

BOOK REVIEW:

Sleepwalking to War; Australia's Unthinking Alliance with America

by Hugh White

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Hugh White (HW) is one of Australia's foremost Security Analysts, with a long and varied career in Defence, academia and government. He is known for his insightful and provocative style, as evidenced in the many books and articles he has written, as well as his media commentaries.

This book is written in HW's usual eloquent prose, is very analytical, logical and rationale in his treatment of the associated issues; he does so in a deliberately selective and partisan way to support his thesis and need to be viewed holistically. However, I find his overall thesis to be deterministic, narrow in its dimensions and anachronistic in its perspective:

The book was finalised after the May 2022 Australian federal election, just after the Solomon Islands 'China Base scare' and during the 'grinding' phase of the Ukraine conflict, and is extremely relevant with the new Labor Government being able to change, or nuance, our foreign policy. The insightful observations covered are:

- by 2035 China will have 24% of Global GDP and the USA only 16%,
- Australia needs to accept this and change our approach, *i.e.*, denial will not work, fighting would be costly and dangerous, our role is to stop supporting a bellicose US, and assist them to evolve towards reluctant mutual 'accommodation',
- there has been no informed debate in Australia on the alternatives, than unseeingly following the USA,
- this is fatal, as whilst the USA is invested in Asia, its core strategic focus and capability is at home, and then with Europe,
- HW posits that the USA will fail, and will step back, leaving us alone to deal with China and isolated; Australia would then be ostracised if we support the US,
- thus, it is Australia's responsibility to craft our own way forward,
- he maps the increased assertiveness and intrusiveness of the CCP since 2017,
- the absurdity of the 'no compromise' Australia position as 'principle based',
- AUKUS is tying us to the US approach and thinking, denying flexibility and alternatives to Australia,
- denial or delusions - in the end, Australia's commitments in Foreign Policy have to be cost benefit calculated,
- he posits that the concept of 'Spheres of Influence' still applies (?),
- maps the contradictory and ineffective path of President Trump towards China,
- the problem of the US in having to face monumental domestic issues, and the 'opportunity cost' of external entanglements, which are not 'saleable' to US voters,
- What is at stake for USA? - not much, China cannot credibly 'dominate the world' due to the increased

distribution of economic power, *i.e.*, with India and other developing nations, thus dominance in Asia-Pacific region is not worth fighting for,

- n confronting China, that the US 'end state' has not been defined, as there is no credible or sustainable construct, *i.e.*, the US is again being strategically incompetent,
- it is not credible that the US could 'share primacy' with the CCP, as Taiwan would have to be 'given up',
- there is no hope of the US winning the economic front in Asia, nor any credible commitment to do so,
- that the 'Quad' coalition is not a true union of objectives with reference to the CCP, *i.e.*, as shown by India's different stance on Ukraine,
- the Taiwan Test - the US is not prepared to fight, as it has assessed that it may lose, and even if it did win, it would be a 'pyrrhic victory',
- if conflict occurred, the probable result is 'stalemate', which would lead to nuclear escalation, being appraised by the CCP (that any US President would not support Taiwan at the risk of a west coast US city being struck by a CCP missile),
- that if the US fails Taiwan, then Japan will abandon the US,
- lessons from Ukraine - correctly blames NATO/EU for being greedy, and failing to give Russia a 'position' that it could accept,
- even after the Ukraine conflict is concluded, NATO/EU still needs to give Russia an acceptable global role
- that the world actually needs a strong Russia to counter the CCP in Central Asia,
- the US failure to use/posture force to defend Ukraine, mirrors what it would do with regard to Taiwan as well,
- in the firing line - a benign multi polar Asia-Pacific region is unlikely - rather, a divided one between India and CCP,
- Japan will have only 1/8th of China's GDP in 2035, *i.e.*, hence will not be a credible competitor to China,
- provocatively, he posits a repeat US request to deploy IRBMs in northern Australia,
- foreign confusion and Pacific delusion - that India has its own great power agenda - we need to figure out how best to engage with India,
- ditto Japan, for a multi pronged, nuanced approach to China,
- good comments on how to effectively engage with Indonesia and the SWP,
- for the future we need courage and imagination and we need to quickly 'get real',
- plan for the worst case, but also for a range of positive outcomes (*i.e.*, recognise the CCP's increasing internal problems).

The text is supported by three pages of reference notes. This essay is well worth a read, with deep consideration of the issues raised, even if in disagreement with HW's conclusions.

Ian Wolfe

¹In the field of international relations, a 'Sphere of Influence' is a spatial region over which a State has, or tries, to exert a level of cultural, economic, military, or political exclusivity.