

Permanent friends and permanent interests

US interests in the western pacific

As Japanese forces were making their way down the Malaya peninsula on Boxing Day 1941, the Melbourne Herald carried a piece by Australian Prime Minister John Curtin with the immortal phrase '*Australia looks to America*'. Since then, Australia has not seriously thought about its defence without the United States. Even the much vaunted 'self-reliant defence of Australia doctrine' that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s had at its heart a recital of Nixon's 1969 Guam doctrine setting limits on US support to allies. Their exit strategy from Vietnam became our defence strategy.

But good things don't always last forever. The seemingly inexorable rise of China has prompted some to ask how much longer we can rely on the United States to underwrite our security. It is not the aim of this short essay to answer that large question. The modest goal here is to understand US interests in the Western Pacific. Unless we understand what America seeks to protect in our part of the world, we cannot begin to gauge how long we might be able to tie our fate with theirs.

What is an interest?

At a primitive level, countries have but three goals: security, prosperity and esteem. Those features of the international situation that affect the attainment of these goals constitute 'interests'. Those interests touching on security are *strategic interests*, those on prosperity are *economic interests* and those touching on esteem are *prestige interests* for want of a better term. More precise definitions of the three will be offered later.

Countries try to shape interests to their advantages. For example, by forging alliances to improve their security or removing trade barriers that limit their prosperity. Interests can be of more than one type. Friendly relations with another country, for instance, will usually be both a strategic interest (because conflict is less likely) and an economic interest (because trade is more likely). To complicate matters further, an interest that is favorable in one respect can be unfavourable in another. Sometimes a country will face a hard choice because its interests pull in opposing directions.

Strategic interests

US strategic interests are those features of the international situation that influence the risk (likelihood and consequence) of an armed attack on the United States or its people. To understand US strategic interests in the Western Pacific today, it is helpful to understand their evolution over the past century.

The Pacific Ocean is the maritime approach to America's westward flank, so it was natural for the United States to establish itself as a maritime power in the Pacific as soon as it could at the close of the 19th Century. Less than half a century later, they were projecting their armed forces across the vast extent of the Pacific to fight Japan. The caricature of the United States responding to an unexpected strike on Pearl Harbour in

late 1941 is both inaccurate and unhelpful for understanding US strategic interests at that time.

Even before the war in Europe began, Japan and the United States were playing out a crisis in slow motion which saw ever more restrictive embargos placed on Japan in an attempt to curb her aggression on the Asian mainland. Hobbled by a strong isolationist lobby and an ill prepared military, the United States moved slowly to exhaust negotiations and buy time. It was not until December 1941 that the United States tightened its embargo sufficiently to force Japan to change policy—though not in the direction hoped.

So why did the United States risk provoking war with Japan, and as it turned out Germany, over what was occurring on the Asian mainland more than 9,000 kilometres from their western coast? It was surely not for the sake of Chinese or Indochinese sovereignty. Rather, a fundamental US strategic interest was engaged long before the attack on Pearl Harbour: the risk of armed attack on the United States would have been unacceptably elevated if the Asian continent had been subjugated by a belligerent and expansionist Japan.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, the Western Pacific was part of a global stand-off between the West, led by the United States, and the Eastern Block, commanded by the Soviets in loose alliance with communist China. Once again, fundamental US strategic interests were engaged. Unencumbered by the baggage of isolationism, the US met the risk with a policy of active containment to limit the economic and territorial expansion of the Eastern Block.

Containment saw the US abandon more than a century and a half of peacetime disengagement from the power politics of the world and create two sets of alliances: the land-based NATO alliance in Europe, and the maritime-focused system of bilateral alliances across the Pacific that at different times included Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, New Zealand and Australia. With these alliances came the permanent forward basing of US forces which persists to this day in Japan, South Korea and Guam.

Even before the demise of the Soviet empire and the opening up of China, the utility of the post-war US alliances and force dispositions began to change. In the early 1950s it was credible for the US to conceive of guarding against attack by the sorts of industrial age military operations that occurred in World War II, operations that would hinge on strong allies and well placed bases.

But, by the mid 1960s, it was increasingly appreciated that the enormous deterrent power of nuclear weapons rendered both the United States and the Soviet Union all but immune from conventional attack. In terms of the ultimate risk of armed force being used against the United States, the strategic infrastructure arrayed across Western Europe and the Pacific became much less important. Or, to put it another way, the advent of nuclear

weapons made an isolationist strategy viable for the defence of the United States against interstate threats—not that they took it up.

Indeed, the United States fought two wars in Asia during the Cold War: on the Korean peninsula in the 1950s and in Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s. It is telling, however, that in neither case were US interests (strategic or otherwise) sufficiently engaged for them to mount the effort necessary to prevail. While the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam were costly in blood and treasure, the scale of national effort in each case was well short of that mustered by the United States in the Second World War when fundamental strategic interests were at stake.

So to what extent does the United States retain strategic interests in the Western Pacific today? That is, to what extent does the United States need to shape the features of the international situation in the Western Pacific to reduce the risk of armed attack on itself or its people? There are four features of the present situation that clearly constitute strategic interests for the United States:

- To varying extents, allies in the region provide intelligence and communications facilities that underpin US nuclear deterrence. The Australia-US joint facilities are a case in point.
- Nuclear proliferation in and from North Korea raises the risk of an attack on the United States by terrorists or the regime itself. The fear is that neither can be trusted to respond rationally to the calculus of deterrence.
- US allies in the Western Pacific provide political and limited military support to the US efforts to counter the threat from Islamist terrorism in the Middle East and Central Asia.
- In the Western Pacific there is sufficient adherence to the norms of international behaviour to ensure that US vessels, aircraft and people can proceed unmolested—free from armed attack—in the region.

Conspicuous by its absence is any reference to ‘containing China’ or preventing any one country from dominating the region. That’s because, unlike the situation in 1941 prior to the advent of nuclear weapons, such a development would not increase the likelihood or consequence of an attack on the United States or its people. That’s not to imply that other US interests would be unaffected by such a radical change to the geopolitics of Asia.

Economic interests

US economic interests are those features of the international situation that affect the prosperity of the American people and its government.

For almost a century, from the dispatch of Commodore Perry in 1852 to the end of the Second World War, the Western Pacific was a source of commercial disappointment to the United States. In the latter half of the 19th Century the European powers divided up

the trading opportunities to the detriment of the United States. Then, in the first half of the 20th Century, Japanese aggression destabilised China and limited commerce with the region more broadly.

It was not until the post-war period that US expectations of trade across the Pacific were fulfilled. It is no exaggeration to say that the Western Pacific has been the epicentre of globalisation upon which the prosperity of the globe and the United States has risen for the past six decades. Beginning with Japan and spreading to Korea and now China, hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty and brought into the global economy. China is the United States' second largest trading partner (behind Canada) and Japan the fourth largest (Mexico is third). It is telling that the United States does more than twice as much trade with North Asia than with Western Europe.

In addition to trade, the United States relies heavily on China and Japan for loans to finance their fiscal and current account deficits. As at the end of 2008, China was the largest holder of US Treasury securities, with \$727 billion and Japan the second largest with \$626 billion. Overall, East Asia holds more than half of the \$3 trillion US government debt.

While the range of US commercial activity in the Western Pacific is vast, its economic interests can be reduced to a handful of factors: trade arrangements with East Asia that benefit US commerce, continuing willingness by China and Japan to lend to the US, adherence to the rule of law in countries where the US does business, and peace. The last factor is especially critical—nothing impedes commerce like conflict.

Apart from peace, none of these factors can be furthered by armed force; the days of gun boat trade diplomacy are long gone. But while it is hard to fight for peace, armed force can deter conflict. In this way, the system of US alliances and benign hegemony gifted the Western Pacific the stability needed for commerce and prosperity to grow in the second half of the 20th Century.

Prestige interests

US psychic interests as those characteristics of the international situation that influence how the United States—its government and its people—feel about themselves.

No doubt hard-nosed realists would reject the idea that the United States acts on anything other than a cold analysis of its concrete economic and strategic interests. To conclude so is to misunderstand the United States. From the very start, in the 19th Century, US involvement in the Western Pacific has been inextricably linked to how they see themselves as a nation.

The convulsion of imperialist zeal that saw the United States annex Hawaii and seize Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines from Spain in 1898 had as much to do with American's self-perceived mission in the world as it did with enacting a deliberate maritime strategy. In a real sense, the close of the 19th Century saw the United States extend its doctrine of manifest destiny from the prairies of the mid-west to the outer islands of the Far East.

In the more than hundred years that followed, the United States changed how it saw its role in the world twice. The first half of the 20th Century saw an extended period of fitful isolation; the second half saw them take up the mantle of leaders of the free world against the Soviets.

American confidence and sense of purpose waxed and waned through the trials of the Cold War and beyond, yet there has been more continuity than change in the five decades between John Kennedy's '*...bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.*' and Barack Obama's '*...know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more*'.

The US self-image since the Second World War rests on two propositions: the United States is the leader of the western world, and the United States is a reliable ally willing to protect democracy and western values. In the Western Pacific, as elsewhere, these propositions help underwrite their dogged persistence with alliances and forward-basing dating back to the early Cold War.

So what?

It is beyond our scope to judge the durability of the US presence in the Western Pacific, that difficult question must await another day. Instead we conclude with three observations that bear on that question.

First, it is striking just how limited US strategic interests are in the region, even taking into account that our definition of strategic interests is narrow. Many things that countries like Japan and Australia properly conceive as being strategic interests are less clearly in that category for the United States. Like it or not, it is possible to secure the United States and its people from armed attack without doing so for other countries.

Second, a country's notion of itself is as malleable as any individual's. What's more, the United States has reinvented itself more than once already. Perhaps only Japan has shown itself more able to quickly redefine its place in the world. Lord Palmerstone may have been wrong when he said that there was such a thing as permanent interests—at least when it comes to interests based on identity.

Third, and this is a critical point, it is entirely possible to conceive of US economic and strategic interests being satisfied with a very different US posture in the Western Pacific to that seen today.

The full quotes by US Presidents John Kennedy and Barack Obama are:

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 21 January, 1961

And so, to all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more.

Barack H. Obama, Inaugural Address, 20 January, 2009