

A new Australian foreign policy agenda under Albanese

by Allan Gyngell

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Australian observers seem to think that the Albanese government's foreign and national security policies will not differ much from those of its predecessor.

The argument makes sense. Australian foreign policy has always had a strong bipartisan core — commitment to the United States alliance, engagement with the region and support for a rules-based international order. During the 2022 election campaign, the Labor Party was determined to let no exploitable gap on national security policy appear between it and the Morrison government.

But while some of the early statements and speeches from Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Defence Minister Richard Marles have strongly echoed those of their predecessors, the changes to come will be greater than expected.

Albanese's early trips to the [Quad](#) leaders' meeting in Tokyo, to Madrid for the NATO summit and to Kyiv reassured allies that the new Australian government's support for the United States and the Quad and its opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was rock solid. The Prime Minister also repaired the relationship with France, which had been shattered by the Morrison government's [cancellation](#) of a contract to purchase French submarines.

Albanese's first bilateral international visit was to Indonesia, which underlined the importance of the Australia–Indonesia relationship. He reassured President Joko Widodo that Australia would not boycott the G20 leaders' meeting over Vladimir Putin's attendance, as Scott Morrison had threatened. Regional solidarity and Australia's national interest in the survival of the G20 took precedence over US pressure on Russia over Ukraine.

The announcement of a possible Chinese security agreement with the Solomon Islands enabled the Labor Party to attack the Morrison government during the election campaign. As soon as the new Foreign Minister, Senator Penny Wong, returned from the Quad meeting she made three quick visits to the Pacific before returning with Albanese for a Pacific Islands Forum meeting. They emphasised Australia's intention to listen respectfully to regional countries and acknowledge their interests, including their [attitudes](#) towards the involvement of great powers in the region.

Australia's shift to a more ambitious carbon reduction commitment was a prerequisite to consolidating Australia's position within the region, as Pacific Island countries are the most vulnerable to climate change. The Pacific Islands Forum's role as a clearing house for regional policy was strengthened and South Pacific leaders agreed to bid with Australia to co-host the COP29 United Nations Climate Change Summit in 2024. This signalled another change — a return to support for multilateral approaches to resolve international problems and for the United Nations.

In contrast to its predecessor, the new government's language about China has been disciplined. Careful steps have been taken to 'stabilise' the relationship. Neither side has backed away from fundamental positions, but Marles met his Chinese counterpart at the Shangri-La Dialogue and Wong met with the Foreign Minister at the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting.

Too much has changed for relations to return to the ease of the early 2000s, but it is no longer impossible to imagine productive exchanges on matters of mutual benefit.

After years of marginalisation, foreign policy has been restored to a more central part of Australian statecraft. Wong will be a powerful foreign minister and an influential member of the Labor leadership team.

The tone is new, and tone matters. In Wong's words, foreign policy 'starts with who we are'. The Albanese government's early actions have been designed to present Australia to the world and the region as a changing multicultural society that draws on the knowledge of its First Nations people. Albanese went to Indonesia with a foreign minister who was born in Malaysia and an industry minister who is Australia's first Muslim cabinet minister.

These shifts have the practical effect of signalling to the region Australia's desire to work as an embedded partner with Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, Japan and India through the complexities ahead. 'ASEAN centrality', Wong stated during a conference in Singapore, 'means we will always think about our security in the context of your security'.

The legacy of the Labor party's activist and social democratic traditions will influence the new Labor ministers. Their field of view will be wider than the Morrison government's framing of a struggle between an 'arc of autocracies' and liberal democracies. They will value the contributions of public servants and those public servants will, for the most part, find political bosses who know their briefs and have their own ideas.

The new Australian government is still settling in and the challenges ahead will be tough. The outlook for the global economy is grim. Human rights concerns in countries with which Australia wants to develop relations will grind against other national interests. The impact of climate change will continue to escalate. And the next three years will reveal whether the United States can still deploy a global strategy that is both principled and consistent through changing administrations.

But in weighing the balance of continuity and change in Australian foreign policy, it is likely that political impulses and external dynamics will deliver more of a change of substance and impact under the Albanese government than many now expect.

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