

SUMMARY

Australia's Imaginary Choice between the United States and China

Ka Po Ng

[University of Niigata Prefecture]

'Choosing' between two alternatives is always at the core of Australian foreign policy debates. As reflected in current discourses, the seemingly conflicting choice this time is between the nation's alliance relationship with the United States and its economic partnership with China. Although various governments have consistently denied the need to choose, the concern about being forced to make such a choice is evident. This essay argues that this 'binary choice' is a false policy presumption. First, Australia does not have to choose because a redistribution of power is still in progress, and the nature of China's rise is not yet clear. No major actor in international relations, including the United States, is ready to commit to a particular course of foreign policy towards China. Hedging their bets therefore represents the best strategy for middle powers like Australia. Second, Australia would not be 'choosing' as defined by the rationalist tradition, because there are built-in factors that are shaping the 'choices' and guiding its 'choosing.' Among these are culture, ideology, experiences of interaction and level of trust. Third, the issue is beyond Australia's choosing because its national interests lie in a regional order, the making of which is not a matter of its choosing. The development of regional politics will not even necessarily be decided by an agreement between the United States and China. Complicated alliance networks may trap the United States in foreign policy dilemmas and put it on a slippery slope. Therefore, Australia should not narrow its perspective to the relations between the United States and China, but rather take a broader regional or even global view.