

6 The evolution of the US–Australia strategic relationship

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Introduction

‘Strategic relationship’ describes the interaction between two independent states when applying national power in pursuit of their international goals. In cases where the relationship is cooperative, the two states combine national power to achieve sought after strategic outcomes. Here we are talking about each countries’ grand strategy, which Hal Brands describes as a ‘purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so’. It is, he suggests, the conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there; that is, the logic that guides leaders towards the goal of security (Brands 2014: 3). Since the signing of the Australia–New Zealand–United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty in 1951, Australia has aligned itself with the grand strategy of the United States (US). This has provided Australia with the protection of the US’s armed forces, the benefits of access to America’s extensive intelligence network and its most advanced military technology. A close strategic relationship has allowed Australia privileged access to high-level decision-making in Washington and has given Australia invaluable insight into the most sensitive areas of US strategic thinking. Furthermore, as the strategic relationship between the US and Australia has evolved, it has demonstrated remarkable durability and strength. It has adapted to a variety of challenges over the years. The challenges it has faced include the United States’ Guam Doctrine, Australia’s ‘self-reliance’ defence policy, New Zealand’s *de facto* exclusion after a dispute with the US over nuclear policy, and the end of the Cold War.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that the US–Australia strategic relationship has evolved from more or less an adversarial position in the 19th century to an Australia largely dependent on the US during the Cold War to the interdependent partnership we see today. In the first section, I outline three key features that underpin the strength and durability of the current US–Australia strategic relationship: ideological solidarity, informal institutionalization, and reliability. The present durability of the US–Australia strategic relationship does not mean, however, that a strong partnership was always inevitable. In the second section of the chapter, I briefly examine Australia’s strategic starting point in the 19th century as an outpost of the British Empire in the Asia-Pacific region. The Australian colonies’ strategic perspectives of the US were

largely subsumed by Whitehall's great power competition with Washington. Australia's Federation in 1901, however, allowed the possibility of Australia pursuing its own strategic relations with other countries independently from Britain. The visit of the US Great White Fleet to Sydney Harbour in 1908 was then the starting point for a period of increasing military cooperation between Australia and the US, which culminated in fighting alongside one another to defeat Japan's armed forces in the Pacific Theatre of the Second World War. The failure of Britain's 'Singapore Strategy' and the US's success in defending Australia from Japan's military aggression became an important catalyst in realigning Canberra's strategic relationship with Washington. By 1951, Australia had signed the tripartite ANZUS security agreement, making it an important part of the US 'hub-and-spokes' system of bilateral alliances in the Asia-Pacific. Over the next 20 years, Australia shifted its strategic dependence from Britain to its powerful US friend.

In the chapter's third section, I examine the evolution of the US–Australia strategic relationship from the end of the Vietnam War until the present. The post-Vietnam hangover of the 1970s and the pre-eminence of Australia's policy of defence self-reliance in the 1980s and 1990s provided impetus to lessen its strategic dependence on the US. Although self-reliance never translated into strategic independence for Australia, it paved the way for a more strategically interdependent US–Australia relationship. In the decade that followed the East Timor crisis in 1999, military interventions were the dominant feature of the US–Australia strategic relationship. Australia was focused on demonstrating loyalty to the US in this period. The US–Australia strategic relationship continued to grow throughout the Obama Administration era and into the present day, with interdependence continuing to be a major theme. At the same time, a number of pressing concerns have emerged, especially the long-term impact of the 'Trump effect' and the potential to disagree over policy concerning the People's Republic of China.

A normative alliance

Ideological solidarity

A key feature of the US–Australia strategic relationship is the ideological solidarity that exists between the two countries. According to Stephen Walt, ideological solidarity between two independent states exists when they share common political values and objectives, while continuing to regard themselves as separate political entities. Other things being equal, he suggests, states will usually prefer to ally with governments whose political outlook is similar to their own (Walt 1997: 168). Walt argues that similar regimes may be willing to support each other on the basis that it contributes to promoting what they believe are intrinsic common goods, such as democracy, socialism or Islamic fundamentalism. Ideological solidarity and a commitment to the same strategic goals, he says, can reduce intra-alliance conflicts and help

sustain an alliance after its original rationale is gone (Walt 1997: 168). This is true of the US–Australia strategic relationship. The ideological solidarity between Australia and the US is a significant source of its strength. In other words, cultural and normative factors are an integral part of the US–Australia strategic relationship’s success. Despite various disagreements and tensions arising between Australia and the United States over specific strategic issues, these have never been more important than the common ideological solidarity of the alliance relationship itself. Australia’s relations with the US have an obvious advantage not commonly considered important for a strategic alliance – the similarity and compatibility of language, values, socioeconomic organization and political-legal practices (Albinski 1987: 8).

A broad range of cultural affinities significantly improves understanding and the likelihood of agreement in the relationship. Bill Tow and Henry Albinski suggest that ideological solidarity reinforces ANZUS by creating a sense of ‘alliance mutuality’ that encourages processes of norm identification, interest adaptability and order-building (Tow and Albinski 2002: 172). This feature led Tow and Albinski to describe ANZUS as a ‘normative alliance’. That is, both countries’ commitment to liberal democratic political values leads them to similar conclusions in relation to their security interests and ideas about strategy (Tow and Albinski 2002: 170). Inevitably, the choice of a national grand strategy involves a decision about which political values should be pursued. Key strategic questions seek to address the main political ideals that are at stake (Barkawi 1998: 181). The ideological solidarity that is such a prominent feature of the US–Australia strategic relationship has meant that Australia’s strategic thinking is more likely to align with US ideas about the purpose of armed force (or the threat to use armed force). John Ikenberry suggests that ‘when all is said and done, Americans are less interested in ruling the world than they are in a world of rules’ (Ikenberry 2004: 150). Hence, Australia has been supportive of US visions of international order. ANZUS is the type of rules-based institution based on democratic political values with which both the US and Australia are comfortable. Such ideological solidarity is important, but it is not the only factor at work in making a strong strategic relationship between Australia and the US.

Three pillars of institutionalization

A second key feature underpinning the strength and durability of the US–Australia strategic relationship is its institutionalization. Unlike the formal institutionalization seen in many of the US’s other strategic relationships, the US–Australia partnership lacks clearly specified formal treaty commitments. This concerns some alliance observers. Stephan Frühling, for instance, describes ANZUS as ‘the informal alliance’. He argues that the US–Australia strategic relationship lags behind all other US alliances in ‘the development of alliance guidance, command arrangements and policy mechanisms’ (Frühling 2018: 202). Frühling wants to ‘fill the institutional gap’ that he believes exists

between formal US–Australia treaty documents and the practices of the strategic relationship. His focus is on mechanisms for strengthening policy dialogue and command-and-control arrangements (Frühling 2018: 210–211).

Yet despite the lack of these types of policies and procedures to translate the ANZUS Treaty into specific strategic practices, three ‘pillars’ of institutionalization make significant contributions to the strength and durability of the US–Australia strategic relationship. The first of these pillars is the intelligence cooperation between Australia and the US. Des Ball described intelligence cooperation as the ‘strategic essence’ of the US–Australian alliance relationship. That is, the UKUSA Agreement of 1947–1948 concerning signals intelligence (SIGINT) cooperation and exchange, and the maintenance of the ‘joint facilities’ in Australia, are the important ‘ties that bind’ the US to Australia (Ball 2001: 237). Michael Wesley (2016a) also believes that intelligence cooperation sits at the heart of an effective US–Australia strategic relationship. He suggests that, in the absence of ‘NATO-like contracts’ or ‘joint strategic planning’, the US–Australia intelligence relationship provides reassurance and risk mitigation. Wesley argues that the best way for the US and Australia to correctly understand one another’s thinking on sensitive strategic issues, such as China’s rise, is via shared intelligence product. Through this process, both parties end up communicating clearly their assessments and priorities for a variety of strategic situations (Wesley 2016a: 160).

The second pillar of institutionalization binding Australia and the US is the collaboration in defence science and technologies. As mentioned above, the US located in Australia three installations of vital importance to the US’s strategic posture. These ‘joint facilities’ initially consisted of North West Cape, Pine Gap and Nurrungar (Ball 2001: 237). Ball argues that hosting these facilities represents Australia’s most meaningful, direct contribution to American security. In return, he suggests, Australia receives access to sophisticated US military technologies (Ball 2001: 238–239). Richard Brabin-Smith concludes that Australia’s relationship with the US in capability development and defence science is becoming even closer. But for this to continue, he suggests that Australia must ensure that it is in a position to give as well as to receive (Brabin-Smith 2016: 195). For instance, Australia has bought equity in the US Wideband Global Satellite communications system. Rather than merely paying as a customer for access, Australia funds one of the six satellites of the system’s constellation (Brabin-Smith 2016: 184).

The third pillar of institutionalization undergirding the US–Australia relationship are the effective personal relationships at all levels of the strategic partnership. Australia enjoys a privileged level of well-established access to the inner workings of key American political and strategic decision-making. Australia’s access in Washington is among the very best of the myriad nations who seek a hearing (Tow and Albinski 2002: 164). At the highest levels, the principal forum for bilateral consultations is the annual Australia–US Ministerial (AUSMIN) meeting, which brings together the Australian Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Defence with the US Secretaries of State and Defense.

But this is merely the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface, a complex array of working-level relationships closely binds Australia and the US. Kim Beazley (a former Australian Defence Minister and Ambassador to the US) has noted that the informal personal relationships forged between Australian and US bureaucrats at the working-level are numerous and perhaps even more significant to the health of the alliance than those at the most senior levels. He suggests that diplomats, intelligence officers and military personnel from Australia and the US ‘work with, argue with, and even marry each other constantly’, which creates ‘an underappreciated sense of common outlook and purpose at the deep-state level’ (cited in Beeson and Bloomfield 2019: 346). John Blaxland also makes this point in relation to the extensive military links between the US and Australia. He suggests that US–Australia military ties are strong enough to withstand considerable buffeting from the domestic politics of either country (Blaxland 2016: 140).

A reliable ally

A third feature of the strategic relationship is reliability. The US values Australia’s reliability as an ally and, in turn, Canberra’s concern is to make decisions that increase the reliability of Washington’s commitment to protect Australia. Whether it be John Howard’s prescription for Australia to be a ‘100 per cent ally’ or Julia Gillard’s reference to the nation being an American ‘ally for all the years to come’, there has been, suggests James Curran, ‘a determination to underline Australia’s reliability’ (Curran 2016: 117). Australia has committed itself to American strategy over the long haul. In particular, Australia has consistently been a strong advocate of the American regional military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. A key theme of Australian strategic culture has been its tendency to be a pragmatic derivation of the strategic policy of its great power ally. That is, it has taken as its starting point the grand strategic frameworks developed by the British Empire and then the US (Wesley 2016b: 20). Moreover, despite Australia’s military being dwarfed by its much more powerful partner, the dependability of Australian support for US strategy has been largely appreciated in Washington. One Obama administration official’s comment holds true as an aphorism for Washington’s view of Australia’s reliability: ‘our allies all give us headaches, except Australia. You can always count on Australia’ (Curran 2016: 121–122).

Being a reliable ally, however, has not meant that Australia has always agreed with US strategic decision-making. Shannon Tow argues that an effective US–Australia strategic relationship has not meant adopting identical policies. Australian policymakers have not traditionally regarded US strategy as immutable (Tow 2017: 160). US strategic preferences, she suggests, can be changed over time, through argument or actions. But securing US assent has meant convincing US policymakers about the merits of Australia’s independent policy (Tow 2017: 160). What this indicates is that alliance reliability is not synonymous with alliance loyalty. *Loyalty* describes an agent’s willingness

to follow a leader without calculations about the worth of doing so. For instance, Australia is exhibiting loyalty when it follows US strategic decision-making instinctively and without question. In contrast, *reliability* in the context of alliance relationships is a notion requiring the exercise of prudence. In other words, Australia is demonstrating its reliability as an ally when it follows US strategic decision-making for the right reasons. This sense of reliability is more akin trustworthiness than loyalty *per se*. Iain Henry utilizes something like this distinction when he argues that a state does not wish to see loyalty in the behaviour of its ally as much as it wants to see proof that the ally's interests align with its own (Henry 2020: 47). Henry suggests that states are primarily concerned with the observed reliability of an ally rather than questions of whether an ally's behaviour is loyal or disloyal. States want to be confident that their ally's interests align with their own, and therefore the alliance poses no risk of either abandonment or entrapment (Henry 2020: 47).

US belief in Australia's loyalty is consequently a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it grants Australia influence and access. On the other hand, it creates an expectation among American policymakers that is difficult to disappoint (Curran 2016: 122). Moreover, unquestioning loyalty can lend legitimacy to poor US strategic policymaking. One of the great ironies of the Howard government's fulsome and uncritical support of the US, argues Mark Beeson, is that it encouraged policies that were unsustainable, unachievable, highly divisive and ultimately corrosive of US authority. By contrast, he suggests, a more critical and less compliant alliance partner would have benefitted both Australia and the US in the long run (Beeson 2003: 388). According to Brendan Taylor and Bill Tow, Australia has sought to shape and control the alliance so that it maximizes its net benefits. For this reason, Australia has willingly accepted its characterization as a 'dependent' and 'dependable' junior ally to the US (Taylor and Tow 2017: 88). In practice, however, Australia has exercised a remarkable degree of independence within the bounds of the strategic relationship. Washington has afforded Canberra considerable latitude, choosing not to impose significant costs when Australia has explicitly gone against its wishes. For example, when Australia joined the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in April 2015 (Taylor and Tow 2017: 88–89). Thus, it should be Canberra's priority to 'disabuse senior US policymakers of the view that Australia's support is simply automatic' (Curran 2016: 119).

From strategic competition to dependence

Anglo-American competition

Although the US–Australia strategic relationship is now strong and dependable, it had inauspicious beginnings. Throughout the 19th century, it was largely subject to Whitehall's great power competition with Washington. The

Australian colonies were generally apprehensive about the US's strategic intent and emerging naval power. The first American interest in Australia was a by-product of interests in Asia. By 1792, American ships trading to China around Cape Horn found that they could profitably call in at Port Jackson with a cargo of stores for the settlers (Bell 1988: 7). The mid-19th century gold strikes also promoted interaction between the US and Australia. At the time of the Eureka Stockade (1854), there were more than 1,000 Americans living in Victoria (Bell 1988: 7). During the Crimean War (1853–1856), the main British enemy was Russia, which was enough of a threat for the NSW colony to construct a stronghold in Sydney Harbour (Fort Denison). Australian colonists also had their concerns about the French (operating from nearby New Caledonia) and the Americans (Bell 1988: 9). In November 1839, for example, two American warships entered Sydney Harbour at night and anchored without being detected until the next morning. This illustrated the potential for a hostile power to control Australia's colonial sea-borne trade or coerce the settlements with the threat of bombardment (Grey 2008: 20).

The first armed conflict that saw Australians fight alongside (and against) Americans was the Civil War (1861–1865). Approximately 100 native-born Australians and New Zealanders fought in the conflict (Crompton 2008). Of particular note are the 42 Australians (from the colony of Victoria) who joined the crew of the Confederate cruiser the *CSS Shenandoah* when it docked in Melbourne in 1865. They sailed 96,500 kilometres around the world and were responsible for destroying 32 Union merchant ships, ransoming six, and capturing more than a thousand prisoners (Smyth 2015: 9). The *Shenandoah* was involved in the final armed conflict of the American Civil War and was the last of the Confederates to surrender, which it eventually did in Liverpool, England on 6 November 1865 (Smyth 2015: 274). The Melbourne recruit George Botriune Canning made history by firing the last shot of the war and by being the last man to die in the service of the Confederacy (Smyth 2015: 269). Since the *Shenandoah* had originally been a British ship, and Victoria was still a British colony at the time, the US Government successfully sued the British Government for £15 million in damages (Bell 1988: 7).

In the 1890s, a surge in French and German colonial activity throughout the Pacific created tension with Britain and anxiety within the Australian colonies. Furthermore, the Spanish-American War of 1898, and the subsequent US annexation of the Philippines, brought the US to the forefront as a major security player in the Pacific (Bell 1988: 10). The US did, in fact, end up developing naval plans to invade Sydney Harbour as a contingency in case it went to war with Britain (Reckner 2001). As early as the 1880s, some colonists were cognisant that close alignment with Britain might increase the dangers to Australia and that the better approach might be to seek a more independent strategic policy (Bell 1988: 9). In the words of one Parliamentarian, 'Let us establish ourselves in a separate community, and not be

involved in ... any of England's wars ... The security we should thus have would be of infinite and transcendent benefit to us' (David Buchanan cited in Bell 1988: 10). But such views were unusual and tended to be held by 'radicals.'

The beginnings of cooperation

Australia's Federation in 1901 began the process leading to the gradual emergence of an Australian grand strategy distinct from British policy, which allowed the possibility of strategic cooperation with the US. The seminal event that established the US–Australia strategic relationship was the US Navy's 'Great White Fleet' visit to Sydney, Melbourne, and Albany in 1908. The purpose of sending the fleet of US battleships on tour around the world – their hulls painted white – was to make the statement that the US was a significant maritime power with aspirations in both the Atlantic and the Pacific. The Australian Prime Minister Alfred Deakin had sent US President Theodore Roosevelt an invitation for the ships to visit Australia. The visit was a huge success, with over half a million Sydneysiders turning out to greet the arrival of the sixteen US battleships with escorts (Parkin and Lee 2008: 1). The British Foreign and Colonial office had opposed the idea of the US fleet visit, however, believing that it would signify a more independent Australian mindset. Consequently, they were furious with Deakin for allowing the visit to go ahead (Sheridan 2006: 303).

Another milestone in the US–Australia strategic relationship was the military cooperation between the US and Australia in the final year of the First World War. The US formally joined Britain and its allies in the war against Germany on 7 April 1917. But it was another year before American troops arrived in France in significant numbers (Beaumont 2013: 264). American troops fought under the command of the Australian General John Monash at the successful Battle of Hamel (4 July 1918), which almost didn't go ahead after the US Commander-in-Chief, General John Pershing, initially withdrew the American contingent of ten companies (Beaumont 2013: 264). More significantly, two fresh American divisions (the 27th and 30th from II Corps) were transferred to Monash's command for the final battle involving Australian infantry troops in the War. From 27 September to 5 October 1918, a combined force of Australian, American, and British troops broke the Hindenburg Line and took the French towns of Beaufort and Montbrehain (Beaumont 2013: 493).

Of greatest significance to the long-term development of the strategic relationship, however, was the military cooperation required to defeat Japan's armed forces in the Pacific Theatre of the Second World War. By the end of the war, Australians came to regard the US, at least potentially, as their chief protector against a threatening region (McLean 2006: 68). Australia and the US had only formally established diplomatic relations in 1940. The appointment of an Australian Minister to Washington was formally completed when

R.G. Casey presented his credentials to the White House on 5 March (Watt 1967: 124). From early 1942 onwards, Australians fought alongside the US military under the command of General Douglas MacArthur. US–Australia strategic cooperation reached new heights during this time. Military engagement was extensive, involving combined operational planning, logistics, and force preparation between each of the services (army, navy and air force) (Blaxland 2016: 122). A key element of this wartime cooperation was the establishment of an Allied Intelligence Bureau on 6 July 1942. At the heart of this arrangement was the secretive UKUSA agreement that allowed the US, Britain, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand to share sensitive signals intelligence (Wesley 2016a: 149–150).

A ‘Pacific pact’

The signing of the ANZUS agreement (1951) signalled the beginning of the era of strategic dependence for the US–Australia relationship. For much of the Cold War, Australia’s primary debate regarding the alliance centred on the ‘metaphor of dependence’. That is, the notion that Australia was reliant on its ‘great and powerful friends’ for its security (Carr 2016: 67). Although Australia remained part of the British Commonwealth, its security became increasingly tied to the US (Dean 2016: 238). In what sense was Australia strategically dependent on the US in this period? Dependence is relying on someone or something other than yourself to provide for your basic needs. One party in the relationship cannot or will not provide for itself. Australia’s decision-makers concluded that they needed the security offered by the US at the time and they had little of material substance to offer in return. There was no real expectation that Australia would be able to make a reciprocal contribution to America’s security.

Australia’s timely support to the US in the Korean War played a key role in the realization of ANZUS. The burden of controlling Japan had been eagerly assumed by the US in August 1945. But nations such as Australia felt let down by the general lack of consultations in relation to US strategic intentions for Northeast Asia (Buckley 2002: 26). Furthermore, Canberra had experienced little success in advocating for a ‘Pacific Pact’, akin to NATO in Europe, involving the US (Lowe 2001: 189). The war in Korea, however, quickly changed the strategic landscape. After war broke out on 25 June 1950, when the Communist north invaded the south, Australia was one of the first member states to volunteer forces to the US-dominated United Nations Command. Australian officials believed that agreeing to US requests for troops would favourably influence negotiations for a security treaty with the US. By 2 July, Royal Australian Air Force aircraft from Squadron 77, which were based in Japan under the operational command of the 5th US Air Force, were attacking the advancing North Korean forces. The Australian government also agreed to send a battalion of ground troops in response to a request by the United Nations (Siracusa 2005: 98). Following China’s entry into the

War on 25 October, the US was in need of reliable allies. Australian Minister for External Affairs Percy Spender's public comments steadfastly supporting the US approach in Korea convinced the US Joint Chiefs of Staff that the State Department needed to pursue a Pacific Pact with Australia (Siracusa 2005: 100). An important reason for Australia then sending a second battalion to Korea was to underline its reliability as a strategic partner to the US.

The ANZUS Treaty was signed in San Francisco 1 September 1951 and came into force 29 April 1952 (Siracusa 2005: 102). Its aim was to reassure Australia (and New Zealand) that the US would use its military to intervene if either country was attacked. What was seen as a vital necessity by Australia was something to be accepted 'with a resigned shrug' by the Americans. In essence, it was a lopsided arrangement, hardly more than 'a protectorate or one-way guarantee' (Bell 1988: 199). The terms used in the ANZUS Treaty were also vague. Unlike the North Atlantic Treaty, which states unambiguously that an attack on one of its allies will trigger an automatic US response, the ANZUS Treaty merely declares that it would 'act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes' (Wesley 2016a: 146). Since the actual commitment to reciprocity within the treaty was unclear, Australia was motivated to follow US strategic initiatives in the attempt to lower whatever fixed costs ANZUS might have in American eyes (Leaver 1997: 72–73). Moreover, the vast asymmetry of military capabilities between Australia and the US led to 'the behavioural pattern characteristic of that between patrons and their clients' (Watt 1967: 124).

Australia strongly supported US national grand strategy in the region throughout the Cold War. The US's increasing support for an alliance with Australia was part of a broader transformation of Washington's East Asian policy in 1949–1950 (McLean 1990: 66). Differences existed between Washington and Canberra over the strategic planning for the defence of Southeast Asia (see: Jones 2004; Lee 1993; Lee 1992). But the onset of the Cold War in Asia prompted US officials to reflect more on the benefits to be gained from a Pacific alliance system that included Australia and New Zealand. It would, they concluded, help protect US interests by strengthening ties with friendly countries and reducing the burden on American resources (McLean 1990: 67). The result was the US-led system of bilateral security ties that included Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia. Dubbed the 'hub-and-spokes' system by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, this network of bilateral arrangements still represents the most important and enduring element of the security architecture for the region (Cha 2010). The region underwent dramatic transformation over decades of war, political upheaval, democratization, and economic boom and crisis. Yet despite the turmoil, this most basic reality of the post-war regional order remained remarkably fixed and enduring (Ikenberry 2004: 353).

Strategic interdependence

Australian self-reliance

The early 1970s through to the mid-1990s began a more strategically *interdependent* trajectory for the US–Australia relationship. There was ‘a greater propensity for Australian governments of both political persuasions to state candidly their disagreement with US strategic policies’ (Curran 2016: 118). In agreeing to the ANZUS treaty, Washington had wanted the strategic benefits of Australia’s unique geographical position in the South Western Pacific. Hosting what became known as the ‘joint facilities’ was the most effective contribution Australia made to the Western alliance at the time (Bell 1996: 27). There was considerable political controversy surrounding these American bases in Australia, many of which had deterrence or warning functions associated with US nuclear forces. The concern was that US bases likely made Australia a target in any nuclear exchange (McCaffrie and Rahman 2014: 89). Nevertheless, the value that Washington put on these facilities meant that the US–Australia strategic relationship became considerably less unequal. Whereas American reliance on its Australian installations increased over time, the scenario where Australia was most dependent on the US – a conventional war of aggression by a hostile regional power – became less likely (Bell 1988: 199). As a result, the bargaining power that was initially weighted almost entirely in Washington’s favour, gradually shifted towards Canberra. That is to say, a ‘one-sided dependence had in effect transmuted itself into interdependence of a relatively symmetrical sort’ (Bell 1988: 199–200).

Part of the reason for this shift was Australia’s defence policy of self-reliance. The seeds for a more self-reliant Australian approach to its security were sown in the shadows of the Vietnam War (1962–1975). The Menzies government had embarked upon its Vietnam commitment in order to bind the US more closely to Australia. The goal of supporting the US was to bring reciprocal support when Australia most needed it (Edwards 1997: 28). In 1969, however, the Nixon Doctrine had made clear the US expectation that its Asian allies should shoulder more of the burden for their own defence (Frühling 2018: 206). General anti-US sentiments in Australia had also been fuelled by the war in Vietnam and the Moratorium Movement (Bloomfield and Nossal 2010). Although defence matters and the alliance were not a high priority for the new Labor Whitlam Government (1972–1975), self-reliance was debated and then formally articulated under the subsequent Fraser Government in the first Defence White Paper *Australian Defence* in 1976 (Brabin-Smith 2016: 180). Self-reliance was at its most influential as government policy, however, in the mid-1980s when the newly appointed Labor Defence minister, Kim Beazley, commissioned Paul Dibb to undertake a review of ‘the content, priorities and rationale’ for Australian defence planning. The 1986 ‘Dibb Report’ was recognized across the political spectrum as a ‘revolution in Australian defence’, for in advocating a ‘strategy of denial’, it turned its back

on the strategic tradition of ‘forward defence’, which started with the proposition that Australia was essentially indefensible through its own resources (Leaver 1997: 70). It recommended a concentration on the defence of Australia’s ‘area of direct military interest’. It argued that, with limited resources, a country such as Australia should avoid using the Australian Defence Force to fight wars outside its region (Dibb 1986). This meant restricting defence planning to the Australian mainland and its contiguous waters, the South Pacific islands, and Southeast Asia. The subsequent 1987 Defence White Paper *The Defence of Australia* mostly accepted Dibb’s propositions and conclusions.

Australia’s policy of defence self-reliance did not equate to strategic independence, however. Strategic independence would indicate that Australia had isolated itself from outside support and become completely self-sufficient (Brabin-Smith 2016: 181). The policy of self-reliance never intended to achieve such a result. Rather, it was always understood as ‘self-reliance in alliance’. The focus on self-reliance in defence planning was to ensure that Australia had sufficient military capability for independence in operations that were likely to be of lesser consequence to the US, especially in Australia’s near region (Frühling 2016: 18). Ultimately, it represented a significant evolution in the US–Australian strategic relationship because it opened the door to interdependence. An *interdependent* relationship is one where each of the parties relies to a significant degree on the resources of the other party to fulfil its needs. Australia’s strategic role and influence in this period became increasingly intertwined with American power and capabilities. A doctrine of strategic interdependence now started to play a significant role in Australian security policy (Lyon and Tow 2003: 34).

The decade of military interventionism

Military interventions were the dominant feature of the US–Australia strategic relationship for the decade following the East Timor crisis. This was the era where a key focus for Australian grand strategy was demonstrating loyalty to the US; disparagingly described by some at the time as playing the role of ‘deputy sheriff’. The strategic goal of Canberra’s military commitments in this period was to bind the US more closely to Australia’s security interests. Australia had a consistent record of fighting alongside US forces in every major conflict since the First World War. A major reason for Australia’s consistent willingness to fight in these wars was a concern to improve the reliability of its great power ally. That is to say, Australia’s strategic goal has been to ensure that, initially London and then later Washington, ‘would remember Australia’s sacrifices abroad and come to its aid if needed’ (Green, Dean, Taylor and Cooper 2015: 8).

Thus, Australian Prime Minister John Howard was bitterly disappointed after Washington refused his request for US ground troops to address the political crisis in East Timor. When it came to power in 1996, a foreign policy priority for the Australian Howard Government was to ‘reinventoriate’ the

ANZUS alliance (Tow 2001: 162). In July 1996, it presented the Sydney Statement at the annual Australia–US Ministerial (AUSMIN) consultations. This was a joint security initiative outlining closer defence links between Australia and the US (Wesley 2007: 10). Then, in 1999, a vote for independence in East Timor led to a series of massacres by Indonesian-backed militia groups. After a public outcry in Australia, the Howard Government reluctantly responded by pushing for a UN-mandated military intervention and by taking the lead in pulling together the international coalition. A number of South East Asian and European countries agreed to contribute military personnel to the International Force East Timor (INTERFET). But Howard was particularly disappointed in President Clinton's unwillingness to send US ground troops, suggesting that 'it was a poor repayment of past loyalties and support' (Curran 2016: 64). Consequently, some prominent alliance commentators have used this incident as evidence for the US's lack of reliability when it comes to supporting Australia's strategic concerns (Beeson 2003: 396; Curran 2016: 65–66; Frühling 2016: 18).

Far from being a failure of the US–Australia relationship, however, the East Timor crisis instead highlighted the effectiveness of strategic interdependence. There was no shortage of countries offering ground troops for INTERFET. What the US provided instead were the crucial strategic elements that Australia most needed to make the intervention a success. First, it applied economic and political pressure on the Indonesian government, causing it to back down and accept the international intervention (Blaxland 2016: 128). Second, it provided valuable logistical capabilities and intelligence support lacked by the international coalition (Blaxland 2016: 128–129). Third, the US maintained a significant offshore military presence via a Marine Amphibious Ready Group supported by a Navy Aegis cruiser. This deterred rogue elements of the Indonesian military or Indonesian-backed militia groups from attempting to confront INTERFET directly, particularly in the tense initial days of the deployment (Blaxland 2016: 129).

Furthermore, leadership of the East Timor intervention demonstrated Australia's worth to the US as a reliable ally in the region. A foreign policy priority of the Bush Administration, when it was voted into office in early 2001, was 'to renew strong and intimate relationships with allies who share American values and can thus share the burden of promoting peace, prosperity, and freedom' (Rice 2000: 47). Australia's performance in East Timor was held up by Washington as a model of how an ally should behave in a regional crisis (Edwards 2005: 46). Canberra was also seen to have acted decisively by intervening in the civil war in the Solomon Islands and against North Korea's rogue behaviour when it intercepted the *Pong Su* in 2003. US policy-makers looked on these initiatives favourably, especially when compared to the inability of its European allies to resolve successive Balkan crises (Wesley 2007: 113–114).

In 2001, Australian Prime Minister John Howard was quick to invoke the ANZUS Treaty, for the first time in its history, in response to the 9/11

terrorist attacks on the US. This led to Australian military commitments to Afghanistan (from 2002) and Iraq (2003 and 2014) in support of President George W. Bush's War on Terror (Dean 2016: 241). Alan Bloomfield (2015) suggests that these Middle Eastern military commitments conformed to a 'Move Fast, Commit Little' pattern. By committing quickly, he suggests, Canberra hoped to gain a 'first mover advantage' that would reap tangible benefits from the alliance. But the substance of what it offered was limited, especially when compared to other contributors. In Afghanistan, for instance, Australia initially contributed 150 Special Forces troops followed by 950 troops in 2006. The number rose to 1,550 troops by 2009 with the contingent largely based in the comparatively quiet Oruzgan province. In comparison, US troop numbers peaked at 101,000, the UK's peaked at 7,700 and Canada's peaked at 2,300. Similarly, Australia's contribution for the invasion of Iraq (2,048 troops) was much smaller than the US (148,000 troops) or the UK (46,000 troops), with these Australian troops withdrawn by mid-2003 (Bloomfield 2015: 26). Australia certainly reaped many benefits from Howard's approach to the US–Australia strategic relationship. Greg Sheridan (2006) concluded that Howard ended up receiving most of what he wanted from the alliance at very little cost. This was

an enhanced intelligence relationship; enhanced defence cooperation; greater Australian influence in Washington's decision-making; a free trade agreement; increased US involvement in the region, especially in Indonesia; the greater prestige in Asia that comes from being close to and able to influence Washington; and the enhanced prestige for his government with Australian voters.

(Sheridan 2006: 13)

Unfortunately, however, Australia also developed a reputation in Washington for talking a 'good war'. That is to say, Australia's 'uncritical support comes with words, but not necessarily in the numbers of Australian boots that the Pentagon would like to see on the ground' (Curran 2016: 122).

From Obama to Trump

The US–Australia strategic relationship continued to grow throughout the Obama Administration era and into the present day, with interdependence continuing to be a major theme. At the same time, pressing concerns about China's rise and the impact of the Trump Administration on the effectiveness of US strategy have also emerged. Under the leadership of US President Barack Obama (2008–16), the alliance went from strength to strength 'deepening institutionally and broadening into new areas of cooperation such as cyber security, ballistic missile defence, space cooperation and new measures to combat terrorism' (Taylor and Tow 2017: 81–82). In November 2011, Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard jointly announced in

Canberra the Force Posture Initiative, an arrangement where 2,500 US marines would be based in Darwin on a six-month rotational basis, and plans for the US Air Force to make greater use of facilities in northern Australia (Gyngell 2017: 311). This was part of Obama's 'pivot to Asia' strategy. An Obama-commissioned review of global strategy and force disposition had concluded that the US defence posture was unbalanced. Too much of the US's overseas force presence was based in Europe and the Middle East during a time when US predominance in Asia was being tested by China's rising power. Hence, in 2011, Obama revealed a shift in US policy towards the Asia-Pacific region (Gyngell 2017: 310).

Another important change was Australia's inclusion of the Indian Ocean in the framing of its strategic environment. The term 'Indo-Pacific' was increasingly being used in official language, with its first official appearance in the *2013 Defence White Paper* and then again in the *2016 Defence White Paper*. In contrast to the more familiar 'Asia-Pacific', which predominantly focused on the area north of Australia, the Indo-Pacific strategic concept was an attempt to elevate the importance of the maritime environments on either side of Australia and the critical sea lines of communication from the Middle East through Southeast Asia to North Asia (Gyngell 2017: 315). The change in emphasis was also motivated by a desire to give more attention to India. The thought being that an increasingly powerful India would make a valuable addition to the US's regional alliances by acting as a counterweight to China's rise (Gyngell 2017: 315). It is far from certain, however, that India is willing to play such a role for the US. Such an alliance with India, suggest Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips, risks entangling Washington in the long-running Sino-Indian rivalry. The US would then take on a substantial strategic burden without the 'compensating benefit of securing India as a reliable junior ally prepared to uncomplainingly support US hegemony' (Bisley and Phillips 2013: 105).

As the US–Australia strategic relationship moves into the future, a pressing concern is the potential for disagreement on how to approach the rise of China. The US is undoubtedly Australia's most important strategic ally, but China is its largest trading partner. Hence, Australia's goal is for the two powers to find ways to avoid serious conflict. Hugh White stirred up some controversy, however, when he suggested that in order to pursue such conflict avoidance, Australia should push the US to relinquish regional primacy and agree to share power with China. He suggested that Australia should urge the US to treat China as an equal on key strategic issues, such as nuclear strategy and Taiwan (White, 2011: 91). Potentially diverging views on the rise of China has caused a small but growing number of scholars and policy-makers in the US to question Australia's future reliability as an ally (Mahnken 2016: 42). The irony of this, note Michael Green et al. (2015: 8), is that 'for much of Australia's history, its leaders have been nervous about abandonment by its primary ally' and yet now it is 'Australians who worry about entrapment by Washington and Americans that worry about abandonment by Canberra'.

US policy-makers worry about losing Canberra's steadfast support in its strategic rivalry with Beijing. In contrast, Canberra's fear is being pulled into an armed conflict between China and the US.

The other major challenge for the US–Australia strategic relationship is US President Donald Trump's 'transactional' and chaotic approach to making foreign policy decisions. Trump's attacks on various US allies have cast doubt on Washington's willingness to continue supporting the strategic goals that are in Australia's interests. This 'Trump Effect' has sparked a debate in Australia about the trustworthiness of the relationship (Beeson and Bloomfield 2019: 341). Mark Beeson and Alan Bloomfield argue that deep and broad institutionalization has reinforced a natural cultural affinity that imparts powerful path dependency effects on the relationship (Beeson and Bloomfield 2019: 353). The hope is that such features, that have made the US–Australia strategic relationship strong and helped it endure over time, are sufficient to mitigate any long-term harm caused by the Trump Effect. The Trump Administration's mishandling of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, however, has been an alarming indicator to the international community that US power is potentially declining rapidly, more so than anyone could have anticipated.

Conclusion

The US–Australia strategic relationship today is an *interdependent* partnership that has experienced a number of historical phases in its evolution. First of all, in the 'Imperial Rivalry' era, Australia's views were synonymous with Britain's imperial grand strategy. The US was simply one of a number of great power rivals to Britain. The visit of the US Great White Fleet to Sydney Harbour in 1908, however, signalled the beginning of the 'Military Cooperation' phase. This culminated in the joint effort to defeat Japan's armed forces in the Pacific Theatre of the Second World War. Next, the 'Strategic Dependence' phase began when the ANZUS security agreement was signed, making Australia an important part of the US 'hub-and-spokes' system of regional bilateral alliances. Over the next 20 years, Australia shifted its strategic dependence from Britain to the US. In the wake of the Vietnam War, the strategic relationship entered the 'Self-Reliance' phase. This paved the way for a more strategically interdependent US–Australia relationship. Then, the decade that followed the East Timor crisis was the 'Military Interventions' phase, where Australia was focused on demonstrating loyalty to the US. Most recently, the relationship reached the 'Strategic Interdependence' phase as it continued to flourish throughout the Obama Administration era and into the present day.

Strategic interdependence means that the US–Australia relationship is not merely a one-sided affair. It also means that Australia has something of substance to offer the strategic relationship. Part of the reason that the relationship is strong is because of a shared language, similar social values, and

compatible political-legal systems. Moreover, the relationship has been thoroughly institutionalized via intelligence cooperation, defence science collaboration, and extensive personal relationships. But what the US really seems to value is Australia's reliability as an ally. Australia best demonstrates its reliability as an ally, however, when it follows US strategic decision-making *for the right reasons*. This sense of reliability is more akin to trustworthiness than it is to loyalty. History demonstrates that Australia has not always agreed with the US. But agreeing does not matter so much when Australia has established a track record of consistently applying sound reasoning to its strategic decisions and making substantive contributions to jointly sought-after strategic outcomes.

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