

**Hanging up, not disconnected: the Australia-US alliance can handle an angry call** by Sinclair Prowse and Brad Glosserman

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Reports of a “[hostile and charged](#)” phone call between US President Donald Trump and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull have [unnerved](#) many in the US and Australia. Alliance supporters in both countries moved quickly to undo some of the damage but confusion and uncertainty persists. The alliance is strong, but that does not mean it doesn’t need fortification to weather the inevitable challenges to come.

While Australian officials and analysts are well aware that the new US administration believed in shaking things up, they were nevertheless gobsmacked by last month’s phone call. Trump was set off by a [post-election agreement](#) with the Obama administration to take, after full vetting, 1,250 refugees from Australia’s offshore migrant holding facilities. Without being formally linked, the agreement was a swap, in which Australia [agreed to join](#) a US-led multilateral plan to resettle US refugees from Costa Rica.

Trump reportedly described the agreement as “[the worst deal ever](#)” while talking to Turnbull, told his counterpart that “[this was the worst call by far](#)” among the four he had had with world leaders during the day, and then terminated it after just 25 minutes, although it was scheduled to go an hour. While the US embassy in Canberra [released a statement](#) saying the Trump White House would honor the agreement, Trump tweeted an hour later to say that he would “[study](#)” the deal.

News of the conversation produced an immediate wave of responses in Australia and the US. Australians were surprised and shocked to hear of the disrespect afforded the prime minister and the seeming indifference to the consequences for the alliance. Turnbull downplayed the call, saying it was a “[frank](#)” discussion that ended “[courteously](#).” In the US, alliance supporters went out of their way to neutralize the damage. Sen. John McCain called Australian Ambassador Joe Hockey to confirm “[unwavering support for the US-Australia alliance](#),” as did Trump’s chief of staff Reince Priebus and chief strategist Steve Bannon.

After the phone call, Australians reflected upon the future of “enduring” and “unwavering” support. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was sanguine, noting that the alliance is “[big enough, old enough and ugly enough](#)” to cope with this and future crises. The editors of the East Asia Forum – a hotbed of clear-eyed, level-headed analysis associated with Australian National University – [acknowledged](#) that “Tough

calls between Australian and world leaders are nothing new. There have been times in the past when there was hard talk within the framework of the Australia-US alliance relationship.” Yet even they [concluded](#) that “there has been nothing quite the same as this exchange or its treatment in the public domain... this is not business as usual and we cannot pretend that nothing’s changed.”

Some fear that this uncertainty could force a reassessment of Australia’s policy toward China. Some Australian strategists have already called for such a change. They see an increasingly robust economic relationship between their country and China – trade between the two countries reached \$150 billion last year, making China Australia’s number 1 trade partner – and an ally that appears hesitant to challenge Beijing’s growing assertiveness. They conclude that their country should make a “China choice” that puts greater distance between Canberra and Washington DC. That choice is premature, say some analysts, flat out wrong cry others, but it is troubling that even establishment voices in Australia are saying that their country “[needs a new China-US strategy](#).”

The Australia-US alliance, like all such relationships, rests on four pillars. The first is a foreign policy that serves the interests of both countries. In addition to the readiness of the two militaries to fight side by side since World War I, the two countries are fervent and committed supporters of the global order, the principles of democracy, the rule of law and a liberal trade system. Speaking in Sydney to the Lowy Institute for International Policy in December of last year, US Pacific Command Commander Admiral Harry Harris told his audience that US interests in Asia were “[enduring](#),” and that the alliance was “more important than ever before.” He concluded by noting that “you can count on America now and into the future.”

The second pillar is a bureaucracy that makes those policies real, ensuring that those ideas, values, and interests are implemented. Importantly, bureaucracies provide continuity and institutional knowledge for an alliance, ensuring continuity and acting as shock absorbers at times like these.

The third pillar is public support for and approval of the alliance. As would be expected by a partnership of such duration, the bilateral alliance enjoys great support among Australians. In a [2016 Lowy Institute poll](#), 71 percent of Australians said the alliance relationship with the US is important for Australia’s security. Support for the alliance is stronger still in the US: according to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ 2016 report “[Asia in the Age of Uncertainty](#),” 93 percent of Americans consider the alliance with Australia to be stable or improving.

The fourth pillar of any alliance is the personal relationship between the two leaderships. While governments

are always at pains to remind their publics (and their partners) that interests transcend particular governments, it is also true that the rapport between top executives – whether heads of state, or ministers of foreign affairs and defense – has a significant influence as well. Personal relationships and trust built between presidents and prime ministers set the tone and shape perceptions.

Unnerving though this moment is, the alliance has weathered challenges before and will surmount this one. The Australia-US partnership consists of a thick weave of relations, not just in military and diplomatic affairs, but in trade, culture, science, and investment too. The US is the biggest source of foreign investment in Australia, totaling nearly [\\$160 billion by 2013](#), while Australians reciprocated by investing nearly \$430 billion in the United States by 2012. The US is the number one long-haul travel destination for Australians, with [1.4 million Australians](#) visiting the country in 2016; [610,000 Americans](#) made the same trek south in 2015. Plainly, these relationships reflect years of positive, substantial cooperation and won't be easily undone.

To fortify the relationship from future shocks, the two countries have several tasks.

First, they should resume the AUSMIN talks as soon as possible. Scheduling problems as the transition approached forced cancellation of the next iteration of the regular (usually annual) talks involving defense and foreign ministers. AUSMIN is a unique opportunity for agenda setting and strategic communication at all levels of government, most importantly among senior officials.

Second, the two governments should commence an Australia-US Strategic Deterrence Dialogue, a conversation similar to those the US has initiated with Japan and Korea. This discussion should go deeper into the weeds on strategic issues than does the AUSMIN, and explore the entire range of ways the two governments can work together to strengthen deterrence in East Asia.

A third assignment is the creation of a Australia-US Wise Person's Group, that would bring together thought leaders and influentials from each country once or twice a year to work out ways to make real and visible the benefits and advantages of this relationship. These meetings wouldn't just be a public relations exercise but would aim to build new strands in thick weave of the bilateral relationship. It is especially important that this endeavor have an expansive definition of "Wise Persons," and include young people in new and innovative fields that are not traditionally associated with the alliance. People-to-people links that have developed throughout all aspects of the Australia-US relationship are arguably the strongest element of the alliance, and must be better cultivated.

The Australia-US alliance is strong, but it must not be taken for granted. Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper, due to be completed this year, comes at a critical moment for the Australia-US alliance. We should expect more shocks and challenges for the alliance; some are likely to be among the biggest the alliance has ever faced. It is time to start preparing.

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