

Canberra's growing silence on US leadership in Asia

By **Hugh White**

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Sometimes what is left out of a major policy speech is as important as what is said. This was certainly true late January when Australia's Defence Minister Christopher Pyne spoke about regional security in a **keynote address** to a prestigious audience in Singapore.

The subject of Pyne's presentation was the challenge that China's growing power and influence and the escalating US-China contest (which he described as the 'defining great-power rivalry of our time') poses to the 'rules-based order' in Asia. Most of the speech was devoted to explaining what **Australia** believed should be done about this.

Pyne explained in some detail Australia's new program of strategic engagement with its close island neighbours in the South Pacific. He talked extensively about Australian ambitions to build even stronger linkages with **ASEAN**. He gave details of major new equipment investments for the Australian Defence Force. And throughout the speech, he urged countries in the region to abide by the rules and strengthen cooperation.

But there was only a single perfunctory mention of Australia's alliance with the United States and no specific mention at all of a US leadership role in Asia.

Comparing Pyne's speech with one that Australia's then-foreign minister **Julie Bishop** delivered on the same theme to the same forum just two years ago, the omission is significant. Bishop also spoke about rising geopolitical tensions in Asia, but her treatment could not have been more different.

Bishop placed democratic systems and values at the heart of Australia's approach to the contest between the United States and China, arguing that the United States — as 'the pre-eminent global strategic power in Asia and the world by some margin' — is uniquely placed to uphold stability in the region.

Pyne did not mention 'democracy' or 'values' at all. Instead he went out of his way to distance Australia from the increasingly bellicose attitudes towards China coming out of Washington over the past year — for instance Vice President Mike Pence's fiery speech at the Hudson Institute in October 2018, widely seen as foreshadowing a 'new Cold War' with Beijing.

Pyne suggested that commentators who seek to 'describe emerging great power competition as a new Cold War' are misguided. 'Any division of the region into Cold War-like blocs', he argued, 'is doomed to failure'.

And yet the division of Asia into geostrategic blocs, with the democracies led by the United States on one side and China on the other, seemed to be exactly what Bishop was proposing just two years ago. Pyne's speech appears to be a very striking and clear repudiation both of Australia's policy just two years ago and of US policy as it is emerging today.

This impression is reinforced by the fact that Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison recently expressed **similar views**. In a major foreign policy address in November 2018, Morrison suggested that it was 'important that US-China relations do not become defined by confrontation' at a time when Washington is very much seeking to define them that way.

Pyne also went out of his way to distance Australia from the Trump administration's trade policies. He spoke of the importance of free trade and of agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Washington has repudiated. And in a thinly veiled swipe at those in Washington who hope to use trade restrictions to hobble China's economy and undermine its growing power, Pyne said, 'There is no gain in stifling China's growth and prosperity'.

None of this means that Pyne is letting China off the hook. He was forthright in criticising China's conduct, particularly in the South China Sea. He called on China to act more positively to reassure its neighbours about how it intends to use this growing power.

Still, the essential message from Pyne's speech is clear. The way to deal with China's rise is not to confront it, as so many people in Washington increasingly demand, but to embrace and persuade it. Not since the disputes over the bombing of North Vietnam in the early 1970s have the United States and Australia differed so sharply over an issue of such importance to the two countries' positions in Asia.

It is worth asking what is driving Australia's shift from strident advocacy of a values-driven, US-led containment of China to cautious proposals for consultation and compromise.

One reason is no doubt pressure from Beijing. Bishop's speech began a long period of tense relations in which ministerial contact was almost completely frozen. For the past year Canberra has been bending over backwards to try and get things back on track. Distancing itself from Washington clearly helps with that.

The deeper reason has more to do with Washington. The presidency of Donald Trump has of course undermined confidence in the United States' willingness and capacity to sustain an effective leadership role in Asia. But it is not just about Trump. Regardless of who occupies the White House, it is less and less

clear that the United States can or will prevail in a strategic contest with China. More likely is that any serious attempt to do so will end up in a catastrophic war, rather than an easy US victory.

That being so, even Canberra's most devoted loyalists to the US alliance must ask themselves whether simply backing the United States is a viable option for navigating the troubled times ahead. And if not, what alternative is there but for Canberra to start talking more seriously, both to China and to its neighbours? This is what Pyne's speech seems to recognise.

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