Three steps needed to advance the Morrison doctrine

By **John McCarthy**

Australian Financial Review 4 Aug 2020

Link: https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/three-steps-needed-to-advance-the-morrison-doctrine-20200803-p55hwl

Australia went to AUSMIN to reaffirm the US alliance without burning bridges to Beijing. But what is the best way of taking this stance forward?

Before last week's AUSMIN meetings, it was apparent the external policies of both China and the United States had become polarised, with Australia almost wholly aligned with the American pole. A quick read of the AUSMIN communique would have confirmed that view.

But against the background of hostile statements on China by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo over the past couple of months, including a call for an alliance of democracies against China, Foreign Minister Marise Payne stated: "The relationship with China is very important and we have no intention of injuring it."

This sends a different message.

If the upshot of Scott Morrison's defence strategic update of July 1, and of Payne's comments after AUSMIN, is that we put more grunt into our security relationship with the US, yet seek to embark on cautious re-engagement with China, that is good policy. If we are to progress from here, we need to do three things.

First, we must understand the complex relationship between security policy and foreign policy (including international economic policy). This entails accepting some apparent contradictions. Security policy and foreign policy work in tandem, but they do not need to be always fully synchronous to advance national interests.

We sell butter to buy guns. We cannot take positions on security that ignore our economic interests. Although this relationship between security and foreign policy is generally understood in relation to the economic aspects of foreign policy, it is much less well understood on matters in foreign policy deemed "political".

This is the idea that a strong security alliance does not necessarily require complete political alignment.

On security policy, the ANZUS alliance and the processes around it work. They involve reciprocity. This is understood, including – dare it be said – in China.

Most countries in the region welcome it. Many would have wondered how our national interests were met by our long involvement in the Middle East, but as it did not harm them, it was accepted. The nature of our security commitment to the US is in fact less onerous than that of many American allies, especially those hosting major US troop presences, such as Japan, South Korea and Germany. Yet the foreign policy of these American allies can differ widely from that of the US.

Japan has more concerns about China than any country except perhaps Vietnam. Still, Tokyo has sought to stabilise its relationship with Beijing with a variety of diplomatic moves, in contrast to the rambling anti-China histrionics of Donald Trump and Pompeo. In another theatre, no serious US ally, except Australia, has a policy on Israel-Palestine issues similar to that of Trump's America.

When Australian ministers claim, as they have for the past two generations, that we always take positions on the basis of an independent evaluation of the issues, that claim can have a hollow defensive ring.

If the ways of seeing the nexus between security and foreign policy are accepted, the second thing we need to do will be to more effectively put them into practice in the region. This will involve an intensification of consultation with Japan, India and ASEAN member states. These countries have to live with China too. If American public opinion dictates a diminution in American strategic commitment to Asia, these countries will still be here.

The steps we have taken already with Japan, India and others in the region to establish defensive structures such as the Quad are consistent with the task of getting the right balance between security and foreign policy. This is to the good.

But particularly when the US heralds the dawn of a new cold war, we need to reflect more critically on the point about the extent of alignment required by our alliance. While our security commitments to the US should remain solid, there is room for moving our foreign policy or diplomatic approaches closer to those of our regional partners. In particular, we should look not only at how we defend ourselves from China, but at how to achieve a modus vivendi with China.

In our policy construct, we should place less emphasis on the Anglosphere (or Five Eyes) as a policy vehicle. It is valuable as an intelligence grouping and could have merit in dealing with COVID-19. But while memories in Asia of the colonial past may be fading, they do remain. Having spent the years since World War II seeking to engage with the new emerging Asia, it would be a policy error for Australia and the others to give the Chinese grounds to allude to an apparent recrudescence of white Anglosphere imperial thinking, particularly given the unbalanced nature of the American leadership and the yearnings in post-Brexit Britain for aspects of the past.

This leads to the third thing we need to do. We must think more cogently about how to repair the international order, battered by the poor performance of some global and regional institutions, but equally by the approach to those institutions of many of its members, particularly the US.

The concept promulgated by Pompeo of democracies working together to contain China makes little sense. Views in Europe differ. Do we bring in India and Indonesia? Would they want to come?

But these democratic countries can work together on putting more bulk into the international rule of law, in seeking to adapt international institutions to change, and in dealing globally with COVID-19 challenges – all objectives that are very much in our interests.

John McCarthy is a former ambassador to the United States, Indonesia and Japan, and a former high commissioner to India.