

One of the enduring myths in Australian foreign policy is the origin of the alliance with the United States. The destruction of the British fleet and the loss of the Singapore base to the Japanese at the start of the Pacific War marked the end of one era. The triumph of American power at the Coral Sea and General MacArthur's assumption of command marked the beginning of another era. From the vantage point of 2009 the shadow of American power is real enough, but the date is premature by nearly two decades.

The alliance with the United States in 1941 was temporary and was born in the aftermath of the Japanese capture of bases to the north of Australia. At war's end the United States resumed its preoccupation with Northeast Asia. The defence arrangement with Australia was abandoned to the British - a step that the Australian Government welcomed. War-time Prime Minister John Curtin, who has been famously misquoted as one who 'looked to the United States' and not to Britain in 1941, was in reality a keen advocate of what he called the 'Third British Empire'. By 1944 Curtin envisaged extensive collaboration with Britain in aviation (British Airways -BOAC - planned an around the world route with QANTAS), the continuation of imperial preference in trade and an extensive defence relationship. There was particular support for Britain in plans to build a strong post-war monetary and trade organisation - an arrangement very much against Washington's wishes. After Curtin's death his successors Ben Chifley and Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies continued these policies. The Sterling Bloc was the centrepiece of the economy, British immigration soared and the regional defence relationship with Britain had more substance than ANZUS (Menzies called the relationship with America in 1951 one 'built on a foundation of jelly'). The Woomera Rocket Range and Maralinga (and other) nuclear test sites became the basis of a, in the words of the British official historian Lorna Arnold, 'very special relationship.' Indeed so close was this relationship that Britain shared some of its most sensitive secrets. This was in marked contrast to the United States which placed a ban on such intelligence sharing with Australia in 1948, a step that led to the creation of the Australian Intelligence structure under British guidance.

The development of closer relations with Washington came, belatedly, after 1956. In that year Anthony Eden faced off against the United States in what became the Suez Crisis. It was a last attempt to assert Britain's independence as a global power and as such was supported by Australia. Menzies' commitment, in the face of American and world opinion, was characterised by the historian of Australian foreign policy, W.J. Hudson, as an act of 'blind loyalty'. Yet the failure of Suez, which brought in its wake the end of Eden's ministry, saw the collapse of British imperial power. Within three years his successor, Harold Macmillan, announced that the 'Winds of Change' were heralding the end of Empire. The Sterling Bloc itself started to unravel with Britain moving to join the European Economic Community, despite a desperate bid by Australia and other Commonwealth members to revive it in 1958. The year after Suez the Eisenhower Administration agreed to assist the British with their nuclear weapons program leading to end of major nuclear tests in Australia 1957 and the effective end ballistic missile development at the Woomera Rocket range in 1960.

Given this background the Menzies Government turned to the United States. In 1957 Eisenhower authorised military missions to visit to assess Australia's defence needs. This would be based not on the comprehensive defence relationship with Britain but a

more limited requirement to equip Australia forces for warfare in South East Asia. The same year also witnessed a historic trade agreement that was signed at last with Japan. Since 1948 Washington had looked to South East Asia to supply Japan's resource needs. It was not a welcome prospect for either of the major political parties in Canberra. Whatever plans for an industrial future in partnership with Britain, however, were in 1957 replaced by those that would see Australia as a major supplier of such resources. It was, as feared, the beginning of a long process of deindustrialisation. A Treaty of Friendship, Navigation and Commerce and a double taxation agreement with the United States saw the United States move to supply much more investment in Australia. By the late 1960s the United surpassed Britain as Australia's major investor. And it was lucrative. Only in 1950 did Australian bilateral trade with the United States go into the black. The imbalance since has been two to three times in America's favour.

The defence relationship, however, was quarantined from the trade problems, and was to blossom. In 1961 the first of many United States bases was established (at North West Cape to control nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean). The same year Australian military advisers were sent to Vietnam - a military engagement which for the first time was undertaken without the British. Two years later the American F111 edged out the British TSR-2 as Australia's strike bomber, thereby breaking a practice that dated to the Second World War. The intelligence relationship was also to become much more intimate, but this would be delayed in large part to the advent of the Fraser and Hawke Governments.

Australian policy-makers were apprised of the major changes in Britain's strategic directions in 1957, following the only visit to Australia of a sitting British Prime Minister. Macmillan provided the strongest case for Australia to look to the United States. Despite this there was still profound shock in Canberra ten years later when London finally announced the end to Britain's end of all military commitments 'East of Suez'. The future was one in which Britain would look to Europe and Australia to the Asia-Pacific. Before 1957, however, Australia saw in Britain a comprehensive partner. Trade, defence, diplomacy and immigration were all based on this imperial association. The events of 1956 and 1957 constituted the major turning point in Australian to that point. The situation after 1957 was more complex with the United States providing a limited security and diplomatic relationship, Asia the foundation of trade and a much more diversified pattern of immigration.

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