

## **Keeping Up Appearances?: Australia's 'dance' with China and implications for the Alliance**

by Michael Sutton

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Australians recently remembered Sept. 11, 2001 with solemnity, respect, and reflection. Responding to this day of infamy strengthened and reaffirmed the US-Australia alliance. This year not only marks a decade since 9/11 but it also marks the 60th anniversary of the alliance since the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand, and United States) was signed in 1951. Australia's response to 9/11 was informed and pursued in part as a consequence of the alliance and treaty commitments.

Following the remembrance of Sept. 11, it was announced that Barack Obama is scheduled to visit Australia Nov. 16-17, in part to commemorate the ANZUS milestone. Will Obama find a changed Australia? This is the 'new view' emerging in Australian strategic circles. China is now Australia's largest trading partner and in response this new view argues that Australia must 'choose' a strategic future informed by a 'power shift' from Washington to Beijing.

The alliance is unlikely to fracture even with a more influential and powerful China. Supporters of the 'new view' misunderstand Australian identity and engagement with the region post-1945. After Britain forsook colonial investments (except for Hong Kong) and sought refuge in the European Economic Community in 1973, Australia has been involved in what could be called an 'Asian Dance.' Australia's engagement with Asia has never been anything more than a dance with several partners, each nothing more than a fling, with loving and longing looks across the seas to Great Britain. At different times and for different reasons, Asian nations have courted Australia but none have been able to enjoy consummation because Australia's passion for 'new love' is as dry as the red desert sand of the Outback.

Australians have special affection for only three nations on earth. The first is New Zealand, a country which in the early 1890s had indicated interest in joining what became the Commonwealth of Australia. Australia's military history is unrecognizable without the ANZAC spirit (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) forged on the beaches of Gallipoli in Turkey in 1915.

The second is the United States. The alliance is central but must be viewed in the context of shared cultural and political values, common experiences, and commitment to democracy. The debt owed to the US by Australia during the Pacific War will also never be forgotten. The sacrifice of many US servicemen during this conflict for the sake of freedom forged

an abiding relationship between the two nations informing the creation of the alliance itself.

The third country of importance concerns the emotional, familial, and historical ties with the motherland or land of origin. All Australians (with the exception of indigenous peoples) are immigrants. Before the Pacific War, this usually implied Great Britain but since 1945, it has come to mean anywhere in the world.

The 'new view' on China fails to understand the profound impact multiculturalism has had on Australian society and identity. Contemporary Australia is by definition ethnically diverse. Filial ties extend across Asia to Europe, the Pacific Islands, New Zealand, South Africa, the Middle East, and Africa. As in the US and New Zealand, these ethnic groups have political lobbyists, constituencies, concerns, and political influence. This multiculturalism also reaffirms and strengthens support for New Zealand and the United States. Importantly, Australia remains a constitutional monarchy, with enduring affection for the British Queen and her successors. Despite several attempts, political elites have failed to sever symbolic ties with the Crown, the most recent being in 1997.

Also strengthening traditional sympathies is the parochialism and sentimentalism of Australian politics which reinforces national priorities. Domestic politics in Australia has always come first, even at the expense of decades of polite diplomacy. Indonesia and Japan are two examples. Australian diplomats, political leaders, and academic lobbyists cultivated a cautious and pragmatic relationship with Indonesia since the annexation of East Timor in 1975. Years of diplomacy were swept away by the violence surrounding the August 1999 referendum and Australian leadership of military intervention. Despite the 1957 Nara Treaty, political democracy and strong economic credentials, Australia's relations with Japan have been at times ambiguous. During the November 2007 federal election, then opposition Leader Kevin Rudd proposed taking Japan to the International Court of Justice over Japan's scientific whaling program along with the use of the Australian navy to monitor, intercept, and possibly board Japanese whaling vessels, a pledge that was popular domestically, but disastrous for foreign policy.

The economic importance in the Australia-China relationship has suggested to some in Australia's small think-tank community that there is a perceived need to appease, coax, and flatter Beijing. The promotion of greater cultural awareness of China by encouraging the learning of Mandarin and the fostering of further economic ties are productive developments, but there are limits.

Moreover, Beijing is not ignorant of Australia's relations with Great Britain and the United States. The problem for China is that no Asian country has been able through diplomatic efforts or economic importance to win over

mainstream Australia. The absence of democracy in China, the evolving narrative on human rights will continue to work against closer ties.

It is also worth noting that Australian public policy is also famously insulated from expert opinion due to the party machines, the federal structures, Australian public opinion, and Australian historical allegiances. Only a few academic scribblers are able to penetrate social consciousness and as such 'new views' must be measured against more meaningful indicators. In evaluating any shift in Australia toward the US, public opinion, public policies, and shared historical experiences are the most important.

It is doubtful that Australia will fall to the charms of Beijing. Australia is more likely to treat China in the same manner it has treated other Asian countries in the past. As other economies become more competitive, the emphasis on attention given to China will also be called into question. Perhaps in a decade or so, India will receive its turn as a partner in Australia's dance with Asia. In the meantime, traditional ties and bonds will remain.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*