## Essay - The US - Australia Alliance: A Prospect of Change?

The most immediate reason for checking the prospects for the alliance between Washington and Canberra is the electoral cycle in both countries. Australia will go to the polls late this year : the US, of course, late next year. In both countries there is a very real prospect of change in the party in

---

power. George Bush must retire in January 2009, and a Democrat may inherit the White House. John Howard may depart from power this year, and there might be a Labor Cabinet in Canberra by December. Bush and Howard have been unusually close, [even as compared to the normal high standard of closeness between Prime Ministers and the Presidents in office during their time]. Probably that has been because Howard happened to be in Washington on 9/11. With a change of personalities at the top, there is usually some marginal policy difference.

But for the 66 years since 1941 that Australia's strategic dependence on the US has been the principal determinant of its diplomatic and strategic policies, party affiliations have seldom made much difference in the working of the relationship. It originated in the time of a rather left-wing, somewhat pacifist Labor P.M., John Curtin, in the desperate months between Pearl Harbor and the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942, but was turned into a formal alliance by a quite right-wing External Affairs Minister, Percy Spender, in the argumentative days of the making of the Japan Peace Treaty in 1951. Robert Menzies, the Prime Minister then, was originally quite skeptical about it: Spender, on the contrary, tried, unsuccessfully, to turn it into a NATO-style serious US military commitment to the Asia-Pacific. If Spender is watching from some vantage-point in heaven, he must be smiling on Howard's current policy of a more multilateral stance on security affairs, including understandings with Indonesia and now Japan. The latter is one of the few points of difference with the stance that might be taken by Howard's probable successor, Kevin Rudd, who is even more attuned to the feelings of China about US "containment" projects than Howard.

The times of serious stress for the alliance have come not from the differences in social and political norms between the two societies, though they are real, but from military engagements that went on for long enough to generate a high degree of resentment and dissidence in the two countries : Vietnam in the 1960's, Iraq at present. In Canberra, policy-makers were initially more 'hawkish' on Vietnam than those in Washington, but on Iraq it has been difficult to discern any well-informed strand of opinion that ever evinced much enthusiasm for the decision to invade Iraq, even while some optimism about its outcome existed. Any such optimism has been dwindling towards vanishing-point since about the end of 2003, and popular resistance is now quite vocal. But whether that will affect the election outcome is uncertain.

Australians are mostly of a rather realistic and skeptical cast of mind on foreign policy issues. The sort of moralistic Wilsonian rhetoric that has come so often and so unconvincingly from the White House in these last few years, about the prospective blessings of democracy in the Middle East, evokes polite nods in official quarters, and a resigned shrug, at best, from much of the community. But the one diplomatic crisis, to my mind, that might break the alliance would be the immediate likelihood of war between the US and China. It used to be assumed that the most probable *casus belli* would be the status of Taiwan, but to Canberra's enormous relief, that no longer seems very likely. I have seen speculation, never confirmed, that the Australian attitude conveyed to Washington that issue was "we will go up the hill with you, but we won't jump over the precipice with you."

### **The alliance under Rudd**

The current leader of the Opposition, Kevin Rudd, has undoubtedly prospects of making it to Prime Minister some time, even if not in this year's elections, likely in October or November, after the APEC meeting in Australia in September. He was by profession a career diplomat before taking to politics, was stationed in China, and is said to be fluent in Mandarin. So he has probably spent more time thinking about Australia's relations with China and the US than anyone else who is currently [or ever] likely to be trying for Prime Minister.

He has already made it clear that he sees the future of Australian foreign policy as resting on three foundations : the maintenance of the US alliance, comprehensive engagement in the Asia-Pacific

region, and what he calls "the Australian tradition of active middle-power diplomacy, which Mr Howard has abandoned". The tenor of his criticisms of the Bush and Howard policies is directed to the Iraq involvement, which he calls "the worst foreign policy and national security disaster since Vietnam". He will not get any argument on that point from the Democrats in the US, or from about 70 percent of the electorate in Australia. He sees Australian policy in the run-up to the invasion as profoundly mistaken. In his words, "Instead of offering useful counsel, [Australian policymakers] became an unquestioning cheer -squad for a deeply flawed policy on Iraq." [1]

Labor in office would ratify the Kyoto Protocol, and aim to cut Australia's greenhouse emissions by 60 per cent by 2050, which is certainly an ambitious target. On nuclear weapons, it would revive the Canberra Commission, which an earlier Labor Government set up in 1995, to find ways of curbing their use, and would also strive to strengthen the Non-Proliferation Treaty. That last proposal might create problems, because it might imply continuing to sell uranium to China, but refusing to sell it to India, which has not yet signed the NPT.

### **The alliance in a multipolar world**

Not much in all that is likely to do serious damage to the relationship with Washington, but the alliance might be challenged within the foreseeable future by quite a different factor in world politics. The world is changing very fast these days, and the basic nature of that change is a redistribution of power, not only *between* sovereign states, but *within* sovereign states. As far as diplomatic relationships, including alliances, are concerned, the outcome of those changes is to transform the unipolar world of US paramountcy which has been with us since 1992 back into the more historically familiar form of a multipolar world. The next landscape of world politics, which might be with us as early as 2010, will see six great powers - the US, the EU, China, India, Russia and Japan - share a central balance of power. And even perhaps a Concert of Powers. But there will also be as many as eight or nine emerging powers - Pakistan, Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, South Africa - who will be important enough, strategically or economically or normatively, to alter the strategic priorities not only of the six great powers, but of middle powers like Australia.

Note that seven of those societies are Muslim or partly Muslim. That has to be borne in mind because of the other aspect of the change in power-relations which I mentioned earlier: that *within* societies. If you ask yourself what is the security problem on the minds at present of the policy-makers of the most powerful sovereignty in the world, the US, it is not, as it would have been in the past, another powerful sovereignty, like the Soviet Union up to 1992, or China maybe sometime in the future. It is a world-wide network of jihadists, who owe allegiance, not to any sovereign state, but to a stateless Saudi millionaire lurking in a cave somewhere on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Or one of his allies or disciples elsewhere.

That is a quite profound change in world politics. Of course the world has had plenty of experience of insurgencies, using terrorist tactics or strategy for political ends. But their ambitions have been local: political or territorial change in Ireland or the Basque country, or Sri Lanka or Kashmir. And their military capacities also have been local. The jihadists are different. Not only are their objectives world-wide - a change in the structure of power in the society of states as a whole - but so to some extent are their capacities to do harm. The phenomenon of the 'home-grown terrorists' preoccupies attention not only in Britain but in Australia as well.

Both sets of changes - those between states and within states - make for greater complexity for policy-makers, including those in Canberra, as they consider their strategic priorities and their security options. In the days of the rather simple, though very dangerous, bipolar balance and the Cold War from 1946 to 1989, or the even simpler unipolar world of a decade or so ago, there was no

doubt in Canberra policy-makers minds as to what was Australia's most significant strategic priority. The relationship with Washington was unrivalled in importance. So an Australian expeditionary force, not necessarily very large, has been an almost automatic reflex of Australian Prime Ministers whenever Washington became involved in a war, as in Korea in the 1950's, or Vietnam in the 1960's. Those two were reasonably large force contingents, and caused some social pain, and political dissidence at home, especially Vietnam. The more recent ones, to the Gulf War in 1990, to Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003 have been smaller, carefully chosen, and almost casualty-free. Rather cynically perhaps, they have been widely regarded in Australia as the premiums we pay for the insurance-policy of the US alliance. Only recently, as doubts about Iraq have grown, has that involvement imposed any serious political costs on the government.

### **The alliance and balance of power politics**

Could those costs become heavy enough to raise doubts about the continuing validity of a strategic relationship of such long standing? There is one perfectly obvious such case: if the alliance threatened to involve us in what Canberra regarded as an unnecessary and disastrous war with China. That will be an issue that future Canberra policy-makers may have to ponder, but as I said earlier not as urgent as seemed the case a few years ago. Even in this lame-duck period of the Bush administration, Washington's stance vis-a-vis China on the one hand, and Taiwan and South Korea on the other has changed quite markedly. But that is too complex an issue to explore further here. There is a less explored factor that needs more attention.

The PM's reaction recently when confronted with a question about the implications of Washington deciding, with a possible Democratic president in the White House in 2009, that the cause was lost in Iraq, and that the US national interest demanded that the troops be pulled out, seemed to imply that he would regard it as a catastrophe for Australian security. But that view is open to question. The US pulled out of Vietnam in 1972, essentially in defeat because of political factors in the US, as now seems possible in Iraq. The adversary took over the contested territory only three years later, and that was in an area of far more direct strategic significance to Australia than Iraq. Thirty-five years on, the current Vietnamese government is in charge of an increasingly prosperous country which the current administration in Washington is eyeing as a possible ally some time in its diplomatic manoeuvring towards a balance of power in Asia. A balance of power in which Australia is clearly seen as taking its place as a small but useful player, alongside certainly Japan, probably India, possibly Vietnam, maybe some other South East Asian countries.

I would expect that balance-of-power line of diplomatic policy-making to be intensified rather than diminished if a Democratic president is in the White House in 2009. Even the Bush administration has abandoned its experiment in unilateralism in 2003-4 after, in my view completely disastrous results, and for more than a year now has been visibly moving back to multilateralism. I assume the change means that Dr Rice's understanding of world realities is at last dominant in policy-making, now that one of her previous rivals, Donald Rumsfeld, has been fired, the other, Dick Cheney, is somewhat under a cloud, and most of the neo-cons are out of the policy-making process.

Of course things could change again in time. What has been called the Jacksonian tradition of rather assertive US nationalism in foreign policy might come again to the surface, since it has deep roots in US history. But not I think in the remains of this administration, or, short of some great crisis or trauma, in the next. Iraq has been no end of a lesson. What I would expect, as after Vietnam, is some probability of the US "drawing in its horns". Especially in the Middle East, of course, but possibly also in East Asia and the Pacific, perhaps along the lines of Nixon's Guam Doctrine of 1969, as the Vietnam War went sour. That latter possibility is what I assume the PM was preoccupied with in his ASPI speech of 21 March [2]. Incidentally, the US base on Guam is currently being much updated and strengthened, in line with the changes in the US strategic stance mentioned earlier.

US strategic priorities will certainly continue to evolve, in line with the changing balance of power in the world. A global balance of the six great powers mentioned earlier, *but with its central focus very much on Asia* is what I would expect to emerge in the long term, though in the shorter term the focus must remain on the Middle East. There does not seem to me much in that picture to threaten Australian security. The unipolar world of the past decade was very easy for us to make our strategic choices in, because until very recently there was no rival to the US in overall importance to us. Now there is one such rival, at least in economic importance, China, and another in strategic importance, Indonesia. The PM's policies seem to me to have been careful and deft in managing that change, but Kevin Rudd seems on education and experience equally well fitted to handle the even more complex choices of the future.

## Information about the author

Coral Bell is a Visiting fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at ANU. She was formerly Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex.

Her most recent books entitled [A World Out of Balance: American Power and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century](#) (Longueville Books, Sydney), and [Living with Giants](#), ASPI Strategy Report, April 2005. A study for the Lowy Institute entitled "The Next Landscape of World Politics: the End of the Vasco da Gama Era" should be forthcoming later this year.

Contact e-mail: [coral.bell@anu.edu.au](mailto:coral.bell@anu.edu.au).

## End notes

[1] All quotations and views attributed to Mr Rudd are sourced from his article "Smart Power" in *The Diplomat* of February-March 2007.

[2] [Iraq and the Broader Security Implications](#), John Howard, ABC, 2007-03-21

## Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: [austral@rmit.edu.au](mailto:austral@rmit.edu.au). Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by the [Nautilus Institute at RMIT](#), Austral Peace and Security Network (APSNet). You can review the [2007 archives](#). You might like to [subscribe to the free Twice weekly newsletter](#).

---

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/apsnet/the-us-australia-alliance-a-prospect-of-change/>

Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: [nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)