

***Independent Ally:
Australia in an Age of Power Transition***

Shannon Tow
(Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017)

Reviewer: Andrew Carr

The most common perception of Australia's alliance with the United States is one of dependence. This is both the folk tale heard in pubs and the title of the most acclaimed academic study of the alliance—Coral Bell's *Dependent Ally*.¹ In *Independent Ally* Shannon Tow takes careful aim at this perception, puncturing it thoroughly. This book is therefore a valuable contribution to understanding the scope, flexibility and constraints of Australian foreign policy over the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

While the folk tale image of dependence has been critiqued widely, this book tackles the harder task: academic assumptions of dependence. Tow notes that academic theories of alliances and power transitions “suggest that the more a junior ally values its alliance, the more likely it is to want to preserve the alliance by presenting itself as a loyal ally and by eschewing ties with a rising power or another external power” (p. 279). Across six case studies, she shows that Australian diplomatic history reveals a starkly different pattern.

In contrast to the wishes of the British Empire during the first half of the century, the new Australian nation under Alfred Deakin sought to build a security relationship with the United States in the Pacific. Thirty years later Joseph Lyons would abruptly apply heavy tariffs to US goods defying both Anglo and American wishes. Meanwhile Robert Menzies, the greatest anglophile to reside in the Lodge, would embrace the pursuit of an alliance with the United States in the face of British opposition.

In a similar vein, Australia often worked independently of Washington's influence in its relationship with China. Gough Whitlam pre-empted Nixon in recognising China, while Bob Hawke developed Australia's disengagement from China after Tiananmen Square with little consultation with the White House. Perhaps most explicitly, John Howard sought—and achieved—a strengthening of relationships with both Beijing and Washington in the 2000s even as China's growing strategic power became undeniable.

¹ Coral Bell, *Dependent Ally* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1988).

Far from being forced to choose one or the other powerful friend, this book presents a picture of a country which carefully shifted its sails, sometimes tacking, sometimes jibing in pursuit of its self-interests. As such, and while recognising the limitations of studying just one country, Tow argues that the alliance literature (much like public debates about ANZUS) overstates how central alliances are to the decisions of smaller states. “Whether Australia engaged or disengaged from a rising power was more often related to Australia’s interests in the rising power than the senior ally’s policies or preferences” (p. 280).

This is a work of meticulous scholarship. Tow has combed both the scholarly and official records and conducted over forty interviews with leading figures to fairly and accurately present the views, choices and deliberations of Australian officials. In detailing this rich history, *Independent Ally* brings to light many significant but largely forgotten events in Australian foreign policy history. Such as Joseph Lyon’s Trade Diversion Act of 1936 which Coral Bell identified as the nadir of the Australia-US relationship in the twentieth century. As well as the intriguing way the Coalition and the Labor Party took different cues and lessons from the Nixon administration’s ‘bifurcated’ approach to China in 1970-71 (pp. 172-3).

Tow also helps to demonstrate that far from simply switching from the declining United Kingdom to the rising United States after World War Two as commonly assumed, Australia “worked to strengthen both relations concurrently” (p. 151). Prime Minister Robert Menzies’ emphasis was always on ‘great and powerful friends’ plural, and this book reveals a leader much more supportive of American engagement than often portrayed. Only as the United Kingdom slipped away from Asia and multilateral bodies such as the United Nations fell short of their promises would the ANZUS alliance remain the only pillar left standing.

To accomplish all this, *Independent Ally*—quite appropriately—assumes readers possess a familiarity with the contours of Australian foreign policy history. And while Tow works hard to present the theoretical concepts and logic as clearly as possible, these do take some chewing through. But they will reward the effort.

Indeed, embracing complexity in our understanding of complex issues—how much freedom do small states have during times of changing power balances such as our own—is fundamental to recognising the actual history of Australia’s relationship with major powers and their underlying dynamics. By operating in the grey zone between what our ally wanted and what it would accept, Australian officials were able to obtain substantial national advantages for its security and prosperity.

By accepting more grey in our own analysis of the present challenges, rather than the black and white view of a ‘China choice’ logic, we may better

understand the opportunities and pathways for Australia to remain both independent and an ally.

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