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Foreign Policy White Paper: Faulty road map in a GPS world

Bob Carr

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While the Australian government's Foreign Policy White Paper was at the printers, it was being overtaken by events.

On page 46 it states that territorial disputes in the South China Sea are a 'major fault line' of the region. Yet on November 10 the US President gave a speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation Summit in Da Nang in which he didn't mention it. Instead, he chose to tell the 21 assembled nations that he was adhering to America First and changing the trade rules.

Meanwhile, on November 12 Vietnam and China reached a 'consensus' to 'appropriately manage maritime issues...and jointly strive to uphold peace and stability in the South China Sea'.

A US President chooses not to mention the issue when he is in Southeast Asia. The country in the frontline settles on a process.

'Fault line'? Probably not the best way of understanding what's happening in our region.

A poll of Southeast Asian elites conducted by a Singapore think tank showed that 74 percent thought China was the most influential country in the region, only 3.5 percent the US.

The countries of Southeast Asia have had a lot of experience in dealing with China, says George Yeo, Singapore's respected former foreign minister. I suspect Association of Southeast Asian Nations states will listen politely to Australia's ideas but Malaysia, The Philippines and Indonesia will be making their own arrangements with China, which is just over the horizon, getting richer by the month.

Remonstrance from Australia is not going to persuade the US to invest more in its security assets in Southeast Asia. It will keep being drawn into Middle East quagmires and seems to love the whiff of cordite in the valleys of Afghanistan, now America's favourite war. Donald Trump hasn't even been able to find someone to serve as assistant secretary of state for East Asian affairs, a key position.

Paul Keating's recent formulation in *Australian Foreign Affairs* makes sense. The US will no longer have a hegemonic role in Asia, but it can nurture a mediating or balancing role. That suits Australia because it points to a balance of power that will spring to life should China push too hard – by dredging around Scarborough Shoal, for example.

The White Paper captures what seems to be Canberra orthodoxy on the Trump presidency: the nightmare will pass, normal broadcasting will resume. Hold on tight, and ignore Trump and his tweets. Until what? Former World Bank head Robert Zoellick becomes the next Republican president? Hillary Clinton becomes the poster child of aggrieved white working-class voters in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio in 2020? High hopes. The US Republicans are transmuting into a party of America First populism with a strong anti-immigrant and anti-trade policy. The US Democrats will respond by moving decidedly to the left. Having Joe Hockey trip along the corridors on Capitol Hill handing out Aussie lapel badges is a diverting game. But it's not based on a serious reading of American exhaustion and American pathologies.

The White Paper commits Australia to 'positive and active engagement with China'. But since the Foreign Minister's speech on US-Australia co-operation in Los Angeles on January 26, all Australian commentary on China has been negative, exceeding on this score the language about China of any US allies, including that of Shinzo Abe.

What then does the government nominate as the agenda for a positive engagement? The Belt and Road Initiative? It's China's conversation with the world. But our reservations about it (some justified) seem to have held us back from doing what the Abbott government did with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: get in early and shape the rules.

Government documents such as this sometimes include polite fictions, such as the assumption we will shape US policy in Asia. This in turn is based on the polite fiction that our relationship with the US is special, when in fact a slew of nations have that assumption about themselves: Israel, Saudi Arabia, Poland, Japan, Britain and France.

Barack Obama called Germany his 'closest international partner'. These days, the United Arab Emirates and India probably believe they rate very highly. There are probably more than 20 countries that believe they have identical intelligence sharing.

Threaded through the White Paper is a hint that somehow China's rise is dependent on the approval of Australia, and an implied resentment that it's happening without our permission. Even the notion that our wisest response has got to be to agitate Washington to make a bigger commitment to Asia. How useful these reflexes may be is what's going to make this space so fascinating in the next few years.

The sense that things are changing fast is something the White Paper got absolutely right.

Bob Carr, former foreign minister and NSW premier, is Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney.