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Source: *Security Challenges*, 2018, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2018), pp. 6-12

Published by: Institute for Regional Security

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26488485>

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# The Uncertainty Principle: The 2017 Australian Foreign Policy White Paper in Historical Context

Allan Gyngell

For governments in Westminster political systems, White Papers are a convenient, formal way to set out for public discussion their policy positions and legislative agendas on significant issues. The 2015 White Paper on agricultural competitiveness and the Defence White Paper of 2016 were recent Australian examples.

In foreign policy, which operates in a fluid and contingent environment and seldom requires legislation, White Papers have been much rarer. Declaratory policy on international affairs has more usually taken the form of statements and debates in parliament, or speeches or reports issued by individual ministers. The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper is only the third of its sort in Australia, all of them the product of Coalition governments. The first appeared in 1997 and the second in 2003. The Gillard government's 'Australia in the Asia Century White Paper', which came out in 2012, addressed some international policy issues but was primarily a domestic policy document.

The genesis of the 2017 White Paper was a promise by the foreign minister, Julie Bishop, to "develop a contemporary and comprehensive foreign policy strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century", within twelve months of the 2016 election.<sup>1</sup> The paper would not try to predict the future, she said, but would look at "the kind of framework that needs to be in place so that we're ... strategically positioned to manage, maybe even shape, events".<sup>2</sup>

Responses from scholars and commentators to the White Paper, released in December 2017, have been mixed but generally positive. The strongest

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Bishop, 'The Coalition's Policy for a Safe and Prosperous Australia', Liberal Party of Australia, 23 June 2016, <[www.liberal.org.au/latest-news/2016/06/23/coalitions-policy-safe-and-prosperous-australia](http://www.liberal.org.au/latest-news/2016/06/23/coalitions-policy-safe-and-prosperous-australia)> [Accessed 22 May 2018].

<sup>2</sup> Julie Bishop, 'Foreign Policy White Paper Public Consultations Launch', 13 December 2016, <[foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2016/jb\\_sp\\_161213.aspx](http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2016/jb_sp_161213.aspx)> [Accessed 22 May 2018].

critiques have come from those who believe that its policy prescriptions should have been bolder.<sup>3</sup>

The analytical foundation of the paper is as solid and subtle as any government could be persuaded to endorse in a public document at the present time (and more radical than the government itself perhaps recognises). Its policy prescriptions are less clearly defined. Its most unsatisfactory aspect is the absence of any commitment of resources to address the dangers and opportunities it foresees.

This article analyses the 2017 White Paper in its historical context: examining what it reveals about changes in the way the Turnbull government thinks about the international system and Australia's role in it, and what it shows about continuities with the past.

The White Paper exhorts Australians to “approach this period of change with confidence” (p. 2). But very close to the surface lies an older sentiment, familiar to all observers of Australian foreign policy: anxiety. The prime minister declares in his introduction that these are “times of uncertainty, of risk, indeed of danger” (p. iii). The first two sentences of the Overview introduce the theme for all that follows: this is a time of rapid change and Australia will need to pursue its interests in a more competitive and contested world (p. 1).

The proposed policy responses are familiar. They align with the policies of every Australian government since the Second World War—support for the alliance with the United States; active engagement in the neighbourhood in Asia and the South Pacific; and recognition that as a country large enough to have global interests, but with limited resources, Australia is always going to be better off in an international order with clear and consistent rules which it has played a part in setting.

Another, more recent, continuity lies in the paper's strategic framing device, the Indo-Pacific. This is defined as “the region ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States” (p. 1). Very quickly, and with bipartisan agreement, the Indo-Pacific has replaced the Asia-Pacific in the major international strategy documents of all Australian governments since Julia Gillard's.

It provides a useful way for Australia to think about the world because it embraces the two oceans around the continent and gives a central strategic place to Southeast Asia and the vital sea lines carrying trade and energy

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Hugh White, ‘Foreign Policy: Why We Should Expect More of Ourselves’, ANU Strategic & Defence Studies Centre, 4 December 2017, <[sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/5841/foreign-policy-why-we-should-expect-more-ourselves](https://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/5841/foreign-policy-why-we-should-expect-more-ourselves)> [Accessed 22 May 2018].

between the Middle East and North Asia. It brings India into the Australian policy equation. In the minds of some commentators it also seems to be a way of diluting China's centrality, although such hopes are not likely to last much longer than the first time the formulation is used by a Chinese senior official as a way of defining the 'Maritime Silk Road' of the Belt and Road initiative.

The only geographic area to be given a chapter of its own in the White Paper is the South Pacific, including Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste. Declarations that the region is important, that earlier approaches have not worked and that "new approaches will be necessary" (p. 99) have a long history in Australian foreign policy and are part of a reliable cycle of Australian policymaking which has alternated between policies of deep engagement and a belief that it is better to stand back and allow regional states solve their own problems. 'New partnerships' with the South Pacific island states have been announced by almost every Australian government since the 1980s, including, most recently, the Howard government's 2004 Enhanced Cooperation Program with PNG and the Rudd government's 2008 'Pacific Partnerships for Development'. The new element this time is the emphasis placed on greater economic integration with Australia and New Zealand. China, the unnamed source of "increasing competition for influence and economic opportunities" in the region (p. 100), is driving the urgency.

Another interesting area of continuity is the prominence given to 'openness' in all its dimensions. The White Paper describes a vision for a "neighbourhood in which adherence to rules delivers lasting peace, where the rights of all states are respected, and where open markets facilitate the free flow of trade, capital and ideas" (p. 4). This openness is not "an absolute", the paper makes clear (p. 14). It is circumscribed in areas such as national security, the integrity of institutions, immigration and foreign investment. But at a time when the idea is under pressure in societies ranging from the United States to China, openness is shaping up as an important part of Australia's international commitments. This is not because Australia has changed but because the rest of the world has. As attitudes towards economic protectionism and cultural nativism become a central dividing line in the politics of many Western countries, the bipartisan support for openness in the political centre of Australian politics is important and unusual. Opposition frontbenchers Chris Bowen,<sup>4</sup> Penny Wong<sup>5</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Bowen, 'The Case for Openness', 11 May 2017, <[www.chrisbowen.net/transcripts/speeches/the-case-for-openness/](http://www.chrisbowen.net/transcripts/speeches/the-case-for-openness/)> [Accessed 22 May 2018].

<sup>5</sup> Penny Wong, 'Building Bridges Not Walls—The Case for an Open Australia', Speech to the National Press Club, 8 November 2016, <[www.pennywong.com.au/speeches/building-bridges-not-walls-the-case-for-an-open-australia-national-press-club-canberra/](http://www.pennywong.com.au/speeches/building-bridges-not-walls-the-case-for-an-open-australia-national-press-club-canberra/)> [Accessed 22 May 2018].

Andrew Leigh<sup>6</sup> have also used it as a theme in recent speeches and monographs.

The 2017 White Paper's real shift from its predecessors comes not in its broad prescriptions but in its underlying analysis of the international situation. What is new here is the directness and frankness with which it acknowledges that "Significant forces of change are now buffeting" the international system (p. 21) and its uncertainty about where these changes may lead. "It is possible", it notes, "that some of the trends identified in this White Paper will move against Australian interests in ways that will require further responses" (p. 3).

The most obvious changes relate to the speed of China's economic growth and military capabilities over the past ten years and to emerging doubts about the strength of US commitments to the region and the international system. The paper's discussion of these issues is cautious and some of it is allusive; a palimpsest on which you can detect the faint after-marks of anxious editorial changes.

It notes that "there is greater debate and uncertainty in the United States about the costs and benefits of its leadership in parts of the international system" and judges that "without sustained US support, the effectiveness and liberal character of the rules based order will decline" (p. 7). There are several references to Australia's support for "US global leadership", but the nature of such leadership is not defined.

In Australia's own region, the paper argues, without US political, economic and security engagement, power is likely to shift "more quickly" (p. 4). It is, in other words, the speed rather than the overall direction of change that is in question.

The reality and legitimacy of China's rise is accepted, although Australia's differences with Beijing, for example on the South China Sea, are clearly and directly stated. The White Paper acknowledges that "Like all great powers, China will seek to influence the region to suit its own interests." (p. 26) Australia welcomes China's greater capacity "to share responsibility for supporting regional and global security" (p. 4) and supports for reforms that would give a "greater role in the international system" to China and other emerging powers (p. 7). Australia's ultimate goal with regional trading arrangements is to involve China, Japan and the United States in an open, integrated, regional system (p. 62).

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Leigh, *Choosing Openness*, Lowy Institute paper ([Docklands, Vic.]: Penguin Books, 2017).

The core of the Australian strategic and economic policy dilemma is expressed by two paragraphs which follow each other in Chapter 3—'A Stable and Prosperous Indo-Pacific'.

The Government will broaden and deepen our alliance cooperation and encourage the strongest possible economic and security engagement by the United States in the region.

Strengthening our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China is also vital for Australia both to pursue extensive bilateral interests and because of China's growing influence on the regional and global issues of greatest consequence to our security and prosperity. (p. 37)

Values have taken on a new centrality in this document. They hardly featured in the 1997 White Paper. They were given greater prominence in 2003, but in distinctively Australian terms: "Our fundamental values and beliefs are clear. Australians value tolerance, perseverance and mateship."<sup>7</sup>

In 2017, however, values are expressed emphatically and defined in classic liberal forms.

Australia does not define its national identity by race or religion, but by shared values, including political, economic and religious freedom, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality and mutual respect.

Our adherence to the rule of law extends beyond our borders. We advocate and seek to protect an international order in which relations between states are governed by International law and other rules and norms. (p. 11)

In a post-truth, post-Trump world that sounds remarkably radical. For the historian of Australian foreign policy, the interesting thing here is the apparent conversion of a Coalition government from interests-based Realism—what the 1997 White Paper defined as the sort of "hard-headed pursuit of the interests which lie at the core of foreign and trade policy"<sup>8</sup>—to full-throated liberal internationalism of the sort usually identified with Labor ministers such as Gareth Evans (although the divide was never as sharp as is sometimes claimed).

What lies behind this shift of emphasis from interests to values is, of course, the changing power balance in the region and China's growing influence. In what seems to be a clear message to China, however, the values are defined as part of our own identity as Australians, not as a missionary endeavour. "We do not seek to impose values on others", the paper states (p. 11). Nevertheless, Australia will work more closely with the region's major democracies "bilaterally and in small groups" (p. 4).

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2003), p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *In the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997), p. iii.

There are some notable gaps in the subjects covered by the White Paper. The Middle East, for example, is largely ignored, except as a source of terrorism. It was just twelve years ago that the Howard government's 2005 Defence Update declared that "Australia's vital interests are inextricably linked to the achievement of peace and security in the Middle East",<sup>9</sup> a reminder, if it is needed, that notwithstanding Lord Palmerston's famous aphorism that Britain had no permanent friends, just permanent interests, our perception of interests can be even more changeable than our choice of friends.

A last, regrettable, foreign policy continuity lies in the 2017 White Paper's treatment of resources. The paper acknowledges that

Our ability to protect and advance our interests rests on the quality of our engagement with the world. This includes the ideas we bring to the table, our ability to persuade others to our point of view and the strength of the relations we build with other countries and, increasingly, with influential non-government actors. (p. 17)

"Having the ability to influence the behaviour or thinking of others through the power of attraction and ideas is ... vital to our foreign policy," it declares (p. 109). But not so vital, apparently, that any resources need to be invested in it. It's as if the 2016 Defence White Paper had simply described the strategic environment and ended.

The original intention seems to have been different. In November 2016 the foreign minister told journalists that "the policy paper will also outline the size and resourcing of DFAT with Ms Bishop ensuring any new proposals would go through the budget planning process".<sup>10</sup>

Presumably that commitment fell victim to the belief, common to many politicians and commentators,<sup>11</sup> that while the instruments of deterrence and war fighting (the ADF) and the instruments of domestic security (police and intelligence agencies) are legitimate ways of spending the taxpayers' money, the instruments of persuasion are less worthy.

Australia still bumps around near the bottom of the OECD and G20 tables for its diplomatic network,<sup>12</sup> and the aid program, an important potential source of influence which is largely ignored in the White Paper, remains at

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2005* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2005), pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Belot, 'Julie Bishop Announces Foreign Policy White Paper', 13 December 2016, <[www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-13/foreign-policy-white-paper-to-be-released-mid-2017/8116680](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-13/foreign-policy-white-paper-to-be-released-mid-2017/8116680)> [Accessed 22 May 2018].

<sup>11</sup> Catherine McGregor, 'Playing a Dangerous Game', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 December 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Lowy Institute for International Policy, 'Global Diplomacy Index: Australia's Diplomatic Network'. <[globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/](http://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/)> [Accessed 22 May 2018].

historically low relative levels. The instruments of persuasion encompass far more than DFAT's budget or the range of its overseas posts, however.

All parts of the Australian government and Australian society that operate offshore—hard power and soft power alike—need to be utilised for this task (“vital”, remember, according to the government's White Paper itself). The options—their costs minuscule in comparison with submarine programs or joint strike fighters—include funding to drive the international agenda in ways that we want; to shape the new coalitions we will need to advance our interests—“strengthening and diversifying partnerships across the globe” in the Prime Minister's own words (p. iii); to enable Australians, including Australian politicians, to participate more actively in the international debate.

So at a moment when, thanks to China, no observer of Australian politics or foreign policy seems to be in any doubt that influence of many different sorts can be used to shift the behaviour of key actors in other states, and its own White Paper concludes that, “For Australia, the stakes could not be higher” (p. 3), the government has squibbed an important opportunity to prepare the country more effectively for the uncertainty it rightly sees ahead.

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