

## **A CHANGING REGION: IS AUSTRALIA PREPARED?**

by

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During the recent election campaign foreign policy received almost no attention, either from the two major political parties, or from the mainstream media ostensibly there to inform us of important events that might impinge on our national interests.

This is partly because there is a remarkable degree of consensus between Labor and the Coalition, with the only significant dissenting voice coming from Richard di Natale of the Greens. His call for a rethink of our foreign and defence policies was largely ignored. The Murdoch press dismissed his arguments as unrealistic without ever conceding that di Natale was raising issues that deserved serious debate.

The Labor-Coalition consensus rests upon several common points, foremost among them being that the US alliance is the cornerstone of Australia's security. This has been long sustained, notwithstanding the lack of any actual evidence upon which it could be based.

The US has embroiled Australia in a series of wars, including Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria where it is impossible to point to any actual vital Australian interest being at stake. It is similarly impossible to point to Australia as being in a more parlous position if instead of joining these (largely illegal) wars of aggression we had simply declined.

The largely unspoken but tacitly accepted premise seems to have been that these involvements were a form of insurance premium payments so that if a real emergency did arise affecting Australia's national security interests, our "great and powerful friend" would come to our assistance.

These tenets of what can only be described as blind faith have had two consequences of particular importance.

The first is that our foreign policy stances have blinded us to an emerging reality about the United States. It is that the US's dominant role as the world's sole military hegemon over the past forty years has been rapidly dissipating.

No less an authority than Zbigniew Brzezinski National Security Adviser to President Jimmy Carter 1976-1981 and the instigator of a vast array of hegemonic and imperialistic ventures, most with disastrous consequences, has been having second thoughts.

In a little noted but important article in *The American Interest* (1) Brzezinski acknowledges the limits of America's ability to project power without constraint. The resolution of a wide theatre of world problems is going to require

cooperation with other power centres that he identifies as Europe, Russia and China.

He further acknowledges that violent upheaval is in most cases a direct consequence of earlier western colonial interventions that led to the devastation of native populations, civil disorder, the imposition of artificial national boundaries, and considerable resentment directed against foreign invaders and occupiers.

That he seriously understates the devastation is undeniable. That he fails to acknowledge the direct role of the United States in the violence inflicted on a large number of countries, as William Blum (2) has documented, is also undeniable.

Coups, color revolutions, assassinations and other forms of regime change have long been a favoured instrument of foreign policy.

Brzezinski's suggested solution is a greater measure of cooperation between the US and Europe on the one hand, and the emerging counter poles to US hegemony, Russia and China, on the other hand.

Brzezinski's warning about the limits of US power is a timely one, and needs to be contrasted for example, with the speeches of US Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, whose mindset is firmly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with her constant references to US exceptionalism and indispensable nature.

It is clearly a mindset that resonates with Australia's political leaders as they seem singularly incapable of grasping the nature of the changes our region is experiencing.

One could interpret Brzezinski's article as a warning to the neocon power centres that dominate US strategic thinking that their crude ambitions for full spectrum dominance are simply not possible.

Brzezinski understates the limits to the US's ability to project power abroad, but he also fails to acknowledge at least three fundamental reasons why those constraints exist.

The first is that the US is damaged internally, perhaps beyond repair, at least in the medium term. That damage, as Dimity Orlov points out in another very important article (3) is largely self-inflicted. He cites endless useless wars, the limitless corruption of money politics, toxic culture and gender wars, imperial hubris and wilful ignorance as the underlying causes. None of these are immediately remediable.

Orlov further notes political dysfunction, runaway debt (\$20 trillion and counting) decaying infrastructure and spreading civil unrest as undermining the US's capacity to sustain the policies of the past several decades.

A second factor is that Russian and Chinese military technology is demonstrably superior to that of the US. This will come as a shock to most Australians who live in a bubble as far as knowledge of non-American military technology is concerned.

Russian and Chinese superiority extends both to defensive systems (the S500 which is Russian) and offensive systems. Here the Kalibr and Sarmat (both Russian) missile systems, and the hypersonic ICBM and cruise missiles of the Dong Feng systems (Chinese) are superior to anything that the west has.

A third factor is that both Russia and China are pursuing fundamentally different foreign policy priorities to those of the West. Australians are blinded by insistent propaganda about Russian “aggression” and Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea and elsewhere to the degree that they are incapable of appreciating the world as it really is.

Paul Dibb’s recent paper for the Strategic Policy Institute (4) is a classic illustration of the former, and the Briefing Book prepared by the Parliamentary Library for incoming members of the House of Representatives and the Senate is an example of the latter. (5)

That such ignorant analysis should form the basis of our foreign policy is alarming.

The reality is very different. The One Belt, One Road initiatives alone are going to transform our world in ways unimaginable to most Australians, fed as they are on a constant diet of misinformation.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the significance of a gold backed Yuan supplanting the dollar in international trade, Russian-Japanese rapprochement, ASEAN deciding to avoid US inspired confrontation with China over the South China Sea and much else, are developments denied to Australian consciousness.

In his earlier book, *The Grand Chessboard*, (6) Brzezinski noted the centrality of Eurasia to the future. In this he echoed Halford Mackinder’s seminal speech to the Royal Society of England in 1904. Then, for Brzezinski, the imperative was for the US to “*prevent collusion and maintain dependence among the vassals.*”

Brzezinski has moved on, recognizing a changing world. Australia however seems intent on remaining one of the “vassals.” That is not a sustainable foreign policy, and certainly not one in Australia’s interests. It is a progression of thinking that our political leaders seem incapable of grasping.

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## References

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6. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, Basic Books, 1998