

**Pivots, tilts and ‘brexits’
in the Indo-Pacific Region**

China’s economic and military rise, coupled with its astute diplomatic employment of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power, has destabilised the region.

In 2008, the incoming United States president, Barack Obama, inherited a nation in decline; whose citizens were exhausted by seven decades of being the global policeman; whose military power and global standing had been weakened by the unnecessary invasion of Iraq in 2003; and whose economic power had been weakened by the ‘great recession’ of 2007-08. Obama responded to China’s rise by reducing his military involvement in the Middle East; and, in 2011, announcing a ‘pivot’ to Asia – a redeployment of a higher proportion of United States forces to Asia, coupled with a proposed trans-Pacific trade partnership.

China’s Southeast Asian neighbours, spooked by China’s rise and its vigorous assertion of its territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, responded by tilting towards the United States. Last July, the Philippines won a case against China’s territorial claims in the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Concurrently, though, Britain voted to exit the European Union (‘Brexit’) and the United States presidential election campaign revealed a nation bitterly divided. The eventually successful candidate, Donald Trump, stood on a platform which included, *inter-alia*, strategic isolation, anti-globalisation, trade protectionism and anti-immigration, and which required Asian allies to carry much more of the military and financial burden for their own defence, including nuclear defence. Many of the issues were common with ‘Brexit’ and he described his approach as “Brexit plus, plus, plus”.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, given these trends, newly installed Philippines president, Rodrigo Duterte, announced a ‘separation’ from the United States in October and a profound tilt towards China and Russia. He may yet require the United States to remove its military bases from the Philippines. To a lesser extent, the Malaysian prime minister, Najib Razak, also flirted with a tilt towards China. In contrast, Indonesia’s president, Joko Widodo, reasserted his nation’s determination to maintain its territorial integrity and asked Australia to assist it to patrol the fishing grounds around the Natuna Islands (in the South China Sea north of Indonesian Borneo) which are also claimed by China.

The foregoing notwithstanding, the United States remains the world’s most powerful nation. For its part now, Australia firstly must work assiduously to keep the United States engaged in the region; and, secondly, must forge a defence partnership with Indonesia, New Zealand and our Melanesian neighbours to ensure the protection of our neighbourhood, if necessary without outside assistance.

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Australia’s pivot to Melanesia

Australia’s future is intimately tied to that of its Melanesian neighbours. One of Australia’s biggest insecurities concerning Melanesia is losing its position of leadership due to the growing influence of external actors with interests inimical to those of Australia (Powles 2016). This is driven in particular by China’s and Russia’s increasing role in Melanesia, especially through their investment and defence co-operation with Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG). Australia’s sanctions on Fiji following the 2006 coup led Fiji to pursue a ‘Look and Engage North’ policy which saw it turn to new partners (Powles and Sousa-Santos 2016). Similarly, Australia’s political indifference towards PNG, coupled with an aid regime which has failed to address the root problems facing the country (Rooney 2016), have created room for Chinese aid and businesses to gain a foothold.

To counter this influence, Australia needs to reassess and renew its commitment to Melanesia. It needs to recognise that these countries are no longer dependencies (with the exception of New Caledonia), but are independent nations determined to forge their own destinies. Hence, Australia must engage with them as a partner rather than a patron, reflecting a nuanced approach which understands their particular interests and priorities.

Australia’s 2016 Defence White Paper takes a step in the right direction in recognising the importance of Melanesia to Australia’s strategic outlook. It shows an appreciation of the unique threats facing the Melanesian countries, including state fragility, uneven economic growth, crime and climate change. Furthermore, under the paper’s second Strategic Defence Objective, Australia commits itself to supporting governments in Melanesia by strengthening their security and governance structures through the provision of aid, policing, defence co-operation and humanitarian assistance (Defence 2016: 41, 48, 55). It also highlights the centrality of regional groupings such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the South Pacific Defence Ministers’ Meeting in engendering co-operative security and a sense of community in the region.

While this pivot to Melanesia is long overdue, there is still a long way to go before our closest neighbours become genuine neighbours in the true sense of the word.

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