

Inquirer

Australia is seen as essential to US military strategy

GREG SHERIDAN foreign editor

1,580 mots

23 janvier 2016

The Australian

AUSTRALN

Australian

13

Anglais

© 2016 News Limited. All rights reserved.

Malcolm Turnbull's visit underscored our critical role in times of conflict

It's just about as definitive as you can get — Australia is increasingly critical to US military strategy in Asia, plays an increasingly important role across the Indo-Pacific region, is vital both for its maritime military capabilities and its ability to host US forces, especially northern Australia as a possible sanctuary for US forces in a time of conflict, and the US will increasingly rely on Australia.

And while there was initially some concern in Washington about Malcolm Turnbull's views on China, his steady and consistent statements have reassured the Americans. These conclusions arise in a seminal study commissioned by the Pentagon of US President Barack Obama's pivot towards Asia, which was presented this week in Washington. The study was carried out by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, the leading US think tank that the Prime Minister chose as the venue for his key strategic address.

In funding the Pentagon, congress mandated an independent review of the rebalance, and this is it. It is the best guide to US policy in Asia. Because it is independent of government, it is astonishingly frank. Overall, it makes depressing reading. It concludes the Obama White House has been incoherent and inattentive in pursuing the Asia rebalance. Defence budget cuts have hurt badly and will hurt more. The Pentagon, especially the Pacific Command, have implemented the rebalance as far as they can. The promise to stage 60 per cent of the US Navy in the Asia Pacific has been almost achieved.

But the report says, devastatingly, the Obama administration has failed to produce any coherent or consistent strategic policy framework. Lacking an official Asia policy document, the administration, according to the report, has constantly shifted the rhetoric about both its ambitions and its purposes, leading to confusion and doubt.

Meanwhile the strategic situation has deteriorated. Chinese military strategy has become more aggressive, its coercive actions have accelerated and it has shown a dangerous willingness to take risks. In a bleak passage, the report says: "at the current rate of US capability development, the balance of military power in the region is shifting against the US".

The report makes plenty of recommendations to change this (it will change under a new president), but meanwhile US allies are more important than ever. The substantial consideration of Australia is perhaps the best insight yet offered to the layperson into the sense of Australia in the official

Washington mind.

The report usefully lacks the tone of routine flattery that accompanies so many Pentagon statements about the alliance. It says: “From a US perspective, Australia has served critical military roles in recent years. First, Australian forces have served alongside US forces in the Middle East. Second, Australia plays an increasingly important role within the Indo-Pacific region, particularly helping to address maritime challenges.” Defence planners must prepare for worst-case scenarios. Here is one: “Finally, Australia could serve as a sanctuary for US forces in the event of conflict, one that is distant enough from most conflict zones to protect US assets, but still close enough to allow rapid deployments to critical theatres. Although Australia’s contributions in the Middle East have been critical to US efforts there, Canberra’s assistance is increasingly required in the Asia-Pacific region.” This would be a reprise of Australia’s role after the evacuation of General Douglas MacArthur from The Philippines during World War II. Of course, it should never come to that. To make sure, the report calls for Canberra, not just Washington, to do more: “To help the United States operate effectively in a crisis, Canberra will have to work with Washington to expand the capacity of northern Australian bases, including its network of bare bases.” The report highlights two of the key strategic contributions Australia makes to the US alliance: “maritime assets and diversification of US posture”.

These words simply mean spreading the US military footprint across more places in the region, further away from China, so they are less susceptible to a sudden, perhaps pre-emptive, strike. The report comments: “As Australia’s own influence expands and (its) geopolitical position becomes more central to US strategy, Washington’s expectations of Canberra are growing.” There is a balanced and sensible discussion of Australia’s strategic outlook, noting that among our top national security concerns are relations with China, Indonesia, terrorism, and the South Pacific’s stability and fragility. The report comments: “China is Australia’s top trading partner and resources market, but Beijing’s coercive activities are a major concern to Australian policymakers, as they are in Washington. Many Australian policymakers hold similar views on China to their US counterparts, worrying about how to shape China’s behaviour so that Beijing’s activities support rather than undermine international rules and norms.” There are of course plenty of nuances within the strategic communities in both the US and Australia, and a few outliers in both countries, but the strategic communities in both inhabit almost identical shares of the dove/hawk, complacent/concerned bell-shaped curve of attitudes about China.

The Australian business community, the report notes, tends to be less concerned and more sanguine about China. Then comes a fascinating passage on Turnbull, worth quoting at some length: “There has been speculation that Malcolm Turnbull — who had close business ties with China before entering politics — might align more closely with the views of Australia’s business community, seeking to manage the US-Australia alliance without damaging relations with China. It is still early, but Turnbull’s public comments suggest a continuing commitment to uphold international rules and norms, including in the South China Sea, even at the price of some friction in Australia’s relations with China.” It is true that half a decade and more ago, Turnbull had some unrealistically rosy views about China, and downplayed the potential dangers of its sometimes aggressive behaviour. But at least for the last several years his public comments have reflected a far more nuanced, balanced and sober assessment, alive to all the wonderful possibilities China’s rise presents, appreciative of the great wealth it has generated for its citizens and ours, but also seriously troubled by its actions in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

So much Australian commentary this week has tried to shoehorn his present position into a position he expressed half a decade ago. It suggests he is incapable of having his views evolve and that everything he has said since becoming Prime Minister either involves mouthing someone else’s formulations or saying things he doesn’t believe for purely political purposes. There is no evidence at all that this is the case.

It is true that Turnbull was concerned to have the optics of this week be as favourable as possible. Of course. This is not only good politics but good strategic policy, for the visit to Washington of an Australian prime minister involves a series of immensely important strategic communications. Turnbull not only reinforced in full amplitude the central importance of the US alliance to Australia, he also, inter alia, called on China to behave itself in the South China Sea and supported The Philippines taking the Chinese to an international court — a move Beijing fiercely condemns — over the territorial disputes.

He also continued the practice of taking the alliance into new areas. He announced the founding of a 1.5 track dialogue (involving officials and independent analysts) between the US and Australia on cyber security, to be conducted by CSIS, which wrote this report, and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

This will lead in time to joint exercises responding to simulated cyber attacks. It is fair to say that cyber security figured in many of Turnbull's meetings: with Obama, with Defence Secretary Ash Carter, with the US intelligence chiefs, and at a special cyber security roundtable.

Australian defence officials, including Defence Minister Marise Payne, put a lot of pre-trip effort into making sure the Americans didn't say anything surprising or difficult about Australia's replacement submarines, the idea that we should deploy more forces in the fight against Islamic State and the faintly ridiculous dispute the two governments are having over who should pay for the air base upgrades and extra and facilities needed to accommodate the marine rotations in the Northern Territory.

And it was somewhat disappointing that this foolish dispute has not been sorted out. It reflects poorly on both sides and suggests the political leadership of both nations should take more ownership of the process. The subs were discussed with Turnbull on the Hawaii leg of his trip. And the northern bases issue was mentioned briefly in at least one Washington meeting. The sense was that the enhanced forces co-operation should go full steam ahead and officials on both sides should work out the costs issue expeditiously.

Turnbull has had a productive, important time in Washington. It was not a revolutionary visit, but rather sober and substantial. The next big moment of truth for him on national security comes with the funding announcements accompanying the forthcoming defence white paper. As Obama's feeble implementation of the US rebalance suggests, and as this CSIS report attests, this will be immensely important, and key people in Washington, Beijing and beyond will be watching it with intense interest.

Document AUSTLN0020160122ec1n0003h