

Comment by Michael C H Jones

The gloves are off and it looks like China has thrown the gauntlet down to the Obama "pivot" to Asia. China will not be encircled or bottled up on its own shores. China will reclaim its historic maritime territories wherever and whenever and however it chooses. Whether this decision is that of the Central Government in Beijing or of the new rising breed of Party apparatchiks is the only unknown - I suggest the latter. The Communist Party of China is now factionalised, there are no authority figures in the post Deng period capable of genuinely restraining power baronies in the provinces let alone rogue elements in the military forces. The mandate of heaven is in the balance, a process of either political libertarian reform or harsher authoritarian rule has started which will work itself out over the next few decades.

For Australia and its Australasian sphere the solidarity of ASEAN is paramount, and that means primarily Indonesia. China has little respect for Vietnam or the Philippines and as the recent ASEAN Regional Forum has proved Cambodia is a surrogate for Chinese diplomacy. The question is will the other diplomatic dominoes fall? Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia are the keys, probably in that order of strength in terms of resisting Chinese pressure in all its forms - economic, political, social and cultural. Will China rule the world, as according to Marin Jacques, only history will determine. But it has to tame ASEAN, then Japan and India first. And given Australia's commitment to the US Alliance and the latter's focus on the China Seas and Indonesian Straits, China has to up the tempo of the Battle for Australia - no longer just an economic struggle but now a political and cultural clash as well.

Singapore is too minuscule to dominate Indauspac, and Indonesia too dispersed with its geography of thousands of islands. Australia is the foundation economy for stability in the broader oceans region and the US Alliance guarantees this reality geo-strategically. So expect the rapid growth of a very powerful China lobby in the Australian Parliament, far beyond that of the old Taiwan/ROC lobby or that of Danby and his present Israeli lobby. The easiest people in the world to buy are businessmen and the lure of the China dollar is already challenging that of the US. As in the past the flow of Australian academics, trade union leaders, civil servants, politicians and all will accelerate to the PRC rather than the USA. The flow of big spending Chinese tourists will be "mind blowing". It is obvious even to the blind man that the times are a changing.

The response ought to be to engage China on all fronts but particularly in its policies of opening up to the world. Australia for self protection has to interfere in the internal affairs of both China and the US. Decisions made in Beijing and Washington determine Australia's well-being and future - if we believe in Democracy and Human Rights, it has to be global democracy and human rights. The strengthening of global institutions such as the ICC, WTO, G20 and UN Agencies are the only limitations on the rampant power and likely decent into confrontation by the PRC and USA.

The days of Australia's "bludge" in Asia or excuses and rationalisations for non-engagement are over. Like China we face some hard realities. A growing independence, or at least more equal partnership with the USA, or a growing subservience to Chinese demands. Do we exchange one hegemony for another and what does a Chinese hegemony mean for Australia's traditional values? Indeed in a multicultural society increasingly dominated by Indian and Chinese ethnic migrant groups does it matter? Most Australians do not understand parliamentary democracy and therefore do not care. Most take human rights for granted. Few are willing to participate in the processes of governance unless their own mercenary interests are involved. We suffer the results of decades of inattention to standards by both major political parties. Our education system is already lagging behind the best in Asia.

Neither Julia Gillard nor Tony Abbott have any of the answers, that has been proven a dozen times over the last two years. Both political parties are seriously deficient such that the nice people in the Greens are made to look good. There are no outstanding leaders in the Corporations and Unions, just an assortment of kids who could not even be described as "powder puffs". A few deaths in Afghanistan has the country in national mourning. I am forced to think of the generations re my father at 23 was killing Japanese at an airfield in Milne Bay, PNG; at 23 I was a veteran of 8 years struggle against the Vietnam War and then Conscription, at 23 my son was swanning around Europe courtesy of his old man's money. And that was ten years ago. Since then the social situation has deteriorated alarmingly. Now I hear you mutter, this is an older man's rant? Perhaps. But should the Chinese PLA decide to settle the Taiwan question militarily, the North Koreans go really over the top, the Israelis take out the Iranian nuclear facilities, or the bloodbath in Syria become immensely grimmer, then we shall see the character of the Australian people. And the radio "shock-jocks" and Murdoch journalists will be little help, rather impediments to sane policies as usual.