

The problem with American assumptions about Australia

by Aaron L. Connelly

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US and Australian defense cooperation has always been close, but there has been a step change under the Obama Administration's 'Rebalance' policy. After years at war together in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Indo-Pacific is now the theater of cooperation: thousands of US Marines and dozens of US Air Force assets now rotate annually through bases in the Northern Territory. For the past three years, an [Australian general](#) has served as a deputy commander of US Army forces in the region – not as a liaison officer, but as a line staff officer planning US operations in the region.

Operational closeness has been facilitated by a strong alignment of views between Australian and American defense officials and academics on the challenges facing the region. Both sides are deeply concerned by the test that Chinese actions in the South China Sea pose for what the Americans tend to call the 'liberal international order' and Australians call – 56 times in this year's defense white paper – the 'rules-based global order.'

China's rise is not a threat in and of itself. But if Chinese leaders believe that they are not bound by international laws and norms, or that they can intimidate China's smaller neighbors into waiving their sovereign rights – as recent actions in the South China Sea would suggest – then China's rise could undermine the system that has served to foster an extraordinary run of peace and prosperity in this region for the last 25 years with devastating consequences for the region, including Australia and the US.

These views are so commonplace within Australian and American defense circles that they are often left unsaid. Academics and officials quickly jump to the next stage of the thought process: how the US and middle powers in the region like Australia can coax China back to the path of a [responsible stakeholder](#) in the international system or, failing that, work together to ensure that the preponderance of power in the region remains in the hands of those who would uphold the rules-based order. (A minority of the defense community, [led by Hugh White](#), agree with much of this but would argue for a very different Plan B).

American officials frequently err, however, in assuming that the Australian defense community's views reflect a

broader consensus in Australian society, or even the backbenches of parliament. As Rory Medcalf and James Brown [noted](#) in their Lowy Institute analysis in 2013, very few parliamentarians expressed much interest in defense policy. To the extent more do today, much of it seems to be motivated by rent-seeking in acquisitions. The Lowy Institute [Poll](#) last year showed that 77 percent of Australians see China as 'more of an economic partner to Australia' than 'a military threat.' Despite increased Chinese assertiveness over the previous few months, only 39 percent of Australians said they saw China as likely to be a military threat to Australia in 20 years, 9 percent fewer than the year before.

These views are particularly noticeable among elites in Australia's financial centers. The *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page [seemed surprised](#) to find former Prime Minister John Howard, 'sitting high above Sydney's sparkling harbor... [to be] cool when asked about China's maritime aggression in recent years.' But Howard reflects the sanguine view from executives in the office towers of Sydney and Melbourne, and among commercial elites in Australia's other capital cities.

Some in the corner suites go further, [arguing](#) that the US is recklessly raising tensions with China in a contest for regional primacy, and that Australia's closeness to the US could pull it into a conflict that is not in Australia's interests. Such arguments misplace the blame for the rise in tensions, overrate the risk of conflict between the US and China, and underrate the importance of the rules-based order to Australian prosperity. Australian defense officials often discourage their American counterparts from taking these arguments seriously, breezily declaring their proponents to be soft on China, but the Australian tycoons making them, like Kerry Stokes, James Packer, and Andrew Forrest, are not uninfluential.

American defense officials in recent years have occasionally flown into this contested environment with their guard down. Assuming that they are among like-minded counterparts, they have failed to first explain their concerns about Chinese behavior in the region and the risks it presents to countries like Australia, before jumping into a discussion of efforts to push back on that behavior, such as American freedom of navigation operations. Public suggestions by American officials that Australia do more to defend its own interests, which might be quite welcome behind closed doors at Defence headquarters in Canberra, are often portrayed in the Australian media as demands that Australia take greater risks in the name of the alliance.

For example, when the commander of the US Seventh Fleet, Adm. Joseph Aucoin, visited Sydney in February, he [encouraged Australia](#) to conduct its own freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Australia would indeed have good reasons of its own to do so, but his comments made the United States appear to be pressing

Australia into action. If Australia does ultimately undertake freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, his comments will add to questions as to whether Australia is doing so in its own interests or merely at the behest of its senior ally, thus making it a more difficult sell domestically and depriving it of some of its moral force abroad.

It doesn't have to be this way, but American defense officials need to get out more. Visitors from the Pentagon or Pearl Harbor should stop in Sydney or Melbourne to canvass a broader set of views on regional politics before continuing on to Canberra. Meeting only with like-minded defense-focused academics and civil servants is insufficient, and likely to only reinforce the perception that these are settled questions in Australia. By spending a day in one of Australia's big multicultural cities, American officials may also find that those with concerns about US policy are not simply 'soft on China' or motivated by greed, but part of a parallel Australian conversation on China that could benefit from greater exposure to US strategic concerns. They will at least take away a better appreciation for the broader conversation on China here, and perhaps be more careful in how they explain American thinking and actions.

When it comes to public debate, however, Australians need to lead the conversation on the alliance and regional politics in their own country. The 2016 Defence White Paper is a good basis for this discussion, but the Australian defense community should [engage more broadly](#) with the Australian business community and Australian people in order to explain their concerns about Chinese behavior and how Australia can continue to do business and build people-to-people links with China while addressing those concerns. (Noting China's need to export excess capacity and invest excess capital overseas is a good place to start.) One of the reasons that occasional gaffes by American officials have seemed so salient in this conversation in recent years is because Australian official voices have been too quiet.

The operational closeness in this region that the US and Australia have developed over the last five years is important, but it will mean little in a democracy if it is not backed by an alignment of views at the popular and political levels. Taking this broader, more respectful approach will allow the defense communities in the US and Australia to build a more politically sustainable partnership in addressing the challenges presented by China's rise.

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