

Australia's recent white paper on foreign policy highlights how the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region is shifting away from the US.

The US has ruled the waves with its large and powerful navy, but China increasingly insists that much of the South China Sea and the islands it has built are its sovereign territory. It has set up military facilities and structures to forewarn all against challenging this new regional order.

This is happening as US power is waning internationally, which has been further compounded by the confusion and uncertainty under US President Donald Trump, whose rhetoric on China during the presidential election foresaw tense times ahead.

However, as president, Trump has toned down his rhetoric on China — one reason being the need for China's help in persuading North Korea's dictator, Kim Jung-un, to abandon his nuclear weapons.

The shifting power balance is causing serious concern in Australia, which has depended on the US security umbrella since World War II.

This concern is stated bluntly in the white paper, which says: "Navigating the decade ahead will be hard because as China's power grows, our region is changing in ways without precedent in Australia's modern history."

One Australian commentator said: "Australia is a country worried about a future under a mighty and demanding China and afraid American leadership has already checked out."

At its worst, Hugh White, a defense analyst writing in *Quarterly Essay*, an Australian journal, said: "How the contest [between the US and China] will proceed — whether peacefully or violently, quickly or slowly — is still uncertain, but the most likely outcome is now becoming clear. America will lose, and China will win. America will cease to play a major strategic role in Asia, and China will take its place as the dominant power."

What are Australia's choices? According to Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, in his introduction to the white paper, "Australia must be sovereign not reliant."

How do you do that when, as Turnbull said recently, the US and Australia are joined at the hip in their security partnership?

Catherine McGregor gave one way in her column in the Sydney Morning Herald: "It might be time to consider theatre missile defense and even nuclear missiles for our submarine fleet. The regional balance is shifting rapidly."

However, that takes time and resources.

Another way is to create a counterbalancing regional group of like-minded nations.

"What we are seeking to do is to balance against bad behavior [from China]. The key is a rules-based order. We urge China to defend and strengthen that order," because "it is the rules-based order that helped China's rise, and it can help other countries to rise too," Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop said, adding that "among the like-minded democracies are the US, Japan, India and Australia. Another balancing group would be the 10-nation Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN]."

However, it is not as neat as that. For instance, some of the ASEAN countries have made their peace with China, especially as the US does not seem as committed to maintaining its primacy and dominance.

That leaves the US, Australia and Japan in a counterbalancing role, as India would like to keep its options open.

Counterbalancing Chinese leverage

Written by Sushil Seth

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Sydney Morning Herald columnist Peter Hartcher highlighted Australia's predicament: "The US cannot be relied upon to protect the regional order. It [Australia] doesn't envisage an Indo-Pacific region without America. But it implicitly accepts that the region has already lost American leadership."

Australia hopes to persuade China to maintain regional stability without pushing its territorial and sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. At the same time, Australia is committed to support in every possible way the US' continued commitment to regional security.

That is the problem.

China does not regard Australia as a disinterested party, being part of the US alliance system. The Chinese government has criticized Australia for making "irresponsible" remarks about Chinese island-building in the South China Sea, such as expressing concern at the "unprecedented pace and scale" of China's activities in the region crucial for shipping.

Within Australia, China is attempting, as the Sydney Morning Herald editorialized, "through control of Chinese-language media in Australia, to keep local populations of Chinese background loyal to its political program and ignorant of alternatives," thus arousing "understandable suspicion."

Australia will find it increasingly difficult to reconcile its primary security relationship with the US — and with China, as its largest trading partner.

Beijing keeps reminding Australia of China's primacy as a trading partner.

A recent Chinese official commentary said: "China continues to maintain its position as Australia's largest trading partner, the largest export destination and the largest source of imports."

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Australia is thus on notice that China has considerable leverage, even as Australia sets forth its foreign policy white paper.

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