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Without America and Without a Plan

book - review

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No country has benefited economically more than Australia from China's recent, historically unprecedented growth and development. Yet few countries are more worried about the possible strategic implications of China's rise. Australia's dilemma highlights a widespread conundrum facing policymakers throughout the Indo-Pacific and beyond: is China's re-emergence as a great power more of a threat than an opportunity?

"Great and Powerful Friends"

Australia's case is made more complicated by its history and location. Asian readers may be incredulous to learn that Australian policymakers have always viewed their geographic position as more of a liability than an asset. Australia has habitually looked to what former Prime Minister Bob Menzies called "great and powerful friends" to underwrite its security in a part of the world that has generally been poorly understood and seen as potentially threatening.

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Consequently, Australia's leaders have relied on Britain and—since World War II—the United States to come to their aid if danger threatens. The demise of the British Empire and the recent costs of supporting American adventurism in Iraq and elsewhere ought to have raised questions about the viability of this policy. Remarkably enough, however, as the government's recently published [foreign policy white paper](#) reveals, even the advent of an unpredictable American administration led by Donald Trump has not shaken the faith of Australia's strategic elites in the efficacy of its alliance with the U.S.

This is the background for Hugh White's latest contribution to what is generally an impoverished debate in Australia. In addition to assessing the impact of the rise of Trump and its implications for relations with China, White's important essay, *Without America: Australia in the New Asia*, considers the once-unthinkable: the idea that the U.S. can no longer be relied upon as the ultimate guarantor of Australian security. Even more provocatively—and rightly, in my view—White ponders the heretical possibility that the “old U.S.-led order is passing, and a new China-led order is taking its place.” To say such views will prove unpalatable in Canberra would be putting it very mildly.

An Asia Without America

White has rapidly developed a reputation as something of an iconoclast and an original thinker in a field and country generally not known for either. His earlier, influential book-length analysis (*The China Choice*) of the implications of China's rise for American grand strategy has been widely discussed—not least in China. The new essay ought to be similarly debated extensively in Australia, too. It is all too likely, however, that White's conclusions will have little influence on Australian policy, despite their timeliness and importance.

Much of White's latest essay is devoted to a thoughtful analysis of why the U.S. may no longer be wedded to the idea of trying to maintain strategic primacy in the region, and what this might mean for friend and putative foe alike. White's message for Canberra is not a happy one:

“To say that America must stay in Asia to support its alliances puts the cart before the horse: the alliances are only there to support America's position in Asia. If America doesn't need to maintain that position, then it doesn't need the alliances.”

“We are, most probably, soon going to find ourselves in an Asia dominated by China, where America plays little or no strategic role at all.”

White's observations are unlikely to win friends and influence people in Australia's rather small, clubby, Canberra-centric security establishment. White is fundamentally a realist, and comes to strikingly different conclusions from most strategic analysts in Australia. The direction of geopolitical travel is, White argues, unambiguously clear: “We are, most

probably, soon going to find ourselves in an Asia dominated by China, where America plays little or no strategic role at all.”

The “we” in this case is the Australian population, but it could well be the rest of Asia, too, of course. Some observers are convinced that the so-called “[Thucydides trap](#)” and the apparent dynamics of hegemonic transition have dramatically increased the prospects of war between a relatively declining America and an unambiguously ascending China. White’s analysis offers some comfort in this context: the U.S. is unlikely to fight a potentially catastrophic war that is not absolutely vital to its own national interests, especially as defined by the current regime in Washington.

Fight for the Status Quo?

White’s earlier suggestion in *The China Choice* that the creation of a regional concert of powers, including China, might be one way of accommodating its seemingly unstoppable rise is unlikely to be taken up in Canberra or, more consequentially, Washington. Indeed, the growing interest in developing a “[quadrilateral](#)” [security relationship](#) that includes Australia, the U.S., Japan, and India, but which conspicuously excludes China, highlights the persistent influence of entrenched views.

Australia’s policymaking elites—and their counterparts throughout the region, for that matter—may not be comfortable about the strategic implications of China’s rise, but they will have to get used to dealing with them. There are grounds for concern, to be sure: China’s behavior is often more alarming than charming these days as it pursues its increasingly ambitious strategic agenda. But attempts to “contain” China look destined to fail. Indeed, such policies risk being put to the ultimate test: is it worth actually fighting to maintain the status quo?

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White thinks it’s a test that the U.S. will ultimately flunk, especially under the leadership of Trump, his bellicose bluster notwithstanding. Australia has enormous sunk costs in its strategic relationship with the U.S., but this is no reason to double down on what may be an untenable position. If this administration or the next decides that maintaining a costly, open-ended strategic commitment to allies in the Indo-Pacific is no longer in America’s vital national interest, there is not much Australia can do about it.

Encouraging China to be a Good International Citizen

The one thing that Australian and regional policymakers can do is to [prepare for a very different regional future](#), no matter how unpalatable or unthinkable it may be. Encouraging China to be a good international citizen might be the best the region’s less powerful states can hope for in the absence of a credible strategic deterrent.

Creating effective multilateral institutions is one way of doing this. Such

institutions have already helped to transform China from a destabilizing source of revolutionary ideology to a key source of regional market-oriented growth in the space of a few decades. So-called middle powers like Australia could, in partnership with similarly placed states such as Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea, coordinate their actions to try and influence the nature of China's future role in the region.

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Whether such normative and discursive efforts will prove sufficient to curb China's ambitions, which are fuelled by a growing chorus of nationalist self-assertion, is a moot point. What is clear, if White's thesis is correct, is that Australia and other regional powers will have to rely on their own efforts, with no guarantee that the U.S. will underwrite their security. Such a scenario may prove too much to contemplate for many of Australia's strategic thinkers, despite their supposedly realist world views. It may take more than White's lucid arguments to challenge a conventional wisdom that looks well past its use-by date.

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