

Australia in Asia without America

By **Hugh White**

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Australians are nervously facing a new reality in East Asia today. Until now they have always relied on global powers from outside the region - first Britain and then the US - to keep their country secure and to shape Asia to suit their interests. That was possible because Britain was for so long the world's richest and most powerful state and the dominant strategic power in Asia, and when British power failed, the US took its place.

After its victory in the Cold War, it seemed likely that the US would remain the leading power in Asia indefinitely, and Australians happily assumed that it would always be there to keep them secure and make Asia safe for them.

But that is not what is happening. Instead, US power and influence in the region is declining as China's grows. For a decade, the two countries have been competing over regional leadership, as the US has tried to remain the primary power in East Asia and China has strived to take its place.

And it is now clear that China is winning this contest. Australians therefore confront the reality that within a short time - maybe a decade or two - the US may well cease to play any major strategic role in Asia, and China will emerge as East Asia's primary power.

The most obvious reason for this is Donald Trump. His "America First" policies show that he is not interested in sustaining the country's leading role in Asia, and his chaotic administration seems anyway incapable of the effective foreign policy that would be required to do so.

But the reasons the US is losing the contest for East Asian leadership to China go much deeper than Trump. They reflect the fundamental shift in wealth and power that has occurred as China has swiftly risen to take the US' place as the world's biggest economy. As China's power has risen relative to the US', the costs and risks to the US of competing with China for leadership in Asia have risen too.

Under former president Barack Obama, it had already become clear that those costs and risks had risen higher than the US is willing to bear. We can see this in the failure of Obama's rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific. The rebalancing was supposed to deter Beijing from challenging US regional leadership, but

Washington was never willing to commit enough resources to succeed.

Instead, it backed off in the face of Beijing's assertive actions, undermining US claims to regional leadership and bolstering China's. Whoever became president in the 2016 US

elections would have faced the same basic problem: China is now too powerful, and too important to the US in too many ways, for Washington to be able to counter its bid for regional leadership effectively. And it is hard to see the US remaining strategically engaged in Asia for long if it loses the contest for regional leadership.

That means Australians must now ask how they can adjust to living in a region without a strong US presence. But the government's new Foreign Policy White Paper, released last month, doesn't address that question. It acknowledges that China's power and influence is growing and that of the US is weakening, but it nonetheless assumes that the US will somehow manage to remain Asia's primary power and set the rules in the region's rules-based order.

In some ways that is not surprising. Governments do not like to give their voters bad news, and the eclipse of US power in Asia is seen as bad news for Australia. That is not so much because they fear China, much as that they fear the unknown.

Australians do not see China as directly threatening them, but they have no experience of making their way in Asia without what one former prime minister called a "great and powerful friend." They do not know how to relate to a country as powerful as China on their own.

They value their relations with China, and they wish it well. But they seek reassurance that China will use its power responsibly, respecting the rights and interests of smaller countries like Australia. Above all, they want to be reassured that China will not seek to impose its political values and system on other countries with very different histories and traditions.

There is a debate in Australia about how likely this is. People wonder what kind of regional leader China might turn out to be. Will it be heavy-handed and oppressive, or open-minded and permissive? Some argue that China's highly centralized political system means it will try to impose its values and meddle in the internal affairs of smaller neighbors. Others say that it makes no sense for China to try to interfere with the internal affairs of other countries when China's interests can be well served by leaving them as they are and letting them choose their own path.

This appears to align with what China's leaders say, but at a worrying time like this, actions speak louder than words. The more China's conduct can reassure Australians about the kind of leadership it will exercise in Asia, the more willingly they will adapt to the new Asia that is emerging.

Hugh White is professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University. He is a member of the China Matters Advisory Council.