

Australia-US (AUSMIN) Strategic Consultations. What To Do About China and the South China Sea

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Region: [Asia](#), [Oceania](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*The Satrap Chronicles of the US imperium will have, near the top of their various ingratiating themes, such Australian politicians as **Senators Linda Reynolds and Marise Payne**. They resemble Siamese consuls, hard to tell apart (robust build, similar of voice and manner). For another, their views form the putty of derivative policy that has characterised a power more interested in being an annex to heft rather than modestly credible as an individual broker.*

The visit to Washington for the Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) saw Reynolds, the defence minister, and foreign minister Payne play the appropriate second fiddle to their US hosts. But do not tell them that. Reynolds was adamant that this was all about friendship, which Australians irritatingly call “mateship”. The term is sociologically questionable, a meretricious one that provides the covering of hollow fellowship. “Mateship means standing side-by-side with your friends with a shared commitment to peace and prosperity,” [she tweeted](#).

Mateship means standing side-by-side with your friends with a shared commitment to peace and prosperity. It was wonderful to meet again with congressional representatives (albeit socially distanced), including members of the Friends of Australia caucus while in Washington DC. pic.twitter.com/8r2g37eq5P

— Linda Reynolds (@lindareynoldswa) [July 31, 2020](#)

An odd thing to say in the context of power interests, but such language is always to be found at these gatherings. “It was wonderful to meet again the congressional representatives (albeit socially distanced), including members of the Friends of Australia caucus while in Washington DC.” Payne also [took care to mention](#) the talks with the Friends of Australia caucus. “Thank you for your continued support & taking time out from a busy legislative agenda in these challenging times.”

Important discussions on Capitol Hill this afternoon with members of the Friends of Australia caucus. Thank you for your continued support & taking time out from a busy legislative agenda in these challenging times. pic.twitter.com/hCbmERXYas

— Marise Payne (@MarisePayne) [July 29, 2020](#)

The caucus in question was established in 2017 as a polite acknowledgment of Australia's unquestioning, not to mention uncritical role, in the projection of US interests. "The Caucus," [explained a release](#) from the Australian embassy in Washington, "is a natural extension of the relationship between our two countries and will further strengthen our enduring bond for years to come."

The AUSMIN gathering was not lacking in irony. That clumsy and awkward term – the "rules-based order" – was used on several occasions during discussions. Given that US **President Donald Trump** finds such rules chafing, preferring to reorder them as much as possible in his image, comments such as the following by Payne were mildly entertaining. Australia and the United States, [she asserted in a tweet](#), "were united in our efforts to address the international challenges associated with COVID-19. #AUSMIN2020 reaffirms our strong alliance & need to maintain a secure, prosperous, inclusive & rules-based #IndoPacific region now and into the future."

🇺🇸 & 🇦🇺 are united in our efforts to address the challenges associated with COVID-19. #AUSMIN2020 reaffirms our strong alliance & the need to maintain a secure, prosperous, inclusive & rules-based #IndoPacific region now & into the future. #USwithAUS <https://t.co/WWPmcdNZ8A> pic.twitter.com/xn6eftp2Fo

— Marise Payne (@MarisePayne) [July 28, 2020](#)

The fallacies of such a pronouncement are viciously glaring, not least in the field of fighting a pandemic which has done little to spur international unity. It has taken a virus to colour in the global fault lines, the divisions of bad faith and acrimony. Canberra, in [boisterously calling for an "independent investigation"](#) into the outbreak of the coronavirus while casting dirt upon the World Health Organization, showed its true and not so independent colours from the Trump administration.

Payne also [seemed to confuse her position](#). No longer was she merely the foreign minister of a state in mateship (read client); she had somehow become a voice for a regional collective, ventriloquised through the US State Department. "I am looking forward to a productive discussion in the interests of our Indo-Pacific region."

The importance of #AUSMIN has never been greater, amid a global pandemic & health, economic & security challenges. I am looking forward to a productive discussion in the interests of our #IndoPacific region. 🇺🇸🇦🇺 pic.twitter.com/RgAxplrNQi

— Marise Payne (@MarisePayne) [July 28, 2020](#)

US **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's** account lacked the dissembling quality of the Australian effort. It was unadorned, blunt. "We started this morning by talking at length about the Chinese Communist Party's malign activity in the Indo-Pacific region and indeed all around the world." He [praised](#) Australia "for standing up for democratic values and the rule of law, despite intense, continued and coercive pressure from the Chinese Community Party to bow to Beijing's wishes."

Pompeo mentioned China nine times; Payne, once. This [seemed to impress](#) the ABC, which

spent its time keeping a tally on the China beating drum. It [also impressed](#) the Fairfax Press. **Matthew Knott** called Payne “a natural diplomat: calm, conflict-averse and doggedly on message”, confusing a reluctance to commit with profundity. Payne was praised for not appearing “a hapless pawn in America’s increasingly tense stand-off with China.”

Think-tankers such as Natasha Kassam from the Lowy Institute were [also taken in by the show](#) of faux independence. China was picking up the qualified signals from Australia, though her evidence was unconvincing and anecdotal. “The condemnation from both China’s ministry of foreign affairs and the Chinese embassy in Canberra was formulaic: boilerplate language that is more of a reflex in the Chinese system rather than anything noteworthy.”

Payne did her superficial best, stiffening at Pompeo’s inflexible belligerence. “The secretary’s positions are his own. Australia’s position is our own.” The “relationship with China is important and we have no intention of injuring it.” Australia and the US had an enduring military alliance, “But most importantly from our perspective, we make our own decisions, our own judgments in the Australian national interests.” This would have come as news to the US State Department.

On the issue of whether Australia would conduct more demonstrative freedom-of-navigation exercises in the South China Sea, the ministers were unforthcoming on detail, though committed to the principle. “Our approach,” [suggested](#) Senator Reynolds, “remains consistent, we will continue to transit through the region in accordance with international law.” Would this involve defiant chest beating? Reynolds would not say, though Australia’s objections are there for all to see [in the submission to the United Nations](#) from last month, which is one of pointed rejection of Chinese claims inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); of the assertion of “historic rights” or “maritime rights and interests” drawn from the “long course of historical practice” in the South China Sea; of China’s drawing of straight base lines linking “the outermost points of maritime features or ‘island groups’ in the South China Sea”.

While signs of difference between Washington and Canberra were being strained by analysts, [the ministers and secretaries were comfortable](#) in expressing “serious concerns over recent coercive and destabilising actions across the Indo-Pacific”, agreeing that Beijing’s claims to the South China Sea had no validity “under international law”. A closer look at the [joint-statement](#) shows little variance between the two countries. “The Secretaries and Ministers discussed practical ways to strengthen our ability to address a range of challenges in a more contested Indo-Pacific, from countering malign grey-zone tactics to deterring aggression in the region.” There is also concern expressed about Hong Kong’s autonomy, the repression of the Uighurs and a nod for Taiwan’s integrity. The satrap did not disappoint.

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