



## ***HARRIS OR TRUMP: AUSTRALIA WANTS MORE OF THE SAME***

BY GRAEME DOBELL

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*The following is the ninth in a series on the challenges facing the next US presidential administration in managing the most crucial Indo-Pacific relationships. See part one in the series [here](#), see part two [here](#), part three [here](#), part four [here](#), part five [here](#), part six [here](#), part seven [here](#), and part eight [here](#).*

The standard political bromide that Australia will always work with the president chosen by the American people has the great benefit of being true.

Since the ANZUS treaty was signed in 1951, the alliance has endured under 14 US presidents and 16 Australian prime ministers. One of those prime ministers, Kevin Rudd, now Australia's ambassador in Washington, draws on that history to buttress the bromide: "We actually [don't have a view](#) about partisan preferences within this country. That's a choice for you all to sort out."

Yet as Canberra gazes towards Nov. 5, the bromide has different Republican and Democrat colorings.

Australia thinks Kamala Harris and Donald Trump both offer versions of "more of the same." The meaning of "same" is where Canberra's alliance confidence takes on contrasting hues. Canberra would *expect* more of the same from a Harris administration and *hope* for more of the same from another Trump administration.

The Harris "same" is a continuation of what the Biden presidency delivered—a substantial development of the alliance. The Trump "same" is based on the success of the bilateral relationship during his presidency from 2017 to 2020, despite a [dramatic early alarm](#).

Under either Harris or Trump, Australia wants to entrench what's been achieved by Joe Biden. Broadening and deepening a formal alliance which is in its eighth decade is quite an achievement, especially given the central place the US holds in Australian strategy. But that alliance build is what Biden's term achieved in:

- the AUKUS [nuclear submarine](#) agreement;
- the evolution of the Quad grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the US;
- America's step-up in the South Pacific, as Washington declared a "[renewed partnership with the Pacific Islands](#)," responding to Australia's view that China's challenge creates "a [state of permanent contest](#) in the Pacific";
- and the shift of US military muscle onto Australian soil in a new era of [alliance integration](#) that will see more US troops, planes, and ships in Australia, and the creation of a US-Australia combined intelligence center in Canberra.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") is one embodiment of Australia's more-of-the-same ambition. The significance of the grouping has been boosted by Biden, who held six Quad summits, four of them in person. The first Quad ministerial meetings happened during Trump's presidency, though, so he has some foundational ownership. Indications from the Trump camp are that he would maintain the Quad. A new piece of strategic architecture in Asia has the benefit of both Democrat and Republican roots.

Quad official language avoids any mention of China. If the meeting is the message, however, then it's all about China and Beijing's aggressive probing in Asia.

At Biden's final Quad summit in Delaware in September, the president had a "hot microphone" moment when he was heard telling the other leaders in what was supposed to be a closed session: "China continues to behave aggressively, [testing us all](#) across the region, and it's true in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, South China, South Asia, and the Taiwan Straits." Biden said that while Chinese president Xi Jinping was focusing on "domestic economic challenges," he was also "looking to buy himself some diplomatic space, in my view, to aggressively pursue China's interest."

Australia takes comfort that amid all the divisions of US politics, the contest with China is a rare bipartisan consensus in Washington. And, whether Trump or Harris, the next president will know that the central balance of international power this century will be [set in the Indo-Pacific](#). The balance-of-power judgement drives formal statements of Australian strategic doctrine. Canberra's 2023 Defence Strategic Review declares: "The Indo-Pacific is the most [important geostrategic region](#) in the world." The 2024 National Defence Strategy judges that the global competition is "[sharpest and most consequential](#) in the Indo-Pacific."

Such strategic logic should mean that the alliance is solid and growing in importance. That's why Canberra *expects* more of the same if Vice President Harris is elected as president. The *hope* about a second Trump presidency is the crunch when strategy comes up against personality.

Australia seeks to Trump-proof the alliance with multiple layers of history and commitment. The art of this effort is to lavish praise on the US while saying nothing negative about Donald Trump; that was the successful technique employed the first time round, and the present Labor government is sticking to the script.

Retired prime ministers do not have to abide by diplomatic bromides. And Australia's second longest serving prime minister, John Howard, has damned Trump as unfit for office. As prime minister from 1996 to 2007, Howard was the firmest of US friends. In 2009, President George W. Bush presented Howard with America's highest civilian honor, the

Presidential [Medal of Freedom](#). Howard said in September that "in normal situations I would unhesitatingly favor a Republican victory" but not with Trump as the candidate: "I think his refusal to accept the result of the last election and various attempts to overturn that result were [not compatible with democracy](#). When you play the democratic game, you've got to accept the democratic result."

The Liberal prime minister who first dealt with Trump as president in 2017, Malcolm Turnbull, predicts that Trump will win again this time. In an article for *Australian Foreign Affairs*, Turnbull describes Trump as "bombastic," "erratic," and "very much the [big, bullying billionaire personality](#)," writing: "This type is narcissistic, driven, totally focused on accumulating wealth and power for themselves. The one thing I had learned about this type of personality is that if you suck up to bullies or give in to them, the only thing you will get is more bullying. Punching them in the nose (metaphorically or actually) is rarely successful either. To succeed with them, you need to stand up to them – but courteously. The only thing they respect is strength."

Turnbull writes that Australia's current prime minister, Anthony Albanese, can't grovel but must be professional, courteous, and disciplined in disagreeing with elements of Trump's agenda "on climate, trade and, potentially, Ukraine." If Australia has business to do with Trump, Turnbull says, only the prime minister can seal the deal, concluding: "The leaders of America's friends and allies, including Australia, will be among the few who can speak truthfully to Trump. He can shout at them, embarrass them, even threaten them. But he cannot fire them. Their character, courage and candour may be the most important aid they can render to the United States, if there is a second age of Trump."

As the bromide proclaims, Australia will work with either Harris or Trump. But "more of the same" from Harris would be the smooth continuation of a Biden administration that delivered much for Australian interests and strategy. If Trump returns to the White House, Canberra will apply all manner of personal, political and policy ratchets to lock the alliance in place and stop it from faltering or falling. The long

history of the alliance gives plenty of guidance on using broad agreement to balance individual policy differences. And even getting deals between leaders with contrasting or clashing personalities.

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