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No. 165/2013 dated 9 September 2013

Australia under Abbott: What It Means for the Region

By Sam Bateman

Synopsis

The incoming Abbott Government is likely to place greater emphasis on bilateral relations and be less sensitive to regional concerns than its predecessor. How will this affect Canberra's ties with its neighbours, especially in Southeast Asia?

Commentary

AFTER SIX years of centre-left government by the Australian Labor Party (ALP), Australia is under new leadership. The right-wing Liberal–National Party (LNP) Coalition led by Tony Abbott swept to power in Canberra in the just-concluded 7 September 2013 federal elections.

With broad bipartisan agreement on the fundamentals, foreign and defence policies were not major issues during the election campaign. However with the LNP in power, some differences are likely in the way in which Canberra relates to the region. This could include a greater emphasis on bilateral relations, particularly economic and trade issues, and reduced sensitivity to regional concerns, including with people smuggling and border protection.

Defence policy

Bipartisanship was most evident with defence policy. Both sides of parliament expressed a commitment during the campaign to return defence spending to two percent of GDP although neither had a clear idea of how to achieve this. The LNP is generally committed to current defence force development plans. However, it intends to have a fresh look at the two “big ticket” items – the new submarine programme and Australia's participation in the US Joint Strike Fighter project.

Maintaining a strong alliance with the US will be a key strategic objective for the incoming Abbott Government. Traditionally the LNP attaches more importance to the US Alliance than does Labor. This may lead to Canberra more actively encouraging US military access to Australian bases. It will also be coupled with less sensitivity to any regional concerns to such a development, including from China.

The LNP also said that on taking office, it will initiate an efficiency review of the structure and processes of the defence ministry and plans on a new Defence white paper within the next 18 months. The overall objective will be to cut cost wherever possible. The Defence Materiel Organisation will be a particular target for the efficiency

review in view of perceptions that its processes are unduly cumbersome and inhibit good relations with defence industry.

Foreign policy

A debate between Australia's Foreign Minister Bob Carr and the Shadow Foreign Minister Julie Bishop at the Lowy Institute in Sydney early in the election campaign highlighted some differences in their foreign policies. The ALP has a long-standing emphasis on multilateralism and international cooperation that led for example, to Australia's successful campaign for a position on the UN Security Council. On the other hand, the Abbott Government will likely focus on bilateral relations and individual arrangements while bringing economic and trade policies into closer alignment with foreign policy. It will give greater attention to finalising free trade agreements with regional trading partners.

An LNP election catch-cry was "more Jakarta, less Geneva". Nevertheless, the Abbott Government is locked into Australia's current multinational commitments: notably, the rotating chair of the UN Security Council and hosting next year's meeting of the G20.

With both the new foreign minister and probable new defence minister, Senator David Johnston, coming from Western Australia, Canberra is likely to continue the recent "Look West" element in foreign policy. While the Labor Government paid lip service to developments in the Indian Ocean and Australia's interests in that region, the new leadership under Abbott may be more proactive, especially with building the bilateral relationship with India.

However, when it comes to the Indian Ocean region and Australia's relations with both Africa and the Indian sub-continent, there is one area where Australia will be stepping backwards, and that is with foreign aid. As part of the LNP's plan to reduce expenditure, it included a AUD\$4.5 billion cut to international aid over the next four years – so much for Australia's commitment to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the alleviation of global poverty.

Other possible new initiatives in foreign policy include a more conciliatory approach to Fiji as the 'rogue' nation of the South Pacific, and the introduction of a "reverse" Colombo Plan. Under the latter plan, instead of subsidising foreign students coming to Australia, the government will support Australian students undertaking studies in regional countries.

Border protection

Asylum seeker and border protection policies were a major area of policy difference between the two parties during the election campaign. They are also the area where changes by the Abbott Government may have the greatest impact on regional relations.

Abbott's LNP played on community concern over the large surge in the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat. They attributed this surge to the "soft" policies of the ALP Government. The Labor solution of transferring asylum seekers to Papua New Guinea, from where they would not be entitled to resettlement in Australia, had also run into difficulties with the PNG Government.

The Abbott solution became the *Operation Sovereign Borders* policy launched in July 2013. This is an extremely robust policy involving a military-led response under the command of a three-star military officer; a more coordinated 'whole of government' system; and the introduction of a "Regional Deterrence Framework". It included Abbott's long expressed intention of "stopping the boats" by turning them back to where they had come from. An extra dimension was added during the election campaign with a plan for Australia to buy prospective illegal entry vessels in Indonesia thus destroying their owners' financial incentive to engage in people smuggling.

Operation Sovereign Borders and the boat-buying plan were not greeted enthusiastically by Indonesia. The "Regional Deterrence Framework" is also going to require a major diplomatic offensive on regional capitals by Canberra. This may not be well received.

The new foreign minister's top priorities will be visits to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and probably Singapore. Prime Minister-elect Abbott has said that his first trips abroad will be to Indonesia, China, Japan and South Korea, and that he will only visit London and Washington after completing his visits to Australia's major regional trading partners.

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