

Heavy-handed approach to aid has disenchanted Pacific Island nations and compromised Australia's security

by Nick Bisley and Shahar Hameiri

The Guardian, 31 March 2022

Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/31/heavy-handed-approach-to-aid-has-disenchanted-pacific-island-nations-and-compromised-australias-security>

Taking countries' preferences and needs seriously is the first step to strengthening leadership in the region

What would a progressive foreign policy for Australia look like today? Sadly, there is no identifiable progressive vision. Labor governments since the 1980s have usually promoted a combination of multilateralism and economic globalisation. Neither is viable now.

Today, increasingly belligerent great powers undermine established international institutions.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine means that rapprochement is unlikely soon. Globalisation is fracturing, hastened by the west's sanctions on Russia.

Closer to home, Australia's relationship with its biggest trading partner, [China](#), has never been worse, while the pandemic has exposed the dangers of long supply chains – a result of yesteryear's economic liberalisation.

In this fragmented and dangerous world, Labor has little different to offer. This is partly because Albanese and his senior colleagues are pursuing a "small target" campaign and offer few new ideas on most things. It also reflects Labor's fear of appearing weak on national security – an anxiety on which the government is seeking to play with its crude attacks on China – even though the parties' positions are nearly identical.

Nonetheless, new progressive foreign policy ideas are absent globally. Labor is not alone.

In a new [article](#) in the Australian Journal of International Affairs, co-authored with four other colleagues, we argue that the key to this is a "progressive realism".

Our starting point is a pragmatic, “realist”, assessment of the main dynamics that shape modern international relations. Governments can only provide security, basic needs, and sustainable development by facing unflinchingly the realities of world politics. This means paying attention to changing distributions of power among states, but also to the contours of global value chains and the impacts of human-induced climate change, for example.

This is followed by a progressive second step. Rather than accepting the world as it is, a progressive foreign policy should seek to redistribute existing power configurations.

In recent years, progressive movements have focused more on issues of identity and inclusion and not enough on redistribution. This is a mistake. If progressive politics stands for anything, it is a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and life-chances.

Placing a redistributive logic at the heart of order-building activities recognises that any global order premised on unequal, unjust distributions of wealth, power and status will be neither stable nor sustainable.

Practice and ethics must, therefore, go together. Without first assessing do-ability, realising progressive goals is impossible. Combined, these two building blocks provide the foundations for a “progressive realism”; the basis for a left-of-centre foreign policy agenda.

What would that mean in practice? For example, the recent leaked draft security agreement between Solomon Islands and China has put a spotlight on Australia’s relationship with Pacific island countries. If implemented, the agreement could potentially allow China to base ships in Solomon Islands, 2,000km from Australia.

While its status is uncertain, Australia should work hard to prevent this agreement or similar from being signed with any Pacific country. It would profoundly transform and destabilise Pacific’s security order hence intensifying the pressure on Australia’s defence planning enormously.

Nonetheless, Solomon Islands is a sovereign state and Australian policymakers would do well to ask themselves why its government would entertain this deal in the first place. Many Australian commentators have blamed Chinese “chequebook diplomacy”, casting Solomon Islands as the gullible party. Solomon Islanders, however, are not [“dupes”](#).

Pacific governments do not necessarily see the world like Australia. While Australia views China as a global bully, Pacific governments perceive Chinese

engagement as giving them more leverage vis-a-vis Australia; the region's hegemon.

As the Pacific's biggest aid donor, Australia has often taken a heavy-handed approach, trying to dictate to Pacific islanders how to run their governments and public institutions. Much of its aid also ended up in the pockets of Australian companies and consultants. Many in the region resent this. Chinese presence constrains Australian paternalism. It has also led Australia to pledge more money for infrastructure, which the Pacific sorely needs.

Additionally, while Australia sees China as its biggest security threat, the Pacific associates that level of danger with climate change, not China.

Australia's dismal approach to climate change mitigation, and disapproval of Pacific climate activism, [rankles](#). Granted, China is not itself a climate change paragon, but Australia's claim to regional leadership has been harmed.

A progressive-realist approach would recognise that China is in the region to stay, because Pacific governments want it there. Hence, leading in the Pacific does not mean kicking China out, as efforts to achieve this would probably backfire.

Australia must take Pacific countries' preferences and needs seriously. It needs to accommodate, even engage, China in areas that benefit the Pacific, and only compete where Australian security is clearly jeopardised, as with the aforementioned draft agreement. Australia could also empower Pacific sovereignty by supporting governments and civil society's capacity to analyse debt sustainability and increase the transparency of Chinese-financed projects.

Australia also should support Pacific countries' capacity to shape regional policy agendas. To continue to use the Pacific Islands Forum to drive through Australia's security and trade goals only heightens regional resentments. Short-termism should be replaced with a long-term commitment to partnership.

A second plank of a progressive realist foreign policy in the Pacific would involve a shift in Australia's climate change stance.

If Australia took climate action seriously, this alone would strengthen its leadership claims. This could be bolstered by allocating substantial financial resources to supporting climate adaptation, which should become the focus of Australia's Pacific financing facility. This redistributive approach recognises the immediacy of the timelines that Pacific countries face in ensuring their own resilience, even survival, in a climate transformed future.

Progressive realism provides the means for a long-term vision focused on maximising Australian influence over a range of strategic issues. We do not claim to have all the answers, but Australia must have an urgent debate over its foreign policy agenda. The left must play its part.

Nick Bisley is Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences and Professor of International Relations at La Trobe University. He is also a member the Advisory Council of China Matters.

Shahar Hameiri is Professor of International Politics and Director of Research in the School of Political Science and International Studies at University of Queensland.