**The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper – Now What?**

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The 2017 Australian Foreign Policy White Paper is exactly the sort of White Paper you have to have when you decide you have to have a White Paper.

The value of a white paper lies in its public information function and its guidance to the policy-maker. It should analyse the foreign policy operating environment. It should identify the key trends and challenges facing Australia as it navigates to protect its security, its prosperity, the safety of its citizens and its values. It must therefore be accurate in its assessments and realistic about potential threats and opportunities.

At the same time, as an official pronouncement of the government and a definitive policy statement, it must be appropriately diplomatic. There is no point in issuing a policy framework couched in terms that gratuitously antagonise Australia’s friends, neighbours and trading partners, with all of whom we inevitably have some differences in view, interests or political systems, and yet with whom we have to work together to promote a safer and more prosperous global and regional environment.

Second, a foreign policy white paper should outline the principles and broad practicable approach the Government intends to follow in meeting the challenges of a more volatile international environment. It cannot become so granular and prescriptive that it leaves little room for future policy flexibility as the international environment changes.

In short, a white paper on foreign policy is necessarily written within constraints. It must be accurate without offending, diplomatic without misleading and prospective without prescribing. Some might say this is an impossible task.

Despite some barbs and bleats, the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper meets these broad requirements. It is a far more comprehensive survey of issues than previous efforts, reflecting the complexity of today’s rapidly changing world. Its elucidation of the breadth and variety of significant issues impacting on Australia’s relations with the rest of the world, too many for each to be given the attention it deserves ihere, should be read by all Australians.

This White Paper is well-argued, with an entirely plausible assessment of Australia’s interests and a sensible if somewhat predictable framework for addressing them.

A key message is the strategic operating environment is changing rapidly, before our eyes. It has certainly changed profoundly since the 2003 White Paper, complicating Australia’s policy choices.

**The International Operating Environment**

A great strength of this White Paper is its capture, albeit in carefully measured tones, of the wide range of uncertainties and volatility in the current international environment. It succinctly describes the headline changes. It draws attention to the shift of the global economic centre of gravity to our region, which it very deliberately terms the “Indo-Pacific”. Shortly after I retired three years ago, I gave a speech in Queensland, noting the return of big power rivalry to our region. The White Paper acknowledges the emergence of big power politics once again as a principal conditioner of world affairs, and hence of Australia’s responses.

On China, the White Paper states the obvious. China has become, sooner than most foreign policy commentators imagined possible, a great power more willing than ever to assert its interests in the region and beyond. “China will seek to influence the region to suit its own interest,” the White Paper says.[[1]](#footnote-1) It will use a combination of hard and soft diplomacy to achieve its aims, which may not always coincide with Australia’s own interests. We should not be surprised; that is what great powers do.

So power is shifting in our region – towards China.

China will not implode any time soon. Nor will a growing middle class automatically achieve greater democracy and power sharing. China’s still essentially Leninist Communist Party will remain in power for the foreseeable future. China is now the world’s biggest trading power. It is arguably the world’s largest economy - or will be shortly. And very soon it will be a technological superpower. It already has the capacity to defend its vast land mass and is developing a capacity to project power within its own region and, ultimately, beyond. China is already, as the White Paper soberly notes, challenging long-held US dominance in the Indo-Pacific.[[2]](#footnote-2)

On the other side of the big power equation in the Pacific, question marks are now being raised (including in the US itself) about the will and ability of the United States to continue play the leading role that has so profoundly, and positively, influenced the world political and economic order since World War II. Perhaps a little more confidently than some commentators,[[3]](#footnote-3) the White Paper makes the judgement that the United States will remain a military and economic superpower with long-term interests in engagement in the Indo-Pacific, and that it has a continued role as a stabilising presence.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Notwithstanding, the unpredictability of President Trump’s America First approach, that judgement is probably correct – at least for the time being. What is significant, however, is that governments now have to address the issue of the long-term sustainability of the United States’ role in the region. It is now a legitimate topic for conversation. That was unthinkable just a few years ago.

Interestingly, the White Paper does not dwell on the impact of a more aggressively assertive Russia under President Putin, although it is critical of Russia’s refusal to act consistent with international law and agreed norms of behaviour, for example in the Ukraine. Of course, the DPRK’s missile and nuclear programmes receive particular attention as the most dangerous current trigger point in our region.

The White Paper covers the longstanding or perennial global issues requiring international cooperation: climate change, weapons of mass destruction, sustainable development, human rights, and world health, to name but a few. Where the White Paper is particularly worthwhile is in its attempts to factor in the scale and pace of other changes now exacerbating uncertainty about Australia’s journey in coming years.

These newer challenges are derived not only from this or that Nation State but from the increasingly interconnected world itself. Australia’s foreign endeavours now have to deal with the unpredictable negative impacts of globalisation, political alienation in western democracies; the return of economic nationalism and threats to the international trading system, State fragility, the emergence of significant non-state actors including the scourge of terrorism, demographic shifts and uncontrolled mass people movements, All this is accompanied by the technological and cyber revolutions, creating great opportunities but also great vulnerabilities and great disruption.

As Prime Minister Turnbull said in his introduction to the White Paper:

*“… we must also acknowledge we are facing the most complex and challenging geostrategic environment since the early years of the Cold War.”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Particularly perceptive is the observation in the White Paper:

“*… the rules and institutions that help maintain peace and security and guide global cooperation are under strain. In some cases, major powers are ignoring or undermining international law. With many divergent interests and shifts in power between states, it is more difficult to get governments to respond collectively to some security and economic challenges.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Reading between the lines of that statement, the White Paper can be interpreted as a conventional policy document grappling with unconventional times, in which the verities of the past 70 years of progressive development of a beneficial world order and world institutions based on concepts derived from a predominantly western philosophical tradition are now under significant challenge, not only from China and Russia but from within the western democracies themselves.

**Policy Framework**

So we are dealing with a world changing so rapidly as to be very different from that of the 1990s – and two generations away from the world of 1970 when I joined the then-Department of External Affairs.

Against this background of extraordinary change, the headline aspirations of Australian foreign and trade policy set out in the White Paper are surprisingly unsurprising. Our goals have not changed much: a prosperous Indo-Pacific, strong commitment to free trade and the global economy, strong national security, a strong rules-based international order and the obligatory focus on the Pacific Islands.

In similar vein, the White Paper’s broad framework for pursuing our national objectives in this more turbulent and complicated world contains strong elements of underlying continuity. These include the conduct of foreign policy in accordance with Australian values; continuation of the centrality of the United States to Australia’s security; building our extensive partnership with China; intensified engagement with other Indo-Pacific countries (especially ASEAN and the democracies of Asia, Japan the ROK, India and Indonesia); support for the UN and international institutions; a liberalised trade and investment environment; continued development assistance; and enhanced regional cooperation.

Our highly competitive political leaders always seek to differentiate their policies from those of their opponents ore monetary political advantage. Some governments are more messianic in foreign policy than others. Some express their policy objectives more eloquently than others. But I see the 2017 White Paper framework representing an essential continuum of the underlying elements of foreign policy followed by Australian Governments since the early eighties. Compare this framework with Gareth Evans’s key foreign policy priorities (a positive regional strategic and security environment; pursuit of trade, investment and economic cooperation, contributing to good international citizenship and to global security), the Howard Government’s 2003 White Paper (strengthen the Australian economy and promote global trade liberalisation, close engagement with Asia, protecting Australia and its values), Rudd’s Three Pillars of Foreign Policy (the Region, the United Nations and the US Alliance, with good international citizenship thrown in once again to retain continuity with Labor values).

**China and the United States**

The White Paper candidly acknowledges:

*“Navigating the decade ahead will be hard because, as Chinese power grows, our region is changing in ways without precedent in Australia’s modern history.”[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Here, the White Paper can offer no definitive policy answer, no final solution, because none is yet possible. We accept that China should and will be an increasingly vital world power. A China growing economically and helping drive growth around the world, but without disrupting other economies, would be in everyone’s interests. At the same time, we want the United States, still the world’s predominant economic and military power, to continue to contribute to peace, security and prosperity in our region.

The White Paper’s treatment of US-China relationship, so important to the future peace and stability of our region, is carefully phrased and inevitably somewhat lame, but probably the best we can manage in these uncertain times.

*“We encourage China to exercise its power in a way that enhances stability, reinforces international law and respects the interests of smaller countries….”*

*Australia will encourage the United States and China to ensure economic tension between them does not fuel strategic rivalry or damage the multilateral trading system.”*

In short, our policy response is “encouragement”. To do that, we need to engage both great powers, as successive governments have sought to do since Australia recognised China in 1972. We want that engagement to encourage the energies of the United States and China to be channelled through partnerships, cooperation and accommodation rather than destructive economic competition and military confrontation. Clearly, given the tariff measures the US and China have now imposed on each other, more encouragement is needed. On present indications, US-China relations may be in for a bumpy ride before they recognise how their mutual interests can be made to coincide. At the same time, we need to be realistic about Australia’s ability, as an ally of one and an economic partner of both, to influence the outcome in any significant way.

**A Nuclear North Korea**

Unless China and the United States are prepared to cooperate to help contain the spread of nuclear weapons in the region, or if China acts and fails, our region is faced with two choices: US military intervention with potentially catastrophic consequences for North Asia (including China) or passive acceptance of a nuclear armed North Korea threatening not only Japan, South Korea and eventually continental United States, but also China itself. And how quickly would either an aggressive North Korea armed with both nuclear weapons and delivery systems, or a weakening of the US umbrella of nuclear deterrence, prompt a re-thinking of the nuclear weapons options for other countries of the region – including even for Australia?

**Other Regional Relationships**

In a time of turbulence between two great powers, Australia’s relationships with the other countries of the region assume even greater importance. India, Japan, Indonesia and our partners in ASEAN deserve constant and sustained attention. While the United States’ neglect of its interests in the region predates Presidents Trump and Obama, the Trump Administration’s current focus on trade protection, China and North Korea, means the other big and middle powers of Asia have to enhance their cooperation if they are to influence significantly developments in our region.

The recent Australian hosting of the ASEAN Heads of Government meeting is a welcome indication of the Government’s commitment to that imperative, as is the intention to pursue the Transpacific Partnership Agreement even in the absence of the United States.

Nor should we rule out the future value of the regional architecture which Australian Governments have sought to develop since Prime Minister Hawke first promoted the concept of APEC. APEC, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the meetings of Defence Ministers, while listless vehicles at present, still represent potentially valuable mechanisms enabling the region cooperatively to manage its own affairs in the pursuit of peace, stability and mutual economic progress. The White Paper touches on these existing vehicles for regional cooperation. An active Australian foreign policy should work hard for their rejuvenation.

The White Paper provides a framework within which Australia can work even harder at consolidating its relations with our Asian neighbours; particularly in South East Asia and the sub-continent – giving real meaning to the concept of the Indo-Pacific.

**The Pacific**

The Pacific, as always, rates a special mention. Here the White Paper bumps up against the essential Australian dilemma; a sense of genuine responsibility to contribute to the well-being of our Pacific Island neighbours without assuming the mantle of post-colonial paternalism. A values-based foreign policy and our strategic imperative means we have no alternative but to assist Pacific Island Countries to realise their goals of nation-building. The challenge is work alongside our Pacific friends as equal partners, valued for our contribution, our reliability and our good intentions. Outbuying other powers with interests in the region will be problematic.

**Diversification of Relationships**

Nor should the Asian Century, with its economic and strategic imperatives, so totally consume us that we neglect opportunities elsewhere in the world: in Africa, Latin America and parts of the Middle East – not to mention the old world in the UK and Europe.

Australia should consider carefully the potential vulnerabilities of dependence on any one overseas market, not because that country might exploit that dependence to exert undue pressure on our foreign or domestic policies, but because we need to avoid becoming hostage to the health of any one overseas market and economy. In international trade terms, diversification is strength. Market diversification should be a key objective even as Australia achieves further enmeshment in the Asian region – it sensibly spreads risk.

**Multilateral Fora**

Australia’s commitment to multilateral international institutions has been a constant feature of our foreign policy – no less so in this White Paper. In a time of big power politics, middle powers like Australia need international institutions even more to build international consensus and cooperation in promoting peace, stability and human progress. While the efficiency and effectiveness of many multilateral institutions can be a source of frustration, they remain an important path to an improved world. Australia has no option but to pursue multilateral cooperation across the rapidly expanding range of cross border issues reflecting the interconnected world.

**Rule of Law and Values-based Diplomacy**

Middle-sized and small countries stand to benefit most from an effective network of international organisations facilitating the peaceful resolution of disputes and from the observance of appropriate norms of international behaviour, promoting free and fair trade, contributing to social and economic development and to the upholding of internationally recognised human rights.

So the White Paper rightly places great stress on the Rule of Law and “values”.

*Our support for political, economic and religious freedoms, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality and mutual respect reflect who we are and how we approach the world. They underpin a strong, fair and cohesive society at home and are a source of influence for Australia internationally.*

One of the problems of a values-based approach to foreign relations lies in others not necessarily looking through the same value-based lens as we do, we run the risk of losing sight of the fine line between promoting values and preaching values, with all the counter-productivity of implied moral superiority. We need constantly to remind ourselves that many people in our region still need to be convinced, for example, that the Rule of Law, based on western legal concepts, will indeed bring the benefits of justice and equity.

One area deserving continuing attention is the tone and atmospherics of our relations with Asia, particularly with the countries of the South Pacific, ASEAN and the sub-continent. Old shibboleths die hard. Lee Kuan-Yew’s “White trash of Asia” warning and Mahathir’s more acerbic remarks about Australia still have echoes today. While Australian Governments have endeavoured to work with other countries of the region as equal partners, the tone of our relations with our neighbours, and their responses to that tone, continue to be influenced by attitudes taken by the Australian press, academics, NGOs and, increasingly, social media. This is a complicating factor for any country following a values-based foreign policy.

This issue will continue to present dilemmas as we advocate our values on the one hand and work to achieve practical results which may involve some compromise in our values. Let us be promoters not preachers.

**An Independent Foreign Policy**

The cover blurb on the first issue last year of the Australian magazine *Foreign Affairs*, had a caption, “Towards an Independent Foreign Policy.” The fact Australian governments have persistently supported the alliance with the United States and that Australia retains historical and institutional links with western civilisation, taking both of those factors into account in the conduct of its foreign policy, has persistently been used to claim Australia lacks an independent foreign policy.

People making such claims seem to be in denial about the changes in Australia over the past forty-five years. Australian society is so very different ethnically, socially and politically than the Menzies era in which I grew up. Perhaps it is easier to advocate further change by claiming we still cling too strongly to our “Britishness” or that our independence and identity is overwhelmed in an alliance. But Australia is no longer just a transplanted vestige of British colonialism. Australian society has changed hugely, we have no forelocks left to tug. Australia will continue to evolve independently in tune with our demographic constituency and our material circumstances.

As for an independent foreign policy, in so far as any middle power can conduct a foreign policy which will not be influenced by the wishes of others and the flow of forces around us, the fact is our decisions are made in Canberra rather than London, Washington or Beijing. Was it the act of an alliance vassal to defy the United States by deciding our interests and those of the region would be better served by Australia joining the Chinese sponsored Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank? Or working with Japan and other partners to revive the Trans Pacific Partnership after President Trump abandoned it in a return to protectionism? Or not rushing in to sign up to the Belt and Road initiative until we have had a chance to evaluate on a case by case basis the merits of Australian participation in particular projects. Indeed, was it not an act of independence for the Government to seek to ban foreign interference from any source into Australian democratic political processes and internal affairs?

Indeed, the White Paper is in itself a demonstration of independence – a realistic, homegrown assessment of Australian interests and an Australian framework for advancing them It provides a sensible basis on which Australian can continue to pursue a realistically independent Australian foreign policy.

**Now What?**

Foreign policy depends on domestic policy. They are interdependent. Successful pursuit of Australia’s international interests within the White Paper framework will be conditioned by the strength and efficiency of our economy, by the capacity of governments to take sometimes unpopular but necessary decisions, by our ability to protect our critical internal assets from deterioration or disruption (including through cyber means); a willingness to commit resources to the pursuit of our foreign policy; bipartisan political support for necessary measures and ultimately support from the Australian public.

The arguments for reform to produce a stronger economy have a logic of their own. Given the international nature of the Australian economy, any domestic reform that assists us to interact more profitably with the outside world is to be encouraged.

There has been a fair measure of bipartisan support for Australian foreign policy over the years, and the Labour Party has endorsed the thrust of this White Paper. This is positive: a bipartisan approach to foreign policy makes for better foreign policy implementation. Domestic political scrapping and ill-chosen remarks made for partisan political purposes can be exploited to our disadvantage overseas.

Bipartisanship is important for another reason. It may be too much to argue that western democracies are currently experiencing a crisis of confidence, but phenomena such as social media, populism, globalisation, social fragmentation and disenchantment with political behaviour have made decisive democratic leadership harder. Our political leaders are bombarded with views and opinions, courtesy of the Internet and social media in which each idea, each special interest, is given equal weight and volume. The Internet, which gave us the “Democratisation of Information” has now given us the “Democratisation of Disinformation”. As we have learned over the past year or so, deliberate malicious information campaigns can be disruptive of confidence in our leaders and even of confidence in our democracy itself. Our political leaders have to fight their way through cacophony to reach sensible decisions. It is to be hoped the White Paper will provide strong reference points for that fight in the foreign policy arena.

Ideally, a White paper should capture the public imagination sufficiently to promote a strong national consensus on foreign policy responses.

Of course, the White Paper has attracted the usual range of comments, both supportive and adverse. Some single-issue groups are unhappy it did not pay enough attention to their key concerns. Aid lobbyists, for example, have complained the Paper did not go far enough towards meeting their interpretation of Australia’s development assistance and humanitarian obligations. The environmental lobby would like to see more decisive action on greenhouse gases. And there are also those for whom the sky, or at least the US umbrella, has already fallen in - and we must change our policy settings immediately, usually to pursue an “independent” foreign policy, but without actually defining what that means.

Notwithstanding these sorts of reactions, it is disappointing but perhaps unsurprising that the White Paper has not provoked much public interest. Four months after its release it is hard to find reference to in the conventional media. That does not, however,, diminish its value as framework and guide for foreign policy decision-makers.

**Foreign Policy Resources**

Then there is the question of resources. The White Paper has set out a huge agenda, reflecting the complexity of Australia’s interactions with the rest of the world. Australia has been well-served for decades by an under-staffed but high quality foreign service. It will be their job to implement under the leadership of the portfolio ministers the broad policy lines set out in the White Paper. It is vital that the Portfolio has the expertise and global reach to fulfil that task. Herein lies the principal hole in the White Paper: it sets a framework for the conduct of a foreign policy, but without addressing the key issue of the resources needed to implement that framework. Perhaps the resourcing Australia’s foreign policy endeavours is worth a White Paper in itself?

**Conclusion**

The White Paper implicitly acknowledges we are in transition from an environment that has served Australia reasonably well for nearly seventy years to one which is far less certain and potentially a lot less comfortable.

After reading the White Paper four questions need to be answered:

* Does the White Paper give us an adequate framework from which to negotiate a world environment and changing power relationships that are rapidly becoming very different to those we have experienced over the past 30-years?
* Does the White Paper allow us the flexibility to manoeuvre to protect our interests if power relationships, trade patterns, technological disruption or any other of the international influences on our national situation change further – as is inevitable?
* Does it lay the ground for Australia to conduct our own sovereign, independent foreign policy in pursuit of our national interests?
* Does the White Paper give us detailed prescriptions for dealing with cataclysmic events such as a catastrophic breakdown in US-China relations, the outbreak of a major trade war with sever implications for health of the global economy upon which Australia depends?

The answer to the first three questions lies in the affirmative.

The answer to the fourth is emphatically negative. A White Paper can only set out a general framework within which governments will still have to make the hard decisions on precisely how to respond to potential levels of international turbulence the world has not experienced in the lifetimes of most Australians. Those decisions will depend on “Events, my dear boy, events!”

1. 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, p.26 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, p.12 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Hugh White, Without America, Australia in the New Asia, Quarterly Essay, Issue 86, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, p.26 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, p.iii [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, p.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. p.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)