Australian establishment concerns over future of US alliance under Trump

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The Australian political, corporate and media establishment has responded with bewilderment to the fact that Donald Trump will be the next president of the United States—a development it did not want and had almost universally declared impossible, prior to November 8.

During the election campaign, Trump insisted that an administration he headed would repudiate the Trans Pacific Partnership economic agreement; impose sweeping tariffs, not only on China but on other key Australian trading partners, such as Japan and India; declare Beijing a "currency manipulator" and provoke open trade war; and demand that US allies in Europe increase military spending as the price for ongoing security relations with Washington. In Asia, Trump condemned the expense associated with maintaining US basing arrangements in Japan and South Korea, and expressed indifference to both countries assembling their own nuclear arsenals.

While there was general commentary on these declarations, none of them was taken particularly seriously within Australia's ruling circles. The assessment made by the US and Australian media "opinion-makers"—that Trump was unelectable due to his populist rhetoric and manifest personality flaws—was simply accepted as fact.

Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten, who has the closest ties to the American establishment, was so confident of Trump's defeat that he broke with diplomatic protocol and publicly commented on the US election in October. "By his own words and his own actions," Shorten declared, Trump "has confirmed the worst fears of millions in the United States and beyond its borders that he is entirely unsuitable to be leader of the free world."

Shorten continued: "I know I am not the only one relieved that with every passing day, with every disgusting, demeaning comment Mister Trump makes, the possibility of him being president fades."

Summing up the view of the vast majority of the Australian elite on the eve of the election, Greg Sheridan, the pro-Republican Party, right-wing foreign editor of Rupert Murdoch's *Australian*, wrote on November 8: "You can take it to the bank—the American election is effectively all over, Hillary Clinton has won."

Since Clinton's concession in the early hours of November 9, a panicked Australian political establishment has rushed to accommodate to Trump's victory while seeking to work out the extent of its implications.

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who heads an unstable conservative Liberal and National Party coalition government, was the second world leader after Israel's to have Trump answer his phone call. Turnbull delivered personal congratulations and vowed to work closely with the new administration.

Labor's Bill Shorten began his backtracking from his previous comments on Trump with a Facebook statement declaring: "Australians should also know our alliance with the United States has grown and thrived for seven decades—no matter who's in charge."

Reports indicate that the Australian embassy in Washington and diplomatic staff in Canberra are scrambling to establish contact with the somewhat unknown individuals who may be installed into key security, foreign policy and economic secretarial and under-secretarial posts of Trump's administration.

Media commentators and strategic analysts, however, unimpeded by the diplomatic restraints of political office, are giving full vent to their fears and uncertainties.

Since World War II, Australian imperialism has looked to and relied upon the United States to assert its strategic and economic interests on the world arena and particularly in Asia. In exchange, Canberra has functioned as the loyal adjunct of Washington on virtually every international issue. It plays a major role as part of the ANZUS military alliance with the US, hosts critical American military bases and has dispatched its own armed forces to participate in every predatory war that US imperialism has waged to assert is global hegemony, from Korea and Vietnam, to Iraq in 1990–1991, and, over the past 15 years, to Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Since 2011, Canberra has functioned as one of

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Washington's main allies in the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia." It has become thoroughly embroiled in the US agenda of threatening China with war if it fails to bow to Washington's demands, aimed at enshrining American dominance over the Asia-Pacific region. At the centre of the "pivot" has been its most crucial economic aspect, the Trans Pacific Partnership, which would establish a regional trading bloc that excluded China, putting pressure on the latter to radically open up those areas of its economy that remain protected from penetration by US, Japanese, Australian and other financial and corporate conglomerates.

The implications of the TPP's collapse, and of the development of a US administration that retreats from both the economic and military aspects of the "pivot," has been one of the main subjects in the post-election media commentary in Australian strategic circles.

On November 9, the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) bluntly editorialised: "In a year when globalisation and open markets have been under pressure as never before, its greatest bastion has fallen to a political huckster with a contradictory and self-defeating agenda…. Strategically, it is a historic rupture in the post-war world. Mr Trump vows to abandon the global leadership that Washington assumed in 1945. Others may move into the vacuum…. Australia will need to look to the like-minded in East Asia to counterbalance the influence of rising regional giant China. The region will become more heavily armed and dangerous. With a less reliable America, we may find ourselves with greater regional strategic responsibility."

Strategic analyst Hugh White, one of the few establishment critics of Australian involvement in the "pivot," wrote the same day in the AFR: He [Trump] is not going to stand up for US allies. But without those allies America cannot remain the leading power in Asia. Indeed, without those allies, America cannot remain a significant strategic player in Asia at all. If Trump acts as he has talked, we might be seeing the end of the American era in Asia."

Paul Kelly, Rupert Murdoch's editor-at-large at his flag-ship *Australian*, has authored a stream of worried commentary on the US elections. In today's edition, he wrote: "Beware confident predictions about what Trumpism means once the man sits in the Oval Office. This is a classic in Donald Rumsfeld's notion of 'known unknowns'—things we know we don't know….

"It is imperative that Trump, in office, change the style and content of his proposed foreign policy. Threats to NATO and to US allies Japan and South Korea are reckless and a threat to world stability. They risk fuelling a huge anti-Americanism in democracies around the globe while achieving little for the US national interest."

Kelly's reference to "anti-Americanism" has been echoed by other commentators. What they are referring to, however, is not hostility among ordinary people toward the American population, but a potential turn by the ruling elites of various countries to develop alternatives to their longstanding alliances and relations with the United States.

James Brown, a former military officer who works with the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, told the media on November 9 that Trump's victory meant Australia "would have to be more cautious in how we cooperate and collaborate with the US in Asia. We would be more worried about the way the US would support us in any sort of security situation, so it might lead us to take another look at our defence strategy."

Former Labor Party Prime Minister Paul Keating has been the most explicit. Speaking on an Australian Broadcasting Corporation current affairs program, Keating declared: "The foreign policy of Australia is basically we have tag-along rights to the US…. It's time to cut the tag. It's time to get out of it."

Behind the perplexity gripping the Australian establishment lies the threat of the breakdown of its alignment with the US, which has provided the framework for the country's foreign policy, defence and investment and trade relations for more than 75 years. The advent of a Trump presidency, which itself is a symptom of the collapse of America's global primacy, is now compelling the Australian ruling elites to reassess how they can defend their interests in a world dominated by geo-strategic and economic uncertainties.

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