

Australia becoming “geopolitical flashpoint” amid sharpening US-China rivalry

Peter Symonds
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A comment this week in the *Financial Times* entitled, “Why Australia’s luck may be running out,” is symptomatic of the growing attention being paid to Australia amid rising geo-political tensions in the Asia Pacific.

Written by the FT’s chief foreign affairs commentator Gideon Rachman, the article underscores the dilemma facing the Australian ruling class as its longstanding strategic ally, the United States, confronts its largest trading partner, China, in every area—diplomatic, economic and military.

In line with Western commentary on the Asia Pacific, Rachman suggests that China and its economic rise is responsible for sharpening geo-political tensions. Without explaining why, he warns that Australia “is in danger of becoming a lightning rod for Chinese anger towards the West in general and the US in particular.”

Rachman highlights “wild invective by Chinese nationalists” toward Australia over two issues—firstly, Canberra’s backing for last month’s ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) negating China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea and, secondly and far less significantly, the provocative remarks of an Australian Olympic swimmer in accusing his Chinese rival of being a drug cheat.

The reasons for the Chinese anger are quite comprehensible. Over the past five years, as part of its “pivot to Asia,” Washington, backed to the hilt by Canberra, has deliberately stoked rivalry in the South China Sea by encouraging countries like the Philippines and Vietnam to more aggressively pursue their territorial claims against China. The US backed and assisted the Philippines to mount its PCA case in The Hague, which China condemned as illegitimate from the outset.

If China’s state-owned *Global Times* reserved some

of its sharpest invective for Australia’s backing of the court ruling, it no doubt reflects the calculation within the Chinese regime that Canberra can be used as a whipping boy with fewer consequences than Washington.

Rachman points to the underlying shift in the objective position of Australian capitalism, which in the past was known as “the lucky country”—rich in resources and “separated from the world’s trouble spots by vast oceans.” This “historic good fortune” partly depended on the dominance in the Asia Pacific of Britain, then the United States.

“However, if the South China Sea and the wider Pacific Ocean become contested waters, Australia faces a tricky choice. Should it accommodate itself to the idea that China will eventually dominate the Asia-Pacific region? Or should Australia place its bet on the continuing dominance of a like-minded, traditional ally—the US,” Rachman wrote.

In reality, while deep concerns remain about the economic consequences of any breach with China, the strategic choice essentially has been made. Australia has aligned itself with the US “pivot,” which is aimed at maintaining American supremacy in Asia and subordinating China to US interests.

For the past five years, Canberra has integrated the Australian armed forces more closely into the US military build-up throughout Asia against China, opening up bases in northern Australia to American Marines, warships and aircraft. As Rachman notes, Canberra is under growing pressure from Washington to join the US in conducting provocative “freedom of navigation exercises” in the South China Sea by sending aircraft or naval vessels within the 12-nautical-mile limits around Chinese islets.

Moreover, the Australian government,

unquestionably under pressure from Washington, is making decisions that impact on economic relations with China. Last week, Canberra blocked bids from two Chinese corporations for leases to operate the Ausgrid electricity network in the state of New South Wales, citing undisclosed “national security” concerns, provoking sharp criticisms from Beijing.

Rachman’s comment reflects a discussion about the rising danger of war that until recently was largely confined to strategic and foreign policy circles but is now being voiced more prominently in the establishment press. The front page of Murdoch’s *Australian* on Monday highlighted a recent report by the US-based Rand Corporation, commissioned by the US Army, assessing the potentially catastrophic outcomes of a US war with China—now and in a decade’s time.

In comments to the *Australian*, longstanding strategic analyst Paul Dibb placed the Ausgrid decision squarely in the context of war with China, which, he said, could break out almost by accident. “Would the cost matter [to China] in a crisis where we were involved and they wanted to cut off our electricity supply to our intelligence agencies, for instance?” he asked.

While claiming conflict was unlikely, Dibb said “it is plausible and it could erupt in my view from a miscalculation or a deliberate act of provocation between China and the US in the East China Sea or the South China Sea.”

Australia’s central role in a US war with China was underlined by the Rand report’s lead author, David Gompert, a former US principal deputy director of National Intelligence. Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Monday, he said Australia would be “very consequential” in a conflict with China.

Gompert suggested that Australian military involvement could include: “For Australia to support the United States in logistical ways, for Australian forces to take on missions that American forces had been fulfilling, freeing [them] up for the conflict.” He added that the Australian military could “actually enter operations, and of course American and Australian forces do know how to operate together—that would produce significant operational consequences for the Chinese.”

As a former top intelligence adviser, Gompert is well

aware that new basing arrangements for US forces in Australia, the routine rehearsal of war plans in joint exercises, and the direct integration of Australian personnel and assets into the American military serve to prepare for just such Australian involvement in a conflict with China. Given the US dependence on bases like Pine Gap in central Australia for intelligence and targetting, any decision by the US to launch war on China would automatically involve Australia.

In this context, Rachman’s comment in the *Financial Times*, a newspaper that has in the past rarely remarked on Australian affairs, takes on added significance. After reviewing the impact of rising regional tensions, he concludes: “All of these developments suggest that, unlikely as it currently sounds, Australia could emerge as a geopolitical flashpoint in the coming decades.”

The only correction that needs to be made is that conflict is rapidly becoming more likely, and not decades from now.



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