Our exceptional friend: Australia’s fatal alliance with the United States

Emma Shortis | Reviewed by Elena Collinson

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Currently, the US alliance has a prominence in national debate arguably comparable only to the times of the Vietnam and 2003 Iraq wars. Yet for 20 years, debates over the Anzac legend have been entwined in discussions of the alliance and vice versa. At the same time, successive Australian governments have presided over institutional enhancements to the alliance. In 2002, Australia committed to purchasing up to 100 F-35 fighter jets; ‘the first Australian defence purchase with the explicitly stated intention of improving interoperability’.1 Since 2012, American marines have been hosted on permanent rotation in the Northern Territory. Most recently, the relationship between Australia and the US has been further deepened with the agreement to build an Australian fleet of nuclear-propelled submarines, using highly sensitive technology shared by the US, under the auspices of the newly minted Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral partnership (AUKUS).

Emma Shortis’ book, Our exceptional friend: Australia’s fatal alliance with the United States (Hardie Grant, 2021), has been released at a time when the rattling of the alliance cage during Donald Trump’s presidency and China’s bullying and assertive rise under President Xi Jinping has intensified calls for Australia to ‘do more’ to shore up its relationship with Washington. As Australia scrambles to ensure that it is seen to be pulling its weight, Shortis throws down the gauntlet, arguing that the ANZUS treaty, as Australia’s central foreign and defence policy principle, is ultimately antithetical to the Australian national interest, makes conflict inevitable and undermines Australia’s moral posture abroad.

The book is an unabashed, colourful take on both America as a rapacious and imperfect great power and the shared history of the alliance. Shortis is upfront about the fact that she ‘[does] not approach the subject

as a dispassionate observer’;\(^2\) the contents are ‘unapologetically anti-American power’,\(^3\) and a call to examine the ‘poisoned heart of alliance politics’.\(^4\)

Yet her work draws on a powerful, if long-established, strand of critical analysis of the alliance. A selection of examples collated by Australian historian David McLean provide a snapshot of this school of thought\(^5\) – LG Churchward in *Australia and America 1788–1972: An Alternative History* (1979) argued that in the Menzies years Australia became ‘an American satellite’; Stephen Alomes in *A Nation at Last?* (1988) described the alliance as ‘the most dramatic form of dependence’, lambasting Australia’s ‘bland subservience to the US’; while Dennis Phillips in *Ambivalent Allies* (1988) lamented that Australians ‘so willingly and so totally handed over both their sovereignty and their freedom of choice to a foreign power’. In *Reluctant Nation* (1992), David Day bemoaned that ‘[f]or too long, Australia has looked at the world with British, and then American eyes’, stating that Australia was inhibited by a ‘dependent mentality’. Deep grievance runs through the veins of this ‘radical nationalist’ school. It argues that Australia’s development and nationality have been inhibited by reliance on great and powerful friends; and what the country could be has been thwarted and held back by dependence, while national growth and maturity have been stifled.

Cleaving to this model, Shortis argues that ANZUS ‘has perpetuated a craven and unquestioning fealty to the United States regardless of what American governments do in the world or who leads them’.\(^6\) She presents myriad historical examples pointing to Australia’s generally unwavering support for, and uncritical embrace of the US, its failure to safeguard Australia’s independent interests and eagerness to sign on to America’s global design. But the proposed antidote here goes further than most texts in this school, for Shortis advocates neither for an ‘independent’ foreign policy, nor for a move to ‘trash the treaty and start again’.\(^7\) Rather, Shortis seeks a root and branch rethink of the very structures – political, economic, cultural, social and environmental – which, as closely intertwined with the American model as they are, comprise the

\(^3\) Shortis, *Our exceptional friend*, p 11.
framework for Australian domestic and foreign policy.

Critical of Australian eagerness ‘to [leap] out of the blocks’ in support of American adventurism, Shortis compels us to interrogate why Australia ‘so willingly follow[s] the United States into war after pointless war’. It is a timely and important question. Defence Minister Peter Dutton in a 17 September interview indicated that should conflict between China and the US arise with respect to Taiwan then Australia would likely support the US: ‘As to whether [the Communist Party of China] decide to do something in regard to Taiwan, in that case what is the American response and we obviously have an alliance with the US … so we need to be realistic about that.’ So after committing itself to fight alongside the US in the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq, the possibility looms that Australia may be drawn into another military conflict alongside its ‘great and powerful friend’.

Crucially, Shortis also divines the cultural and racial prism through which policymaking is conducted, pointing to Australian and American governments’ tendencies to concoct ‘racist narratives which lump government actions together with entire peoples and ignore historic and national complexities and specificities’. She notes that with respect to the alliance relationship’s current major threat unifier, China, assumptions underpinning current policy and diplomacy ‘are still based on a barely updated racist narrative of the yellow peril’, while acknowledging the ‘[entirely legitimate] concerns about the actions of the Chinese government, on the Chinese mainland and outside it’.

Acknowledging and recognising the cultural and racial baggage that continue to attach themselves to Australian and American policy formulation and communication is critical not simply for the purposes of enhancing Australia’s relationships on the global stage but for the country’s domestic harmony. Worryingly, a Scanlon Foundation survey last year that tested Australian attitudes towards specific national groups showed that 47 per cent of respondents held negative views towards Chinese-Australians. And in an Australia–China Relations Institute/

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8 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 71.
9 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 12.
11 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 30.
12 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 56.
13 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 52.
Business Intelligence and Data Analytics poll conducted this year, about four in ten Australians said they believed that ‘Australians of Chinese origin can be mobilised by the Chinese government to undermine Australia’s interests and social cohesion’.

Occurring alongside this rise of division and suspicion in the Australian public sphere is a recrudescence of the Anglosphere, evident in the way the scope of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing partnership has been expanded and applied more broadly across the conduct of Australian foreign policy. Described by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade this year as ‘a vital strategic alliance and key to Australia’s interests’, the grouping, with nudging from Australia and the US, coordinated to exclude Chinese telecommunications company Huawei from their domestic networks, issued a joint statement condemning Beijing’s actions in Hong Kong, and, to an extent, welcomed an Australia push to lend an economic dimension to the partnership through means of coordinating economic responses to COVID-19. This is not to say that these decisions are devoid of merit; rather that their execution via a grouping with a distinct lack of non-Anglo membership sends its own particular message.

The reflexive embrace of the Anglosphere is evident, too, in the AUKUS partnership, an exclusively Anglo-Saxon grouping purporting to take the lead in the promotion of ‘security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific’. Prime Minister Scott Morrison confidently declared the

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15 Elena Collinson and Paul Burke, _UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2021: Australian views on the Australia-China relationship_, Australia-China Relations Institute and the Centre for Business Intelligence and Data Analytics, University of Technology Sydney, 16 June 2021. [https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/utsacribida-poll-2021-australian-views-australia-china-relationship](https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/utsacribida-poll-2021-australian-views-australia-china-relationship)


partnership to be one ‘that will benefit all in our region’. The defence minister’s insistence that ‘[t]here has been a universal acceptance of the plan, the logic, and the vision of AUKUS’ sidelines reservations expressed by Indonesia, Malaysia and, to a degree, the Philippines.

Shortis wants the political class, the foreign policy ‘blob’ and the Fourth Estate held to account for their general unwillingness to subject the alliance to the blowtorch of scrutiny. Both major parties are united in declining to turn too critical an eye on any aspect of Australia’s relationship with America. The gentle criticisms in 2016 floated by then-Deputy Leader of the Opposition Tanya Plibersek – ‘there have been times when we have made mistakes because of the alliance’ – and Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong – ‘the fact that the alliance with the US is central to Australia’s foreign and security policy has never meant that we trade away our values’ – are now a distant echo.

Shortis is particularly scathing of the kid glove treatment afforded to the alliance relationship by the press. The charge sheet here is long. She points to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s describing the White House state dinner between the Prime Minister and then-President Trump as ‘almost...romantic’; the fact that Morrison was ‘generally let off the hook in Australian press coverage’ for having attended a Trump campaign rally; the lack of scrutiny over the joint intelligence facilities at Pine Gap; and the ‘generally congratulatory’ tone of articles on the Morrison government’s response to the American drone strike that killed Iranian Major General Qasem

27 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 17.
28 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 38.
Soleimani. Her book is not short on other examples.

The lack of substantive and dispassionate reflection from these quarters deserves emphasis, and an honest, careful consideration as to why such reflection is lacking needs to be mulled over by those with any kind of a stake in the alliance debate.

But here’s the rub. For all that Our exceptional friend is passionately argued, for all that it is a galvanising call to action through its insistence that we stop accepting existing structures as immoveable and focus instead on how these might be reshaped or dismantled in favour of a more inclusive domestic, regional and global reality, there are no practical means offered for how this might be implemented nor is any alternative myth of national community proffered, much less how it might be achieved. This is acknowledged by Shortis, who says, ‘I don’t know how we do that. I’m not sure I can even imagine what it looks like.’ Instead, she says, ‘The starting point for … radical reshaping needs to be a genuine, historically informed understanding of why Australia behaves as it does in the world, and how deeply that is connected to both our relation-

ship with the United States and the broader histories we share.’ This book, then, can certainly reinvigorate that conversation. But is this enough?

How realistic is it to dislodge the dominant prism through which Australia has viewed the world, namely the tension between its European and North American cultural moorings and the reality of its persistent geopolitical anxiety? It is true that in the 1970s and 1980s Australian governments of both political persuasions, while maintaining the US alliance as the first principle of Australian foreign and defence policy, did not invest the relationship with any new content or meaning? Yet from the mid-90s, as China’s economic rise fuelled its military modernisation, Australia’s anxiety about the region began to bubble slowly once more. And this concern has clearly taken a more concrete form in the new century. The US alliance is so embedded into Australia’s strategic psychology and defence posture that, arguably, the only thing that can rupture it is severe internal political crisis in the US. It is America that will need to give up on the alliance: for Australia likely never will.

29 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 62.
30 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 232.
31 Shortis, Our exceptional friend, p 232.