Reimagining Australia's place in a new world order

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To Asian policymakers, it's obvious that the pattern of international power is shifting. It's understandable and probably inevitable; as in the past, the region will reorient itself. Just as these policymakers read US power in material, not moral, terms, so they understand China's surging power in matter-of-fact ways.

It's a laconic view of power that only a long-term, cyclical conception of supremacy and decline can impart.

Australia needs to be similarly dispassionate about the way power is shifting in its region. The advent of Donald Trump calls for a fundamental rethinking of Australia's strategy towards the Asia-Pacific. Such a rethink has long been needed, but with Barack Obama and his predecessors we hid behind a hope that US power and resolve would prevail once again. Trump tears away any excuse for wishful thinking.

For the past quarter-century, Canberra's policy has been to support US primacy and US efforts to prevent the rise of rivals. Trump's election forces us to confront the failure of that policy and the implausibility of the restoration of the US's position of dominance. Rather, Australian policymakers must acknowledge the overwhelming reality that our future will increasingly be shaped by Beijing, not by Washington.

The Australian debate on the US alliance misses the point entirely. We should neither summarily break the alliance nor blindly deepen our investment in it. We should keep the alliance with the US but reshape it towards ensuring an enduring US role in the emerging Asian power balance, just as we reshaped the alliance towards a different rationale at the end of the Cold War.

We need to become as unromantic about US power as our northern neighbours. US power will endure, but the US will no longer be the arbiter of the regional order. We should therefore make sure that we use our alliance with the US to help secure what we regard as an acceptable and achievable environment in the Asia-Pacific. But first that requires working out what we want.

Reimagining our foreign policy is going to be the hardest thing we've done because this is the first time since European settlement that Australia has had to contemplate living in a region not dominated by a culturally similar ally.

For all of its talk of "shared destiny", nothing about contemporary China gives cause for confidence that a Beijing-centred regional order will be sympathetic to our values or interests. Nor can we have much confidence that other regional powers will combine to enforce the principles of stability, access and equality that have been so important to our safety and prosperity.

The first challenge is to let go of the belief that only US primacy can ensure an acceptable regional order. The government's mantra of upholding the rules-based order is an exhortation to regional countries to rally around the flagging superpower and help buttress the status quo against China.

But the longer we profess faith in US primacy, the harder it is to prepare for the new era already begun. We've drawn a rhetorical line in the South China Sea to which few regional countries have been willing to commit. Even Canberra has been reluctant to join the US Navy in its freedom of navigation exercises.

Next, we need to think about power as countries in the Asian region do. For most of them, US power was not inherently a good thing. It was useful because it provided stability and predictability without being too onerous.

US power made fewer demands in Asia than in Europe or Latin America; it was mostly unconcerned about the nature of domestic regimes, human rights or economic governance, nor was it inclined to make sudden geopolitical demarches. This means the countries in the region that have developed security partnerships with Washington, including India, Indonesia and Vietnam, have not done so from an admiration for US values or a desire to bolster US primacy in the region. They have built relationships with the US because they believe the US can help them develop their own capabilities, giving them the credibility and confidence to resist Beijing's growing assertiveness.

In most of the region's capitals, there is resigned acceptance that China will become the dominant power in Asia, alongside a hope that China's dominance will not be any more onerous than the US's.

But at this stage it remains a hope. There is substantial disquiet in the region about the arbitrary way China uses its power and its condescending dismissiveness towards those with differing interests. Nor has the US or any other country found a way to deter or shape China's assertive behaviour. And few really believe that Beijing's "core interests" will stop at the South China Sea.

So the key question confronting Australian policymakers is the same that confronts their counterparts in Asia: how can China's power be moderated in ways that allow space and voice for other regional countries?

At the moment there is little co-ordinated thinking about this. The region confronts a geopolitical version of the fable of the blind men and the elephant: each man describes the elephant based on the part of the animal he can feel. Each country is so preoccupied with its own challenge in managing China that it has little inclination for thinking in collective terms about this question.

Even Japan, the Asian neighbour most alarmed about China's power and intentions, and the most energetic in working to preserve the status quo, has given up on the thought of moderating China's behaviour. Tokyo is in balancing mode, encouraging other countries to build the capacity and summon the will to push back if China's demands continue to expand. For now, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts are focused on outreach to India, Australia and Southeast Asia, and the revival of the concept of a quadrilateral security dialogue between the US, Japan, India and Australia.

This is unlikely to work. The traditions of non-alignment run too deep; the complexities of bilateral relations with Beijing are too consuming; the capabilities and interests of regional countries are too diverse.

Our best hope is not for some grand coalition to balance China but for each of China's larger neighbours to assert its interests when they are challenged. China is wealthy and powerful, but it is in a crowded neighbourhood; not one of its frontiers, from India in the west to Japan in the east, is geopolitically uncomplicated.

In recent years Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and India have each stood up to China, confidently but not provocatively. These assertions of resolve are important. They are noticed not only in Beijing but also in other capitals. The best hope of moderating China's behaviour is to convince it that every time it acts arbitrarily or coercively, it increases its neighbours' willingness to push back.

This is where we need the US to help bring about a new equilibrium in the Asia--Pacific.

The US will have a role not only in Asia's balance of military power but also in continuing to shape the principles of regional order.

It is in our interests that Washington, supported by countries such as Australia, Japan, South Korea and Singapore, uses its influence to champion ideas such as freedom of navigation, an equal voice for all countries, and the importance of clearly articulated and generally supported rules.

US places and bases in the region, including its training facilities in Darwin, will continue to play an important role in anchoring a stabilising US presence in the region. Australia's alliance with the US undoubtedly gives us the capabilities and the confidence to push back against those of Beijing's activities we object to.

This will become harder as China's power grows relative to America's; that is why we have started exploring our capabilities and techniques of asserting our interests. Last year's shifts of policy and tone, from blunt statements about Chinese interference to the strong language in the foreign policy white paper about the South China Sea and the call for Beijing to respect smaller countries showed Canberra testing how far it could assert its interests.

But we should be deploying the alliance in other ways as well. We should be talking to the US about its vital role in fostering an emerging power balance in the Asia-Pacific. We should be discussing with our regional neighbours where their, and our, non-negotiable interests lie, and how best to assert these when challenged.

We need to be talking with our neighbours about what a China-dominated region will mean for their and our interests, and where the points of resistance and influence with China may lie. This is going to be difficult and politically sensitive, particularly since countries such as Indonesia, India and Vietnam are deeply committed to traditions of non-alignment.

And we should be urging China to think about its power in terms not of pre-eminence but of finding a stable equilibrium in a complicated neighbourhood. This is going to be tough. It will mean finding the right format that allows both sides to escape the largely sterile and formulaic script they have used thus far. The relationship will need to be more intimate, which will allow the communication to be more direct.

Talking to the US about shifting to a balancing role in Asia would have been a difficult conversation to have in Washington before Trump's inauguration.

Americans see their power and their alliances in moral terms; any doubts about US primacy or instrumental approaches to alliances in the past have been met with accusations of disloyalty.

Trump is different. His rhetoric on China may have been tough but his actions have been accommodating. He wants more independent allies, and for him every relationship is renegotiable. Finding a new American role in Asia, where the US works alongside its allies but doesn't take responsibility for ensuring regional order, is a deal the Donald just might make.

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