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## The China Syndrome

by Ted Galen Carpenter

03.23.2010

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Australians are increasingly uneasy about both China and the United States, although for very different reasons. That dual uneasiness is creating an incentive for Canberra to hedge its bets and become, ever so quietly, more independent regarding security issues and capabilities. That is a development Washington should encourage rather than discourage.

China's voracious appetite for industrial commodities makes that country a crucial trading partner for Australia. Chinese demand for those commodities has been a major reason why the Australian economy has fared far better than most during the current global recession. Understandably, Canberra wants to remain on good terms with Beijing.

At the same time, officials are not entirely convinced that China's proclaimed "peaceful rise" will be all that peaceful and benign. Beijing's unexpected arrest of top executives of Rio Tinto, the huge mining firm, shook both government and business leaders. The incident demonstrated that China was willing to play hardball, if not engage in outright bullying behavior, even toward a valued trading partner. China's rapid military modernization reinforces Australia's uncertainty about what kind of regional power—and neighbor—the colossus to the north will turn out to be.

Canberra's uneasiness about future U.S. policy is for the opposite reason. Members of the country's political and policy elite have been quite content with America's hegemonic role in the western Pacific and East Asia since the end of World War II. But during my recent meetings in Canberra, it became apparent that many of them were worried that Washington would be unwilling—or more likely, unable—to continue such a dominant posture in the future. A parade of American dignitaries and policy experts over the past few years telling them that everything was fine and that U.S. benevolent hegemony would go on forever and ever left them unconvinced.

I sought to give them a more sobering assessment, noting that the United States filled an extraordinary power vacuum in the region after World War II, and that it was unrealistic to expect such a role to continue in a vastly different era. When America achieved its dominance, Japan had been crushed, a weak China was in the throes of civil war, and the rest of the region consisted of small powers (like Thailand and Australia) and decaying European colonial empires. The

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situation today bears no resemblance to that environment. Japan and China are both major powers, and East Asia boasts several other rising political and economic players. It is naïve to assume that Washington can continue dominating the region from thousands of miles away under such circumstances.

That would be true even if the United States had the same vast economic and financial edge that it enjoyed during the first few decades after World War II. But a nation whose national government is awash in red ink and has to borrow hundreds of billions of dollars a year from some of those rising East Asian powers is clearly going to come under growing pressure to prune some of its security commitments. The only questions are how soon and how deep those adjustments will be.

Australian policy makers and opinion leaders seemed to be reaching similar conclusions on their own. What was so striking was the general lack of surprise about what I was telling them. A sign of the country's growing realism about the probable future limits of Washington's security role in their part of the world was evident in the White Paper the defense ministry produced last year. Several of its provisions envision a more robust—and independent—military capability, rather than always counting on the United States to take care of Australia's security needs.

U.S. political leaders should both welcome and encourage such realism. We do Australia and other allies no favors by pretending that nothing has changed, and that America's military role in the western Pacific and East Asia will never diminish. Such false assurances merely encourage the perpetuation of an unhealthy security dependency and an underinvestment in defense. It is no longer 1945, and American visitors to the region should stop pretending that it is.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (2008). He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.

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