

Alliance maintenance in the Turnbull Era: a good driver isn't everything by Euan Graham

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Commentary in Australia since Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's inaugural visit to Washington last week has focused, naturally enough, on the dynamic that a new leader brings to the alliance. Turnbull is well known to have his own world view and, at the very least, provides a stylistic contrast to Tony Abbott, who was widely, if not always accurately, portrayed as cravenly loyal to the United States. So, it was inevitable that the premier would see his words and deeds in Washington scrutinized for evidence of greater "independence," that perennial itch within Australia's foreign policy.

Turnbull's visit was, by most accounts, successful on that score. His [keynote address](#) at the Center for Strategic & International Studies conveyed the impression of a supportive ally, especially in the fight against Islamic State, albeit led by someone whose loyalty is tempered by independent judgment and a willingness to offer as well as to receive advice, as demonstrated by Turnbull's pitch for the US to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

If there were lingering US doubts raised by Canberra's decision not to reinforce Australian forces committed to Iraq and Syria, despite a formal US request, they did not appear to tarnish Turnbull's Beltway interactions. This may owe something to his less-noticed move, announced during a mid-January lightning visit to Kabul, to augment the Australia Defence Force (ADF) non-combat mission to Afghanistan by 20 personnel to 270.

The premier's stop in Hawaii to visit the US Pacific Command (PACOM) en route home is also worth highlighting. PACOM's outspoken chief, Adm. Harry Harris, has repeatedly called out Chinese misbehavior in the South China Sea and elsewhere to the extent that he has sometimes appeared at odds with the Obama administration's more cautious line. That the prime minister made time to visit PACOM, where Australia has a senior officer attached, sends a signal of institutional solidarity and that he understands Australia's future strategic challenges lie in Asia. However vexed Turnbull may be about the Thucydides trap in China-US relations, it also makes sense to have the ear of Sparta's frontline commander, whoever his next commander-in-chief will be.

These calibrations suggest Turnbull can and will steer a smart course on alliance management, but sometimes we focus too much on the leader. Such attention on Turnbull encourages

the easy perception that, with the right person in charge, the alliance will take care of itself. Little attention in last week's commentary was on the mechanics of the alliance itself and the tests it faces ahead. It's as if the co-driver and his presumed influence on route selection matter to the exclusion of the car.

That is because years of continuous coalition operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, regular joint exercises, and deepening institutional integration have fostered the perception of an alliance in good health, unencumbered by serious barriers to defense and intelligence cooperation. A few tweaks under the hood and she'll be right.

At first glance, not much appears awry. Australian units are used to operating, in combat, under US command. Australian warships have been embedded into the US Seventh Fleet, while the US Marine presence augurs for an expanded US military footprint on Australian soil. Time and again, we are told that while there are no grounds for complacency, the alliance's engine still fires on all cylinders. (OK, I really shouldn't belabor the automotive metaphor).

However, in the run-up to Turnbull's visit there was an illuminating revelation of discord in a *National Interest* article by Andrew Shearer and Michael Green, who have enough experience at the policy coalface to give them credibility as canaries. Four years after President Obama announced the rotation of up to 2,500 US Marines through northern Australia – as the lead element of the US re-balance – Washington and Canberra remain at odds over who pays for their supporting facilities and infrastructure.

If the two allies cannot agree on something as basic as this, involving relatively modest sums of money, one has to wonder about the prospects for more ambitious force posture adjustments. Australia prides itself on a high level of interoperability with US forces. But increasingly the US judges its allies on the capacity, as well as capability, that allies like Japan can bring to bear. Washington will be watching closely whether Turnbull is willing to match his predecessor's commitment by putting defense spending on a path toward meeting the 2 percent of GDP threshold.

Canberra will, before long, have to decide how actively to participate in ballistic missile defense (beyond the enabling role it already plays in hosting the joint facility at Pine Gap) – an issue already causing ructions in Washington's alliance with South Korea. Then there was the Australian defense department's undoubted oversight in not informing the US about the sale of Darwin port to a Chinese state entity, despite its proximity to the US Marine presence. That looked something rather like complacency.

Prime Minister Turnbull may also have to contend with more domestic politics on alliance matters than he bargained

for. Opposition spokesman Stephen Conroy's entry into the debate on freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, effectively calling the government's bluff by advocating for an Australian operational response, suggests a new willingness to test the limits of bipartisan consensus on national security.

These hiccups and hurdles pose challenges to the alliance which effective political leadership can certainly help to overcome. But we also need to step back and reflect that the existing templates for alliance management were developed when the strategic focus of attention was in the Middle East, not Australia's own region. Planning for defense contingencies in which Australia is required to fight alongside US forces in the Pacific theatre (where the US has not engaged in a single combat operation since the Vietnam War) is an entirely different proposition, unsuited to ad hoc responses or niche unit contributions of the kind that Canberra and the ADF have grown used to.

A scenario in which the US and China are fighting each other, or possibly even a more limited US armed intervention on the Korean Peninsula, would also be far harder for Canberra to say "no" to, as well as requiring a much deeper degree of alliance integration and a bigger scale of military effort on Australia's part than anything experienced for decades. Conflict, of course, is far from inevitable. But preparing and planning for high-intensity warfare in the Indo-Pacific is bound to take up an increasing amount of alliance bandwidth in the years ahead.

Tom Switzer's commentary "[Turnbull the clear-eyed realist](#)" was among the more perceptive analyses of the prime minister's trip to Washington. However, as even Switzer concedes, where China is concerned the best that Australia can probably hope for in the Turnbull era is to be a "helpful passenger." That being the case, it's time to strap in and concentrate more on the car and the road ahead.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.