Australia: US-China rivalry provokes heated debate

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In the wake of the Australian election on August 21, a heated debate has opened up in the press over the emergence of China as a major power, growing US-China rivalry in the region and its implications for Canberra's strategic orientation into the future. For Australian capitalism, rising regional tensions present a fundamental dilemma: how to balance between China, which is now Australia's largest trading partner, and the United States, which has been the cornerstone of strategic and defence policy since World War II.

None of these issues was discussed in the media in the wake of the ousting of Kevin Rudd as Labor leader and prime minister in June nor during the subsequent election campaign. But the vehemence and rapidity with which the debate has subsequently erupted underscore the fact that Washington's increasingly aggressive stance towards Beijing was undoubtedly a major factor in the recent political upheavals in Canberra.

The dispute, which to date has been largely confined to the pages of the *Australian*, emerged in the September 4-5 edition with a comment by foreign editor Greg Sheridan entitled "Obama: The perfect model of a president in touch with Asia". Sheridan, who is well known for his strong pro-US stance, enthused over the Obama administration's "engagement" in Asia over the past year—from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's presence at key regional forums, to closer US ties with Vietnam and Malaysia. In the case of Indonesia, Sheridan hailed the US decision to ignore human rights organisations and lift its ban on cooperating with the notorious Kopassus special forces as demonstrating Washington's "absolute determination to have a completely new relationship with Jakarta" which holds "a central position in ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations]."

Sheridan was at pains to deny the obvious—that the US moves are directed against China. "It would certainly be mistaken to see these actions and initiatives by Washington only through the lens of strategic competition with China. Certainly they don't come within a million miles of Washington pursuing a policy of containment of China," he declared. After blaming China's "general swagger and bullying tone" for rising regional tensions, he concluded: "Nothing has been more important to Asian economic success and strategic stability than the presence of the US in the region."

The same edition of the *Australian* also published an extract from a lengthy article by long-time foreign policy and defence analyst Hugh White that appeared in full the following week in issue 39 of the Quarterly Essay. Entitled "Power Shift: Australia's future between Washington and Beijing", the essay sought to examine the impact on power relations in Asia of China's rapid economic rise—overtaking Japan to become the world's second largest economy and possibly the US in the 2020s.

While Sheridan welcomed US "engagement" in Asia, White bluntly warned of the consequences of rising US-China rivalry for dominance in the Asia Pacific region. "As China grows, America faces a choice of Euclidian clarity: If it will not withdraw from Asia, and if it will not share power with China, America must contest China's challenge to its leadership. That choice carries great costs—much greater, I think, than most Americans yet realise," he wrote.

White continued: "China is already too powerful to be contained without intense and protracted pressure from America. That means committing more [US] forces to Asia, an intensifying nuclear confrontation and building a bigger, more intense anti-China alliance in the region. Even if America does all this, China is unlikely simply to succumb. It would mount a determined and sustained resistance. The resulting antagonism could soon develop its own momentum, as each country reacted to the other. Military capacities on both sides would intensify, and it would be harder and harder for other countries to avoid taking sides. Asia would face the prospect of a deep division between camps aligned to one or other of the two strongest powers. The conflict between these camps would inhibit trade, investment and travel, with immense economic costs. And there would be a real and growing risk of major war—even nuclear war—between them."

Nor was it a matter of conflict in the distant future. "The drift towards antagonism is already underway," White explained. He pointed in particular to the American and Chinese military build up and Washington's efforts over the past decade to forge closer strategic ties in the region, including with India, Japan and Australia. For White, the dangers of Australian capitalism being drawn into a US confrontation with China were self-evident: "In an intensifying conflict, our trade relationship with China would, of course, collapse, and relations elsewhere in Asia would become more complex. We would need to do more to support the US militarily, building bigger armed forces, hosting US bases and, if war came, sending big contingents of our armed forces to fight. The risk of being drawn into a major war with a nuclear-armed power would be much greater than ever before."

White's proposed solution was to urge Canberra to push for a "Concert of Asia"—a deal between all the major Asia-Pacific powers, including the US, China, Japan, India and Russia, to share power in the region and respect each other's strategic and economic interests. Such an arrangement, White explained, would mean that the US would remain an Asian power, but would have to relinquish its present primacy and accommodate China. While describing it as "the best outcome for Australia," White candidly admitted that "unfortunately it is the hardest to achieve, because each of the great powers has to give up so much to make it happen." If a "Concert of Asia" was not achieved, White concluded that Australia had no good alternatives and, whatever choices were made,

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would be compelled to undertake a major military buildup just to retain its position as a middle-order power in the region.

White's essay provoked a furious response in the *Australian* of September 11-12 from Sheridan, who described it as "the single, stupidest strategic document ever prepared in Australian history by someone who once had a position of some responsibility in our system (White was once deputy secretary of the Defence Department)." What sent Sheridan into such a rage, were clearly the question marks that White had put over Washington's present confrontational policy and the efficacy of Australia's alliance with the US, come what may. As Sheridan declared, "White is quite explicit that the greatest obstacle to a peaceful future in Asia is American—yes, that's right, you didn't read wrong, American—strategic ambition. And that the greatest difficulty in securing a peaceful future for Asia is in persuading the US to give up its strategic primacy peacefully."

While liberal in his use of derogatory adjectives, Sheridan failed to address the central thrust of White's arguments or the implications of his own staunchly pro-US stance. The omission was not accidental and was itself an ominous warning. As far as Sheridan is concerned, Australia has no alternative to strengthening its alliance with the US even as Washington aggressively raises tensions with China that threaten to trigger a confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers.

Sheridan has spent the past two months in Washington, where he is well connected to the American foreign policy and defence establishment, as a visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars. Not surprisingly, the subject of his project is "US-Australian Strategic Cooperation in the Asia Pacific". Last month, he argued in the *Australian* that the next government in Canberra should offer the US new basing facilities near Darwin in northern Australia. "A greater US naval and air force presence in Darwin, perhaps even some Marine element, and certainly pre-positioning of materiel: that might just make a lot of sense." And given Sheridan's connections that is quite likely what the Pentagon and the Obama administration will be pushing for.

Sheridan was not alone in denouncing White's essay. Labor parliamentarian Michael Danby and two foreign policy analysts, Carl Ungerer and Peter Khalil, published a comment in the *Australian* on September 16 also condemning White. In line with US propaganda on "human rights", they accused White for "appeasing" totalitarian China and described his essay as "a Canberra Munich moment", akin to British prime minister Chamberlain's "appeasement" of Hitler at the 1938 Munich conference. "White says the US should abandon its primacy in the region. Presumably he wants it to eventually abrogate its treaties with Japan and Australia, withdraw its troops from South Korea and its navy from Asia, and stop Taiwan acquiring the means to defend itself. Any one of these would be a disaster for our region... They would be a betrayal of all the region's people, including the Chinese people," they declared.

Battle lines are being drawn. White's critics will not tolerate any questioning of Australia's alliance with the US and, without discussing the catastrophic consequences, see no alternative to Canberra throwing its lot in with Washington as it seeks to maintain its hegemony in Asia. In his rejoinder to Sheridan last week, White argued for a more reasoned debate. He pointed out that if "the US does resist China's challenge and hostility grows between them, it is possible that Australia will have to choose whether to follow America into that fight or step back from it. These are not pleasant prospects, but this is not a time for wishful thinking. We should all prefer American power to endure unchallenged indefinitely, but good policy requires us to deal with the world as it is, not as we would like it to be."

But while he calls attention to the danger of economic conflict and war, White's proposal to halt the growth of antagonisms in Asia is itself a classic case of wishful thinking. The notion that US imperialism will magnanimously give up its dominant position in Asia and reach a new accommodation with China and other regional powers is belied by the lessons of the 20th Century that produced two world wars. It also runs counter to the stated policy of the Obama administration, which is recklessly turning up the heat on China throughout the region. As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in mid-2009: "The United States is not ceding the Pacific to anyone."

In fact, the Obama administration may have already given a definitive reply to White's plan for a "Concert of Asia". The proposal bears a strong resemblance to Rudd's call as prime minister in mid-2008 for a new overarching Asia Pacific Community to moderate tensions, especially between the US and China. Rudd's plan, however, was increasingly at odds with the Obama administration's determination to undercut Chinese influence in Asia. When Clinton declared last year that the US was "back in Asia", she was looking for staunch allies to challenge China, not, as Rudd was offering, a "middle power" mediator to facilitate a dialogue between Washington and Beijing.

The Obama administration's effusive welcome for Rudd, now Australian foreign minister, in Washington last Friday should fool no-one. While Clinton declared that she had been "influenced" by Rudd's "very strong argument on behalf of an Asian-Pacific community", she certainly did not embrace the proposal. Rather she will continue the Obama administration's aggressive "engagement" in Asia by attending the East Asia Summit in Hanoi next month where she will push for US membership.

The extent to which Washington was involved in Rudd's ousting remains to be seen. What is certain, however, is that the Obama administration did not use its considerable influence to keep Rudd in office or to breathe life into his proposed Asia Pacific Community. The new Prime Minister Julia Gillard immediately pledged her fealty to Washington and foreign minister Rudd has been quick to toe the same line. As for Labor government support for anything resembling a "Concert of Asia", Gillard gave her reply in an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* last Friday. After admitting that she had not yet read White's essay, Gillard added: "I'll certainly read it but I don't think I'm going to find myself in agreement. There is no rethinking of our alliance with the US."

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