

China relations can only be unfrozen with Julie Bishop's sacking

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Once again Australian foreign policy seems to be missing in action. As events unfold at remarkable speed in our area of most strategic interest – north-east Asia – Australia finds itself unable to engage with the key participant at the centre of those events: namely China.

Since Australia decided to adopt a policy of strategic mistrust towards China, any semblance of influence has waned to the point where [relations are now in the freezer](#).

In terms of Australia's geopolitical interests, the [freeze on our relationship with China](#) could not have come at a worse time. It was once widely understood in Canberra, but apparently no longer, that we need to have good and close relations with China not just for trade and commercial reasons but because China is critical to all the major international issues of interest to Australia and none more so than peace and stability in north-east Asia.

If there were any doubts about China's central role in shaping events in the region, last week's visit by North Korea's supreme leader, Kim Jong-un, to China should dispel them. This was his second visit in less than a month, his second since becoming leader in 2011.

Julie Bishop and Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi on February 17, 2016, in China. Bishop hasn't visited China for more than two years.

Scenes of President Xi Jinping and Kim walking along a beachside promenade in the northern coastal city of Dalian or taking in the spring sunshine sitting on a park bench were featured in local Chinese media. It was all intended to convey a sense of close personal intimacy and comfort, compared with the official pageantry of Kim's first visit just a few weeks ago.

Kim's forthcoming summit with President Trump would no doubt have been the subject of conversation. [China is crafting the list of demands Kim](#) will take to the table with Trump. This is what the new, [emerging international order](#) is going to look like.

Major diplomatic victory

Since the meeting, rumours have begun circulating in Beijing that this month's Shanghai Co-operation Organisation meeting (SCO) is to be moved from the coastal city of Qingdao in Shandong Province to North Korea. If true, this would be extraordinary were it to occur.

Not only would it highlight the rapid speed of developments within North Korea, but would be a major diplomatic and geopolitical victory for China. The idea of North Korea joining any international security body other than the United Nations would have been unthinkable just a few weeks ago. Further it would suggest that, whatever accommodation is reached over the North's nuclear weapons, Kim intends for it to be durable and not just a short-term negotiating tactic.

China created the SCO in 2001. It initially comprised central Asian states and Russia. It was established to balance US influence among the former Soviet Republics of central Asia. Iran and Pakistan have been observers and more recently India has done so. In another significant diplomatic achievement by China, both Pakistan and India joined in 2017. If the SCO meeting is in fact moved to North Korea it would mark China's diplomatic pre-eminence in the region.

Australia has never taken much notice of the SCO, in fact we seem to have no policies on central Asia and little more on Russia other than to be hostile towards President Vladimir Putin. It is interesting that India has chosen to join the SCO. Australia hopes to draw India in as the anchor to the Orwellian concept of the Indo-Pacific, as if something gains substance by calling it by a politically loaded name. But as we are seeing as events take shape quickly in east Asia, India has no geopolitical or strategic role or interest in east Asia. The Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept is as meaningless as the Atlanto-Pacific would be.

As events are changing with such rapidity in the region of Australia's most immediate strategic interest, it is extraordinary that there is little or no diplomatic activity by Australia.

When the six-party talks were conducted last decade or when North Korea behaved aberrantly, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer would dispatch special envoys to visit Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul – and even on one occasion Pyongyang – to be sure each participant understood our interests and to work constructively with them to find solutions. All the countries understood that Australia had genuine and immediate security interests at stake both through our deep economic interdependence and our alliances.

Bishop's 'bizarre speech'

The past fortnight has also seen two other significant developments in which China has been the key actor. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a bilateral visit to China and agreed on new future forms of co-operation and Premier Li Keqiang visited Japan, the first visit by a Chinese premier since 2008. Both India and Japan have made it clear that they are seeking to have improved bilateral relations with China. So two of the much-vaunted quadrilateral dialogue group intended to balance China are each seeking closer relations with China, while our bilateral relations remain frozen.

The Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has not visited China in more than two years. She angered China by making the most [strident public comments on the South China Sea](#) of any foreign minister and last year, in an [utterly bizarre speech in Singapore](#), said China was [not fit for regional leadership](#). If the role China is now playing to resolve tensions on the Korean Peninsula and possibly removing North Korea's nuclear capability is not leadership, it is difficult to find another word to describe it.

The Foreign Minister has many esteemed attributes both professionally and personally and has achievements to her credit, not least of which is the New Colombo Plan. Australia, however, needs a foreign minister who is steeped in history and geopolitics, who lives and breathes the issues and who has a grasp of the profound challenges Australia faces in the rapidly evolving new world order being shaped, in large measure by China.

The Prime Minister needs to replace the Foreign Minister with someone better equipped for the demands of the job. Fortunately, he has a wealth of talent and experience within his cabinet. Both Josh Frydenberg and Greg Hunt have extensive experience in foreign policy, having each worked for many years in Alexander Downer's office, one of Australia's most effective foreign ministers.

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