

## Australia's White Paper woes

7th December, 2017

Author: Hugh White, ANU

Low expectations have triumphed in the responses to the Australian government's [recent Foreign Policy White Paper](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, which has been widely welcomed for providing both a convincing assessment of the international challenges that Australia faces and a credible response to them.



This says a lot about how little Australians have come to expect of their governments, because the White Paper so obviously underestimates the seriousness of the situation and offers no convincing policy response to it. If this is 'good enough', then Australians are accepting that their country should keep drifting into the most profound and problematic shift in international circumstances in decades without any comprehension of what is happening or any idea of how to deal with it.

[The White Paper](#) <sup>[2]</sup> has been praised for [acknowledging that China's power](#) <sup>[3]</sup> and influence are growing and that the United States is having doubts about how to respond. But it goes nowhere near recognising just how far these trends have already gone and where they are heading. It evades them on four key issues.

First, the text is silent on the implications of one of its graphs showing Treasury estimates that just 13 years from now China's economy will be close to double the size of the United States' — US\$42 trillion to US\$24 trillion. It does not comment on what these remarkable numbers mean for the shift in power between Washington and Beijing and hence what they mean for the United States' future role in Asia. The implications are fundamental and revolutionary: this shift reflects by far the biggest shift in the distribution of wealth and power in Asia in centuries.

Second, the [White Paper is equally evasive on what China aims to do with its growing power](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. It coyly acknowledges that Beijing seeks more influence, but nowhere says that it aims to dominate East Asia as the region's primary power. But this is now absolutely clear, especially since Chinese President Xi Jinping's [plain statements at the 19th Party Congress in October](#) <sup>[5]</sup>. This means that China aims to deny the United States any significant strategic role in the region. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull himself acknowledged this in his [speech](#) <sup>[6]</sup> to the Shangri-La Dialogue in June.

Third, the White Paper again coyly acknowledges that the United States' commitment to preserving its leadership in Asia is not as clear as it used to be. But this massively understates the reality. Under President Trump, Washington clearly has little desire to remain the leading power in Asia, nor does it have the skill in statecraft to do so. But it is not just Trump. The deeper reality is that as China's power grows, the costs and risks of resisting its challenge in East Asia have become more than Washington is willing to bear. Leadership in Asia just doesn't matter that much to them.

And fourth, there is no reason to assume, as the White Paper does, that the United States' failing position in Asia can be buttressed — and Australia's fears of China assuaged — by like-minded democracies such as India and Japan.

When it [talks of the 'Indo-Pacific', the White Paper](#) <sup>[7]</sup> presupposes that India and China will be rivals across that entire region, which implies that India will use its power to constrain China's ambitions in East Asia. But that is very unlikely, because India will be focused on keeping China out of the Indian Ocean. And as Japan's confidence in the United States falters it will be focused on managing its own relationship with China. It won't spare much thought for Australia in doing that. Why should it? What can we do for them?

All this makes it very risky to expect, as the White Paper does, that the United States will remain deeply engaged in the region as the guardian of the rules-based order. It says that this is 'essential' to peace and stability. It further assumes that if the United States does play the role that Australia wants, China will abandon its ambitions and peacefully accept it. The reality today is that the United States is very unlikely to resist China's bid to dominate East Asia, and that if it does, Asia is — with or without the support of like-minded democracies — headed not for peace and stability but rather for rivalry and conflict.

This is not inevitable. It is possible to imagine a new Asian order that both accommodates and constrains China's power and ambition. It would be one in which China plays a larger role, but the United States stays engaged to balance and limit its power, along with India and Japan. For Australia that would undoubtedly be the least bad of the plausible outcomes. But this is very different from the Asia that Australia has known and to which the White Paper proposes it cling. It makes no effort to describe or promote a new vision of Asia's future that realistically reflects the distribution of power in Asia today and in the future.

Instead it has Canberra looking backwards, hankering after the Asia for which Australia reminisces as it is instead propelled swiftly forward to an Asia it barely understands but instinctively fears. By refusing to acknowledge how swiftly China's power and influence in East

Asia is growing and the United States' is shrinking, Australia is preventing itself from making the best of the new circumstances it faces. Canberra will glide into supine subservience to China's power because it lacks the courage and imagination to deal with the reality of its [rise](#) <sup>[8]</sup>.

*Hugh White is Professor in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at The Australian National University. His new Quarterly Essay '[Without America: Australia in the New Asia](#)' <sup>[9]</sup> was published last week.*

A version of this article was originally published [here](#) <sup>[10]</sup> in The Australian Financial Review.

Article from the East Asia Forum: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org>

URL to article: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/12/07/australias-white-paper-woes/>

[1] recent Foreign Policy White Paper:

<http://www.afr.com/news/policy/foreign-affairs/foreign-policy-white-paper-australias-sovereign-not-reliant-future-20171123-gzrbun>

[2] The White Paper:

<http://www.afr.com/news/policy/foreign-affairs/foreign-policy-white-paper-australias-sovereign-not-reliant-future-20171123-gzrbun>

[3] acknowledging that China's

power: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/11/27/australias-foreign-policy-white-paper/>

[4] White Paper is equally evasive on what China aims to do with its growing power:

<http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/white-paper-has-no-answer-to-our-biggest-regional-challenge-20171127-gztij5>

[5] plain statements at the 19th Party Congress in October:

<http://www.afr.com/news/world/asia/ccp-congress-affirms-xi-jinpings-might-20171018-gz3gy8>

[6] speech:

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/malcolm-turnbull-reassures-us-that-allies-will-help-warns-china-against-bullying-20170602-gwja16.html>

[7] talks of the 'Indo-Pacific', the White

Paper:

<http://www.afr.com/news/economy/foreign-policy-white-paper-our-economic-future-lies-in-indopacific-20171122-gzqpdq>

[8] rise:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/12/the-rise-of-china-through-the-eyes-of-china/>

[9] *Without America: Australia in the New Asia:*

<https://www.quarterlyessay.com.au/essay/2017/11/without-america>

[10] *here:*

<http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/foreign-policy-why-we-should-expect-more-of-ourselves-20171202-gzxkag>