



## Living with giants:

Finding Australia's place in a more complex world

### Executive summary

The landscape of international politics a few decades hence will be dominated by a company of giants: societies which will range demographically down from India and China at well over a billion each, through those at four or five hundred millions, like the US and the EU, to those at the hundred million plus level. Of the nineteen societies of those dimensions, ten will be in, or involved with, Australia's area of primary strategic concern. The relations between them will provide most of the preoccupations of our foreign policy makers.

In the past, population alone has not been a major factor in determining the diplomatic influence or military clout of any given society. But for the first time in most of their respective histories, these societies will have access to modern technologies and media of communications, and their governments will have aspirations about the standard of life their peoples could and should hope for. Some of them, China especially, are already experiencing spectacular rates of growth, and others are hoping to achieve something similar. That will make for unprecedented levels of demand for resources of all sorts: oil, water, maybe land, certainly capital. Unless attention is paid in

time, the world could see in coming decades, a sort of replay, at giant size, of the 1930's conflict between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. And it will be complicated by a revolutionary factor, the jihadists war. The population base of the jihadists, the Islamic world, is also a billion-plus, rising fast, and very young. So even a tiny fraction of that group, less than one tenth of one percent, is a potentially formidable force.

Though that may seem to imply a conflict-ridden society of states, the paper argues that two quite hopeful diplomatic patterns are emerging within it. Both are advantageous to Australia. They are the regional security community, and the global concert of powers.

The more straightforward of the two, the regional security community is also the nearer to realisation. The timbers from which it could be built [though it may well take twenty years] are already to hand in the current multilateral organisations of the area, like ASEAN plus the three major economic powers [China, Japan and South Korea] plus now Australia and New Zealand. Those fifteen powers are more than either the EU, which started with 6, or NATO, which started with 10, had to begin with. The

diversity of civilisations and ethnicities in the Asia-Pacific has always in the past been cited as a reason why multilateralism could not flourish in the area, but the new pressures of globalism, the jihadists war, and the sheer rise, through population growth and economic growth of the pressure on resources of every kind, will combine to make cooperation more necessary in the not very distant future than it ever was in the past.

The prospect of a global concert of powers may seem a lot more remote in the present unipolar world of US paramountcy, but the paper argues that the unstoppable and accelerating process of the redistribution of power has brought the twilight of that world much closer. The company of giants may organise itself in one of the two traditional patterns, a balance of power or a concert of powers. The possibility of an anti-hegemonial alliance is briefly touched on, but it is argued that in a world of at least eight nuclear powers and possibly more, a concert of powers is much the less dangerous, even for the dominant sovereignty. Some very recent signals from Washington appear to indicate that appreciation of that point is dawning there.

Though maintaining that these are the likeliest diplomatic patterns for the future, the paper looks briefly at five 'alternative scenarios', any of which might de-rail the international processes involved. It sketches in turn an environmental disaster, an economic disaster, two alternative endings for the current US democratisation drive, and the 'Anglosphere' or 'rimlands' hypothesis, which seems to have developed a new lease of life since the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns. The paper also looks at the likeliest frictions of these future decades, and offers a few tentative suggestions, in the final paragraphs, to Canberra policy makers.



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