

# Australia's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect

By Gareth Evans

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Delivered to the National Press Club at the launch of *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World Since 1942* by Allan Gyngell (LaTrobe University Press, 2017), 13 April 2017

Link: <http://www.gevans.org/speeches/Speech626.html>

I don't know how many policymakers, parliamentarians - or even journalists - these days actually read any more full length works of history and analysis. But they should certainly read this one. Allan Gyngell's book is as comprehensive and accurate, up to date and lucidly written account as you could wish for of the course of Australian foreign policy since the 1940s - and its analysis of the main themes in our international relations history, and their contemporary application, is of immense contemporary relevance.

The whole work is deeply informed both by Allan's early academic life as an historian, and his later decades of intense engagement as a practitioner - a diplomat, foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Paul Keating and Director-General of the ONA (the most credible - or perhaps least incredible - of our intelligence agencies), as well as six years as the founding head of the Lowy Institute. And it's extremely informative: even for someone relatively familiar with these issues: I found myself constantly coming across succinct and engaging accounts of significant things I had only half-remembered, completely forgotten or never really known.

Allan accurately describes Australian foreign policy, since the beginning, as characterised by three broad responses to what he describes, I think plausibly, as our 'fear of abandonment'. The first has been a constant, seeking the protection of a great and powerful friend, initially Britain and now the United States. The second and third have always been visible, but have waxed and waned in intensity over time: trying to create a more benign environment with our regional neighbours, and seeking to influence the major inter-governmental organisations in their global rule-making and norm-setting roles.

I think he is historically and *analytically* quite accurate in saying that these three themes, each focusing on different relationships, or sets of relationships, capture the way most policymakers have thought and talked about what they are doing, and

probably the way most of the public thinks about foreign policy, to the extent that it thinks about it at all.

But when one moves from analysis to prescription, trying to think *prescriptively* about what foreign policy *should* be about - writing a White Paper for example - I have always believed that the conceptual starting point should be not *relationships* as such, but the national *interests* which those relationships are meant to be protecting or advancing. Relationships, with allies, neighbours, the UN or anyone else, are means of achieving ends, not ends in themselves.

To insist that national interests should be the key underlying driver of foreign policy across the board is not, of course, to say anything new, and that is certainly the perspective from which Allan himself, as you would expect, primarily judges - when he is being judgemental - the successes and failures of our international relations history. Most Australian foreign policymakers would say of course our foreign policy is driven by our national interests - that's how we think, and what we do. But I'm not sure that is right, in two key respects.

First, I think that when it comes to our alliance with the United States we have become so absorbed with keeping the *relationship* intact we are not paying sufficient attention to the nature of the Australian national interests that relationship is meant to protect and advance - I'll come back to this.

Second, by tending to focus more on having seats at various tables rather than what we do when we get there, I think we have given insufficient attention to defining with precision what our national interests actually are.

**Interests and Values.** In particular, there is a real issue as to how national interests relate to the pursuit of 'values'. There is a general disposition among policymakers to regard the pursuit of values - be they described as 'Australian' or 'Western' or, as I would prefer, 'universal' - as something separate and distinct from the pursuit of interests, which are thought of solely in terms of the traditional duo of national security and national economic prosperity.

This means that pursuing 'value' issues with no obvious and immediate security or economic return to us - like stopping faraway atrocity crimes or health pandemics, urging better human rights protection, hauling people out of poverty, working for a nuclear weapons free world, reducing global CO2 or finding humane solutions for asylum seekers - is something governments tend to do only when they have the time, money and inclination, or are under the political gun from some key constituency. This is optional add-on territory, not core foreign policy business. And as a result it means that policy commitment - to decent aid budgets, climate change, disarmament, human

rights advocacy, peacekeeping and the like - swings hugely with the mood of the government of the day.

My longstanding view is that this approach - treating interests and values in conceptually distinct boxes - undervalues not just the importance but the necessity, in today's extraordinarily interdependent world, of collective action to achieve global and regional public goods.

If I was responsible for producing a new White Paper I would not only start with a clear articulation of our national interests (as this one probably will: they usually have some boilerplate of this kind) but give some substantive new content to that by insisting (as I did as Foreign Minister, not that anyone took much notice) that these be seen not just as a duo but a *trio*. Security and economic interests would be joined by a third - the national interest in being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen, or if you prefer, responsible international citizen.

Contributing to transnational problem solving - achieving global and regional public goods - should be seen both as worth doing for its own sake, and also as generating for Australia concrete reputational and reciprocity returns. Pursuing these values is not just for boy scouts and naifs, but a matter of hard-headed national interest. Articulating the issues this way can help make these policies more politically saleable to charity-begins-at-home sceptics. My argument has always been that breaking down the conceptual distance between interests and values, between realism and idealism, in this way would make for much more coherent and consistent, as well as decent, Australian foreign policy.

**The US Alliance.** The question of our alliance relationship with the United States, and to the extent to which it still really serves Australia's national interests, has been an issue of increasing concern - as the tectonic plates shift with the rise of China, the US-led West is no longer the undisputed global rule-maker (despite even President Obama's efforts to assert the contrary, and the established global order rapidly evolves towards something much less recognisable and comfortable for us.

And of course the alliance has become very much more immediately salient since the election of Donald Trump - manifestly the most ill-informed, under-prepared, ethically-challenged and psychologically ill-equipped President in US history. Personally driven by instinct and impulse, unhampered by knowledge or judgment, he has led an administration acting so far on the basis of postures rather than policies. While the commentariat is beginning to find some comforting early signs that the adults are regaining charge of foreign policy, anyone betting on this administration delivering consistent, coherent, constructive and decent outcomes over the next four years is making a very big gamble indeed.

My own answer to the dilemma of how Australia should respond to all of this is, in bumper-sticker terms: less United States, more Asia, and more Self-reliance.

**Less United States** does not mean walking away from the alliance, from which we of course profoundly benefit in terms of access to intelligence and high-end armaments, and - however flimsy the ANZUS guarantee may prove to be in reality - the notional deterrent protection of America's massive military firepower. We may be able to cope with most defence contingencies ourselves, but a genuinely existential threat would be hard to meet without US support.

But less reflexive support for everything the US chooses to do is long overdue. 'Whither thou goest, there I goest' might be good theology, but it is not great foreign policy for a country that values its independence and wants international respect. We should have learned that lesson after Iraq in 2003, but recent events suggest not. Take our immediate, absolute and quite unconditional support for the unilateral missile strike in Syria (certainly defensible, but with a number of very problematic dimensions). And take our absolute capitulation to US pressure, along with the rest of its allies, not to participate in any way the current international effort to take some serious steps toward nuclear disarmament.

My own experience strongly suggests that periodically saying 'no' to the US when our national interests are manifestly different, makes for a much healthier and productive relationship than one of craven dependence. The clearest example I can give is the negotiation of the Chemical Weapons Convention. Secretary of State James Baker asked Australia to take the lead on bringing this to conclusion because, as he said to me in 1989 in almost these words: 'You want what we want; but we're seen as too big and ugly and self-interested to lead on it; you've been giving us a hard time lately on things like MFN for China and are seen as a pretty independent voice; you can make the running on this in a way we can't; please go for it.' And we did.

**More Asia** means a much more sustained and intensive effort to build multidimensional and productive relationship with all the key players.

In the case of China, it means essentially recognizing the legitimacy of China's claims to be a global rule-maker and not just rule-taker, and to have some strategic space of its own. And it means getting close enough to the Chinese leadership to be seen, as Stephen FitzGerald puts it, as a genuine 'friend at court', influencing positively their bilateral and multilateral behaviour. None of this means becoming Beijing's patsy any more than we should be Washington's: we should not hold back in making clear our own commitment to democratic and human rights values, and should be prepared to push back when China overreaches, as it has in the South China Sea.

In the case of Indonesia - it means getting back to kind of relationship which delivered the Keating-Suharto Australia-Indonesia Security Agreement of 1995, with its commitment by both parties to closely cooperate, including in the face of 'adverse challenges' to either. And it means a willingness to engage in the kind of joint naval operations in the South China Sea which would make clear that China's ambitions in the region cannot extend to making its southern neighbours tributary states.

In the case of ASEAN, notwithstanding the acute domestic problems of a number of its members, it is time to get closer than we ever have, exploring the possibility at least of some form of associate membership.

In the case of India, it means consolidating the good start that PM Turnbull has made in building genuinely closer security as well as military ties.

And in the case of Japan it means consolidating and further developing our already strong security ties - but at the same time recognizing that the region's history wars are still not completely over, and that China is even more acutely sensitive to any overt military 'containment' operation involving Japan than it is for anyone else.

**More self-reliance** In military terms, this certainly means building defence capability that involves not only more bucks than we are usually comfortable spending but getting a bigger bang for each of them. (I for would keep an open mind about nuclear powered submarines if that proves ultimately best option, although I acknowledge that this would mean developing a civil nuclear industry of our own in support if we are not to become even more dependant on the United States). It certainly means maximising our capacity to protect our shores and maritime environment from hostile intrusion, but also means having a capacity to engage in military operations wider afield if there is a *good* national interest (including responsible global citizen) reason for doing so.

But being more self-reliant also means being more of a diplomatic free agent - adding to reputation and credibility with an activist foreign policy: creative, proactive, value-adding and unconstrained by constant urge to look over shoulder to Washington.

Of course it is harder now than it was in the heady international atmosphere of the early post -Cold War years when reconstructing the world seemed possible. As I've written in a political memoir to be published later this year: 'Bliss was it that dawn to be alive, but to be Foreign Minister was very heaven!'

It is also clearly much more difficult to get traction for serious foreign policy debate and implementation in this tweeting/ instant-coffee blogging/ soundbite universe we now inhabit.

But every time a book like this gets written - and read - my diminishing stores of optimism survive another day. This is the clearest, most up to date, balanced and judicious description you will find anywhere of what has gone both right and wrong in the conduct of Australian foreign policy, and Allan has left us with few excuses for making the same mistakes again. This is an outstanding contribution to the literature, and to Australian policymaking. I warmly congratulate him on it, and declare *The Fear of Abandonment* duly launched.