

Trump will create early tests for a new Labor Government

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In a few months, Labor is likely to take charge of Australia's foreign policy and security. It will be doing so with a global order vastly different that which existed last time it held power. It is important then to consider how prepared is Labor for the task.

Senator Penny Wong is likely to be foreign minister and seems to relish the opportunity. She has been preparing for the role for some time. As the first Asian born female cabinet minister and Foreign Minister, she will attract a lot of attention across the Asia-Pacific region. She is cool, methodical and analytical. All valuable qualities in a Foreign Minister.

She will not be given to the rhetorical flourishes and strident language of Julie Bishop. She understands that in diplomacy words matter and need to be carefully weighed. She is ambitious and will not be nearly so invisible as our current Foreign Minister. With Bishop and Paine, Australia seems to have gone from one extreme to another.

Labor's top team has also been clearly working hard on a number of important initiatives. Labor's FutureAsia Strategy is an interesting initiative, with its emphasis on whole-of-government coordination and the direct involvement of senior ministers. This will be the most recent effort of a long line of initiatives by governments of both sides of politics to deepen Australia's engagement with Asia.

In recent years, we have had the Henry Report on the Asian Century, DFAT's White Paper and most recently the Varghese report on deepening ties with India which the government that commissioned it seemed not to wish to promote for some inexplicable reason. Each of these reports has essentially called for the same thing – greater engagement, more resources into the relationships, lifting of the language effort in this country, and, of course, better coordination within Australia at the Federal and State levels. Let us hope that the FutureAsia Strategy will have a longer shelf-life than these other reports, as worthy as they may well have been.

Luckily for Australia, our coal, iron ore, LNG, education and tourism services, wine and clean green food continue to command markets within the region without a lot of assistance from the public sector in Australia. In fact, the best way governments can support these industries' efforts is to have a competitive regulatory regime domestically.

The value-added of government to our engagement in Asia is more in terms of providing clear leadership, articulating a vision of Australia's Asian future, and backing it with deep political engagement with the region based on mutual trust and understanding.

In this respect, Labor's approach seems like the curate's egg – part good, part less so. Penny Wong has promised to open four more diplomatic posts in the region. And while acknowledging that the international order faces “disruption”, Wong's fundamental policy settings seem hardly different from the Coalitions.

Wong emphasises Australia's values, rule of law, rights and so on, as if the Coalition doesn't. Her formula for dealing with China – which is welcome – is that which John Howard had pragmatically set out in the late 90s and followed until he fell under the sway of the Bush-Cheney neo-conservatives post the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Under this approach, we recognise that we have differences, but we get on with all of our areas of common interest. This worked well for a while for Howard and saw Australia rewarded with our first major LNG long-term contract. China was smaller then and far less consequential in world affairs. Times have changed.

Wong employs the new concept “Indo-Pacific” promoted by Turnbull/Bishop and Trump, rather than the older Asia-Pacific. Like much else in foreign policy these days, “Indo-Pacific” has been coined in response to the China challenge in the hope that somehow India will be co-opted into balancing China in East Asia. India, however, has little strategic interest in East Asia. Its security is not derived from within the region and it trades relatively little with it as well.

India is concerned about China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, an area of little strategic interest for Australia, but it of course far outweighs China's presence. India's main security interests are westward. Immediately, Pakistan and beyond to the Persian Gulf and further west. As are its commercial interests. India will not provide the solution to Australia's security challenges with China. It is not in India's interests to do so.

Wong supports the complete ban on Huawei in Australia's 5G. Judging by the rollout of NBN, in Australia 5G might be like waiting for Godot. Again, this is just a continuation of Coalition policy. While the "Five Eyes" have clearly been under enormous US pressure to fall into line on this, the UK has under a Conservative Prime Minister felt that a nuanced approach is feasible while protecting sensitive infrastructure from security risks.

Surely there are parts of a complex telecommunications system which are sensitive and parts which are not? A blanket ban seems neither necessary on security grounds nor in Australia's interests to impose additional costs on ourselves where a cheaper more competitive supplier of equipment could be used for non-sensitive areas.

Wong, however, has repeatedly said that "we will always take the advice of our security agencies". The various agency heads could not be happier with that. But who then will challenge them on behalf of the Australian public? As we have seen time and time again, they, like most of Australia's institutions, are fallible. After all, it was the intelligence of these agencies provided by the US that was fake and used to justify the disastrous invasion of Iraq.

Wong has said that the US is the "indispensable actor" in the region, which is a truism. A key and pressing challenge will be how a new Labor Government deals with the US. The incoming US Ambassador, even before presenting his credentials to the Governor General, has already enlisted Australia, as reported in the AFR, on the "front lines" of a new, modern cold war with China as set out in a speech last October by Vice President Pence. Former Trump ultra-neo conservative adviser Steve Bannon, in a visit to Australia last year, described Australia as the "spear" against China. If we are the tip, who then is holding the staff?

Later this year, Australia is promised visits by Vice President Pence and National Security Adviser John Bolton, who believes in military action rather than diplomacy and still has unfinished business in the Middle East. The timing of the visits is not coincidental. This will bring enormous pressure to bear on the new government. The US will look to test the new government early on.

Thus far nothing suggests Labor is ready to handle such pressure. Labor is still to articulate a foreign policy framework within which to respond to the new order and the changed balance of power between the US and China. Wong seems to believe it is mainly about messaging, but it is far more fundamental than that. So without solid substantive policy it looks as if it will be more of the same for Australia under a Shorten Labor Government.

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