The Schizophrenic Australian Foreign Policy

Earlier this month on 13 May 2015 David Shear, the US Department of Defence Assistant Secretary for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs addressed the US Senate Foreign Relations committee. Mr Shear was asked by Senator Cardin whether the deployment of US forces across Asia was a “direct response to additional challenges because of maritime safety concerns” and if the US “had the assets in place to deal with those potential problems”.

The “problem” in question is of course China, whose growing economic, military and political power is perceived by the Americans as a direct threat to their self-proclaimed role as the guarantor of “security” in the Asia Pacific region generally and in this context the South China Sea in particular.

Mr Shear gave a detailed and comprehensive reply. In the course of his answers he stated, “we are undergoing an important shift in the way we posture our forces. We will be moving significant numbers of Marines to Hawaii, Guam and Australia. We will be placing additional air force assets in Australia as well, including B1 bombers and surveillance aircraft.”

This was reported in the Australian media, and not denied by the Australian Department of Defence whose spokesman merely told Fairfax Media that the “specifics” were “yet to be finalized”.

As public realization grew that the stationing of B1 bombers, probably in or near Darwin, would make that city a prime nuclear target in the event of war, the Abbott government sought to downplay the implications. The Australian Defence Minister, Kevin Andrews, whose grasp of defence and foreign policy issues could comfortably be summarized on the back of an envelope, claimed that Mr Shear had “mis-spoke.”

Neither the Americans in general nor Mr Shear in particular acknowledged any such “mis-speak”. The Abbott government’s official denials are in any case not believable. The former Labor government of Julia Gillard agreed a Joint Posture Initiative when President Obama announced his “pivot to Asia” in November 2011. This Initiative included agreements on rotational deployment of B52 nuclear bombers which have been visiting Australia ever since.

Australia is strategically important to the US war machine. The Pine Gap facility in the Northern Territory is a crucial link in the US missile program. Similarly the electronic monitoring centre at Geraldton is Western Australia (which also hosts American warships) is a crucial part of the “Five Eyes” agreement whereby Australia electronically eavesdrops on all electronic communications both within Australia and its geographical region. The results are sent to NSA headquarters in the US.

This spy program, codenamed “Stellar” is never mentioned in the Australian media. The principal target of all this hostile activity is of course China. And here the conundrum is most vividly exposed. A large part of Australia’s prosperity is linked to China, which is its largest trading partner by a significant margin ($151 billion in 2013), more than twice the value of two-way trade with Japan, its second largest trading partner ($71 billion).

Six of Australia’s ten largest trading partners are in Asia and the future prosperity of Australia is inextricably linked to the region. The recent fall in the iron ore price alone has had major budgetary consequences in Australia.
Australia has recently gone out of its way to offend Indonesia, its nearest neighbour, the world’s largest Muslim population, and a country with the world’s third largest population overall.

Despite Abbott’s claim at the outset of his prime ministership that his government’s foreign policy would be “more Jakarta, less Geneva” the reality has been a ham-fisted and incompetent mixture of muddled priorities.

The fundamental problem with Australia’s foreign policy is an inability to recognize geographical and geo-political realities. Australia looks to the US for its “security”, yet pursues policies in support of what a former Prime Minister called a “dangerous ally” that are antithetical to that security.

Whether it is joining US adventurism in the Middle East, or hosting US nuclear bombers, spy centres and US Marines, it is very difficult to perceive how Australia’s national security concerns are being effectively addressed.

The recent decision to join the Chinese led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank against American wishes was a rare gesture of independence. Any likely economic benefits from that decision however, are likely to be cancelled out by being a party to the relentless military maneuvers that have the hubristic ambition of “containing China”.

The major geopolitical changes occurring in the world, as Pepe Escobar has brilliantly pointed out, are centred in Eurasia, the hugely important growing ties between Russia and China, and the rapid expansion of cooperative blocs such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Australia’s failure to grasp this reality and the opportunities it creates risk it being dragged down with the crumbling dollar based US empire.

**James O’Neill, an Australian-based Barrister at Law, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.**