

## Risk and imagination in the Trump era



**Although the Australia-US alliance is a relationship of longstanding mutual benefit, Canberra now needs to take very seriously the possibility of its ally devising plans that are not well matched to the risks the nation now faces, writes Greg Raymond.**

The most important quality in statecraft is imagination. The capacity to imagine consequences of actions, as well as inaction, and devise a path through what are often a range of unappetising alternatives.

The George W Bush Administration was conspicuously lacking in imagination. Neocons Rumsfeld, Cheney and Wolfowitz were unable to envision the difference between constructing democracy in sectarian Iraq compared with homogenous Japan.

Obama's eight years of careful stewardship was not without mistakes, Libya most significantly. But by comparison with the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in 2003, a misjudgement of colossal proportions, the spillover consequences have been far less. Under Obama's leadership his country and the world have managed a creaking recovery from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Australia now must deal with an inexperienced American leadership inclined [to reject expertise](#). Intelligence chiefs have been removed from the most important decision-making apparatus, [the National Security Council, and replaced with ideologues](#). The potential for grave errors of judgment appears greater than for some years.

Obama's China policy frustrated many, including in Australia but also within the Washington "beltway". There is a smoldering sense that China has been allowed to get away with too much in the South China Sea. The fact that it has been able to construct its islands, building a defensive buffer zone [below the level which would require a military response](#) rankles rather than reassures. Appeasement analogies have arisen; conceding maritime territory to China looks like "[Sudetanland in 1938](#)".

It is thought that China's unilateralism in the South China Sea is a dangerous precedent likely to see it taking similar liberties with its neighbours. Somewhat contradictorily, there is also a belief that without greater demonstrations of US resolve, smaller Asian countries will fall under China's control. In the Trump Cabinet there is as yet no coherent policy, but some want to take riskier courses of action, including [blocking China's access to the islands](#).

There is a problem in the South China Sea, make no mistake. Partly it is a problem of legitimacy. Under laws that China signed up to, it has no valid right to seek virtual sovereignty over large swathes of ocean territory, on its doorstep or not. But more substantively, it is a problem of portents -- what China's disregard for these laws, and military control of its near abroad mean for the future.

China's actions, while currently not harming Australian direct interests, could be laying the basis for a longer term threat. Its South China Sea islands now allow it to project force, including missiles and combat aircraft further south, [some 1,100 km by one estimate](#), although questions remain about the logistics resupply and vulnerability of the islands. China having the capabilities to harm Australia is of course nothing new. Its ballistic missile nuclear capabilities have made this theoretically possible for decades.

But here again we need imagination. Currently an estimated \$US5 trillion of annual sea-borne trade wends its way through the shallow South China Sea, profitable trade not only supporting China's growing middle class and the innovative economies of Korea and Japan, but providing a lucrative market for Australia's commodities of iron, LNG and coal. Do we imagine China wishing to damage that trade by making shipping unsafe? For a country whose leaders abandoned Marxist ideology decades ago, and whose political stability depends greatly on continued economic growth, this would surely be an unattractive option. We know roughly what China's goals are: creation of a protective buffer zone, possibly a bastion for the protection of its nuclear deterrent submarines, and the fulfilment of an historic nationalist project, the nine-dash line.

In these circumstances should Australia be encouraging the United States to adopt a more muscular South China Sea policy? Should it follow the US if it does? There may come a time when

running risks to deal with China is unavoidable.

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once wrote that dealing with problems of ambiguity required a “willingness to run risks on partial knowledge”, knowing that an “insistence on absolutes... is a prescription for inaction.” This was in 1957, after the Soviet Union had brought nearly the whole of Eastern Europe under its control, had backed the Communist takeover of China and North Korea’s invasion of South Korea. China’s ambitions at this point appear considerably less dangerous.

China is exercising more restraint with its neighbours, including through partial compliance with the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling and more caution in its military operations at sea. It is seeking a greater global leadership role on trade and has already assumed a greater role in global peacekeeping and counter-piracy. It’s ‘One Belt One Road’ and investment bank policies are bringing needed infrastructure to developing countries, albeit not to the standards of corporate governance Western countries might prefer. Australia’s trade and military vessels continue to exercise freedom of navigation through the South China Sea.

At the present time restraint and a steady policy of strengthening our defence forces and maintaining close links with our ally and neighbours appears appropriate. Although the alliance is a relationship of longstanding mutual benefit, Australia now needs to take very seriously the possibility of its ally devising plans that are not well matched to the risks now faced, and insufficiently consider their consequences. Australia may need to argue its case, and take a browbeating, rather than go along with a bad plan.

At the same time Australia needs to develop diplomatic, economic and military options, to respond should China impose unreasonable restrictions on seagoing trade in the South China Sea, unlikely as that currently seems.

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