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Alliance Unleashed:

Australia and the US in a new strategic age

Executive summary

The events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent War on Terror have reinvigorated the Australia–US security partnership. The ANZUS alliance, which languished through the 1990s, has been given new purpose and energy, and the security connection between Canberra and Washington has been broadened and strengthened. Not all Australians are reassured by this turn of events. Some believe Australia has tied itself too closely to the Bush Administration, and the Australian Government should find more overt ways of separating its own interests from those of its unipolar partner. Some even suggest placing the ANZUS Treaty into a period of ‘suspended animation’ until the excesses of the Bush Administration run their course.

But the forces for change in our bilateral security partnership don’t emanate solely, or even primarily, from the Bush Administration. Western Cold War alliances are under pressure to adapt to a transformational international security order. That order is increasingly characterised by new

adversaries, against which the old, static, reactive and geographically constrained alliances offer only limited capacities. That’s why the US Government has increasingly turned to ‘coalitions of the willing’ to carry more of the load in the War on Terror. Coalitions are versatile, comparatively easy to build, and provide opportunities to reach out to new friends. Unfortunately, they require almost constant tending. Moreover, they probably lack the durability to nurture a range of capabilities that can be developed only over time, for example through sustained cooperation on military exercises and training, the networking both of information flows and of forces, and shared experience in joint operations. These latter capacities have traditionally been generated within the West’s long-lived alliances, providing good reasons for Washington to find a larger role for alliances in any protracted conflict.

So we can expect a second-term Bush Administration to show greater interest in alliances. Still, that doesn’t mean Washington

wants to go back to the sorts of alliances it promoted during the decades of the Cold War. Rather, it will be pressing an agenda of change. For alliances to be effective security partnerships in the new security environment, they will have to take on a set of characteristics different from those of the past fifty years. They will need to be proactive in their engagement against terrorist groups and expansive in their reach. They will need to possess the fine motor skills that will allow them to cope with small war-making units and not merely large ones. They must become adept at coping with transnational adversaries, and capable of countering threats within their own societies, rather than merely focusing outwards in the search for external enemies.

Such a reinvention of the bilateral security partnership has already begun. Australia is already engaged in much closer security cooperation with the US than are many other Western allies. But pressures to deepen the intimacy of security cooperation will increase rather than decrease in the years ahead, driven by deep, fundamental changes in the nature of international security in an era of globalisation and technological diffusion. We should begin thinking now about what our future security partnership might look like, how much of the new partnership we wish to place under the formal auspices of the ANZUS alliance, and how the emerging pattern of closer cooperation can best serve Australia's interests.



Prepared by:
Dr Rod Lyon

Dr Lyon is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Queensland. He teaches courses on conflict, international security, and civil-military relations. His research interests focus on a range of problems associated with global security, nuclear strategy and Australian security. He previously worked in the Strategic Analysis Branch of the Office of National Assessments between 1985 and 1996. As a Fulbright scholar in 2004, he was a visiting research fellow at Georgetown University in Washington DC, researching a project on the future of security partnerships in the post-September 11 environment. He was appointed to the National Consultative Committee on International Security Issues in April this year.

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