

Michael Pence calls for confrontation with China over co-operation

By Geoff Raby

Australian Financial Review, 14 October 2018

Link: <https://www.afr.com/opinion/michael-pence-calls-for-confrontation-with-china-over-cooperation-20181013-h16lyp>

Hugh White in his controversial 2010 book, *China Choice*, warned Australian policymakers that with the rise of China, the time would come when the US would have to make a choice as to whether to withdraw gradually from east Asia and allow China strategic space for its continued expansion or to take a stand and seek to limit China's rise.

In many ways, White was stating the obvious. It is a variant of the Thucydides Trap thesis, whereby conflict is likely to occur between an ascendant and a dominant power.

In the case of the Peloponnesian War, which Thucydides was observing, it was the dominant power, Athens, that attacked and eventually was defeated by the ascendant power, Sparta.

White's book was met with a barrage of foaming invective from conservative commentators attacking him, either explicitly or implicitly, as an "appeaser" – the worst of all sins in the foreign policy and strategic analysis worlds.

White's transgression was to argue that to maintain regional peace and stability the US should try to find ways to accommodate China's rise.

Avoiding conflict between the US and China was of paramount interest to Australia, so policy should seek to assist the US to come to this historically defining decision.

If anything, Australian policy has gone in the opposite direction to that which White counselled, with our enthusiastic embrace of Obama's Pivot to Asia, our busyness behind the scenes in promoting the Quadrilateral Grouping (US, Japan, India and Australia) comprising three of China's strategic competitors, and more recently the Indo-Pacific concept that aspires to draft India into balancing China. The speech by [US Vice-President Mike Pence](#) last week has now answered the "China choice" question. The US does not intend to cede any more strategic

space to China and if anything intends to push back on China, as is already happening with the tariff war.

Pence's speech sets out the Trump Administration's doctrine of open competition, not co-operation, with China.

The implications for Australia are significant. East Asia, the region of immediate strategic importance to Australia, has just become a more dangerous place. Pence's speech intentionally ramps up tensions in the relationship, showing Beijing that far from searching for positions of compromise ahead of the upcoming Trump-Xi meeting at the G20 summit the administration has no intention of backing down.

On trade, China's retaliatory measures to the US's unilateral tariff hikes are described as interfering in domestic politics by "influencing public opinion" in the 2018 mid-term elections and the "environment" leading up to the 2020 presidential election.

"China wants a different American President". In response, the US was prepared to "more than double" again tariffs against China.

In classic, zero-sum, mercantilist thinking, the speech claimed that China's economy had grown at the expense of the US, reiterating the administration's familiar list of grievances: tariffs, intellectual property theft, industrial subsidies, currency manipulation and coerced technology transfer.

"Masterminded" by China's security agencies, Made in China 2025 was an attempt by China "to control 90 per cent of the world's most advanced industries" by stealing US intellectual property.

"And in music to the ears of the US industrial-military complex, the Chinese Communist Party" ... was turning ploughshares into swords on a massive scale ..."

Echoing the excitement in Australia over Chinese agents of influence in domestic politics, Pence claims China is "rewarding or coercing" American business, movie studios, universities, think tanks, scholars, journalists and local, state and federal officials. As in Australia, it would seem that in the US too there is a red under every bed.

Pence finds that the Chinese state under Xi Jinping has taken a "sharp U-turn towards control and oppression". It has built an "unparalleled surveillance state"

which is "Orwellian" and unleashed a "new wave of persecution ... crashing down on religious" freedoms.

For Christians in China, these are "desperate times", according to the Vice-President. Beijing is also increasing its repression of Buddhists in Tibet and Uighurs in Xinjiang.

Apart from the direct confrontational tone and style of these remarks it is the extension of this line of thought to foreign policy that is most concerning. According to Pence, ". . . a country that oppresses its own people rarely stops there. Beijing also aims to extend its reach across the wider world."

Beijing is threatening stability in the Taiwan Straits, challenging neighbours in the region, behaving aggressively at sea by confronting the US Navy, and using "debt diplomacy" to "corrupt" political processes in developing countries. The days of China's advancing its "strategic interests across the world", which had been "all but ignored" by previous administrations, were now over. The US will stand up to China. Pence claimed that the US was responding with a massive military expansion that was the "biggest increase in military spending since Ronald Regan".

The reference to Regan, being a blunt reminder to Beijing of the military competition of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, the China choice has been made – confrontation over co-operation. That Pence gave his speech at the conservative Hudson Institute itself is no accident. Michael Pillsbury is the director of its China centre, a Sinologist, former Defence Department official and ex-intelligence officer and author of the influential book, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. Trump has described Pillsbury as the "leading authority on China".

Pillsbury's ideas are parroted in Australian defence and security circles and in the domestic debate about Chinese agents of influence. Pillsbury is one of the leading proponents of "how the US got China wrong" revisionist school of thought.

This increasingly influential group argues that the US (and by implication Australia's) policy of the past 40 years of engagement with China has turned out to have been mistaken.

Pence says himself that after the fall of the USSR, it had been "assumed that a free China was inevitable" and that "... freedom in China would expand in all forms ... with a newfound respect for classical liberal principles ..."

If engagement was the wrong policy, the alternative is confrontation. The China Choice has been made. Australia will now have to choose.

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