

Foreign Policy Blues: The Australian Foreign Policy White Paper

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Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

The [Australian Foreign Policy White paper](#) was touted as a main course for consumers of policy, a document that revealed the inner workings of those creatures working for the Department of Trade and Foreign Affairs. Its temper is predictable, its prose wooden, the voice of a satrap trapped in the body of a sovereign.

There were the traditional nods, the appreciating, ingratiating glance towards US power. There was the tiptoeing commentary about international hostilities and disagreements.

“No surprises,” claimed [Remy Davison](#) of Monash University: “the Foreign Policy White Paper from Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is about trade, not guns.”

The emphasis, for all the clichéd control in language, was troubled. Looming over the text was a certain **President Donald Trump**, who has given Australian policy wonks much in the way of perplexing trouble.

“The politics in many countries,” observe the [authors](#), “has also become fragmented and volatile. Nationalism has become a stronger political force and protectionist sentiment has increased.”

So much in the nature of Australian foreign policy has given way to the [fears of abandonment](#), and the search for a powerful friend. It is a tendency that creeps up again, as much as Canberra wishes to be seen as maturely independent.

Much of it is also grand crystal-ball gazing, something policy analysts should never dabble in. Not, however, those at DFAT, where astrology, social science, and economics mix. The lingering interest in the document, even obsession, is one that fears agents of destabilisation. The stress, then, is on those long established “rules” of engagement between states, preferably the sort dictated by Washington.

According to the [ministerial forward](#) by foreign minister, **Julie Bishop**, and minister for trade, tourism and investment, **Steven Ciobo**, the paper “sets out a comprehensive framework to advance Australia’s security and prosperity in a contested and competitive world.”

That said, such might is being questioned. The US may well remain “the preeminent global power and most important influence on international affairs” but it “now shares the stage with a number of countries with large populations and economies.” Enter the influence and

effect of non-state actors makes the authors draw a clear conclusion: “global governance is becoming more complex.”

The frowning here is palpable, and each observation is tempered by a modestly negative note. China is invaluable, even indispensably tied to Australia’s future, but is challenging US power, the very same power shaped by Washington’s “leadership”. “US leadership has supported global security, including through the network of US alliances and the US military presence in Asia and Europe.” The bland hope on the part of the White Paper’s authors is that disputes that arise between powers will be settled amicably, preferably through mediation and arbitration.

Such observations could only come from the script writing of a client state, one with close military ties to the United States. So much so, in fact, that the Australian defence forces are projected to become entirely [inter-operable](#) with their US counterparts in the not too distant future.

Technological opportunities are tempered by technological nightmares. The wish for open cyberspace is squared by the interest in controlling [dangers](#) posed by agents who roam through it. “An increasing dependence on global ICT networks means that the potential costs of disruption are large and growing.”

The globalisation ideologues are being given a beating – a bad thing, in the view of the authors. The [White Paper](#) insists on the beneficial cornucopia of neo-liberal trade, lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty in Asia. Along with this came benefits for consumers stemming from “access to goods and technologies from around the world at lower prices.” As ever, these are observations freed of nuance and social awareness.

Environment is not mentioned, though the paper, with some reproach, notes those doubts “about the effect of globalisation, mainly immigration, on cultural identity and social cohesion.” The object of disagreement within the document is clearly a sense that Australia has gotten it right, while other states have not. Yes, populism might well be on the rise, including suspicion of establishment politics, but no matter. The voters, and those leaders who capitalised on such sentiments, are in error, and Australia must find ways of setting the course.

Free trade agreements are one such source of self-deluding fancy – the continued, and now even comic pursuit of such agendas – remain status quo aspirations. The Trans-Pacific Partnership, ever weakened by a lack of US participation and Canadian scepticism, is to be kept afloat.

“Economic nationalism” is deemed a great problem, and there are “concerns about globalisation and levels of political alienation”. The world might well be “interconnected” but what “empowers individual citizens increase risk and volatility in the international system”. Reading such observations is much like going over the ponderings of a blind man: he keeps running into a wall, but refuses to accept its presence.

The ministerial forward seeks to flatter Australia in this “competitive and contested world”, a formulation that is repeated through the document with robotic consistency. “Our strong economy and institutions, innovative businesses, educated and skilled population and secure borders provide solid foundations for success.”

The [Indo-Pacific](#) makes its appearance as a serious area of engagement, one made to sound like El Dorado, its streets paved with opportunities and gold. “Within the next 15 years, four of the world’s five biggest economies in purchasing power parity terms are likely to be in Asia: China, India, Japan and Indonesia.”

The hope here is the rising middle class of the region, one made to sound like low hanging fruit for Australian business and commercial opportunities. “Some forecasts suggest that by 2030, Asia could be home to a middle class of almost 3.5 billion”. These will be hungry for Australian minerals and energy (how fortunate that these are already there, in the ground, awaiting export), though “services and premium agricultural products” are also mentioned.

To that end, the White Paper reveals what is Australia’s self-imposed reality: that it cannot entirely escape from its role as Asian breadbasket, or supplier of commodities. Nor can it detach itself from its destiny as a US satellite. The best it can hope for is avoiding trouble altogether.

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