



Mr. Howard Goes to Washington: The U.S. and Australia in the Age of Terror by Hugh White

As the planes struck on Sept. 11, 2001, Australian Prime Minister John Howard was in Washington to mark the 50th anniversary of the ANZUS Treaty which formalizes the security alliance between Australia and the United States. The poignancy of Howard's presence in Washington that day, and the symbolic significance of the anniversary that he was there to celebrate, have lent weight to a wider hypothesis: that Australia under John Howard is undertaking a fundamental realignment of its international relationships away from Asia and toward the U.S.

There is evidence, some of it quite compelling, to support this view. Over the intervening 22 months since that tragic day, Australia has been second only to the UK in the warmth of its support for the Bush administration's approach to the war on terror. And the Howard government has put less rhetorical weight on Australia's relationships in Asia than did predecessor Paul Keating. Even so, one must be careful. Relationships as old and deep and complex as that between the U.S. and Australia have a tempo and a trajectory that are not easily transformed by individual events - even events as resonant as Sept. 11 - and instead reflect longer term, slower acting forces.

Back before...

John Howard's policy credentials, when he came to the prime ministership in March 1996, were in economic issues. He had an instinctive respect for Australia's alliance with Washington, and a concern to do what was necessary to ensure that the alliance flourished. But Howard did not have the intense emotional empathy with U.S. political culture of many of the most influential people among his political opponents.

The most remarked-upon feature of John Howard's early foreign policy was not a tilt toward America, but a perceived tilt away from Asia. In fact, the pace of Australia's engagement with Asia was slowing for reasons that had little to do with John Howard. Australia's inability to find a seat among Asian countries at the Asian-European Summit meetings was at one level a diplomatic pinprick, but it served as a discouraging reminder that after a decade of creative and energetic diplomacy in helping to build Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation and the ASEAN Regional Forum, Australia was still not accepted on our own terms as part of the region. The financial and economic crises of 1997 and 1998, and Japan's decade of stagnation, dented Australians' long-held view that the economic miracle of Asia was the key to their future prosperity, especially as their own economy continued to perform strongly despite the downturn in Asia. And the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998, followed by the tumult

in East Timor in 1999, killed off many Australian's faith in our ability to work constructively with our closest Asian neighbor.

Howard and Bush

John Howard's agenda for the relationship with the U.S. moved from conservative to ambitious with the election of George W. Bush. Bush brought to the White House two things that changed the dynamics of the relationship. First was Bush's own political and personal style, which Howard found very congenial. In Bush, Howard found a president that he felt he could do serious business with. The second was a group of senior officials who knew Australia and were well known to Australian counterparts - people like Paul Wolfowitz, Rich Armitage, and Bob Zoellick.

The search for a new dynamic in the relationship was manifest in particular in the push for a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) between Australia and the U.S., which moved to the top of the government's foreign policy agenda early in 2001. The FTA was seen as a way to inject into the economic relationship some of the glamour and intimacy that has hitherto been the monopoly of the security alliance.

Opponents argued that it would blunt Australia's commitment to push for multilateral trade liberalization under the WTO, and signal a turn away from Asia as the prime locus of our economic aspirations. Some of those concerns may have been overdrawn, but it is probably fair to say that an FTA with the U.S. would have had little appeal before 1997, when Asia's economies seemed set to be the powerhouse of global prosperity in the new century.

That is how things stood on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

September 11 - the First Shock

It is perhaps hard now to quite capture in the imagination the simplicity, strength, and spontaneity of our first reactions to the attacks of Sept. 11. Like many other countries, Australia responded quickly to U.S. requests for support in the war on terror. A large majority of Australians strongly supported the government's commitment of forces to military action in Afghanistan. The scale of the military commitment was relatively small, the key element being a company-group sized contingent of special forces, and after they were withdrawn Australia declined to contribute to the multinational peacekeeping effort. Australia's military contribution to the first phase of the war on terror was substantial and significant, but hardly exceptional compared to those of many other countries.

enforcement efforts. Australia also hosted the second coalition meeting that was held in Brisbane July 9-10.

Redefining the Alliance

Nonetheless the overall impact of Sept. 11, the war on terror, and Australia's engagement in Afghanistan did change the public mood in Australia, and created a whole new context for thinking about the U.S. relationship. Howard sensed the opportunity, indeed perhaps the inevitability, of re-conceptualizing the relationship in this new security environment.

In the meantime the war on terror itself was metamorphosing in important ways. In Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002, a whole new front was opened up against the "Axis of Evil," and especially against Iraq. Without making an irrevocable military commitment, Australian ministers expressed early support for the Bush approach to Iraq, and endorsed the radical evolution of U.S. strategic policy as spelt out in President Bush's West Point address.

Over the same period, however, the war on terror was metamorphosing in other ways as well. In January evidence emerged from Afghanistan of plans for al-Qaeda affiliates in Southeast Asia to attack Western, including Australian, targets in Singapore. This was not a complete surprise. Concerns grew up that Australia's own region - especially Indonesia - would become part of the front line of the war on terror.

Terrorism comes home to Australians

On Oct. 12, 2002 the war on terror came home to Australians when the terrorist bombing in Bali killed 88 Australians as well as many more Indonesians and large numbers of other nationals. This tragedy both reaffirmed Australia's commitment to the war on terror, and reinforced the tendency to keep Australia's efforts focused close to home. But nonetheless the Howard government sustained its support for U.S. policy on Iraq. This generated significant anxiety in Australia, and a fair amount of outright opposition, not least of which from the Labor opposition.

But of course the war came. Australia's small contribution - special forces, F-18s, maritime patrol and tanker aircraft, and naval ships and divers - performed creditably and took no casualties. The swiftness of initial victory, pride in the Australian forces' achievements, and Australia's relative detachment from the perils and frustrations of Iraq's rehabilitation, have all deflected much of the dissent expressed before the war, and limited the costs to Australia's relationships with its Islamic neighbors.

After Iraq

Alongside postwar Iraq, the other key priorities over coming months will be North Korea and Iran - both urgent and important security issues, but neither looking amenable to swift or muscular action. Canberra joined the 11-nation "coalition of the willing" that in Madrid agreed to more aggressively impede the spread of weapons of mass destruction primarily through greater maritime law

Meanwhile Australia's own attention has been refocused swiftly back to its own immediate region, where the government announced a significant change in policy approaches to the Southwest Pacific. Initially Australia is set to lead a coalition of local states to restore law and order in the strife-torn Solomon Islands; later it may look at more active aid and other policy approaches to other Southwest Pacific neighbors in trouble.

But that does not mean the underlying questions posed by the war on terror have been answered, nor that the opportunities offered by it to reconfigure the U.S.-Australia alliance have been exhausted. Some of the biggest issues are still on the table. Australian policymakers are still wrestling with the implications of Sept. 11 for Australia's long-term strategic policy. One key question is how to strike the balance in shaping Australia's forces between capabilities to defend Australia itself against conventional attack, capabilities to undertake the kind of low level operations now being launched in the Solomons - and still being maintained in East Timor, and capabilities to slot into U.S.-led coalitions in high-intensity conflicts far from home.

It is the answers to these questions which will shape the long-term development of the U.S.-Australia alliance. All of them will be influenced by the events of Sept. 11 and the subsequent war on terror. But equally they will be influenced by a range of other, potentially longer-term, issues: how U.S. strategic objectives and postures in the Western Pacific evolve, how Australia's closer neighborhood develops, how Australians come to see themselves and their place in the world. It is far from clear what the answers to any of the questions will be, and it is likewise not clear, even post-Sept. 11, that Australia is indeed committed to ever-closer strategic integration with the U.S.

Hugh White is director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. These personal views are extracted from a longer commentary on U.S.-Australia relations published in the July issue of Comparative Connections [http://www.csis.org/pacfor/ccejournal.html]