

Julie Bishop's doctrine of denial is no foreign policy future

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by **Hugh White**

Julie Bishop is anxious about Asia. She worries about intensifying economic competition as too many workers in rising economies chase too few consumers elsewhere.

And she worries about intensifying strategic competition as the region's emerging great powers seek to expand their spheres of influence and protect their growing interests.

But fortunately she thinks she has the answers to these problems, as she tried to explain in a major address to the International Institute of Strategic Studies in Singapore on Monday night.

Her text is not a model of the speechwriter's craft, but it does offer a glimpse of our Foreign Minister's view of the world and Australia's place in it as she prepares the government's new foreign policy white paper.

Perhaps we might call it the Bishop doctrine – her solution to managing all this rising economic and strategic competition in Asia.

As she set it out this week it has three elements: the rules-based international order, American power and democracy. It seems these are the foundations on which she believes Australia's foreign policy is to be built.

Few of us would doubt that these things are good in themselves: who wouldn't want a region full of democratic countries living peacefully together under rules upheld by US power? The question is whether there is any reason to believe that this model of Asia's future will work.

Let's start with the idea of a rules-based order. This has loomed large in Canberra's foreign policy pronouncements since its debut in last year's Defence White Paper. But what exactly does it mean? Which rules are we talking about?

Who gets to make the rules, and who is entitled to enforce them? The closer one looks, the clearer it becomes that talk of a rules-based international order assumes that international relations can work like national politics where a clear authority gets to set and enforce the rules.

But who could that authority be? At times it has been imagined that the UN might play that role, but no one takes that seriously any more. Australia itself, especially under Coalition governments, has been perfectly willing to defy the UN when we thought it suited us. Remember the invasion of Iraq, for example?

So it is perfectly plain that when Julie Bishop speaks of the "rules-based order" she means one in which the rules are set and enforced by America.

That is the kind of order we had in Asia for many decades, and it worked very well for us and for the rest of the region. But assuming it can keep working in future is just nostalgia, not policy making.

That brings us to the second element of the Bishop Doctrine: confidence in America's preponderant power. Mrs Bishop boldly asserts that "If peace and prosperity are to continue, the United States must play an even greater role as the indispensable strategic power in the Indo-Pacific".

Her faith that Asia's future stability can be assured by an American-led rules-based order assumes that America has both the power and the will to provide that leadership.

Her assumption about American power is quite explicit. "It is the pre-eminent global strategic power in Asia and the world by some margin," she said in Singapore.

Of course that used to be true, but not anymore. China has already overtaken America to become the world's largest economy in PPP terms, and will soon do so in MER terms as well.

That gives it not just great economic heft but real diplomatic weight as well – as Canberra's careful attention to Beijing quite plainly shows. And China's growing maritime forces already effectively undermine America's ability to project military power into the East Asian theatre.

So the Bishop doctrine seems to be stuck in denial about the most important change in Asia's strategic situation in decades - the radical shift in the distribution of wealth and power away from America towards China.

As long as we fail to recognise the scale and significance of this shift, we will be powerless to manage its consequences.

The Foreign Minister also seems blithely confident about America's willingness to lead in Asia. At one point in her speech she acknowledged that regional countries are a little uncertain, but her ringing call for an even greater US regional role suggests that she has no doubt.

So she seems to have missed the significance of Donald Trump's election as President of the United States on a platform of "America First". Perhaps she doesn't take what Mr Trump says seriously. Many people have made that mistake before.

Which brings us to the third and final pillar of the Bishop Doctrine – her faith in democracy. Her audience in Singapore were no doubt interested to be told that

democracy as she defines it is "essential for countries to meet their economic potential" and "a prerequisite for a stable and prosperous society".

No one should or could doubt our commitment to democracy here in Australia, but at this time in particular we should be careful not to be too complacent about how much better it works than other political philosophies.

Brexit, Donald Trump and our own less spectacular but nonetheless serious recent pattern of poor governance and failed political leadership should prompt sober introspection instead of boastful tub-thumping.

We cannot assume that democracies will always end up on top, as Mrs Bishop seems to do. And that means we cannot overlook the very real possibility that Australia will, in the quite near future, face an Asia shaped more by power than by rules, and where most power is exercised not by America but by China.

That is the Asia which our foreign policy must prepare Australia to encounter. The Bishop Doctrine is not a promising start.

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