

# Waning US power must shape Australia's defence strategy

By **Hugh White**

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Almost a year ago, Paul Dibb and Richard Brabin-Smith wrote an [important ASPI paper](#) in which they acknowledged, for the first time, that China's growing power and ambition constitutes a major shift in Australia's strategic circumstances, and requires us to rethink key elements of our defence policy.

Now Dibb has returned to the issue, in a [recent talk](#) in which he takes that analysis a big step further by acknowledging, again for the first time, that China's rise is only half the story.

The other half is about America. Dibb and Brabin-Smith's paper last year barely mentioned America, but Dibb's latest speech places the growing uncertainties about US intentions and resolve at the heart of the analysis. Dibb recognises that America is no longer the ally we've hoped and expected it to be, and that our defence policy needs to take account of this too.

It is a critical point. As I [wrote in response](#) to the paper last year, China's rise would not require us to change our defence policy much, as long as we were sure that America was willing and able to respond to China effectively. It's our doubts about that which really require us to think again about what we can and should do to look after ourselves.

That is especially important because over the past 25 years Australia has quietly abandoned the commitment to self-reliance which was the central pillar of our defence policy in the 1970s and 1980s. One can understand why. On the one hand, Australia's relative strategic weight in Asia has fallen fast over the last few decades, and our technological edge in air and sea capabilities has eroded. Self-reliance has therefore become harder and harder.

On the other hand, America appeared, at least for a time, unchallengeable, powerful and unshakable in its resolve to preserve the US-led order and uphold its alliances. Self-reliance looked less and less necessary, so we slid back into depending on America for our defence. Arguably that dependence is even

deeper now than it was at the height of the old [‘forward defence’](#) era of the 1950s and 1960s.

That makes our current predicament all the more challenging. To really understand today’s defence and strategic challenges, we have to jettison a lot of the assumptions and axioms which have framed our defence policy debates for a generation now, and this is where I think Dibb’s analysis still falls a little short. At many points it still presupposes that America will be there for us, despite the clear acknowledgment elsewhere that we can no longer take this for granted.

The tension is perhaps clearest where Dibb says that he ‘is not one of those who believe that America is about to pull out of Asia’, because that seems to be precisely the risk that he is addressing. So what’s going on here? Perhaps Dibb means that he doesn’t think America will suddenly decide that it no longer wants to be the leading power in Asia. In that case, he’d be quiet right: Americans like being the region’s leading power, and they would not step back from that lightly.

But as China’s power grows—and Dibb does now seem to accept the reality that China’s power has grown and the probability that it will keep growing—the cost to America of resisting China’s ambitions grows too. Whereas once it seemed that America could remain the dominant power in Asia without breaking into a sweat, today it’s clear that resisting China is going to be both expensive and dangerous.

So now the question is whether the US wants to remain the leading regional power *enough* to pay the costs and accept the risks involved in confronting and containing China. I have [argued](#) that the answer is quite likely to be ‘no’, and the case made in Dibb’s speech plainly suggests that he now agrees with that.

If this is right, then the implications for Australia’s strategic and defence policy are even bigger than Dibb portrays. For example, he says that it’s vital that we continue to have access to highly advanced US military equipment. But we cannot afford to overlook the possibility that we will lose some of that access if America’s strategic engagement in Asia falters, so we need to consider how we can cope with that if it happens.

More broadly, we have to recognise and accept the challenge of negotiating our place in the new Asia without US support. Dibb says that the ANZUS alliance provides ‘the best and most realistic chance’ to shape the long-term regional order. But we cannot assume that our ANZUS partner will be there to help us. Indeed, it’s hard to see that America is doing anything constructive to shape Asia’s regional order to help us define our place in it, and, for reasons that Dibb explains, no reason to expect that will happen anytime soon.

Finally, we cannot assume that even if America stays engaged in Asia, it will do so in a way that serves Australia's interests. Dobb observes quite rightly that we have to think about how we'd respond if Washington asked us to join a war with China over an issue like Taiwan. The question is hardly hypothetical: Vice President Mike Pence's [speech](#) on 4 October about China shows how sharply the relationship has deteriorated in the past few months.

It's far from clear that America has any idea of how it can remain as a key power in Asia on terms which avoid escalating rivalry with China, and nor is it clear that Washington has any plan for how to prevail in such rivalry—and that's a problem for us. Australia would be unwise to follow the US into a confrontation with China which Washington had no idea how to win. But the more we depend on America, the harder it would be to say no if that call came.

So Dobb is right. We do need a radical rethink of our defence policy, but it needs to be even more radical than he suggests. I have a book coming out next year which will explore in some detail what that might look like.

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