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Aryanta Nugraha

**REBOOTING AUSTRALIA-US ALLIANCE:
AUSTRALIA’S INTERETS AND STABILITY
IN ASIA PACIFIC REGION**

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Abstract

As Asia Pacific is becoming the whirlpool of strategic competition with its growing importance of geo-economic and geo-politics it, however, set Australia policy-makers into dilemma. Indian Ocean, Malacca strait, and South China Sea are very important maritime sea lanes that also have large amounts of hydrocarbon reserves. It is not surprising if the region has become a vortex for strategic competition amongst regional players. With US re-presence in the region, strategic competition will be intensified. This essay will answer the questions related to Australia’s interests in the rebooting US-Australia alliance and the implications for Australia’s foreign policy in its relationships with Asia Pacific. This essay argues that the rebooting alliance is part of Australia soft balancing policy towards China. The alliance also provides a window of opportunity for Australia towards a more independent ally of the US in the region.

Keywords: *Australia, US-Australia Alliance*

Introduction

In his address to joint sitting of the Australian parliament on 17 November 2011, US President Barrack Obama announced his administration policy to expanding and intensifying its already significant role in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in the southern part of the region. The policy which later to be described as ‘pivot to pacific’ or ‘rebalancing’ policy towards Asia, is objected to give more effort to influencing the Asia pacific geo-political changes following the emergence of China as one of influential regional players in the

region (Manyin, 2012). As part to the policy President Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared plans for up to two hundreds and fifty US Marines to be stationed in Darwin, Australia. The number of marine will ramped up to two thousands and five hundreds in the year after. The agreement includes increased acces of US aircraft and ships to Australian bases and also joint exercise and training.

The Obama initiatives to reboot of US–Australia alliance gain enthusiastic support from both Labor government and the opposition coalition, the Liberal and National Party. Julia Gillard stated that the expanding presence of the U.S. in Northern Australia will give substantial leverage to Asia Pacific change in the coming decade. Similarly, opposition leader, Tony Abbot said that the joint facility and permanent basing of the US Marines force will be beneficial to Australia long-term security (Dobell, 2012). In contrast to unanimity of the government and opposition, negative concern rose from several Australian eminent persons. Mark Latham, a long standing ANZUS critic, for example argued that Labor government policy has put Australia in the middle of geopolitical tension in Asia Pacific since there is China factor (Bloomfield & Nossal, 2010). In a similar vein Malcolm Turnbull also criticised Gillard government for not being careful, since the deployment of US military in Darwin will endanger Australia relations with China which is Australia's most important trading partner. In a stronger tone the former Prime Minister Paul Keating argued that Australia should make a clear foreign policy identity not just to copy US foreign policy in Asia, since 'the future of Asian stability cannot be cast by non-Asian power' (<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/4268094.html#>). The Australian public, however, seemed to support the rebooting US-Australia alliance. A poll by Lowy Institute in the mid-2011 showed that 82% of Australian believed that US-Australia alliance is important to Australia's national interests. The poll

also showed that more than 50% of Australian did not believe that the US power is in decline relative to China power (Hanson, 2011).

Asia Pacific is now become the whirlpool of strategic competition with its growing importance of geo-economic and geo-politics. Indian Ocean, Malacca strait, and South China Sea are very important maritime sea lanes that also have large amounts of hydrocarbon reserves. It is not surprising if the region has become a vortex for strategic competition amongst regional players. With US re-presence in the region, strategic competition will be intensified. It, however, set Australia policy-makers into dilemma. As China emerges as Australia's largest trading partner, enhancing alliance with the US will Australia at the risk of Beijing retaliation due to implicit objective of the alliance is aimed at China. Based on the outline above, the Australian government policy to rebooting US-Australia alliance which is now over 50 years is very interesting to be analysed. This essay is explaining what are Australia's interests in the rebooting US-Australia alliance? And what are the implications for Australia's foreign policy in relationships with Asia Pacific? This essay argues that the rebooting alliance is part of Australia soft balancing policy towards China. The alliance also provides a window of opportunity for Australia towards a more independent ally of the US in the region.

US-Australia Alliance Initiatives

The idea of joint force posture started from November 2010. The US and Australia held a meeting of foreign affairs and defense minister (Australia-US Ministerial Consultation, AUSMIN) or the so-called Two plus Two. The meeting announced the establishment of a bilateral working group on the US Global Force Posture Review. The first AUSMIN meeting held in Australia in December 2010, the two countries agreed to strengthen the alliance relating to the US Global Force Posture Review

(<http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/us/ausmin/index.html>). The agreement mounted in the aforementioned joint posture initiatives announced by President Obama and Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The two countries decided that the US will send a maximum of about 2,500 personnel from Marine Air Ground-Task Force (MAGTF) from 2012 to 2017, from April to September 2012.

There are several factors behind the agreement to reboot US-Australia alliance. First, there is a growing synergy of both countries' perspective over the Asia-Pacific region by using the concept of “Indo-Pacific region” adding to the previous concept of “Trans-Pacific Partnership” (TPP). While TPP is referred to US led multilateral free trade arrangement in Asia Pacific under APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), the concept of Indo-Pacific never clearly defined except employed in the context of US-Australia alliance. Indo-Pacific refers to geographical position that defines Asia to include Australia based on two ocean geography; Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. US Secretary of the State, Hillary Clinton as well as Australia Defence Minister, Stephen Smith often use this concept. Aside of the lack of detail, the concept of Indo-Pacific indicates the growing recognition of the importance of Indian Ocean and East Asia region has put Australia as unique geographical position in facing the whole geo-economics and geopolitical changes in Asia-Pacific region. According to John Mearsheimer, the growing role of China in shaping the structural change in Asia will encounter the US and Australia in geopolitical challenges and policy choices in the next decades. The development of ‘blue water fleet’ and escalating China’s economic and political involvement in South Pacific could potentially challenge liberal-democratic norms and Western influence there (Mearsheimer, 2010; 394-5).

The second factor behind reenergising the alliance is the objective of both countries to presence a stronger engagement in Asia-Pacific. After the

winding down of wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan, Obama administration repeatedly highlights their plan to increase its existence in Asia-Pacific. The publication of "Defense Strategic Guidance" and "Defense Budget priorities" in January 2012 showed that the US is striving for new approach to achieve security objectives in the region. The so called innovative, low cost and small foot-print approach will involve collaboration of force including joint training and support for capacity building, instead of building permanent bases (Dale & Towell, 2012). At the same time, Australia is also looking for new international role following the plan to withdraw Australian Defence Force (ADF) troop from Uruzgan province Afghanistan, from Solomon Island (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Island, RAMSI) and from international stabilization force (ISF) in Timor Leste. From this point of view, it could be considered that the US and Australia share policy convergence to strengthen their role in Asia-Pacific security. Joint posture initiatives offer both countries new opportunity to further collaborate in regional engagements. Australia will significantly benefit from joint exercise with the US Marine Corps. Furthermore there is also a plan to involving neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Japan in the joint training. The involvement of neighbouring countries will strengthen the legitimacy of active engagement of the alliance in the region.

The third factor is that the US and Australia share the same intention to reaffirm the US's continued role in the region. In his speech to the Australia Parliament, President Obama stated that Asia-Pacific will become the centered of the globe in the 21st century, in which the US will play a bigger and long-term role in shaping the future of this region. Similarly Prime Minister Julia Gillard also highlighted the importance of strengthening the bilateral alliance to deal with the undergoing structural changes in Asia-Pacific (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/16/remarks->

[president-obama-and-prime-minister-gillard-australia-joint-press](#)). Based on these statements, the two countries seemed to make a counter argument on the spreading hypotheses of power shift and the decline of the US power in this region. Rather than affirming the hypotheses, both countries are sending a message that although Asia-Pacific is witnessing changes in strategic environment with the rise of China and India, the alliance will become the central geopolitical foundation in which stronger economic relations in the region could be built.

Paul Dibb, a strategic and defense expert argued that an alliance with the US, for Australia is a necessity to guarantee its survival. According to Dibb, alliance with US is based on rational calculation on national interests, sharing values and history and also domestic public support. Strengthening alliance with the US, therefore is a vital policy and advantageous to maintain Australia vulnerability in the ongoing geopolitical changes and uncertainties in Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, it could be employed as soft balancing policy to manage security risks as well as a breakthrough in increasing Australia role in engaging regional and global security challenges (Dibb, 2003). From the explanation above, it is clear that there are policy convergences between the US and Australia that both countries aspire to become key players to shape regional security changes in the region.

The China factor and Australia Policy Options

Many argue that the US-Australia rebooting alliance is being made with a strong focus on China. Zbigniew Brezinski, the former US national security adviser, for instance, stated that the Obama pivot could easily be interpreted as part of policy to contain China (cited from Dobell, 2012; 2). As Chinese officials think that Obama-Gillard's policy is directly aimed at Beijing, unavoidably it will turn into dyadic power competition between US-Australia

versus China. Many other commentaries also revolved around this logic. In Australia, the debate on the reinvigoration of the alliance revolves around two interconnection arguments. The first argument supports and tends view that the alliance will positively contribute to the enhancement role of both countries in Asia-Pacific region. The second argument, in a rather anxious tone, is questioning the impact of the alliance towards Australia-China relations.

From the outset, China questioned the appropriateness of expanding US-Australia military alliance, which is considered as external power, with the interest of countries within region (<http://rthk.hk/rthk/news/englishnews/news.htm?highlight&20111116&56&798593>). China has also strongly reproached and warning Australia may be "caught in the crossfire" if the United States uses new Australian-based military forces to threaten its interests (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/obama-in-australia/our-indispensable-alliance-barack-obama/story-fnb0039u-1226197460882>).

Many Australian leaders raised concerns that Australia is in the process of mismanaging, even damaging, relations with the People's Republic of China. The decision to upgrade military ties with the US increases the risk of damaging relations with Australia most important trade partner, China (Switzer, 2010).

The issues relating to US and China are always encountered Australia in uneasy choice. Australia has gain windfall benefit from China economic growth. China has become Australia's major trading partner. In 2010, China taking 25.3 per cent of Australian exports (mainly iron ore and concentrates, and coal), and providing 18.7 per cent of imports (especially clothing products). China Investment in Australia is also significant, as well as Australia investment in China (<http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/fs/chin.pdf>).

With the growing importance of China to Australia economy while the significance of China will be even greater in decades to come, the question on what is the appropriate policy towards China has always been a vital issue for Australia's foreign policy. There has been no consensus about proper policy towards China, whether Australia should accommodate or balancing China.

Argument to accommodate China is strongly advised by the former deputy secretary at Australia Defence Department, Hugh White. In his influential *Quarterly Essay*, published in 2010, 'Power Shift: Australia's Future between Washington and Beijing', White argued that there has been a power swing in Asia Pacific, in which America and China should share power as equal partner in a joint regional leadership. If America does not choose to withdraw from Asia and conversely push back China to maintain its supremacy, there will be a dangerous era of rivalry (White, 2010). From an Australian perspective US-China accommodation would be the ideal situation. However if antagonism between both countries occur, Australia would have to choose between pursuing its own accommodation with China and siding with the US. According to White, Australia should choose to accommodate China rather than siding with the US. The reason is that Australia's long term interests as a middle power in the Asia-Pacific requires strong economic links to China (White, 2010; 44-45). Another argument that supports Australia to build close relations with China is Michael Wesley. According to Wesley, Australia needs to give less attention to the US and international organisations, and re-calibrate its involvement in the Asian region to give relatively more attention particularly to China (Wesley, 2011).

All these pessimistic assessments highlight the extent to which China will dominate and the most influential power in Asia. Those assessments based on realism view on the primacy of state and the ultimate role of major power in creating international structure. These, however, dismiss the

plurality of the region and the impact of globalisation in which the state are not solely actors in international politics. From this point of view, it is interesting to note Derek McDougall's argument on what Australia should choose between China and the US. According to Dougall, China's rise should be account at wider power relations perspective. In Asia, although China is growing influential, there other middle power such as Japan, South Korea, India and other ASEAN states that interact positively as well as constraining China. As China's rising becomes one of important issues to be handles amongst states in the region, it means that opposition to China is the dominant power (Dougall, 2011). Dougall also underlines the importance of Australia-China relations to Australia economic growth. Therefore, according to Dougall, Australia should pursue on the one hand, accommodate China's rise, while at the same time conduct soft balancing to ensure that China's rise would not destabilising the region (Dougall, 2011; 8-9). Accommodation enables Australia to develop its important economic connection with China, while at the same time developing a better understanding of China's security perspectives. Soft balancing can be pursued in a modest fashion by fostering relations with the range of states in the Asia-Pacific region. This network of relationships can be helpful in ensuring greater pluralism within the region and facilitating China's integration in the region in a non-threatening way. Regarding the mix strategy between accommodation and soft balancing, Dougall writes:

It would be in Australia's interests to ensure that confrontation between China and the US or significant regional states did not occur. A concert of powers might be useful as one element of a strategy designed to promote peaceful international engagement by China, but other regional networks and international organizations should also be used. There should be a multiplicity of strategies rather than reliance on one or a few (Dougall, 2011; 13).

This mix strategy can also be seen as a hedging strategy, in which Australia makes as large possibilities of policy options to deal with various possible unpredictable circumstances. From this perspective, therefore, the US-Australia finds it relevance with Australia middle and long term interest towards Asia-Pacific region. Australia has accommodated China in various issues, including supporting China to take a bigger role in regional organization such as ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and East Asia Summit (EAS). Australia in Gillard era also has accommodated China economic interests in Australia by making commitment with Wen Jiabao in meeting in Beijing in 2011 (<http://austeparty.com.au/web/gillards-world-is-falling-apart/>). Australia, however, should also maintain its closer relations with the US in short and middle-term to soft balancing China.

Australia Long Term Interests: an Independent Ally?

Not only to maintain soft balancing with China, the current rebooting alliance also simultaneously provide a window opportunity to Australia to become a more independent ally of the US. The argument of independent ally is based on the fact that the nature of US-Australia alliance would be much affected not only the rise of China, but also the relative decline of the US power. William Tow opens the debate on the possibility of 'modification of the alliance' in which the US will foster Australian to become more independent Ally (Tow, 2011). Tow shows several factors that evidently sustain this argument. This factor is the relative position of Chinese and America economy (Tow, 2011; 4). Although the US still generates the world's largest annual GNP, followed by China and Japan, the US economic is continued to place more emphasis on how to reduce its skyrocketing levels of debts and deficits that are eroding US economic power, which is the foundation of

defence spending and off course military power. Domestic political pressures in the US also demand that Washington should end the kind of expensive global leadership role and re-order the fiscal priorities in favour of internal affairs. If the pressures go stronger, it will reduce American global leadership role and slowly fading the Pax Americana century. Although Obama administration is trying to sustain the idea of global leadership, domestic political condition shows different pace. It is proven from the survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs that revealed the increasing numbers of Americans are opposing a global leadership role for their nation (Switzer, 2010). Compare to China, the Chinese government continue to support the modernization of People Liberation Army (PLA), although China is also confronting economic problems such as high level inflation and decreasing external market due to global financial crisis. Its economic growth still capable to maintain nearly 10 per cent per year military budget rising and it is likely to convert more of its economic wealth into strategic resources. If the trends persist, Australia will encounter a bigger pressure due to its dependency on US weapon system. While the US keeps restrict access to certain US military technology to its allies, Australia may consider developing its own defence industry as part of long term strategic posture (Wylie cited from Tow, 2011; 5).

The second factor is the US military presence in Asia-Pacific and the evolution of relative military balance. If the US is increasingly constrained by domestic politic competition and economic crises, it will decrease US's capabilities to play a decisive strategic role in Asia Pacific. Moreover, the US still continues to involve in overseas wars (in Iraq and Afghanistan) and other intensifying conflict in Middle East that hinder it to play as a region stabilizer. It was acknowledged by independent panel which review the 2010

Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The panel found that there was a significant gap between the US military force and the mission that will be perform in the future. The panel also acknowledged that although the US is still the greatest power in Asia pacific, its preeminence will be challenged by the emerging multi-polar power (QDR, 2010; iv). The panel also found that the size of US military has smaller by one-third over the past two decades (QDR, 2010; 26). It is not surprising if the 2010 QDR explicitly stated the need of the US to increase its collaboration with its allies since the US cannot play as international stabilizer alone (US DOD, 2010; 57). The problem is that the US and its allies often find disagreement over burden-sharing, as showed by the case of Japan's decision to discontinue its refueling mission in Indian Ocean to support NATO's operation in Afghanistan (Tow, 2011; 10). The intensifying US's economic problems and the growing crisis of confidence towards the US could lead Asia-Pacific states to a more accommodating if not bandwagoning policy towards China. In this rapid evolving situation, the US considered Australia as the most important allies to be able to facilitate the US interests amid uncertainty regional power competition. For the US, enhancing Australia military power could be transformed into bigger capabilities of Australian Defence Force (ADF) to deal with hostile geopolitical competition, particularly in southern Pacific instead of deploying its own forces. The current policy to establish a US bases in Northern and Western Australia is amongst the important step to prepare Australia to become more independent.

The third factor that may lead to Australia strategic independence regarding the role in Asia-Pacific is the uncertainty of US Asia-Pacific strategy in the future (Tow, 2011, 11). For the mean time, the US Global force posture points out the centrality of Asia-Pacific region. The Obama Administration also repeatedly announces that the US 'is back to Asia' and determine its

engagement as Pacific power. It however, faces several problems. The aforementioned economic problems will obstruct the US to adjust military capabilities that would effectively deter China. The US is also being doubted to provide and maintain defence technology, weapon procurement and other sources that needed to address the Asia security challenges in the future. Furthermore, the US also lack of burden sharing support from its traditional Asia allies. The US, therefore needs to work with other regional partner to pursue security order building. In this case, Australia is the most reliable long term ally to work with. To this purpose the US projects to support ADF capabilities, particularly on ground forces into a level that the ADF could carrying out security operation in neighbouring area. The Joint posture initiative is part of constructive measures to address this problem since there is plan to redeploy Australian forces to Darwin and Perth to support the maritime defence force.

The US gesture to foster Australia as independent ally also shown in diplomacy. The US supports the Australia's effort to enhance its middle-power diplomacy in Asia Pacific. It can be proven by US support to Kevin Rudd's idea of Asia-Pacific Community. Although the idea gained less support by other Asian states the US than modified the concept into Trans-Pacific Partnership to reinvigorate the APEC. Ruud's approach to Asia, however, established a ground of trusted relationship between Australia and Asian states, particularly ASEAN. ASEAN then involved Australia into the newest regional framework in East Asia, the East Asia Summit, in which the US also joint into this frame work recently. For the US, Australia involvement in the Asian regional framework is a significant value added for American soft diplomacy. It would support regional order building in Asia and entangled China into norms-based regional framework. By supporting Australia independent foreign policy, there also a chance to hinder Chinese fears of

Australia as being the US's servility. Moreover the close relations between Australia and China could become an important step to enmesh China into a regional confidence building measures and any regional order that associated with liberal-based norm and seeking. The Joint posture initiative therefore is part to strengthen Australia's middle-power diplomacy in Asia Pacific.

Conclusion

Much has been stated that the US-Australia rebooting alliance mainly serves American rebalancing or pivot. This analysis tends to perceive Australia as one of long-standing ally that passively accept the US strategic policy without reserve. The US indeed is the most important Australian ally. However, Australia now faces different America and has to deal with the rising importance of China to its economic interests. With the rapid and expanding geo-political and geo-economic competition in Asia-Pacific region, the US and Australia once again find a strong platform to reinvigorate their alliance. Different with previous alliance model (ANZUS), this new alliance agreement could result into what William Tow called as modification of alliance cooperation. The analysis above shows that the rebooting alliance could serve Australian soft balancing policy towards China as complement to accommodation policy in economic realm. From Australian perspective, the alliance is part of hedging policy in the ongoing changes of Asia-Pacific geopolitics. Moreover, the rebooting alliance provides a window of opportunity for Australia to become an independent ally of the US. It a historical moment for Australia to build its strategic identity and policies that would lead to Australia future role as middle-power in Asia-Pacific and bringing stability in terms of balance of power in Asia Pacific region.

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