America: Australia's Dangerous Ally

by Malcolm Fraser via darcy - The National Interest *Thursday, Dec 18 2014, 9:15am*
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> It is time for Australia to end its strategic dependence on the United States. The relationship with America, which has long been regarded as beneficial, has now become dangerous to Australia's future. We have effectively ceded to America the ability to decide when Australia goes to war. Even if America were the most perfect and benign power, this posture would still be incompatible with the integrity of Australia as a sovereign nation. It entails not simply deference but submission to Washington, an intolerable state of affairs for a country whose power and prosperity are increasing and whose national interests dictate that it enjoy amicable, not hostile, relations with its neighbors, including China.

Abbott sucking up to Obama

As painful as a reassessment of relations may be for intellectual and policy elites, there are four principal reasons why one is long overdue. First, despite much blather about a supposed unanimity of national purpose, the truth is that the United States and Australia have substantially different value systems. The idea of American exceptionalism is contrary to Australia's sense of egalitarianism. Second, we have seen the United States act in an arbitrary, imprudent and capricious fashion. It has made a number of ill-advised and ill-informed decisions concerning Eastern Europe, Russia and the Middle East. Third, at the moment, because of U.S. military installations in Australia, if America goes to war in the Pacific, it will take us to war as well—without an independent decision by Australia. Finally, under current circumstances, in any major contest in the Pacific, our relationship with America would make us a strategic target for America's enemies. It is not in Australia's interest to be in that position.

American fecklessness has produced this state of affairs. As the recent twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall reminds us, the breakup of the Soviet Union created a different world. It was a world bursting with opportunity, as was first described by President George H. W. Bush in a speech to Congress after the first Gulf War. Bush was then talking about a new world, one in which there would be much greater cooperation between nations large and small. It was the kind of speech that many people worldwide wanted to hear from an American president. However, the purposes and commitment expressed in that speech were to be cut short. The presidents that followed—Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama—may have differed in tone but not in substance. They have all adhered to the illusion of American omnipotence.

It was Morton Abramowitz of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a former U.S. ambassador and one of the prime movers in establishing the International Crisis Group, who wrote in 2012 that "American exceptionalism dooms U.S. foreign policy." Nothing has altered since then. Even President Obama has embraced the idea of exceptionalism, telling the UN General Assembly in 2013, "I believe America is exceptional." A nation better than any other, innately motivated to do good; what America does is right because America does it. The idea of American exceptionalism, which has always been present in the United States, has gone far beyond all comprehension in the years of America's absolute supremacy. It has created a different nation, a different society. Such ideas influence American foreign policy in ways that make it much more difficult to achieve a secure and safe path in the future. Our task is not to embrace America, but to preserve ourselves from its reckless overreach.

This is not a message that the Australian government appears to endorse. The 2014 Australian Defence Issues Paper, for example, suggests we have shared values with the United States. This is nonsense. America's views of itself have no part in Australia's values system. They represent an important point of difference between the United States and Australia. They affect the United States' strategic thinking and policies and drive America in directions that at times have not been in Australia's interest.

No doubt our alliance with the United States made sense in the Cold War years. The Soviet Union was regarded as a global Communist threat. The battlegrounds of the Cold War spanned the world, including in our own region. Australia, with limited resources, was quite correct in wanting a close association with a major power in these circumstances.

Ending the Communist threat was only one consequence of the breakup of the Soviet Union. A greater one, perhaps, was the absolute supremacy of the United States as a military and economic power. Before that time, each superpower acted as a restraint on the other. Neither wanted a nuclear war, and both took care to avoid the kind of provocations that would inevitably lead to war. After 1991, the United States was under no such restraint. Russia was down for the count, so far as global influence was concerned.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, it was a time for generosity. Recalling the spirit of the Marshall Plan and the post–World War II enlightenment, it was a moment for magnanimity to prevail; it was not a time to revive the spirit of Versailles and exact vengeance on a fallen foe. Unfortunately, Europe and the United States chose the wrong path. Many ways could have been found at that time to secure the independence of states freed from Soviet domination. NATO and the United States chose what turned out to be the most dangerous and provocative mechanism, and worked to include much of Eastern Europe within the confines of NATO itself. This approach ignored history and past strategic relationships. The results speak for themselves.

There were many who opposed the movement of NATO eastward. Mikhail Gorbachev had been particularly concerned, and he believed he had a deal with Secretary of State James Baker for NATO not to move east. Today, Russia believes that "agreement" was broken. Russia's acceptance of the reunification of Germany was supposed to be the quid quo pro for NATO not marching eastward. But it did.

The point of all of this for Australia is that the United States—not for the first and surely not for the last time—exhibited a marked lack of historical understanding as well as an inability to exercise effective diplomacy and make choices that would provide for a lasting peace. There should have been more sustained attempts to make sure that Russia would be a collaborative and cooperative partner. As some commentators in the United States have argued, the West bears significant

responsibility for more recent developments in Ukraine, based on that one major and tragically mistaken strategic decision to move NATO east. The United States must recognize the impact of its decisions in the difficulties that have ensued.

Throughout this past year we have seen turbulence in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and actions that have soured Western relations with Russia even further. There has been no understanding of the historical circumstances, no attempt to act in ways that might increase trust. This has been a continuation of a Cold War mentality, with dramatic and unfortunate results. President Vladimir Putin and Russia have been roundly condemned for the annexation of Crimea, but if Russia had not done so and if the United States had been successful in getting Ukraine to join NATO, the West would have faced a far larger problem. No Russian president would simply surrender the military facilities in Crimea. If Crimea, as part of Ukraine, became part of NATO, the alliance would have required those facilities to be removed. This is a demand that Russia could never accept. So Russian actions in relation to Crimea, as former West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt has said, should have been understandable and are not deserving of the intemperate obloquy that they have attracted from Western commentators.

Instead of trying to induce Ukraine (and, in earlier times, Georgia) to join NATO, the United States should have been asking itself what is necessary if Ukraine is to become one country, cohesively and sensibly governed. Clearly, both the pro-Western and pro-Russian factions in Ukraine would need to learn the art of compromise, to know that neither can have it all. If they wanted their young country to become a cohesive, peaceful land, then the art of compromise would have had to be practiced by both sides. This could have been possible if the West and Russia had both taken the same view.

It is too early to predict how events in Ukraine may ultimately work out. Events in Eastern Europe centering on Ukraine represent a major strategic problem and have heightened present difficulties between the West and Russia, with potentially very serious consequences. The current situation, then, represents a failure of U.S. diplomacy—a failure to understand historical perspectives and to reach decisions that could have led to a more secure outcome.

Something similar can be said about the Middle East. The first Gulf War, designed to secure the freedom of Kuwait, was a major international success. More than thirty nations fought together for this common purpose. At the time, there were many who claimed that George H. W. Bush should have marched on to Baghdad to get rid of Saddam Hussein. He did not do so, because he had an understanding of wider international events. He knew the importance of history and culture. It would have been easy to get rid of Saddam, but Bush understood that he did not have the capacity to establish a cohesive government or to prevent malignant sectarian hatreds from arising. As a consequence of the 2003 Iraq War, we now know that he was totally correct in that judgment.

In retrospect, the 1991 Gulf War was the last American success in the Middle East. With turmoil in Libya and Yemen, difficulties in Turkey and Egypt, and continuing problems in Iraq and Syria, the whole region is more at risk than ever. Indeed, America, for all its fumbling attempts to withdraw from Iraq, has committed to a new air war in Iraq and Syria. President Obama must know that any kind of victory over the Islamic State cannot be achieved without effective ground forces. To commit to an air war without ground forces being in place, or in sight, is an act of strategic folly. It again underlines the melancholy fact that we are far too close to the United States.

We know what is said about Iraq. We are told that the new government will overcome the divisions between Sunni and Shia and that training from the United States and Australia will strengthen the Iraqi army and help it stand up to the Islamic State. But there is no sign yet that the new Iraqi government is able to build a cohesive Iraq. If it cannot, all the airpower in the world will not be

successful in the war against the Islamic State. In Syria, where the slaughter continues unabated, where the country is being denuded and where hundreds of thousands of refugees are seeking shelter in neighboring countries, the situation is even more alarming.

The United States has been too ready to rush in and assume the people fighting a brutal dictator are necessarily going to have higher ideals as well as a better sense of values than the person they are fighting against. In relation to the rebels in Syria who have morphed into the Islamic State, that assumption was certainly wrong. The assumption that the so-called good rebels can be an effective force is also most likely to be proved false. How much moderation is there really among the "moderate" opposition?

So America, Australia, Britain and others have embarked on this new war. We have been told it will take many years, but without troops on the ground, which I agree should not be ours or American, the chances of a peaceful outcome or a defeat of the Islamic State are slight. We have pliantly followed America into a war where the United States has acted without marshaling the necessary forces, the necessary coalition and the necessary assets to achieve a military and strategic victory. The reality is, at this stage, that there is no achievable and defined "end point"—no real characterization of what success will look like. Radical groups have emerged, designed to end Western influence throughout the region. Does this mean that such groups represent an existential threat to people further afield? So often, as we have learned more, and tragically often in retrospect, we have found that our basic assumptions were wrong. What we do know is that the Middle East is now more dangerously poised than at any time in the postwar years for further conflagration.

In Afghanistan, while most NATO forces are withdrawing, about ten thousand American troops are going to remain. We are likely to see increased attacks by the Taliban, who do not appear to have been particularly weakened by the long years of warfare. The way in which war has been conducted through South Asia—especially the use of drones, which have killed significant numbers of civilians—provides the extremists with a welcome and potent recruiting tool. Nor is this all. Events in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine also represent a grotesque failure of U.S. diplomacy and a reduction in American influence worldwide. This has so often occurred because the United States (and, indeed, the West generally) interprets events through its own eyes without taking historical circumstances into account.

There have also been significant strategic changes much closer to Australia, in the Pacific and throughout East and Southeast Asia. Here, too, we have increasing tension. Western commentators tend to say that the rise of China and its growing military power are at the center of that tension. Unfortunately, Chinese and Asian perceptions of what is happening often differ from American or Australian interpretations of events.

The United States has sought to counter China's military buildup and what it regards as growing Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas. It is worth putting these matters into a broader context. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Chinese military expenditure in 2013 was 11 percent of the world's total. America's was 37 percent. There are vast differences in the circumstances of the two countries. America has no military problems on its borders, but claims to have worldwide responsibility and a need to exercise force anywhere in the globe. China has traditionally been, and continues to be, more concerned with its own region. It does have a number of unstable situations on its borders, problems between India and Pakistan, and difficulties with Iran and Iraq, to say nothing of an unpredictable North Korea. These factors alone give China a reason for a significant military force, a reason that the United States does not have.

But, as with Ukraine, relationships with China are also a function of history. The "unequal treaties"

forced upon China are distant in our memory, but are deeply relevant to the way China deals with issues at the present time. Because of Chinese withdrawal then and in the years after World War II, during which much of China was ravaged and brutalized by Japanese imperial forces, China has not participated as much to help solve major international problems as a country of its size and stature might be expected to do. What's more, from China's perspective, a number of events would be regarded as provocative. First, the United States' handing of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands back to Japan in 1971 occurred at a time when Sino-American relations hardly existed. There was little thought of the fact that Japan had taken those islands from China in 1895, and it has turned out to have been a provocative decision. It was an event that was ignored at the time, though, as China had no means then of asserting itself.

More recently, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's attempt to get Cam Ranh Bay reopened as a U.S. naval base would surely have been seen by the Chinese as provocative. This was something the Vietnamese had the good sense to reject, on the grounds that Cam Ranh Bay was open to the navies of many nations who might wish to use it. It should not become a base for the United States—or any other country, for that matter. China has welcomed U.S. diplomatic engagement, but at the same time wonders what policy America is actually pursuing—one of consultation and discussion and perhaps collaboration, or one of rearmament, encirclement and containment. Which America is going to win out? The one that wishes to talk, or the one that relies on military solutions?

Many have written about the possibility of war between China and the United States. If left to the two great powers, war could probably be avoided, but with Japan in the equation, it is a different matter. Japan has become more assertive. Far more nationalistic, if you like, with a growing militarism. It already possesses very powerful military forces, with a capacity to develop, in short order, effective and long-range nuclear weapons. Japan claims there is no dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. But this is unpersuasive. For one thing, the United States recently affirmed that its defense guarantee for Japan extends to those islands, thus effectively siding with Japan in that particular dispute. That act was a major strategic mistake by the United States, one that will encourage Japan to be increasingly assertive.

If shooting starts between China and Japan, then it is not possible to say with any certainty that calmer heads will prevail and that serious dangers will be averted. Such a dispute could easily lead to a long, drawn-out war, which the United States may well not win. If over many years the United States could not win in Vietnam, despite the resources poured into that particular war, how could it possibly win in a contest with China? If, moreover, Australia were to become involved in such a contest, we would become a defeated ally of a defeated superpower. Such an outcome would place Australia at great risk, leaving it without a friend in our entire region. And unlike America, we cannot retreat to the Western Hemisphere in this event.

AUSTRALIA has been far too quiescent and passive. After 1990, Australia could have exhibited a greater degree of strategic independence, but did not. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, Australia still had the capacity to make its own decisions about peace and war. We did not have to follow America. We were not committed purely because America was committed. In other words, up to that point, we had maintained the integrity of Australia as a sovereign nation, despite our close relationship with the United States. Up to that time, facilities on the Australian mainland did not, and could not, commit Australia to follow America into a war. These developments have occurred in the years since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Through a series of missteps since 1990, we have become progressively more enmeshed in American strategic and military affairs. This has been achieved by close collaboration between our armed services, and with the agreement of both major Australian political parties. It is a mistake. Major

issues were never put to the Australian public. It was just assumed that these steps would be good for Australia. There was never a debate.

The idea of interoperability of our armed services is something that has, of course, been assiduously promoted by the United States. It has influenced many decisions relating to military operations, including the kind of equipment that we procure. It has in part influenced the appointment of the Australian Army's Major General Richard Burr as deputy commander of U.S. Army Pacific, in charge of sixty thousand American troops, and the part-time deployment of a frigate as part of the USS George Washington's escort. It is also relevant to our dependence on U.S. satellites for communications.

There are, however, two factors that tie us more closely than any of these events to America's military machine and strategic objectives. The first is the U.S. military base in Darwin. If U.S. leaders wish to use the air-ground task force from Darwin to attack some target—to use it in support of their defense commitment to Japan, for example—they will not ask an Australian prime minister first. They will do it, and Australia will be told about it later. There is nothing new or unique in that. It is the way a great power behaves. But the consequence of that is that we can hardly say we are not complicit in the actions of that task force when it has taken off from Australian soil.

More important still are the changed purposes and operations of Pine Gap. This used to be a largely defensive facility. It was, more than anything else, an information-gathering operation of significant importance. Changes in communications and weapons technology, and their application to a great variety of U.S. weapons systems, from drones to longer-range missiles, have altered the character of Pine Gap. Information from Pine Gap is also used for missile defense (which China regards as vitiating its nuclear deterrent) and for targeting a range of modern offensive missiles. This would give Pine Gap a new and urgent relevance if a conflict between China and Japan involving the United States developed into a serious crisis. It is Pine Gap, above all, that makes it impossible for Australia to say that it is not involved.

Thus, step by step, discreetly, even secretly, successive Australian governments have allowed a situation to develop in which if America goes to war in the western Pacific, we will have no option but to go to war as a direct consequence. If Australia sought to stand aside, it would not be believed. We have never before been in such a situation. This situation is not compatible with Australian integrity or with Australian sovereignty. Australians do not realize that America's capacity to declare war and include us is far greater than the power Britain had over the Dominions.

No foreign power should have that control over Australia, and certainly not a United States whose values are different and whose strategic decisions have been shown to be ill balanced and dangerous. Australians are unaware that the wars in which we have followed America were outside the terms of the ANZUS Treaty. Our commitment to the United States ties us to its values system and denies us the opportunity to decide our own fate.

There are several steps that Australia should take to rectify its previous shortcomings. For a start, the task force in Darwin would need to be moved to some other location outside Australia. This should be possible to accomplish in a relatively short time frame. The facility at Pine Gap would need to be closed, as we cannot control how America uses the intelligence it gathers from that site. Because it is a complex facility, we should give America time to do this—perhaps four or five years. However, Australians working at the base should be withdrawn at the end of six months. This would clearly result in implications for our shared intelligence arrangements, especially with Britain and America. When New Zealand left the ANZUS Treaty, it was not cut out of the "Five Eyes" intelligence operation. There is no gainsaying that Australia may well find access to American

military equipment diminished. But this is not necessarily a bad thing. We have sometimes bought American equipment because it aided strategic cooperation even when it was not the best equipment. There are a number of countries that are providers of quality military hardware.

Another step that Australia should take is to ensure that its diplomatic facilities throughout East and Southeast Asia are reinforced to prepare for more active diplomacy in our own part of the world. Australia needs to reinforce its support for UN agencies and work more effectively both bilaterally and through the UN, with other middle-ranking and like-minded powers. Such approaches would add to stability throughout our region and over time greatly increase our capacity to help mediate difficulties between states.

Of course, all of this would involve greater cost, possibly requiring a boost in Australian defense spending to about 3 percent of GDP. Until now, we have had defense on the cheap, hiding behind the American war machine, at too great a cost to Australian nationality and respect. At the end of the day, we need to ask ourselves what Australia's independence—Australia's integrity—is worth to Australians. Australia must regain the ability to deny any other power the capacity to decide whether we stay at peace or go to war. Only by embarking upon a new course can Australia recapture its squandered sovereignty.

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