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The Hold of the Old in Australian Foreign Policy

By James Curran

SYNOPSIS

The Australian government has welcomed the “stabilisation” of relations with Beijing. But the dominance of the American alliance, most visibly manifest in the AUKUS agreement which aims to deliver Australia a nuclear-powered submarine capability, has the strongest hold in the public and political debate. That complicates Canberra’s continued efforts to try and balance the US alliance with its Southeast Asian relationships.

COMMENTARY

Although 2022 brought a change of government in Australia and a new public tone to its diplomacy, particularly towards relations with China, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, it also revealed the hold of deep-seated geopolitical anxieties regarding the nation’s strategic environment. While the new Labor government, led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, put aside the rhetoric about the beating “drums of war” and achieved a “stabilisation” in relations with Beijing, it also underlined its strong commitment to the pillars of its predecessors’ policy: the American alliance, AUKUS and increased defence spending.

China and the Pacific

The security concerns from increased presence of China in the Pacific played a prominent part in the conduct of the May 2022 Federal election in Australia, although the poll did not become the khaki election some feared. The announcement of the Solomon Islands/China security agreement, almost at the very moment campaigning got underway, brought into the sharpest possible focus the brewing concerns about China’s reach into the Pacific. The deal was noteworthy because it established Beijing’s legal right to send police and troops to protect Chinese citizens, as it sees them, regardless of how many generations they are divorced from residence in China.

Both sides of politics and the Australian public found the prospect of a potential Chinese military foothold of this kind profoundly disturbing, touching on fears that have animated policymakers since colonial times: a foreign power occupying a strategic launch pad in the Pacific. But the initial political response in Canberra at times opted for hyperbole over cool rationality.

Some adopted a crude realism which ironically threatened to bring on the very circumstances they were trying to avert. Then Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce saw Cuba off the Australian coast. Defence Minister Peter Dutton, now Opposition leader, once more raised the spectre of the 1930s and Hitler's rise. Then Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that the prospect of China building a military base in the Solomon Islands would cross a "red line", but he consistently refused to lay out publicly how Australia would respond in any such eventuality.

The New Team

Expectations were high, then, for the advent of a Labor government which had consistently emphasised out of office that it would prioritise diplomacy in setting the coordinates for Australian foreign and defence policy. And few would dispute the solid start Prime Minister Albanese and his senior ministers made in their carriage of Australia's engagement with the world. Where continuity has been demanded – on the Quad, AUKUS and the US alliance – Labor has given willing assent. Where a change in tone was necessary, most clearly on relations with China and the Pacific, it has been expressed.

In the government's first substantive foreign policy address, delivered by Foreign Minister Penny Wong on her visit to Fiji at the end of May 2022, she revealed a return to first principles in Australian statecraft. Ms Wong affirmed that Canberra would consistently proclaim to its neighbours and others "Australia's full identity". She explained that the 270 ancestries represented in the Australian population gives Canberra "the capacity to reach into every corner of the world". There would be developed a "First Nations approach to foreign policy". The foreign minister outlined practical steps to define a new era of Pacific engagement and delivered the key message with clarity – "nothing will change our geography, our proximity".

But while the Labor government broke decisively with the Morrison government's tendency to shout at China, it does not play down the difficulties of the relations with Beijing. Indeed, Australia and China continued to talk past each other. The then Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi attributed the tensions over recent years entirely to Australia.

In his first weeks in office, Prime Minister Albanese confessed too that there is still a "long way to go" and that the relationship will remain "problematic" for some time. Defence Minister Richard Marles declared that China remains Australia's "biggest security anxiety". Trade Minister Don Farrell conceded that "we have put too much in one basket in the past with our relationship with China".

Labor did achieve a cautious resumption of ministerial contact at the defence and foreign minister level, and Mr Albanese met President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Bali G20 Meeting. Although there are signs of a gradual easing of China's

economic coercion vis-a-vis key Australian exports, two Australian citizens, Yang Hengjun and Cheng Lei, remained detained in Chinese prisons on murky charges.

The key advisers which shaped the policy response to China under Scott Morrison have been left in place. That means any progress in the relationship with China will be interpreted by a vociferous group of commentators as proof less of a thaw in the diplomatic deep freeze, more that Australia was able to restart relations at the highest levels without substantive concessions.

Mr Albanese appears determined to find his own way through the impasse. After meeting with the Chinese president at the Bali G20, he noted that Australia sought a “stable” relationship with China while “managing differences” through “constructive dialogue”. And he stated a home truth that has been missing from much of the Australia-China debate over the last five years. “We know that China is Australia's largest trading partner ... they are worth more than Japan, US and Republic of Korea together combined. So, it's an important relationship for Australia”.

The Prime Minister knows that the path ahead will not be smooth. Negative attitudes towards China in the political culture and populace are entrenched. Over the preceding four years, the chief proponents of the view that Australia faces an existential threat to its security and prosperity marshalled an array of slogans that touched on powerful memories in the national psychology. And they continue to do so.

“All the way” with America

With ongoing anxieties about what China's bullying and truculence mean for Australian security, the Labor government was keen to emphasise that it would not only maintain but deepen the relationship with Washington. In early August, the Prime Minister announced a Defence Strategic Review, to be conducted by former Chief of Australian Defence Force Angus Houston and former Defence Minister Stephen Smith.

The Houston/Smith report will be handed to the government later this month, the primary purpose of which is to identify a clear path ahead on Australia's acquisition of a nuclear submarine capability under the auspices of the AUKUS agreement. Prime Minister Albanese has also been emphatic in his commitment to funding this new posture.

Defence Minister Marles has been particularly forthright in expressing Labor's ongoing commitment to the American alliance. “From an Australian point of view,” he said in Hawaii following a meeting with his US counterpart Lloyd Austin in October last year, “our alliance with the United States is completely central to our national security and to our worldview”.

Defence Minister Marles has emphasised that the alliance, far from weakening Australian sovereignty, bolsters it. Indeed, in a major speech towards the end of 2022, he set out the policy objective: Australia desired to be “the most active participant in the alliance we can be”.

This emerged from his judgment that the idea of “simply paying the entry price to obtain our security guarantee” from America belongs to the past. Accordingly, Mr

Marles has publicly spoken of his ambition to reconfigure the Australian Defence Forces so that it can “deploy and deliver combat power” via increased strike capability. This is the essence of what the Minister deems to be “impactful projection”.

ASEAN Centrality

The Albanese government has also been keen to emphasise a renewed dialogue and approach to its Southeast Asian neighbours. It has proclaimed that “ASEAN centrality” is the lodestar of its regional approach. Foreign Minister Penny Wong, while stressing that Canberra’s focus on ASEAN centrality “does not mean (an) ASEAN only” foreign policy, places the Quad and AUKUS in a broader narrative of regional security engagement: from Australia’s role in the Five Power Defence Arrangements with Malaysia and Singapore to its Comprehensive Strategic Framework with ASEAN.

As Wong said in Singapore in July, ASEAN’s vision of regional order is “framed by a strategic equilibrium where countries are not forced to choose but can make their own sovereign choices, including about their alignments and partnerships”. Australia’s planned acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, she added, should therefore be seen as “not...remarkable”. But Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, at least, do not necessarily agree with that position.

Canberra might find it increasingly tricky to speak one language to Southeast Asia, and another to its American ally.

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