

Adam Broinowski

The rapid withdrawal of US-led coalition forces from Afghanistan just prior to the 20th anniversary of 9.11 was quickly followed by the declaration of a new Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) tripartite alliance.

As part of this alliance, the commitment to a nuclear attack submarine program involving the exchange of sensitive nuclear reactor technology locks in Australia's vital human and industrial resources and aspects of its foreign policy to support US-led strategic operations toward China. Among several other weapons capabilities, nuclear submarines are said to give Australia the capability to conduct offensive operations at great distances, far beyond the mission to protect Australian territorial waters.

It would seem paradoxical that China remains the primary country for Australia's exports and imports. Our trade relationship with China was responsible for much of Australia's economic buoyancy during the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-9. It has given Australia greater leverage in the global economy. In short, trade with China has provided a strong ballast to the livelihoods of Australians and our place in the world.

Nonetheless, the policy commitments taken by the Liberal-National coalition government, now formally established in AUKUS, ensure a steeper decline in our economic and political relations with China. This can be seen as the outcome of the inability of Australian political leaders to maintain the necessary independence and flexibility to formulate and negotiate in a mature, even-handed way with Chinese perspectives, foreign and economic policy, and historical context.

Repetition in the public sphere of opaque terms such as 'the rules-based order' or variations on 'China's human rights abuses' have masked and ignored rather than identified any real solutions to the significant re-centring of gravity in world politics toward Asia and China. As tensions with China have intensified since China's launch of its Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, free, fair and frank discussion on important aspects of our relationship with China has been censored.

This has meant a wilful neglect in examining critical issues in public, such as 'how exactly China poses a threat to Australia's national security'; 'Australia's options to manage its security guarantor and primary economic partner'; potential benefits to Australia in a 'multipolar order'; and pro-active ways for Australia to 'cooperate with China to address some of the world's most significant, time-critical problems'.

At a deeper layer, the political project of the Howard government to roll-back Australia's efforts to achieve a degree of agency to chart our own course as an independent sovereign nation and in relation to countries in our region is now plainly visible in the present.

Aside from setting our economy back, impacting millions of Australians, the revanchist re-orientation as an Anglocentric nation in the region and in the world which underpins that project goes against the tide both within Australia and internationally in the twenty-first century.

However unsuccessful it may prove to be, Howard's project to strongly identify with our nation's colonial heritage and its core relationships with the United Kingdom and the United States continues to suppress Australia's ability to sincerely reimagine itself as a multicultural nation interconnected with our region and animated by multiple languages, cultures, stories and traditions. It also goes against our continued efforts to recognise and place indigenous heritages deeply rooted in the lands and seas of this country at the front and centre of our national identity.

At a time when we need far-sighted vision, sophisticated engagement and pro-active public policy which protects our world for future generations, the policies and commitments that have led to and stem from this alliance only further accelerate the erosion of our democratic institutions by increasing waste, instability and devolution toward a great conflict.

As planetary conditions degrade more rapidly, the waste of vital resources on poorly thought-out national security programs like nuclear attack submarines only make plainer the need for change in Australia's outmoded policy orientation to reckon with our reality in a rapidly changing world.