

Australia must look beyond the US and make some new strategic friends

By Peter Leahy

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What happens when your great and powerful friend is no longer great and powerful? When Britain's power waned during World War II Australia adopted the United States as its new alliance partner.

We are not at war, but it is a time of turmoil and uncertainty. It's not time to seek a new alliance partner, but we need to recognise that America is under challenge. Can we be sure how Donald Trump will react and where Australia might finish up by staying closely aligned?

At a time when America seems to be picking fights with friend and foe across the globe and when nothing seems sure, perhaps we could let our strategic imagination run and consider what our options are. We could: wait it out, seek a new alliance, go it alone, or diversify.

By waiting we assume that Trump will only have one term and things will return to normal. If we go this way we should be more independently minded and critical of US statements, policies and actions. Saying no to the United States must be a definite option.

As for Trump, what do the military officers close to him think of him? Certainly, he lets them get on with their jobs, but they have lived their lives according to a set of rules and behaviours that their new commander-in-chief ignores. The essential traits of a leader – character, integrity, consistency and vision – seem lacking. Did you tweet "attack", or something else Mr President?

As for a new alliance, [there are no alternatives to America's military power](#) and for the time being its economic power. But the foundation of America's greatness has always been its moral leadership. Recently, international soft power surveys indicate the US is slipping down the ranks. There is no viable alternative for America's ability to do good in the world, so we must keep it engaged.

China is an economic power but there are too many incompatible elements around values, behaviour and diplomacy for them to be an alternative alliance partner. Any alignment with Russia is similarly incompatible with our values, interests and aspirations. This doesn't mean we shouldn't engage with both countries, but we need to do so with care and precision.

As for going it alone, without some connection to the United States, Australia would be vulnerable. Although mentioned in every recent Defence White Paper, defence self-reliance is an unrealisable dream. Without access to US intelligence, logistics, communications and equipment Australia could not generate a credible military capability even with hugely increased defence budgets.

Diversifying is the long game and should be pursued. We need a broad range of friends, not just one. Three obvious candidates are Japan, India and Indonesia. [All are Indian-Pacific Ocean powers](#) and democracies with potential for future economic growth, diplomatic weight and an ability to do good in the world.

We are already making headway with Japan and India has real potential. With India we will need to be patient as we make up for lost time.

Real prospect

Indonesia is a real prospect as a valuable and reliable partner. We wasted too many years imagining Indonesia as a threat, so things won't be easy. Things could get bumpy as we are brash, impatient and noisy. Indonesia is none of these and has some significant issues to contend with internally. However, Indonesia offers us the clear advantages of being an opening to ASEAN and a strategic shield to our north.

Any effort to adjust our reliance on the United States will take time and effort. There will never be a singular replacement for them as an alliance partner, but a broader range of friends will allow for strategic flexibility.

To focus on the task, we should streamline our strategic portfolio by withdrawing our military from the Middle East. There is a clear way out of Iraq – just leave. They now have the ability to look after themselves. It won't be so easy to get clear of Afghanistan, but we must be alert for any opportunity to leave.

The Middle East is a long way away and it is hard to see anything good happening there. A regional war is a distinct possibility. Our military have been involved in the Middle East since World War I and we must respect their sacrifice. But, as one author has suggested, we are just hapless bystanders in the Middle East. Let's stop being bystanders and come back and focus on our region.

By focusing on our region and regional friends Australia can best protect its own interests and take advantage of its geographic location to provide a link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Let's focus on Indonesia. Our two countries provide a hinge between the two oceans and together can make a positive contribution to peace, security and stability in the region.

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