

# Trump's election fuels foreign policy debate in Australia

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22 December 2016

The election of Donald Trump as US president has generated heightened uncertainty and tensions throughout the Asia Pacific region with his promises to scrap the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and implement trade war measures against China, as well as threats to abandon military alliances with Japan and South Korea unless they bear the costs.

The concerns were further exacerbated when Trump this month called into question the so-called One China policy that has formed the linchpin of relations with China, not only for the United States but countries throughout the region. Under the policy, Washington recognises Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

In Australia, Trump's election has intensified the ongoing debate in the political and military establishment over the basic dilemma facing the ruling class: how to balance between China, the country's largest export market, and the United States, the country's longstanding strategic partner. The divisions, which run through both the ruling Liberal-National Coalition of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and the opposition Labor Party headed by Bill Shorten, are being intensified by the worsening economic position of Australian capitalism and the growing danger of conflict between the US and China.

Trump's victory has prompted those critical of the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot to Asia" against China to once again call for a more independent Australian foreign policy—one that safeguards trade and investment with China.

Former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating last month publicly blasted those who treat the Australian alliance with the US with "a reverential, sacramental quality." He declared that Australia had a "more or less tag-along foreign policy" with the US and "it's time to cut the tag." Speaking later in November at the University of Melbourne, he declared that under Trump, the US would be "refocussing on themselves, not alliances" and that Australia needed "a dexterous, mobile, clever foreign policy."

Former Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade secretary

Richard Woolcott commented that Trump's election "may well be good for Australia" by forcing the forging of "a more independent foreign policy" focussed on the Asia Pacific region. Moreover, "the Trump presidency will hopefully bring an overdue end to our misconceived and ineffective operations in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Iraq."

The *Washington Post* this month noted the debate that Trump had triggered in Australia, pointing to the remarks of Labor's foreign affairs spokeswoman Penny Wong who called for consideration of "a broader range of scenarios" than previously contemplated and declared that Trump's views ran "counter to what are core values for more Australians."

The call for Canberra to focus more on the Asian region has been the longstanding catch cry of the Greens party, even as it tacitly supported the US-led war in Afghanistan. Greens leader Richard Di Natale declared last month that Trump's views represent "an ally's worst nightmare" and called for "a fundamental reassessment" of the US alliance. "We need to recognise that the alliance has served us well; it's served us poorly at times, but there are grave concerns now that the alliance with the US represents a security threat to Australia," he said.

None of those pressing for a more independent foreign policy focussed particularly on Asia is openly advocating an end to the US alliance. Rather their call for a more agile foreign policy expresses the deep concern in ruling circles about the economic impact of the US confrontation with China and the potential for Trump's extreme right-wing militarist views to provoke popular anti-war opposition.

The room for manoeuvre is narrowing, however. In 2010, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted in an inner-party coup by party and trade union powerbrokers, who, it was later revealed in WikiLeaks cables, were "protected sources" of the US embassy in Canberra. Rudd had alienated the Obama administration by suggesting that the US reach a *modus vivendi* in Asia with China, right at the point when it was preparing to confront Beijing.

Rudd's replacement Julia Gillard provided the Australian parliament as the platform for Obama to announce his "pivot to Asia" in November 2011 and signed a deal for the basing of US Marines in northern Australia. Over the past five years, under both Labor and Coalition governments, the Australian military and intelligence apparatuses have been more closely integrated into the Pentagon's planning for war against China.

Australia is already central to the US military's operations around the world, with key facilities such as the Pine Gap spy base essential to its intelligence, communications and missile targeting systems. Since 2011, the US has obtained growing access to Australian military bases, not only for its Marines but its warships and planes. Admiral Harry Harris, head of US Pacific Command (PACOM), revealed this month that the most advanced American fighter jet, the F-22 Raptor, would start operating out of northern Australia next year. Nuclear-capable bombers already fly in and out of northern bases.

The integration and "interoperability" of Australian forces with the American counterparts extends to the embedding of Australian officers in PACOM headquarters in Hawaii. Harris pointedly paid tribute to the fact that Australian Major General Greg Bilton is deputy commander of US Army Pacific and Australian Navy Commodore Ian Middleton is a senior advisor for strategic planning and policy.

While Prime Minister Turnbull was critical of the "pivot" when it was announced, his government has continued to strengthen Australia's integration with the US military. After protracted haggling, Canberra reached an agreement with Washington in October to share the costs of upgrading Australian bases to bring US Marines in Darwin up to a full complement of 2,500 and to provide for US air force and naval deployments.

Last month Turnbull publicly endorsed Trump's plans for a vast expansion of the military, including the expansion of the US navy from 274 ships to 350 and their more extensive deployment in the Asia Pacific. "A stronger United States means a safer world," he declared, and berated Labor spokeswoman Wong for wanting "to move away from our most trusted, most enduring ally, move away [and] put our country at risk."

Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne has enthusiastically embraced Trump's plans for a military expansion as a possible boon for Australian military industries. Referring to Trump's criticism of Japan and South Korea for not paying enough toward US bases, he declared last month that "we are not strategic bludgers" and foreshadowed greater defence spending. The close integration of Australia and US is underscored by the decision of the huge American defence contractor, Lockheed

Martin, to establish a research lab at the University of Melbourne next year, the first of its kind outside the United States.

Sections of the Australian political establishment have responded to the uncertainty generated by Trump's election by calling for even closer ties with the US. Former Labor leader and ambassador to Washington Kim Beazley hit out at Keating's remarks, declaring he was "right off the beam." Beazley said Canberra had "to use the influence we have [in Washington] to try and mitigate the effect of policy changes" in the region, including Trump's trade war measures against China.

Peter Jennings, director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, advocated a doubling down of Australian military commitments to the US to send a signal to Trump that Canberra was fully on board. He called for more Australian troops to be dispatched to Iraq and suggested allowing the US navy to base an aircraft carrier in Western Australia. The remarks reflect the prevailing view in strategic policy circles that Canberra should remain firmly wedded to the US alliance as the means for prosecuting its own economic and strategic interests in Asia and internationally.

The debate highlights the increasingly precarious balancing act facing the Turnbull government, which has backed the "pivot" and the US military build-up in Asia, while attempting to avoid antagonising China and risking economic retaliation. It has so far not carried out a "freedom of navigation" operation—sending a warship into Chinese-claimed waters—despite pressure from Washington. Last week Turnbull also made clear that his government was not about to change its One China policy as Trump has threatened to do.

The debate in Australian ruling circles will only intensify after Trump is inaugurated as US president next month and proceeds to implement his aggressive agenda against China. The disputes in Canberra undoubtedly reflect discussions taking place in capitals throughout the region as each seeks to defend its economic and strategic interests. This in turn will only intensify geo-political rivalry in the Asia Pacific and heighten the dangers of trade war and military conflict.



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