

US election stokes deep concerns in Australian ruling circles

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The degraded spectacle of the US presidential election has provoked great trepidation in the Australian media and political establishment amid fears that the result, whoever wins, will have far-reaching implications for global politics and economics.

President Obama's term in office coincided with the ongoing breakdown of world capitalism following the 2008–09 global meltdown and the escalation of tensions throughout the Asia-Pacific as his administration rolled out its confrontational “pivot to Asia” against China. Both the present Liberal-National Coalition government and the previous Labor government enmeshed Australia in this military build-up, basing US Marines in the northern city of Darwin and opening up Australian air and naval bases to the American military.

Now not only the “pivot” but the whole framework of post-war alliances in Asia is being called into question. The most overt sign has been the opposition of both major presidential candidates—Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump—to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was aimed at ensuring, as Obama put it, that the US, not China, writes the economic rules in the twenty-first century.

The *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly warned in a worried comment last week: “It is more likely this crisis of American culture and politics is closer to its commencement than its conclusion. An unconvincing win by Clinton could cripple her governing ability arising from a permanently divided polity. An unexpected Trump win would generate even deeper domestic trauma and plunge the world into hazardous uncertainty.”

After declaring that it would be a mistake to exaggerate America's decline, Kelly questions the ability of the US to maintain its global dominance, and by implication, defend Australian interests. “Well, there are limits now, big time, limits everywhere. The truth, however, is that limits on American power have been growing for 25 years and are now on embarrassing display for the entire world, notably US rivals,” he wrote.

Kelly is just one of a string of commentators fearful of the

implications of a Trump presidency. While Trump has not publicly questioned the US-Australian military alliance—indeed privately his advisers have signalled to Canberra that he regards it highly—he has called into question longstanding American alliances with Japan and South Korea. Trump has even suggested that Japan and South Korea should develop their own nuclear weapons if they are not prepared to pay more for American military protection.

An editorial in today's *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) entitled “The dangers of President Trump” declared that his populist appeals to widespread anti-establishment sentiment had “made this into the most extraordinary and dangerous US election of modern times.” Not only would a Trump presidency “undermine the credibility of the West's defensive alliances” but “his antics have damaged the global prestige of Western democracy.”

While not uncritical of Clinton, the editorial opined: “Mrs Clinton may be wrong on many things, but she is in the realm of normal. In an extraordinary election she is not the extraordinary danger, and must be the world's choice.” It did, however, call on Clinton to reverse her opposition to the TPP, echoing sentiments in ruling circles throughout the region that any US withdrawal from the economic deal could undermine the “pivot” and America's position in Asia.

Another AFR comment by US Council of Foreign Relations fellow Sheila Smith criticised the Trump variant of American isolationism, saying that “his prescriptions for US policy sound downright dangerous.” It warned of the dangers of “China's growing use of military force” and declared that “Washington will need to bolster—not reduce—its forces in the region.” Smith appealed to US allies in Asia not to back off and to “remind the United States of what is at stake if the US loses its way in Asia.”

Such pronouncements stand reality on its head. The primary factor in raising geo-political tensions in Asia has been the Obama administration's “pivot” and its preparations for war with China. While Trump might put pressure on key allies, his “make America great again”

demagoguery foreshadows a reckless resort to military force in Asia and globally.

As for Clinton, she was one of the chief architects of the “pivot” as secretary of state and consistently adopted a more militarist stance than Obama in the Middle East as well as against Russia and China. In 2010, Clinton deliberately inflamed longstanding territorial disputes in the South China Sea by declaring that the US had a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation”—transforming the disputed waters into a dangerous flashpoint for war.

Several commentators have warned that a Clinton presidency would place far greater demands on Canberra to play a more prominent role in the US military build-up against China.

Speaking to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, an unnamed “Washington expert” declared that Clinton was “very invested in the pivot to Asia and sustaining advantage [over China]” and suggested that she would challenge the Australian government to mount a military “freedom of navigation” operation into Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea.

The same article entitled “End of the Alliance?” cited James Brown, research director of the US Studies Centre at Sydney University, who warned against assuming that “it’ll all be OK if Hillary wins.” He said that a President Clinton would make big and difficult demands of Australia, ones that it is not ready for. Brown said before too long Clinton would pose the questions: Is Australia prepared to host US long-range bombers? Is Australia prepared to host a US aircraft carrier battle group?

Andrew Shearer, former national security adviser to Australian prime ministers John Howard and Tony Abbott, told the AFR: “Australia will find itself having to stand up. Issues like freedom of navigation where we’ve been given a bit of a pass by the Obama administration, when Clinton settles on a policy there will be a part for Australia to play and expectations on us.”

The apprehension in ruling circles over the US election feeds into sharp divisions over how to deal with the underlying dilemma posed by Australian capitalism’s longstanding reliance on the US to defend its strategic interests, on the one hand, and its growing economic dependence on China, the country’s largest trading partner.

The government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has ignored repeated suggestions by American officials for the Australian navy to intrude into Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea. Turnbull is under pressure both from the opposition Labor Party and within the Coalition to carry out a provocative “freedom of navigation” operation, regardless of possible Chinese economic retaliation or the risk of a destabilising military clash.

The American election is also viewed in the Australian political establishment as another warning of the political instability threatened by widespread popular alienation and hostility deepening social inequality and the agenda of austerity, not only in the US, but Australia and around the world.

An editorial in today’s *Sydney Morning Herald* draws the parallel between the rise of the Trump, the surprise referendum vote in Britain to exit the European Union, and the re-emergence of the right-wing, anti-immigrant populist Pauline Hanson in Australia. As it points out, Hanson and other small parties and “independents” who have exploited seething resentments have created a parliamentary logjam.

“Nations across the Western world have reached a point where citizen anger at dysfunctional and tone-deaf political institutions is palpable. The backlash by outsiders against political insiders had combined with an endemic yet largely overblown fear of migrants, Muslims and multinationals to destabilise global relationships. Trust in policy making is being eroded. The risks of conflict on a national and community scale have grown,” it stated.

The editorial warned that “centuries-old rules of liberal democracy are under fire, but offered no solution other than the pious call for “higher standards of behaviour” on the part of politicians.

All but ignored in all of the commentary is the significance of the campaign waged by the self-proclaimed democratic socialist Bernie Sanders who won millions of votes, many from young people, who believed his empty posturing against Wall Street. The unspoken fear is that the anger and opposition of workers and youth will take a genuinely socialist direction and pose a threat to the capitalist order.



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