

What you can do for us, not what we can do for you

Rory Medcalf

The Australian Financial Review

27 June 2013

P. 55

The nomination this week of America's new ambassador to Australia coincides with a poll suggesting that his job may not be all plain sailing.

John Berry had many claims, including as an exceptional administrator. This is just as well, as Canberra may prove a demanding test of alliance management.

The current ambassador, Jeffrey Bleich, will leave a relationship in good shape. Since 1951, the security alliance between Australia and the United States has been one of the few constants in Asia, and this has been reinvigorated on his watch.

But below the surface, new polling raises disturbing questions about how that relationship would fare in a crisis.

While it seems that most Australians are comfortable with US forces being based in this country, only a minority supports the idea of Australia fighting alongside those forces if war came to our Indo-Pacific region. The poll, released this week by the Lowy Institute, suggests that Australians are becoming more interested in what their ally can do for them, but less so in what they can do for their ally.

This is important. Since President Barack Obama's visit in 2011, it has been widely assumed that US-Australia ties are integral to America's "pivot" or rebalance to Asia, a strategy driven in large measure by the rise of China.

For Washington, the poll numbers still bear some good news. A large majority of Australians, 82 per cent, consider the alliance important to their security.

Most Australians, a solid 61 per cent, are comfortable with US forces being based on their territory. This is despite the hullabaloo in some quarters over those marines in Darwin. No need to choose between China and the US

One heartening result for Berry and Bleich alike is that the poll indicates the overwhelming majority of Australians, something like 87 per cent, do not feel their country has to choose between the US and China. And despite the obvious importance of the Chinese economy, 48 per cent of Australians think America is their nation's most important foreign relationship overall, while 37 per cent say the same about China.

Even so, what is extraordinary is that more than a third of Australians think China matters more than America, despite a lack of affinity in political values or the fact that the US is still far and away our largest source of foreign investment as well as being our strategic ally.

The biggest worry for Berry, though, should be what the poll reveals about Australian public attitudes when it comes to what allies are meant to do – help each other when trouble looms.

The polling suggests Australia's support for future US-led military action in the Middle East or Asia can hardly be taken for granted.

Australians are evenly divided on whether this country should act in accordance with its US alliance if that meant supporting war in the Middle East such as against Iran: 48 per cent would be willing to see Australia support America in such a conflict, with 51 per cent against. This is understandable in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan. Not much support for war in the Indo-Pacific

But the real test would come if Washington called on its ally to support a war in Australia's own region. There are several scenarios for such a crisis, all of them unlikely but imaginable. It could start via a Chinese confrontation with Japan or the Philippines, or a regime collapse in North Korea.

According to the poll, only 36 per cent of Australians would support their nation acting in accordance with its US alliance if that meant supporting war in Asia, "for instance in a conflict between China and Japan", while 60 per cent would disagree with such a move – 31 per cent of them strongly. This presumes that Australia could choose not to support the US if its forces came under attack in Asia, even though that could mean a breach of the alliance. Does all this mean that the recent strengthening of US-Australia security ties disguises a dangerously brittle bond?

Not necessarily. In Australian politics, the alliance has bipartisan support; only the Greens would be comfortable seeing it break down. But this new window on the public mood reveals what a difficult task a future leader will have in persuading the population that supporting American-led military action is in Australia's interests – if indeed it is.

If Australia finds itself on the brink of an armed crisis in Asia, there will be a premium on leadership, far-sighted strategy, cool-headed policy and skilful diplomacy. In an era of change in Asia, a fractious and distracted Australia needs those qualities more than ever.