

# Foreign policy white paper has no answer to our biggest regional challenge

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*Australian Financial Review*, 27 November 2017

Link: <http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/white-paper-has-no-answer-to-our-biggest-regional-challenge-20171127-gztij5>

Foreign policy white paper has no answer to our biggest regional challenge Save Article Print License Article We still do not know how Australia fits in with the new crowd in the region. Malcolm Turnbull by Geoff Raby Finally, the government's white paper on foreign policy has arrived. Judging by media and the public's reaction, it has been underwhelming. This is no one's fault. It is in the nature of the beast. Credible foreign policy cannot be developed in a public document with all the international sensitivities involved, and public servants cannot be expected to strike out in new directions from existing government policy.

The whole exercise is intended to create the impression that the government of the day is thinking about the big international issues and has an active foreign policy agenda. Over the years, Australian governments have become less prepared to engage with contested ideas over foreign policy. It is telling that the report was not tabled in Parliament with a full parliamentary debate.

The Asian Century report was sunk under the weight of bureaucratic oversight committees and disappeared without a trace. The only such exercise over the past 30 years to have had a lasting impact on Australia foreign policy was Ross Garnaut's, *Australia and the North-East Asian Ascendancy*, released in 1990.

Garnaut came from outside the bureaucracy; had Hawke's full authority; and was not tethered by inter-departmental committees and anxious ministerial staffers.

This is not to say that the white paper is without considerable merit and is a valuable review of the changing landscape, especially with respect to many of the loose strands of foreign policy: asymmetrical security (terrorism, criminal activity), technology and – presumably reflecting DFAT's absorption of AUSAID – sections on PNG and Timor Leste.

The paper's clear and firm emphasis on free trade is a highlight and should be welcomed. It will be important for the Australian government to have accountability in this area. It is a standard by which its own policies should be judged. With a more protectionist Trump administration, the government will need to find the courage to pursue this agenda vigorously with the US, as well as China and others. We have had rows in the past with the US over trade without adversely affecting the security relationship.

But on the big foreign policy issue of the day, namely China's ascendancy and how Australia might contribute to shaping the changing regional and global order, the paper is making policy in the rear-vision mirror. It wistfully looks to retain the status quo ante of the US guaranteeing Australia's security and ensuring regional stability, while Australia prospers from China's economic growth.

The issue is not, however, how we would like things to be. Unquestionably, the past arrangements served Australia well. It was comfortable when the dominant power was one with whom we shared values and with whom we are like minded.

But these happy circumstances can't and won't continue indefinitely. China's rise has changed that. Australia now has to live with a dominant regional power that stands very far from the norms of political and social organisation of the post-Cold War era, Washington consensus.

Although the paper asserts, not unreasonably, that the US's extensive interests in the region will keep it engaged in East Asia, understandably in a public paper there is no analysis of how that engagement may change with a US administration that brings a transactional approach to foreign and security policy. On Trump's recent visit to Beijing, Western values such as human rights were not raised. Earlier Trump set aside concerns over China's behaviour in the South China Sea in favour of greater Chinese efforts on DPRK. And the most closely involved Southeast Asian states are working on an accommodation with China on how to manage their differences.

On each of these, Australia has been blind-sided. We no longer have in Washington a president who is a champion of the liberal international order. In view of the white paper's central assumption that the US will continue to guarantee our security, it would have been useful for the white paper to analyse whether the Trump administration is a passing moment of an accidental presidency or does a Trump presidency reflect deep structural changes in US domestic politics. After all, a second-term Trump will cover the white paper's entire timeframe.

The white paper sensibly avoids the almost fetish-like attraction some strategic commentators have developed for the previously failed Abe Quad grouping, with its glaring contradiction that some of the regions' most vibrant democracies are not included. A grouping whose main common denominator is that three of the four members are strategic competitors with China and two have hot border disputes with it, making Australia the odd man in.

The white paper's recognition of South Korea and Indonesia as important regional democracies is to be welcomed. As is the Prime Minister's initiative to host next year an ASEAN regional leaders meeting in Australia. Greater military co-operation with Singapore is foreshadowed. All of these can be seen as threads of an emerging response to the changing regional order.

Unfortunately, the paper is silent on how we deal with countries that should be part of a regional hedging strategy against China, but whom we don't like. The Philippines is a vibrant democracy but we don't like the results it throws up at times. Or Thailand, which is a key regional country, but is run by the military, or Myanmar which is much the same but more brutal.

The white paper missed the chance to explain to Australians that the comfortable world we inhabited for the past in the post-Cold War era has gone for good. In the transactional world of Trump's foreign policy, with powerful autocracies like China, and authoritarian leaders like those in Russia and Turkey, Australia needs a consistent realist approach to foreign policy, with the resources to prosecute it.

It is time for a genuinely independent government report on Australian foreign policy. If the Opposition finds itself in government before long, it might consider commissioning a new "Garnaut report".

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