

Has Australia gone soft

on Communist China?

Paul Dibb

The Howard government seems to be going soft on Communist China. Consider the following events:

- In August last year, the Foreign Minister cast doubt over whether the ANZUS Treaty, which he described as ‘symbolic’, would automatically apply in the event of war between China and the US over Taiwan. Mr Downer is right, of course, by implying it would depend on the circumstances at the time. But, make no mistake about it, Washington would be most likely to invoke the treaty if China attacks US forces in the Taiwan Straits. We would simply not be able to stand aloof. To do so would irreparably damage the alliance.
- In Washington this July, the Prime Minister asserted that he does not believe ‘there is anything inevitable about escalating strategic competition between China and the United States’. Maybe, but world history tells us otherwise: rising powers have generally come into conflict with established powers. Why should China and the US be any different, particularly given their vastly different cultures and political values?
- In June this year, on a visit to China, our Defence Minister stated that he saw China’s expanding military expenditure as a process of modernisation, not destabilisation. Try telling that to Taiwan, or to the citizens of Japan and the United States who are targeted by Chinese nuclear warheads. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld contradicts Hill when he says ‘Beijing’s military spending threatens the delicate security balance in Asia’.
- Then we had the vacillation (to put it politely) over whether to give recent Chinese defectors asylum. In the Cold War, we would have given our eye-teeth for a defector—any defector—from the Soviet Embassy.

What is the reason for all this ducking and weaving by the Howard Government, which after all has such impeccable conservative political credentials domestically? The answer seems to be the critical rise in importance of China to our economy. The Government now talks about a ‘strategic economic relationship’ with China. China has overtaken the US as our largest source of imports and it now ranks only behind Japan as an export market. It is just a matter of time before China becomes our largest trade partner. China already

has a substantial impact on our export income and low-cost imports into our economy. It is not much of an exaggeration to argue that the tax cuts Australians have recently enjoyed were helped by the booming impact of our trade with China.

What is inevitable is China’s rise to power in the Asia-Pacific region and the consequences this will have for the regional balance of power. It is not necessary to portray China as an expansionist or aggressive power to understand that it will become *the* predominant influence in our region in the foreseeable future. Canberra must realise that its role is not to mediate between Beijing and Washington, but rather to help ensure that China’s rise is indeed peaceful and that the United States maintains its pre-eminence in Asia. Australia relies on a balance of power in Asia in which America continues to hold the balance, and plays the leading role. An Asia without America, and one in which China holds the balance of power, would be a potentially dangerous place for Australia.

Already, Beijing is carving out a sphere of influence for itself in Northeast Asia—where it is seeking to cower Japan and detach South Korea from its alliance with the US; in Southeast Asia—where it has skilfully used the idea of an East Asia Summit to change the regional order dominated by the US; and in the South Pacific—where Chinese diplomats, businessmen and criminal money are making worrying inroads in our immediate neighbourhood.

The nature of the Chinese regime

We would do well to remember that, despite its adoption of the capitalist road to business, the leadership in Beijing is illegitimate. A small clique in the Communist Party of China continues to repress any challenges to their monopoly on political power. Freedom of speech, the right to demonstrate or the ability to criticise the government remain heavily circumscribed in today’s China.

Senator Hill says: ‘We accept that it is perfectly legitimate that China modernise its defence force...they are entitled to do so, in the same way as anyone else is entitled’. But China is not anyone else: it is an authoritarian regime and no amount of diplomatic obfuscation will paper over that unpalatable fact.

China, like all communist countries, lies about what it spends on defence. Its published figures do not include expenditure on military acquisitions, subsidies to defence industry, military sales, space and other covert programs, and research and development. The best estimate is that China currently spends more than \$US56 billion on defence. That makes it the largest defence spender in our region and the third largest in the world, after the US and Russia. China has by far the largest armed forces in the world with 2.25 million regular troops and some 800,000 reserves.

The Pentagon's recent report to Congress *Military Power of the PRC 2005* warns: 'China is specifically building military capabilities to counter third-party, including potential US, intervention in cross-Strait crises'. China deploys over 650 short-range ballistic missiles opposite Taiwan and it is developing a submarine capability that would strengthen its hand in imposing a blockade on Taiwan, and countering intervention by US aircraft carriers. The Pentagon states that if current trends persist 'PLA capabilities could pose a credible threat to other modern militaries operating in the region'. No prizes for guessing whom!

The US National Intelligence Council has assessed that China will continue to strengthen its military by acquiring advanced fighter aircraft, sophisticated submarines, and increasing numbers of ballistic missiles. It predicts that China will become the second largest defence spender in the world after the US over the next two decades 'and will be, by any measure, a first rate military power'. If that doesn't concentrate our minds what will?

Australia's geopolitical interests

This brings me to the question of where our geopolitical interests really lie. China has already eclipsed Japan to become the most important country in Asia. It is a matter of serious concern that Beijing is currently taking such a belligerent attitude towards Japan. That can only raise tensions in Northeast Asia and put regional security at risk. As important as Australia's relations are with China, our relationship with democratic Japan is much more important. As John Howard has said 'Australia has no greater friend in Asia than Japan'. We had better remember that.

The Asia-Pacific region, despite increasing economic prosperity, is likely to pose major challenges to our security interests in the coming decade. And none is more important than the rise of an undemocratic China. Economic success has given China an advantage over earlier forms of dictatorship, such as the USSR. But countries such as ours, which care about freedom and openness, should not succumb to the temptation of believing that we are better off with a China without politics, without organised dissent, or without such troublesome things as opposition parties or a free press. Do we really want to have a 'strategic partnership' with that kind of country? We must not allow our realist stance toward the undoubted importance of the China market to undermine our upholding of democratic values and freedom.

Hopefully, China's rise will indeed be peaceful. But history suggests otherwise. Prudent defence planners need to be alert to the risk that Beijing's growing economic and

military influence may come to be applied less benignly in our region.

The Government's 2003 *Defence Update* asserted that there was 'a reduction in major power tensions' and an increased focus 'of the major powers on co-operating to advance shared interests'. Try telling that to Tokyo right now about China. The same official Defence document acknowledges that China's economic rise will 'pose challenges for some countries' over the next decade, but it asserts that the consequences for regional stability could be greater if growth in China stalled or there was social breakdown. It is true that domestic turmoil in China or, even worse, disintegration could have serious implications for regional stability. But the emergence of a strong, confident China seeking its place in the sun, and increasingly inclined to challenge US supremacy, would be a much more serious strategic issue for Australia.

The Australian Government cannot afford to be so completely preoccupied with the war on terrorism (as fearful as that is) that we take our eye off the geopolitical ball of a rising China. That would indeed be a serious failure of strategic policy.

As the Defence White Paper, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, argues: 'We would want to avoid the emergence in the Asia-Pacific region of a security environment dominated by any powers whose strategic interests might be inimical to Australia's'. But, as my ANU colleague Hugh White argues, Australia, by its support for China's growing regional influence, is promoting a profound transformation in the strategic architecture of Asia, with immense implications for Australia's security.

The question is, does the Howard Government understand just where it is headed with China, or are short-term economic benefits taking precedence over strategic imperatives? The Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, argues that we need a 'realistic' policy towards China, not one that focuses 'relentlessly, intensively and disproportionately on those matters where our experience and perspectives differ'. The Prime Minister too talks about building on the things we have in common, and not becoming 'obsessed with the things that make us different'. Again as Professor White points out, for John Howard values and power can apparently be treated separately: but shouldn't we be of the view that China's values undermine its claims to regional power? That is certainly the view of our US ally, and arguably it should be our stance too.

In the long term, Australia will face a fundamental challenge managing relations with China and the U.S. that are equally good. On the surface, Beijing's approach to building up a 'strategic economic relationship' with Australia seems primarily to be about providing secure and stable energy and resources supplies for China. But the subterranean agenda may be that Beijing requires Canberra to have more of a 'realistic' approach to the changing geopolitical map of Asia, and the inevitable rise of China to power.

The real test of this would be if there were a military conflict between the US and China over Taiwan. What we are talking about here is in many ways the worst possible

nightmare for Australia. Let's be clear: our involvement in a war against China would have much more serious consequences for our national interests than the recent war in Iraq, or even a future conflict on the Korean Peninsula. As I have already argued, if we refused to aid America in the face of unprovoked Chinese aggression the damage to the ANZUS Treaty could be severe, and just possibly terminal.

These then are some of the strategic implications that Australia needs to face squarely in managing our national security response to China's rise to power. None of them, except for Taiwan, involves Australia being in direct confrontation with China. But by actively supporting the

growing influence of China in our region, and acquiescing to the emergence of a new security architecture dominated by China in the East Asia Summit, our security interests risk being undermined. The Government should cease appearing to foster a complacent attitude towards Communist China. ♦

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Conference Calendar

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Facing Complexity: New Dimensions in Strategy and Warfighting in the 21st Century
22-23 September 2005
National Convention Centre, Canberra
(02) 6265-9828 or www.defence.gov.au/army/lwsc
- **DSTO Land Warfare Conference 2005**
Warfighting in the 21st Century: New Threats, New Technologies, New Solutions
04-07 October 2005
Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre
(08) 8259-5873 or www.dsto.defence.gov.au/corporate/conferences/landwarfare
- **Chief of Army History Conference 2005**
Entangling Alliances: Coalition Warfare in the Twentieth Century
13-14 October 2005
National Convention Centre, Canberra
(02) 6266-4248 or emma.robertson@defence.gov.au
- **Kokoda Foundation International Conference**
Next-Generation Threats to Australia
25-26 October 2005,
National Convention Centre, Canberra
(02) 6230-5565 or manager@kokodafoundation.org
- **Australian Defence Magazine Defence Skilling Summit 2005**
25-26 October 2005
Stamford Plaza Hotel, Adelaide
(02) 9080-4307 or www.informa.com.au/defence/skills
- **Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers 14th Annual Conference**
Intelligence: Truth and Accountability
03-04 November 2005
Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney
www.aipio.asn.au/
- **Royal Australian Navy Seapower Conference 2006**
Challenges Old and New
31 January – 02 February 2006
Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour
(02) 6127-6514 or www.seapower2006.com