

What a Labor victory might mean for Australian foreign policy

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A federal election is due this year in Australia. While the Liberal-National Coalition government has yet to formally announce a polling day, the stage has **effectively been set** for a May election. According to Australian law, May 18 is the latest possible date a federal election could be called. The opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP) is favored to win, having **consistently** polled **ahead** of the Coalition over the last year, at least, and having extended their lead in polls in the aftermath of Malcolm Turnbull's ouster from the Coalition prime ministership in an internal Liberal Party leadership contest last year.

Labor has made efforts over the last two years to articulate a comprehensive foreign policy framework, with cohesive public messaging on key issues – for the most part – by the shadow cabinet. This disciplined approach seems to augur for consistency and certainty in their public diplomacy should they win control of government. In his **first** major foreign policy speech on October 29, opposition leader Bill Shorten was emphatic about crafting a foreign policy that was clear-eyed about a changing world, and one that would “speak with a clear Australian accent”. **Asked** what this meant precisely, shadow foreign minister Penny Wong stated, “Confidence, independence, making sure that our primary focus, as always, is on Australia's national interests.”

Should the ALP win control of government, Shorten's personal criticisms of President Trump during the U.S. presidential election campaign and thereafter may present some difficulties in navigating the U.S.-Australia relationship. In October 2016, Shorten **declared** Trump “entirely unsuitable to be leader of the free world”, having earlier that year **described** Trump's policies as “barking mad”. In January 2017, Shorten **called** the new president's policy barring visitors from several Muslim-majority from entering the United States “appalling”. While some Coalition ministers had also publicly **deployed** colourful language to describe Trump during his candidacy, then-prime minister Malcolm Turnbull had refrained from wading in with comments. To be sure, leaked footage of Turnbull impersonating Trump during a speech to the Press Gallery Mid-Winter Ball – a closed-door equivalent to the White House Correspondents Dinner – emerged in June 2017, only a few months after Trump was inaugurated. However, the off-the-record speech was no serious attack in the public sphere on the American president, with Turnbull **asserting** that it was “light-hearted, affectionate, good natured.” Indeed, this assessment enjoyed some **support** from the opposition and seemed to be swiftly accepted by Washington with the U.S. embassy in Australia **saying** the footage was taken “with good humor that was intended”.

Shorten's unflattering comments about Trump might make for some initial awkwardness. As might comments by shadow defence minister Richard Marles, who [said](#) in October 2017, "An immigration system which overtly seeks to discriminate on the basis of religion is clearly repugnant. So pro-American advocates like myself are now in a position where on certain issues we will need to be deeply critical of the United States." But any rift this may cause between the two countries is likely to be superficial. Shorten and the senior members of his shadow cabinet have articulated an "[unshakeable](#)" commitment to the U.S.-Australia alliance, terming it a "[pillar](#)" of the ALP's foreign policy vision and "[central](#) to Australia's strategic interests." While [stating](#) that Labor would have no qualms "speaking truth to power" they have also demonstrated an intent to work in with others in the region "to [ensure](#) that the U.S. recognises that it is integral to the region we collectively seek". That said, trade issues will continue to be an irritant in the bilateral relationship so long as Washington continues to move away from the rules-based multilateral trading system.

With respect to China, there is no immediate indication that the ALP's approach will differ significantly from that of the current government. Criticisms from Labor of the government's handling of the Australia-China relationship have predominantly centred on rhetoric, variously characterising it as "[disjointed](#) megaphone diplomacy", "[Chinaphobic](#)" and "[unwise](#) and provocative", as opposed to disagreement on policy substance. On matters of national security the ALP have often been in lockstep with the Coalition, supporting legislation to counter foreign interference after revelations of growing Chinese influence in Australian politics, a ban on foreign political donations, and the decision to block Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE from involvement in the rollout of Australia's 5G network. Labor has also been supportive of strategies to balance China's regional rise, actively engaging in the push to forge closer ties with Pacific nations, and articulating a strong [commitment](#) to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. There is also general consensus between the two major parties on how to approach human rights issues as well- Wong has [stated](#), for example, that the Australian government is handling the mass internment of an estimated one million Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang "the appropriate way" by enunciating Canberra's concerns "very clear publicly and privately" but not immediately reaching for sanctions against Beijing.

Shorten has also [rejected the notion of](#) "pre-emptively framing China as a strategic threat", placing some distance between the Labor Party's proposed China policy and the more adversarial posture toward China reflected in the U.S. National Security and National Defence Strategies and amplified in Vice President Mike Pence's [tough speech](#) on China last October. His statement also comes against a domestic backdrop in Australia of increasing wariness of Chinese state influence and interference in Australian politics, academia and industry, and rising alarm at the Chinese government's moves toward the playing of a more aggressive diplomatic game, [most recently](#) with its detentions of foreign nationals, including Australian citizen Yang Hengjun. Turnbull in December 2017 [spoke](#) of "unprecedented and increasingly sophisticated attempts to influence the political process" – an assessment received from Australia's [intelligence](#) agencies – citing "disturbing reports about Chinese influence". And in December 2018 the New South Wales Labor Party's headquarters were raided by investigators from the Independent Commission Against Corruption, [reportedly](#) looking for financial records linked to an annual Chinese Friends of Labor party fundraising event. Shorten's statement seemingly is trying to reassure Beijing that despite growing and serious Australian concerns about China a Labor-led Australia would continue to pursue constructive engagement with Beijing.

Two areas of potential difference in a Labor-led China policy may be on Australian strategy in the South China Sea and participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Marles, a [self-described](#) "China hawk", might [push](#) in a Labor cabinet for Australia to increase its actions in the disputed waters, having [signalled](#) an [openness](#) to such in the past. It is unclear exactly what this increased activity would look like, however. Marles has not explicitly advocated for Australia to conduct freedom of navigation operations within the 12 nautical mile zone of disputed territory, but he has [stated](#) that "Labor would consider opportunities for further co-operation with partners in the region." The ALP has also [expressed](#) an "open mind as to how Australia and China can best collaborate on the [BRI]", and has not ruled out participating in joint infrastructure projects to develop northern Australia.

Labor also has committed to “a significant increase” in Australian outreach with Asia generally, matching Australia’s “economic and trading agenda with our broader geopolitical priorities”. Key initiatives on this front were nominated in some detail in the ALP’s “Future Asia” policy framework, [launched](#) in 2017.

One priority in Labor’s overall Asia strategy is to deepen economic ties with Indonesia, one of Australia’s most important, and often contentious, bilateral relationships. Shorten has [pledged](#) an “early visit” to Indonesia should he be elected prime minister, and asserted that reaching a level of “strategic trust” with Indonesia would be “a central objective” of a Labor government.

Tensions in the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship arose anew late last year with the government’s announcement that Australia would recognise West Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi [declared](#) that this was a “really big blow” that would “affect bilateral relations” and Indonesia’s trade minister [indicated](#) that it would adversely impact the conclusion of a Australia-Indonesia free trade agreement (FTA). In one instance of emphatic divergence from the current Coalition government, Labor has [stated](#) that, if it wins power, it would reverse the government’s decision on recognising West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. However, the Australia-Indonesia FTA could still stall under a Labor government given the ALP’s opposition to a provision allowing for the importation of foreign workers. There is also the potential for a rhetorical flare-up between Australia and Indonesia should Abu Bakar Bashir, the radical Indonesian cleric linked to the Bali bombings which claimed the lives of 88 Australians, be given early release, as Jakarta is considering. Shorten had [declared](#) in January this year that jail is “where he belongs”. However, it is unlikely that a Labor government would take a strong stand on this front, with Shorten conceding his views were “a personal opinion”.

In office, Labor also likely would maintain Canberra’s “Pacific pivot”, having [committed](#) to place the Pacific at the center of Australia’s regional foreign policy. This would likely include a Labor government moving forward with Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s [promise](#) to establish a \$2 billion fund to support infrastructure projects in the region.

Despite some variances, it appears at this point that there would be no substantial foreign policy overhaul under a Labor government. As Wong noted in 2017, there is bipartisan [support](#) for the Australian [foreign policy white paper](#) released that year. The white paper, Australia’s first in 14 years, examines the shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, with a particular focus on the challenges presented by China’s rise coupled with concerns about decreased a potential decreased U.S. role in the region. Wong said the ALP recognised that “long-term planning is in the national interest, and that the nation is better off when changes of government don’t translate into the digital burning of months and years of public service work.” While there may be some differences between Labor and the government in terms of the execution of policy priorities, all indications currently point to a preference for broadly staying the same course.

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