

Quo vadis, Australia?

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Foreign policy white papers can disappoint. More than white papers on domestic policy, they deal largely with the unknown. And, for small and medium-sized countries in particular, foreign policy is often more a matter of reaction than action.

They're also the products of government and are therefore seldom modest about government achievements. And, because they are diplomatic instruments, their thrust can be obscure for fear of upsetting those with whom we seek to engage.

But, that said, they force a government to think through the issues and compel interaction between the government and the community on the priorities of the day—hopefully contributing to a national perspective. In that respect, the DFAT white paper launched last week was a good effort.

The central issue in the paper is the challenge posed by the rise of China and the concomitant relative decline in United States influence. The paper is lucid and frank in its analysis of the challenges, but less satisfying in what it proposes we do about them.

In essence, the paper prescribes a three-legged approach to our security environment: widening and deepening the security relationship with the United States; enhancing our relationship with China; and strengthening our relationships with other regional countries—particularly Japan and India—partly as a hedge against a diminution in the United States' commitment to the region.

However, the paper—and the comments by ministers at its launch—suggests that the alliance leg is overwhelmingly the most important of the three and is the one that will weigh most decisively in our approach to the region.

Hence, while the paper, and the remarks that launched it, describe a confident Australia proud of its sovereignty, its underlying message suggests an insecure

and needy Australia. To draw on Allan Gyngell's phrase, we seem to be a country in fear of abandonment.

The paper won't be the end of the debate on how we should approach our region. Australians will—and indeed should—continue to ponder, not the merits of the three-legged approach, which makes good sense, but the relative emphasis we give to each of the legs. In particular, some will continue to argue that, while ANZUS remains central to our external posture, it doesn't have to be the dominant feature of that posture.

Among its other main themes, the paper underlines, correctly, the importance of the rules-based system. Countries like Australia, with limited power, benefit most from international rules. Adherence to a sound international system matters—whether it applies to security, the environment or trade. Our diplomacy has to be guided by rules-based precepts, including when those precepts are challenged not only by China, but also by the United States.

The paper sets out cogently our policy responsibilities in our immediate Pacific neighbourhood. That is all to the good, not only for altruistic reasons but because we should balance excessive Chinese influence in the region. It also describes the economic opportunities offered by the growth of the region. No argument there.

While there will be differences in the Australian community about foreign policy content, there should be little disagreement with one all-encompassing thrust of the paper: Australia has to be more mindful of its international environment and alert to both problems and opportunities given the changes that are taking place and the uncertainty that those changes bring in their wake.

If that conclusion is accepted, several things need to happen.

The Australian government and opposition have to accord our external policies appropriate weight in overall political terms. The effective conduct of our foreign policy has to be a national priority—in the same way that economic reform was a priority in the 1980s and 1990s and counterterrorism has been since 9/11. Real resources have to be put into foreign policy implementation, and in particular into the underfunded Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The government of the day has to bring the community with it in understanding the need for enhanced regional engagement. Such an effort has to stretch into education of the community in the widest sense.

The recommendations of the Asian century white paper were allowed to lie fallow by Labor because they were not seen as a funding priority, and were consigned to oblivion by the Coalition because the paper wasn't their own.

Australians have to understand that no other Western democracy has a greater number of priority foreign partners with traditions and historical background so different from its own, and that we have to grasp how those societies work.

We must practise what we preach. Reputation counts. It is, for example, hard to claim leadership on human rights while defending our policies on the camps on Manus and Nauru.

We should seek more national constancy on policy. While there will be policy differences between the parties, every effort should be made to uphold international commitments. Labor's retreat in 2008 on the quadrilateral talks involving Australia, the United States, Japan and India and its temporary injunction in 2007 against uranium exports to India caused doubts in the region about our international credibility. And the Coalition's questioning of our UN Security Council candidature in 2014 and backtracking on bipartisan commitments to overseas aid didn't redound to our national credit.

In foreign policy, predictability and reliability are assets.

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