

The Partnership: The Inside Story of the US-Australian Alliance Under Bush and Howard

Greg Sheridan

Reviewed by Michael O'Connor

Greg Sheridan has been foreign editor of *The Australian* since 1992 and his expertise covers not just the alliance but also Australia's relations with Asia. His writing for the paper is normally well-informed and forthright. Sheridan is also a member of the Australian-American Leadership Dialogue which brings together leading individuals from both countries in the fields of government, business and academia. He has held visiting fellowships at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies and Canberra's Land Warfare Studies Centre.

As the sub-title explains, this valuable book seeks to present a comprehensive view of the Australian-American alliance from its beginnings to the present day. While the book treats the early history of the alliance in a generally introductory fashion, the focus is very much on the way in which it has developed under the stresses of the Iraq conflict and under the leadership of John Howard and George W. Bush. Sheridan believes strongly that Australians know little about an alliance that is indispensable to Australia's security and that the resources for students are seriously deficient.

Sheridan's familiarity with the leading players in the US and Australia has led many of his sources to be unusually frank in their interviews. This is particularly true for the Australians whose obsessive secrecy is all too familiar. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer is one whose standing in Sheridan's eyes could hardly be higher. It is worth noting that this is in sharp contrast to the usual political view of Downer as a figure of fun.

The book contains three chapters based upon the experience of three senior ADF officers who have commanded US forces in Iraq. Sheridan regards this as something unique (which it is) but this could have been placed in the context of the traditional American refusal to allow its personnel to serve under any foreign commander.

Sheridan's argument is that the US-Australian relationship is now closer than it has ever been and that this is a product of several factors that are somewhat unique to today's circumstances. One is the close personal relationship between Bush and Howard that has developed in the war on terrorism. Another is the exceptional professionalism and performance of the ADF units committed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Although these have been small (too much so because of our sustained under-investment in the ADF), they have been especially effective in a number of engagements, including some where US units were in some danger.

So substantial is the regard the Americans have for the ADF that key Australians have been well-placed to impose tactical limits upon some American recklessness.

Sheridan also points to a number of very influential people in the American government who have a strong commitment to the alliance. In this context and others, notably the relationship with Japan and Indonesia, personalities are important and good interpersonal relationships at the top understandably filter down to the working levels.

The book is not just about the defence aspects of the alliance. Sheridan looks at the trade factor and details why Australia was not able to get all it wanted from the free trade negotiations. He notes elsewhere the importance of, and the historical background to, the Australia-US-UK connection and its growing significance to peacemaking efforts around the world. Sheridan is generally dismissive of the United Nations, seeing it as wholly ineffective in its core peacemaking task.

For Sheridan, the alliance between the US and Australia is of fundamental importance to Australia's standing in Asia and, as a development of this, he sees the emergence of a US-Japan-Australia strategic relationship as important for all three countries.

Given the inevitable question of the impact of the alliance on relations with China, the issue is canvassed but without any substantial conclusion. Sheridan is emphatic that China cannot replace the US, either economically or strategically. He believes that Australia has exercised some moderating influence on the US but he is critical of what he sees as an Australian tendency to obsequiousness toward the Beijing regime.

Inevitably, there are some inaccuracies that will jar on the professional reader but these are insignificant. More significantly, Sheridan notes in Chapter 2 that when Australia invoked the ANZUS Treaty after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, this was done under the provisions of Article IV which refers to armed attacks in the Pacific Area and he considers this to be wrong. Later in the book, he realises that Article V extends the application of Article IV to the whole metropolitan territory of the parties. In fact, one might wonder why the treaty had to be formally invoked; it makes no provision for invocation in the circumstances of an armed attack which is its sole justification for action.

It is difficult in a short review to do justice to this book. It is an important and valuable work directed towards a general but informed lay readership. That is a proper target because for too long the Australian community has had to be content with superficial platitudes or esoteric academic tomes. The book has a reasonable index but is mercifully free from even a single footnote. It is eminently readable and informative. ♦

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