

Explaining Australia's foreign policy

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White Paper recommendation: Develop a narrative which explains how Australia pursues its national interests and the role it will play in Asia in the 21st century.

There is a growing public perception that Australia's foreign policy behaviour is determined by other states. That Australia is directed by the United States when it discusses security concerns and influenced by China when it pursues economic interests. This 'dependence' perception represents an inaccurate but easily understood assessment of Australian foreign policy since the mid-2000s. Its prevalence is growing and increasingly damaging to the country's national interests.

This submission argues that the primary task of the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper should be to develop a narrative that replaces the 'dependence' or 'China choice' frameworks with one of the government's making. The new narrative must explain how Australia pursues its national interests and the role it will play in Asia in the 21st century. It must be simple, direct and easily communicated. This is a task ideally suited to the mandate of the White Paper. If successful it would make a substantial contribution to supporting Australian diplomacy overseas and supporting resilience at home.

Narratives are often seen as mere window-dressing. But how domestic and international audiences discuss and explain the actions of a state directly contributes to the ultimate influence and impact of that state. This is widely known to politicians and diplomats and increasingly to the military under the concept of 'strategic communication'. Language is a form of power politics which middle powers like Australia must master if they are to manage an increasingly difficult environment.

Why this matters

As a middle-sized country Australia finds itself in the uncomfortable position of not having the power to substantially shape or resolve the US-China competition, yet it is still large enough that its every action is scrutinized for signs of loyalty or abandonment. While policymakers reject the idea they are dependent upon either country, or that they may face a 'China choice', their own explanations for the nation's actions have failed to gain widespread acceptance. Descriptions based on what the government is doing, such as 'pursuing Australia's national interests'¹ may have the virtue of truth, but lack a compelling story that tells how and where this occurs. It is akin to saying 'our purpose in life is to keep breathing'.

The costs of this approach are several. First, audiences local and international can and do misunderstand or misinterpret Australian policy. What was deliberated and deliberate can look ad-hoc and random. This can cause domestic voters to lose faith in the direction of government policy, or lead foreign governments to see patterns of behaviour that are not there. Second, in the absence of a clear

¹ The Hon. Julie Bishop, 'Australia in China's Century', Speech to conference on Australia in China's Century, 30 May 2014.

framework, alternate and simplistic explanations will emerge to fill the gap. Such as the present notion that large states dictate the behaviour of smaller states. These ideas can be hard to dislodge, reducing the opportunity and credibility of future Australian initiatives. Finally, each part of government and civil society will interpret the pursuit of 'the national interest' differently, leading to competition over resources and policy direction. Siloes become embedded and the basis for cooperation is reduced without a common language and sense of direction. Thus the concern in recent years that while Australia's intelligence and security agencies have looked at Asia with growing unease, the economic arms of government view it through the prism of growth and opportunity.

Narratives in Australian foreign policy

Australia has employed several foreign policy narratives over the 20th century. The most recent —and arguably successful— was that of Australia's 'enmeshment' (later 'engagement') with Asia. While Australians had already been visiting and trading with Asia for several decades before this narrative was developed, it was valuable for three reasons. It outlined a clear and easily understood role, providing *transparency* for Australian foreign policy. This simple explanation for what the government was doing allowed domestic voters and external elites to easily view specific Australian actions during the 1980s and 1990s and fit them within a larger framework. Engagement was also important as a *legitimation* device, helping the government shape the domestic debate, restricting alternatives and creating a sense of inevitability and 'common sense' for the government's approach. Finally, through clearly setting out what the government was trying to achieve, engagement enabled the *coordination* of executive, legislative, public service, business and civil society actions. This improved the efficiency of Australia's resources for foreign policy influence, and reduced the chance of cross-purpose behaviour.

Engagement is no longer a viable narrative. As I argued in a recent book² the engagement metaphor suggests an ambition which has already happened (Australia is deeply integrated into Asia) and it suggests a looser relationship with the region than might be ideal (engagements are not yet a full commitment and can be called off). When the governments of Kevin Rudd (2007-2010; 2013) and Julia Gillard (2010-2013) attempted to re-align their foreign policy along the framework of engagement, they often adopted policies inappropriate to the times (such as new forums in a region already overloaded with them) and struggled to explain their approach, timing and ultimate ambition. A new narrative for Australia is therefore needed.

A new narrative for a new century

Building a new foreign policy narrative is a task ideally suited for Foreign Policy White Papers. These documents are ill-suited for making bold predictions about the future, and do not need to address the same challenges of cost, timescale, and doctrine which determine much of the content and shape of Defence White Papers. Beyond the allocation of resources, the language used to explain how, why, where and when Australia will act, is one of the few areas the Government and public service can substantially influence, if not control. An important caveat here, is that while public servants and

² Andrew Carr, *Winning the Peace: Australia's campaign to change the Asia-Pacific*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015), Chapter 12 – Conclusion, pages 298-308.

scholars can help build and advise, the development of a narrative will only be valuable if it is embraced by those tasked with deciding and explaining the government's message (Politicians) and fine-tuned through the skills they alone have (audience awareness, communication and persuasion). This effort will also take years to fully refine and embed in public consciousness, as well as through policy levers.

As such, this submission does not presume to offer a specific narrative. But the key parts of a successful narrative can be identified. Following the small but developed academic literature³, there are four features of a narrative which should be considered:

- *Agent*: Who are we and what resources do we have?
- *Scene* – Where is the action taking place? Are regional and global issues divisible or do they represent a seamless whole?
- *Agency* – What means or instruments will we employ? What characterizes the relationships between us and others, and what evidences supports this picture?
- *Purpose* – What are our motives or reasons for this behaviour?

Or to put it another way, “Who are we and what are we trying to do?” Two features stand out:

Scene: This submission has focused on Australia's narrative towards Asia for two reasons. First, it is the region with the most significant foreign policy challenges and opportunities for Australia. Second, because Australia's role in Asia is still extremely pliable. By contrast, Australia will always have a defined and dominant role in the South Pacific by virtue of its size, and a defined and minority role in other regions by virtue of distance. A defined narrative for Asia would make a substantial contribution to Australia's influence and access in the region, and build domestic support for the costs this entails.

Purpose: The narrative of ‘engagement’ shone because it had a robust sense of purpose. Australia was re-orienting towards its own region to finally embrace its place in the world. Compare this to the largely direction-less formulation adopted since the 2000s that Australia is a middle power type country seeking its national interests. Purpose is also the avenue for the most creativity and innovation. The heart of the Foreign Policy White Paper should therefore focus on explaining what the purpose of Australian foreign policy is, so as to answer the following questions clearly and succinctly:

- What does Australia want Asia to look like in 2030?
- What role will Australia play to help the region achieve that vision?
- What are the right pathways (tools, partners etc.) to achieve this vision?
- How important is it to Australia that this ambition is achieved?

A foreign policy narrative that answers these questions will go a long way to ensuring Australia can pursue its national interests free of international perceptions of dependence and with robust public support at home.

³ Recent noteworthy examples include Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: the Art of Strategic Communication*, (Washington D.C: Georgetown University press, 2012); Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates*, (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2011).