

An independent foreign policy requires our leaders to take on fear of the US and China

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Paul Keating and Gareth Evans used to claim that by the mid-1990s Australia had become "the odd man in" in Asia. This was in large part because of the headway they'd made in Southeast Asia, with ASEAN countries, in gaining acceptance of Australia as "one of them". It was no slogan. Behind it lay a geo-strategic idea of Southeast Asian countries as natural partners into the long-term future, in a world dominated by competing great powers.

Alexander Downer had something of the same inclination, but it was explicitly and strongly rejected by John Howard, and it's been absent from the thinking of all prime ministers since Howard.

Twenty years on from when Evans was foreign minister, Southeast Asia and Australia are objects of rivalry between a China intent on restoring what it sees as its rightful and historic place in the sun and a United States intent – in what it does, not what it sometimes says – on blocking or containing China's ambition.

This gargantuan contest challenges Australian policy thinkers to ask how we should respond strategically, in our interests. The government claims a kind of even-handedness, citing for example economic relations and the recent Free Trade Agreement with China, and the strong political, and (not too loudly) defence and intelligence relationship with the US.

But the government has offered no honest narrative about how it thinks we can manage ourselves successfully and securely into the next 10 to 20 years. If it did it would have to admit and defend the fact that it's a witting part of the US intent to try to deter and contain China, through alliance arrangements and Australia's more-intimate-than-ever intelligence and defence enmeshment with the US – including our participation in US military command arrangements and military manoeuvres in the Pacific. And it would have to concede the dangers this carries for us.

Its position has the complete acquiescence of the Opposition, so there's no debate from that quarter. And neither side discusses it frankly with the Australian public. Australian independence is crippled by this subordination to the national interests and great power purposes of the US.

Among the many blinkers on this policy is that Australia looks from the US side of the fence at China's assertion of political and strategic influence. A big danger about the US and China, to which Australian politicians on both sides seem oblivious, is that their contest is not simply that of the re-emerging world power challenging the existing one, already volatile enough. It's that each is driven by an idea of itself as exceptional. We've long lived with American exceptionalism, although we don't always recognise it or raise the awkward question of just how completely that idea puts American interests above all others including its allies. But China too is a similarly exceptionalist power, and the contest between these two is not just about power and influence relative to each other, it's also about who has the exceptional "right" to determine the rules by which the world is run.

It's by no means assured that China's hegemonic rules will be worse, or better, than America's. But a clash of two exceptionalisms is ideological, and particularly hazardous, and this is no time for Australia to be picking winners. It's a time to stand clear of their fight lest some of the blows land on us.

Assuming there was an Australian government that wanted to return to an independent foreign policy, viewing the world through the Australian prism and serving Australia's interests, there has to be a strategy for moving to that position. And one effective strategy would be to re-invigorate the relationship with ASEAN, revive the idea of Australia being a part of

Asia, re-energise the project of closer regional integration, think creatively of Southeast Asia as our critical geostrategic region, and find our security in rather than from Asia. This would have many advantages. It would be welcomed in ASEAN countries as an Australian re-dedication to regional partnership. Neither the US nor China could object, and it wouldn't entail repudiation of them. It would give us collective weight in seeking to influence and moderate the more high-risk behaviour between these two. It would encourage us to plumb the varieties of Asian thinking on regional affairs and power politics, rather than discount or dismiss them as we often do.

There's also a host of economic and pressing trans-national issues on which we can only benefit from much closer cooperation with ASEAN countries, not least the question of asylum-seekers. And domestically, it would help Australia re-imagine the positives of our Asian engagement. Who knows, we might even see a diminution in the negative view of our most important neighbour, Indonesia, and perhaps even a resurrection of Indonesian language learning!

This is not to suggest there should be anything but the closest and most constructive of relations with China and the US. But it is to say that Southeast Asia is our immediate habitat, and in today's shifting and dangerous power relations it's more central for us geostrategically than it was even when Keating and Evans recognised it two decades ago.

Would we be able to pull back from the client relationship with the US? You can't be too optimistic about today's Australian political leaders, because they have no foreign policy framework and seem frightened of big ideas. They don't even feel able to debate critical policy decisions, such as going back to Iraq with the US.

But it could be done. When Gough Whitlam took on the fear of China by going to Beijing as opposition leader, he also took on the fear of being independent, of offending the US, of daring to see the world through a prism other than that of America, of taking issue with it on foreign policy. He went to Beijing before the US surprised the world with its reversal of China policy. As prime minister, when he publicly condemned the 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi, this initially infuriated Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger but, like it or not, in the end America accepted his re-framing of relations. What Whitlam had done was open out the relationship, to one of independence without repudiation of the alliance, and that later became the position of Malcolm Fraser and his two successors, Bob Hawke and Keating.

What about China? Doesn't it see Southeast Asia as its pond? Being China's potential adversary as a client of the US is dangerous. But being hugged by this panda would be uncomfortable, even painful, and not without its own perils. So, Australia part of a more integrated Southeast Asia, caucusing for the common interest, where necessary in resistance to a Chinese interest? Why not? If we could have the fortitude to believe we could stand up to America without damaging our long-term relations, why shouldn't we do the same with China?

We can have an independent foreign policy. But to have it, with a strong and strategic bilateral relationship with both the US and China, we have to have leaders in ideas, who are not afraid to lead, not afraid to take on the fear of the US or of China. I'm waiting.

Stephen FitzGerald was Australia's first ambassador to China. This is an edited version of an article to be published on the blog Pearls and Irritations (www.johnmenadue.com/blog).

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