



Australia's tilt on China

On January 26, in a speech to the US-Australia Dialogue on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in Los Angeles, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop supported a position where China's rise is balanced by an expanded US role in the Indo-Pacific region:¹

The US presence and its alliances have provided the stability that has underwritten the region's growth for many decades... Most nations wish to see more United States leadership, not less, and have no desire to see powers other than the US, calling the shots. Australia believes that now is the time for the United States to go beyond its current engagement in Asia, to support Asia's own peace, and to capitalise on the era of opportunity that long-term United States investment has already created.

She returned to this sentiment on March 13 in a talk to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore:²

If stability and prosperity are to continue, the United States must play an even greater role as the indispensable strategic power in the Indo-Pacific.

In the same speech Minister Bishop also sent a blunt message to China on the importance of adopting democratic institutions:³

The importance of liberal values and institutions should not be underestimated or ignored. While non-democracies such as China can thrive when participating in the present system, an essential pillar of our preferred order is democratic community. Domestic democratic habits of negotiating and compromise are essential to powerful countries resolving their disagreements according to international law and rules. History also shows democracy and democratic institutions are essential for nations if they are to reach their economic potential.

It is reported Minister Bishop also emphasised these points during meetings with US Vice-President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster in Washington in February.⁴

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¹ Julie Bishop, 'US-Australia Dialogue on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', speech, Los Angeles, United States, January 26 2017 <http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2017/jb_sp_170126.aspx>.
² Julie Bishop, 'Change and uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic challenges and opportunities', speech, 28th IISS Fullerton Lecture, Singapore, March 13 2017 <http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2017/jb_sp_170313a.aspx>.

³ Ibid.
⁴ Phillip Coorey, 'Julie Bishop calls on US to step up to ward off China threat', *Australian Financial Review*, March 13 2017 <<http://www.afr.com/news/julie-bishop-calls-on-us-to-step-up-to-ward-off-china-threat-20170312-guwxku>>.

Australian foreign policy analyst Tom Switzer points out that this rhetoric is stronger than that employed by most Australian governments in the past:⁵

Ever since Gough Whitlam's opening in the early 1970s, our prime ministers and foreign ministers have generally refrained from lecturing the Communist leaders about the merits of democracy or calling for any containment of China.

On June 2, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in a keynote address to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore appeared to confirm that Australian government policy towards China is veering towards a harder line in the face of China's rise:⁶

Some fear that China will seek to impose a latter day Monroe Doctrine on this hemisphere in order to dominate the region, marginalising the role and contribution of other nations, in particular the United States...A coercive China would find its neighbours resenting demands they cede their autonomy and strategic space, and look to counterweight Beijing's power by bolstering alliances and partnerships, between themselves and especially with the United States. And this hemisphere has nothing in common with the Western Hemisphere of President Monroe's day. Our region includes the third largest economy, sophisticated, capable and advanced Japan; a rising giant in India destined to match China itself; the fourth most populous nation – an increasingly confident and prosperous Indonesia – not to speak of Australia's, or indeed our hosts',

own determination and capability to assert and defend our interests.

Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University (ANU), in an analysis of the Prime Minister's speech, observed that:⁷

No regional leader – not even Japan's bellicose PM Shinzo Abe – has ever gone this far before.

Foreign Minister Bishop supported the Prime Minister's remarks in an interview with *Sky News* on June 5:⁸

The Prime Minister spoke realistically and pragmatically about the way things are. The fact is in the South China Sea China has unilaterally reclaimed features, [has] built military features on islands and it's in direct disregard to the international rules-based order and the Prime Minister has set that out...[W]e urge countries not to take unilateral action to change the status quo and that's why the Prime Minister spoke as he did in the Shangri-La speech urging countries to resolve their differences peacefully, not impose their will on smaller countries less able to respond.

On April 20 at a press conference prior to the Australia-Japan Foreign and Defence Ministers' Meeting (2+2) in Tokyo, Defence Minister Marise Payne seemed to indicate that Australia was open to reviving the quadrilateral security dialogue with the US, Japan and India that had been supported by the Howard Government in 2007:⁹

Australia is very interested in a quadrilateral engagement with India, Japan and the United States.

⁵ Tom Switzer, 'Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's rhetoric on China is striking', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 27 2017 <<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/foreign-minister-julie-bishops-rhetoric-on-china-is-striking-20170324-gv63uc.html>>.

⁶ Malcolm Turnbull, Keynote address at the 16th IISS Asia Security Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 2 2017 <<https://malcolmt Turnbull.com.au/media/keynote-address-at-the-16th-iiss-asia-security-summit-shangri-la-dialogue>>.

⁷ Hugh White, 'Malcolm Turnbull condemns China but has no alternative plan', *Australian Financial Review*, June 4 2017 <<http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/malcolm-turnbull-condemns-china-but-has-no-alternative-plan-20170604-gwk1un>>.

⁸ Primrose Riordan, 'China in 'direct disregard' for international order, Bishop says', *The Australian*, June 5 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/china-in-direct-disregard-for-international-order-bishop-says/news-story/ea5c251d38c392cd42007a1d89390ad9>>.

⁹ Doorstop – Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Defence, Australian Embassy, Tokyo, April 20 2017 <<https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/transcripts/doorstop-minister-foreign-affairs-and-minister-defence-australian>>.

Minister Payne said a rekindling of the quadrilateral security dialogue was 'part of our discussions [with Japan]' but that at that point Australia had not issued a request.¹⁰

Senior departmental figures have remained more cautious in their characterisation of the Australia-China relationship and recommendations for the way forward, speaking more to the complexities in the relationship and the need to better manage these while continuing to maintain a friendship with China.

Then-outgoing Defence Secretary Dennis Richardson in a speech to the National Press Club on May 12 acknowledged, for example, that 'China is very active in intelligence activities directed at us. And it is more than cyber'.¹¹ He qualified this with the observation that '[i]t would be wrong to suggest that the Chinese Government are the worst offenders. It would be wrong to suggest that they are the first ones to have done it'.¹²

Mr Richardson went on to state that the Australia-China relationship was 'many-sided' and that '[p]ositives are rightly emphasised' but that 'it would be foolish to pretend that the negatives do not exist or to attempt to diminish their significance'.¹³

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary Frances Adamson in remarks at the Crawford Australian Leadership Forum at the ANU on June 20 stated that while 'China's actions in the South China Sea have rightly given rise to concerns' and that on the Belt and Road Initiative Australia is concerned 'about transparency, about rules, about open contracts and governance arrangements', the challenge posed by a rising China is perhaps not as overwhelming

as many Australians might perceive it to be.¹⁴

We have been challenged by our sometimes vivid imagination about some of these things. Some of the polling says Australians see a much bigger China emerging that the Chinese themselves see. It may be natural for us to do that but I think the reality lies somewhere in the middle.

Ms Adamson also noted, 'We need to stand up again and say international law and respect for it doesn't mean there's no scope for adjustment. That's more around roles, I think, more than rules and we want to be welcoming of China's rise'.¹⁵

There is, however, some concern that Australia's China policymaking is undergoing a leadership shift, with influence moving away from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and towards the Prime Minister's Office and defence and national security agencies. It is reported that former Ambassador to China Geoff Raby in June told the *Global Times*:¹⁶

Although those organisations might be experienced in the global landscape, they might not be close to China or know China well...[T]he foreign ministry of Australia is turning into an implementation body.

¹⁰ Ibid.
¹¹ Dennis Richardson, 'Australia, the US and China – where to?', speech, National Press Club, May 12 2017 <<https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/dennis-richardson-ao-australia-the-us-and-china-where-to->>.
¹² Primrose Riordan, 'China has been spying in Australia', *The Australian*, May 12 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/china-spying-in-australia-dennis-richardson-says/news-story/84b92773d886d02c42636db75981c38f>>.
¹³ Dennis Richardson, 'Australia, the US and China – where to?', speech, National Press Club, May 12 2017 <<https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/dennis-richardson-ao-australia-the-us-and-china-where-to->>.

¹⁴ Australian National University, 'China not as big a challenge as we think: DFAT chief tells Crawford Forum', news item, Australian National University, June 20 2017 <<http://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/china-not-as-big-a-challenge-as-we-think-dfat-chief-tells-crawford-forum>>.
¹⁵ Primrose Riordan, 'Taking a lend: concerns over China aid to Pacific', *The Australian*, June 21 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/australia-concerned-about-transparency-in-chinas-belt-road/news-story/7549b1826c5e142b86de571c1122296d>>.
¹⁶ Kirsty Needham, 'Defence not driving Australia's China policy, says former ambassador', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 19 2017 <<http://www.smh.com.au/world/defence-now-driving-australias-china-policy-says-former-ambassador-20170619-gwu56k.html>>.