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AUSTRALIA’S FOREIGN POLICY NEEDS TO BE GROUNDED IN A CLEAR-EYED ASSESSMENT OF OUR NATIONAL INTERESTS.

How should we define Australia’s national interests in a changing world? How should our values underpin Australia’s foreign policy? What should we do differently? How can we do better?

Policy Recommendation

- Australian foreign policy must reflect a clear dedication to the rules-based global order, finding an independent path of the Trump presidency

Australia is one of the most affluent, safe, open and democratic countries in the world. Australia is in the top 20 nations for virtually all social and economic indicators that reflect the status and value of nations (ASPI, 2014).

Australia has been a long supporter of a US-led, consistent, rules-based global order that allows simultaneous support of its values and interests and in which Australia has thrived.

Situated in the important region identified as the Indo-Pacific, the decisions Australia makes in the region cast large shadows over the potential security and prosperity of the nation.

In its foreign policy, and within the international community Australia asserts itself as more than a middle power, with a significant voice in international affairs and organisation. Australia tends to be an internationalist in pursuit of its values, a regionalist in terms of our interests, and bilateralists in terms of its priorities (Bishop, 2015).

As a middle power reliant on its relationships with more powerful nations for security and economical purposes, Australia does not always have the luxury to shape events, and must work hard to respond effectively to events outside of its control (Bishop, 2015).

The international community operates on a slowly shifting power paradigm. Developing countries are seeking a larger chunk from the existing rules-based order (Department of Defence, 2016).

Due to this shifting paradigm of power, Australia finds itself in an uncomfortable middle ground as it tries to balance its principle security alliance with the United States with its largest trading partner and economic powerhouse – China.
The rise of China – attributed to its remarkable economic ascent, its recent economic reconfiguration, its modernisation and gestures toward sociopolitical moderation have brought China into a rivalry with the Indo-Pacific Hegemon – the United States (McDaniel, 2012).

Seeking to project its new influence and power in the region, China has made territorial claims of reef islands and disputed waters, militarising these islands whilst practicing aggressive rhetoric and actions against those who infringe on the sovereignty of the People’s Republic of China (Kurlantzick, 2012).

China desires a rules-based order in the region, however the support for the basis of the concept is where the agreement with the West ends. To an Australian policymaker the concept seems obvious; compliance with international law, free access to global commons, and participation in multilateral institutions, including security arrangements. However, from a Chinese perspective, the fundamental rules would be sovereignty and non-interference (Leslie, 2016).

In its desire to maintain a rules-based order and contain China, the US continues to conduct freedom of navigation (FON) exercises in the South China Sea, whilst simultaneously shoring up alliances in the region and pressuring these allies to conduct their own FON exercises and be more willing to condemn Chinese actions (Spry, 2016).

The United States continues to pressure Australia to conduct its own naval FON exercises on top of its surveillance program within the region – progressively forcing Australia to choose a side.

Australia could sail its comparatively small naval fleet into the South China Sea supporting the US in enforcing the rules-based order, however this risks escalating the issue (Goedecke, 2016).

China has responded negatively to these exercises, specifically naming Australia’s involvement in the disagreement and identifying any potential actions as damaging to their bilateral relationship (Carney, 2016).

A new, more unpredictable US president adds more vitriol into the region. President Donald Trump has given conflicting accounts of his plan for the Indo-Pacific, heavily criticising China, breaking the ‘One China’ policy and prompting fears of a trade war or more physical confrontation in the South China Sea (Carney, 2017). China has responded negatively with at least one senior Chinese military official stating that war with the US is becoming a practical reality (Szoldra, 2017).
Australia cannot risk being dragged into another Iraq War debacle – supporting the US in a unilateral, unsanctioned war. The rhetoric of Donald Trump has further inflamed tensions with China and places pressure on the ‘friend to all’ position Australia pursues in the region.

The divisive nature of the Trump presidential campaign as well as the list of executive orders he has implemented regarding indiscriminate immigration bans to those people from war-torn countries and the indefinite ban of Syrian refugees are arguably in opposition to Australian values and interests which are strongly based on international law and the protection of human rights.

Furthermore, the Trump condemnation of an Australia-US refugee deal negotiated late in the Obama presidency and his attitude towards Malcolm Turnbull, describing his phone call to the Australian prime minister as the ‘worst of the day’ out of a series of calls to world leaders, abruptly ending it more than 30 minutes early offer an opportunity for Australia to reassess exactly what it seeks from ANZUS and what it’s ready to invest to secure that (Hawker, 2017).

Former prime minister Paul Keating has called for a more independent foreign policy, focusing less on the US reliance and more on forging and strengthening alliances in the Indo-Pacific (Sales and Wearring, 2016).

Australia’s strong alliances in the Indo-Pacific with Japan, South Korea and its potential to further strengthen ties with ASEAN could allow Australia to lean on others in the region to maintain collective responsibility over how to enforce a rules-based order, relying less on the dominance of the US.

Australia’s values and interests must be taken into consideration in respect to its foreign policy. A dedication to a rules-based order and multilateralism underpinned by Australian values and interests provide the foundation of Australian foreign policy – its prevalence perhaps never more overstated (rules-based order appears 56 times in the 2016 Defence White Paper).

In his preparation of executive orders minimising the US role in the UN and other multilateral institutions, Trump has shown a lack of commitment to upholding the rules-based global order (Fisher, 2017).

If a Trump presidency wishes to move away from such established norms and implement questionable policies, then Australia must exercise its own autonomy to distance itself from the US and avoid being captured as a pawn in Sino-US Chess.
Australia’s dedication to a rules-based global order means it wishes to appease no particular master but work within a system. If both Australia’s most prominent relationships cannot work within this system than Australia’s must cement its dedication to the rules based order through action, or face the prospects that they are operating under empty rhetoric employed as necessary – and should deviate from the middle road and pick a side.
AUSTRALIA CONFRONTS A RANGE OF STRATEGIC, SECURITY AND TRANSNATIONAL CHALLENGES.

How can Australia best deal with instability beyond our borders? How can our foreign policy, including our overseas development assistance program, support a more prosperous, peaceful and stable region? How should our international engagement work to protect Australia against transnational security threats, such as terrorism?

Policy Recommendations

- Continue or increase current levels of aid to our immediate region so as not to lose influence
- Continue to utilise multilateralism and partnerships to incorporate aid for trade with an end goal of entering economic partnerships with aid recipients

Australia has deep strategic security and economic interests in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The geography of the archipelago of Australia’s immediate north will always have particular significance to our security and prosperity (Department of Defence, 2016).

The stability of Southeast Asia and the Oceania provides a front line against illegal activities, the foundation for prosperity, and an uninterrupted trade route for the flow of Australian goods.

Approximately two thirds of Australia’s exports pass through the South China Sea and the island corridors north of Australia (Bateman, 2013). Any internal or external conflicts between countries can directly impact upon the prosperity of Australia.

Australian aid plays a significant role in promoting the stability of a variety of countries within the Indo-Pacific - For the 2016/17 period 90% of Australia’s aid will focus on this region. Australia’s aid program aims to reduce poverty and contribute to sustainable economic growth (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016).

In the most recent budget Australia has significantly slashed its funding of Australian aid, cutting $224 million from the aid program and subsequently seeing the country fall from top 10 OECD donors list (Roggeveen, 2016).
Direct cuts to the Australian aid program risk its international influence weakening (Roggeveen, 2016). This short sightedness of resources could be capitalised upon by countries seeking to replace or rival Australian influence – China has massively increased their aid budget and in specific made donations to Pacific Island countries. Australia must ensure that it remains the partner of choice for its neighbours (Roggeveen, 2016).

The alternative to increasing aid or at least staying competitive is that Australia will ultimately have more money to invest domestically to repair a budget deficit – however the investment into the region requires massive foresight to see that a stable and prosperous region eventually will see a demand for more of the luxuries Australians enjoy and an ensuing higher demand for exports (ASEAN is already Australia’s second biggest trading partner) (Goydych and Matthews, 2016).

Australia can best advance its own interests through establishing economic partnerships with aid recipients.

The establishment of aid for trade practices focuses on building lasting and inclusive economic success. Aid for trade supports developing countries’ efforts to better participate in and benefit from the global rules-based trading system and implement domestic reforms (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016).

Australia’s aid for trade investments are made through multilateral, regional and bilateral networks. The majority of aid for trade capital is administered through bilateral country agreements and regional programs (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016).

Former aid recipients China and India have demonstrated what can be achieved through sustainable and inclusive economic growth. One of Australia’s closest neighbours is poised for this level of growth – Indonesia has experienced relatively strong economic growth in recent years, reaching middle income status and achieving substantial development progress (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015). This growth benefits Australia and contributes to regional stability and prosperity allowing a more economic relationship to replace an aid based.

Australia’s national interests are directly correlated to the success of its neighbours, they are the first line of defence against a plethora of issues that affect Australia. The wealthier these states become the better positioned they are to respond to threats and engage in trade - providing Australia with a great opportunity to participate in collective regional security and stimulate further trade in the region.
• Continue to support the fight against ISIS within the US led coalition framework

Since the devastating 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, Australia has worked alongside the US, showing unwavering support to fight terrorism in multiple theatres across the globe – including Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the wake of the US-led Iraq invasion an extremist ideology and terrorist organisation re-emerged and consolidated in the wake of US military drawdown – the Islamic State (ISIS).

At its base ISIS is a Salafist jihadist militant group that subscribes to the fundamentalist doctrine of Wahhabi Sunni Islam.

ISIS commands as many as 31,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq, in addition to tens of thousands of fighters who have pledged allegiance to the group worldwide, including groups within Southeast Asia (Lister, 2014).

Due to the atrocities committed by the group against civilians, minorities, attacks on the US supported government of Iraq and an extreme anti-Western view characterised by a desire for offensive jihad, Australia among other countries have joined an international coalition of actors dedicated to disrupting, degrading and ultimately defeating the terrorist threat of ISIS (Department of Defence, 2016).

After the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014, foreign fighters from over 80 countries heeded the call to wage jihad in Iraq and Syria – Australia (per capita) has provided some of the highest numbers of fighters entering the fray (Zammit, 2015).

ISIS has taken root in a sociopolitical vacuum in the Middle East capitalising on the fragility of the states within it operates. ISIS has effectively used its strong social media presence and saturation of content entailing life within the caliphate to operationalise ISIS sympathisers to conduct lone wolf attacks - Australia has not been invulnerable (the Martin Place Siege).

Of the US-led coalition Australia provides the second largest contingency of forces on the ground (second to the US). Australia provides training and advice to Iraqi security forces, in addition to providing an Air Task Group to fly combat sorties and support operations in Iraq and Syria (ABC, 2016).
The multilateral nature of the fight against ISIS is made possible by the superior nature and dedication of US resources to the fight. Australia must continue to readjust its commitments in response to US drawdown or accelerated contribution.

In the light of any accelerated campaign, the US could call for Australian military personnel to assist in a ground campaign. Since the rise of ISIS numerous politicians and military leaders in the West have called for this style of campaign. History has shown that military dominion, especially in Iraq does not lead to victory and stability (Mansoor, 2016). The power vacuum and instability that arose in the wake of the 2011 US troop drawdown is evidence of this. Australia must draw a line in the sand at this prospect.
Bibliography


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