

Bush Administration's 'Asia guru' admits Australia can scuttle US plans for war with China

Throughout Australia's brief history, it has been a common refrain among those who have passed for geopolitical strategists that the nation were always in need of some "great and powerful friend" to safeguard our national security—or to dispense with polite euphemisms, an external imperial power to protect us from our Asian neighbours. In reality, however, the truth was always the converse: the British Empire went to the enormous effort and expense of colonising Australia in the first place precisely because it needed a strategic outpost whence to project military force and political influence into Asia from a safe remove, if it was to preserve its predominance in world maritime trade. Likewise today, the United States would have us believe that we should effectively surrender any pretence of national sovereignty and make both our military and our territory mere extensions of the "democratic" USA's, lest we be subjugated by a rapacious "authoritarian" China. In an interview published 15 September by the *Australian Financial Review*, however, former George W. Bush administration Asia strategist Dr Michael J. Green candidly admits that the US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific over the last decade has been less about defending allies than it has about countering, and at worst "containing" China, to maintain US primacy. Green's remarks also reveal worry among some US foreign policy circles that unless Washington brings its pet Taiwanese separatist forces to heel, they may declare independence from China and thus unilaterally trigger a conflict the USA either does not want, or is not ready for. Whether he intended it or not, Green also effectively acknowledged that it is actually Canberra that has the upper hand in the US-Australia relationship, in that it could scotch the USA's plans at any time—and thus prevent the world war they are needlessly leading us towards—simply by denying it permission to conduct operations from Australian territory, as indeed Canberra did once before when tensions last flared over Taiwan two decades ago.

In the words of Sydney University historian Prof. James Curran, who interviewed him for the *AFR*, Green "is a member of a bipartisan American foreign policy elite that has maintained the US alliance structure in East Asia for the last two decades". He served on the US National Security Council (NSC) in 2001-05, first as director for Asian affairs covering Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand and then (in 2004-05) as Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and Senior Director for Asian Affairs, with responsibility for all of South and East Asia. Prior to joining the Bush Administration, Green held various executive and teaching roles at Johns Hopkins University's prestigious School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in 1992-2001, and was a senior advisor to the US Defence Department's Office of Asia-Pacific Affairs in 1997-2000. And both before and after his stint with the NSC, Green held positions with an array of influential Anglo-American think tanks, including the London-based Institute for International Security Studies (IISS); the Lowy Institute in Sydney, where he is a non-resident senior fellow (p. 10); the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in New York; and most recently as Senior Vice President for Asia, Japan Chair, and Henry A. Kissinger Chair in international politics, diplomacy, and national security policy at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC. In May of this year Green relocated to Australia, to take the job of chief executive officer at Sydney University's United States Studies Centre (USSC).

Delicate balance

According to Green, his "mentors and advisors in Washington" unanimously encouraged him to take the job (despite the apparent demotion), because "Australia is on the front lines of strategic competition with China in a way it wasn't a few years ago" and therefore "the decisions Australia makes are much more consequential to the United States in the region than they were even a few years ago". Among the mentors and advisors Green presumably consulted is Kurt Campbell, author of the Obama Administration's 2011 military "Asia Pivot" and now senior coordinator for Asia in the Biden Administration. The two are close friends and collaborators, who have worked together on and off, both in and out of government, since the mid-1990s. Green's remarks to Curran, however, suggest significant concerns among his wing of the Washington establishment with the confrontational approach Campbell and Biden have taken towards China, particularly the tacit encouragement of separatism in Taiwan, and evince a desire that Canberra use its influence to have them tone things down a bit.



Michael Green (right) with Kurt Campbell (second from left) at a CSIS event in 2014. Photo: Screenshot

"I'm a realist in international affairs", Green said. "I believe that a stable equilibrium and a balance of power matters", thus his career devotion to maintaining so-called alliance structures—otherwise known as preserving the "*pax Americana*", as then-Senator Joe Biden denounced the Bush Administration's foreign policy in 1992, by preventing the emergence of any independent power in Eurasia which might rival the United States. "But *that does not mean we have to contain China*", he warned (emphasis added). Whilst he praised the turnaround in the Democratic Party from the days of the Obama administration when "one wing of that party, which was represented by people like [Secretary of State] John Kerry and [Ambassador to the United Nations and later National Security Advisor] Susan Rice, were supporters of what [Chinese President] Xi Jinping called the 'new model of great power relations'—this idea that we should compromise and reach a grand bargain with China to avoid conflict, even if that damages our alliances", Green hinted that things have now swung too far in the other direction. In contrast to the Labor government in Australia, and even the "hawkish conservative LDP [Liberal Democratic Party government] members in Tokyo", who all say that their goal is a productive relationship with China (albeit on entirely their own terms), "there's *no narrative in Washington right now* coming from the administration, or Congress, about *how we actually live with China*." (Emphasis added.) Even the late former LDP Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe—who was instrumental in reviving Nazi geopolitical theorist Karl Haushofer's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" for the modern era,¹ and was the intellectual father of the US-Japan-Australia-India Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—had as his "ultimate goal" a stable working relationship with China, Green said. "I think that's a good characterisation of the Albanese government's goal as well", he added, but "that's not an intellectual journey the Biden administration has completed."

Green downplayed the chances of the Biden Administration actually provoking a conflict with China, suggesting that once the upcoming midterm Congressional elections were over it might moderate its hard line in light of the fact (according to CSIS surveys) that "the constituencies for actually decoupling from China, for cutting China off, are pretty small", comprising only 20 per cent of respondents across the business community, "thought leaders" and the general public in either the USA or Australia. And although members of Congress from both houses and both parties, along with various Administration officials up to and including President Joe Biden himself, have publicly encouraged Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) with promises of political and even military support in the event of an "invasion" by China, Green said that he had been part of a delegation sent by the Administration in March to tell her privately to cool it. "I think we need to, in the United States, remain true to our commitments, under the *Taiwan Relations Act* [of 1979], [to] help Taiwan with its defence articles and preparations, [and] strengthen our own preparations, should we have to intervene. ... The other thing we have to do, though, is engage Taipei, because the risks to a China war over Taiwan are existential both in terms of what defeat would mean for the Chinese Communist Party or what nuclear war would mean for all of us." Referring to Tsai and the DPP as a "wildcard that could cause Beijing to change its calculations", he said: "So the more we're engaging with her, the more we're talking to her, the more it will reinforce the growing consensus in Taiwan not to be the one to change the *status quo*. Because when I was in the Bush administration, and I was going to talk to then-President Chen Shui-Bian [in office 2000-08], we were very worried he was going to unilaterally bring it on."

Left unsaid is that what killed off any prospect of a US-China conflict over Taiwan back then was Australia's refusal to be involved. And whether he intended it or not, Green's further remarks map the route by which, had it the courage, the Albanese government could do so again.

'We need access'

Chen, Tsai's predecessor as leader of the DPP, had been making noises about independence from China since he co-founded the party in 1986, including as a member of the island province's legislature in 1990-94 and mayor of Taipei, the capital city, in 1994-98. Things took a more serious turn, however, when as president in late 2003 he proposed a referendum on the subject, to be held the following March. Bush poured cold water on the idea by declaring on 9 December 2003—at a joint press conference in the White House with China's then-Premier Wen Jiabao, no less—that "The United States government's policy is 'one China', based upon the three communiqués [signed by the USA and People's Republic of China in 1972, 1979 and 1982] and the *Taiwan Relations Act*. ... And the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose."

Numerous reports since, however, hold that behind the scenes the Bush Administration was gauging support among its Asia-Pacific "allies" for the idea of letting Chen off the leash to provoke a stand-off with China, in the hope that the latter would back down, giving the USA a "democratic ally"—and more to the point, an unsinkable aircraft carrier, as the island was referred to in WWII—a mere 100 miles off China's coast. In August 2004, however, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer put paid to any such plans via the simple expedient of declaring, during a visit to Beijing, that the 1958 Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) security treaty did not oblige Australia to assist. "The ANZUS treaty is invoked in the event of one of our two countries ... being attacked, so some other military activity elsewhere in the world, be it in Iraq or anywhere else for that matter, doesn't automatically invoke the ANZUS treaty", he said.

Then as now, the issue was not what meagre military contribution Australia might make, but the fact that the United States has zero capability to mount a major, sustained campaign anywhere in the so-called Indo-Pacific unless it has Australia as a base of operations. As Green told Curran: “our alliance is now going to become much more interdependent.... The US is going to be relying on Australia just because of geography. Western Australia, North Australia and the geography of parts of Australia are critical now as the US and US allies move from an Asia Pacific strategy to an Indo-Pacific strategy. *We need access: we need purchase on the Indian Ocean* and so geographically ... [and] in terms of military operations and intelligence, *the US is going to be more dependent on Australia*, there’s no two ways around it.” (Emphasis added.) Which means that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese can stop the USA starting World War III over Taiwan with one word: “No.” If Downer—a shameless Anglo-American sycophant whose boss, PM Liberal PM John Howard, Labor rightly ridiculed when he proclaimed Australia the USA’s “Deputy Sheriff” in Asia—could stand up for Australia’s vital interests when it counted most, then what is Albanese’s excuse?

Footnote

[1. “The Nazi roots of the ‘Indo-Pacific strategy’”, AAS, 20 Jan. 2021.](#)

By Richard Bardon, Australian Alert Service, 21 September 2022