

Former Australian ambassador calls for foreign policy turn toward China

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The character of the Trump administration—with its “America First” economic nationalism, flagrant contempt for international law, bellicose threats of unilateral military provocations and manifest political instability—is bringing to a head a longstanding foreign policy dilemma within the Australian ruling elite.

For decades, the US alliance has been at the centre of Australia's international relations. However, the steady decline in American global power and the rising danger of war, embodied in the Trump White House, have emboldened a layer of the establishment which argues that Australian imperialism should orient, instead, toward China, Australia's largest trading partner and the perceived “rising power” in the Asia-Pacific region.

Stephen FitzGerald, Australia's first ambassador to China, after diplomatic relations were established in 1973 by the Labor Party government of Gough Whitlam, is a long-standing representative of this faction.

Now 79 years old, FitzGerald can be described as the elder statesman among those former and serving politicians and diplomats, strategic analysts and business figures, who advocate an “independent” or “self-reliant” Australian foreign policy. Since Trump's victory, their views have been most prominently aired by former Labor Party prime minister Paul Keating; ex-Labor state premier and foreign minister Bob Carr; and Hugh White, an academic, political commentator and former defence department advisor (1985–2000). Last November, the Greens raised FitzGerald's positions in the Australian parliament, accompanied by calls for the “re-negotiation” of the US-Australia alliance.

Last week, on March 16, FitzGerald delivered a lengthy speech in which he laid out the calculations behind such calls, and the narrow self-interest of sections of the Australian financial and corporate elite that motivates them. He also set out how the faction of the ruling elite for which he speaks, and their political representatives, such as the Greens, intend to try to win public support by exploiting the Trump administration's reactionary agenda to cultivate nationalist sentiment.

In arguing for closer relations with China, FitzGerald declared they were necessary because “Trump's ascension has laid bare the danger of dependence, our unquestioned

involvement with America's foreign contests and wars, and the delusion that our interests and America's are the same, or that the US cares about ours.”

An alliance with Trump's America, he continued, “sullies our reputation, subverts any claim to a principled, moral or ethical example in world affairs, and makes it derisory for us to pretend to bear witness to values in dealing with other countries—like China.”

The Australian establishment, in other words, can no longer sell the US alliance to the working class—which it has done for over 60 years—as serving, in some way or another, the interests of “democracy,” “human rights,” “international law,” “peace” or “stability.”

Such propaganda was tested to breaking point during the Vietnam War and, again, in response to the lies over “weapons of mass destruction” and subsequent illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. Mass opposition to the Iraq War was channeled into illusions that Australian Labor, and the US Democrats under Obama, would repudiate the flagrant criminality of the Bush administration.

The experiences of the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments and of the Obama administration largely shattered such claims. With Trump, the “democratic mask” of American imperialism has well and truly been torn off.

FitzGerald, along with numerous other worried figures in Australia, has little confidence that the pro-US policies of the dominant factions of the political establishment could contain an eruption of anti-war sentiment against the Trump White House and American imperialism.

In this context, FitzGerald declared: “Australia must now rethink the orientation of foreign policy, and the focus we give to China, Asia and the US.” Since the late 2000s, he asserted, Asia had entered “what might be called the beginning of the Sinic [Chinese] era.”

FitzGerald identified this era as one of Chinese “soft power” establishing political and cultural influence across the region, including in Australia; the drift of South East Asian countries into China's geo-strategic orbit; and China's ambitions to establish a “new international architecture.” He particularly stressed the “One Belt One Road” project announced by Beijing in 2013, which, he declared, “would, in effect, reorder

and redirect the flow of trade, investment, finance, energy, communication and transport, including ports, roads and railways, between China and Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Central and South Asia and South East Asia and the Pacific.”

The economic and strategic interests of Australian capitalism, FitzGerald asserted, depended upon the degree to which China, as it rises to global dominance, makes an “accommodation” to the “principles and liberal ideas evolved within the existing international order and embodied particularly in the United Nations.”

In other words, according to FitzGerald, the interests of the Australian ruling elite are bound up with its ability to convince the Chinese regime to accept the historic influence of Australian imperialism in its own region of geo-strategic importance—the South Pacific, South East Asia and Antarctica—and to cease seeking to influence domestic Australian politics. Chinese “soft power,” which aims to buy influence over politicians and corporations, FitzGerald complained, “brings Australian and Chinese national interests, and values, into direct contention.”

FitzGerald’s proposals for a new foreign policy orientation reveal the impotence of the Australian ruling class in the face of the decline in the global dominance of the United States and the parallel transformation in world economics and politics. The answers he provided to the dilemma faced by Australian imperialism, arising from its historic ties and military interdependency with the US, on the one hand, and the growing weight of China, on the other, were an exercise in myopic self-delusion.

Australia, FitzGerald declared, must make its “highest priority” the development of ties with the Chinese regime of “such propinquity that we can be a frequently sought and heeded voice in Beijing.” It should offer “support, facilitation and participation” in the “One Belt One Road” project to “take advantage of the economic opportunities” and “help us get into a deeper relationship with China as a strategic partner.”

At the same time, FitzGerald continued, Australia must develop closer relations with “Japan, South Korea and India, and particularly South East Asia,” as a hedge against both Chinese influence and US counter-actions in the region. While he did not refer to it, advocates of a similar course of action, such as former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, have made clear this would require a massive expansion of Australian military spending and the armed forces, paid through “sacrifice” from the population in terms of living standards and social services.

FitzGerald asserted that an “elevated relationship with China need not and must not be at the expense of relations with the US.” He stated: “It’s been a long and valuable relationship and I agree with those who say we must try to stay close, using whatever political and diplomatic influence we can to try and head off damaging Trump outcomes.”

The US, FitzGerald suggested, would maintain an alliance,

even if Australia withdrew from the Middle East and refused to militarily cooperate in the containment of China. He opined that Washington would accept Canberra “untangling defence entanglements which have the potential to involve us in a US conflict, including the marine base in Darwin and the use of Pine Gap [one of the most critical US satellite and missile-targeting bases in the world] for purposes where Australian interests do not align with America’s.”

Given the history of US intrigue and interventions around the globe, and the weight of the substantial pro-US wing within the Australian political establishment, corporate elite and military-intelligence apparatus, such a prognosis is not only delusional. It serves to blind the working class to the character and enormity of the struggle that would be required to prevent Australia being used as a base for American military operations against China or other countries.

FitzGerald summed up his orientation with an appeal to “those many in business who see the issues” to “use their influence with Canberra.” He said the “many foreign policy specialists who have renewed calls for an independent or self-reliant foreign policy in recent months must organise to mobilise public opinion, press their case in Canberra and collaborate with business.”

FitzGerald’s conclusion establishes clearly the content of all the appeals being made for an “independent or self-reliant foreign policy.” This is the standpoint of a wing of the Australian ruling elite that hopes it can protect its wealth and imperialist interests from both international tensions and the working class at home by promoting nationalism, retreating into a Fortress Australia and desperately attempting to manoeuvre between the dominant powers. Meanwhile, world capitalism is descending into trade conflicts, as in the 1930s, and all humanity is being threatened with the danger of World War III between nuclear-armed rivals.

Growing numbers of Australian workers and youth are being politicised by these world processes and events. They must be won to the perspective of the unity of the international working class in a common fight for world socialism, rather than being diverted into calls for national “self-reliance” by the likes of FitzGerald and Keating, the Greens and the various pacifist and pseudo-left groupings that echo their reactionary and nationalist views.



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