

Dong Nai & Cuu Long
Cultural Research Group Incorporated
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Submission
To
Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper 2017

We wish to warmly congratulate the Australian government - particularly the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Julie Bishop, MP, the Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment, the Hon Steven Ciobo, MP, and the Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells - for their initiative in considering and formulating a White Paper on Australia's Foreign Policy for the next decade.

This submission is limited in scope as we do not attempt to cover all the six questions raised by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

General

If the government decision was forward looking when it was announced, it has now become even more boldly far reaching to provide major headlands in foreign policy for Australia to navigate its way in an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable world.

The unexpected 'Brexit' by the United Kingdom in June and President Donald Trump's victory in November 2016 in the United States create new challenges on a global basis, adding to the resultant serious threats of China's military and economic emergence and Russia's attempted re-emergence as super powers. The underlying factor for these seemingly separate events is indeed a whipped up sense of excessive nationalism and the populist pursuit by some 'old-fashioned' leaders under disguise as 'strong modern nationalists' for domestic political purposes, in some democratic nations as well as in dictatorial regimes.

Of course, every nation-state in history shapes its policy on the basis of national interests. In today's world, the Chinese President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Mr Xi Jinping is on record to push a "China First" stance and so does the Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin. Recently added to this triumvirate is Mr. Donald Trump with his "America First" rhetoric.

In Australia, currently under some electoral threat by minor populist parties and extreme right wing groups, both the Liberal-National Party Coalition in power and the Australian Labor Party as the Federal Opposition also appear to express themselves more nationalistically. We hope that this trend will not crystallise into a narrower pursuit of 'Australia First' domestically and internationally.

(1) We therefore recommend

that Australia's national interest be defined, for the purpose of foreign policy, not only to reflect Australia as an open, democratic, rule-based, inclusive and multicultural society but also to project Australia's influence in the democratic process, economic liberation, security cooperation for peace, stability and prosperity, particularly in the Asian-Indo-Pacific region.

In acknowledging Australia's global reach, especially if this country will once again try to seek a non-permanent membership of the Security Council of the United Nations, we nevertheless believe that Australia can and will be an effective player regionally in its capacity as a developed nation with a GDP which is ranked 12th/13th in the world.

To some extent, Australia has punched beyond its weight, but realistically our Track 1 diplomacy can only do that much. The government's new two-way Colombo Plan is laudable as an illustration, but we believe Australia should explore more ways to project its influence, for example via the Official Development Assistance (ODA) and to enhance its Track 2 diplomacy. Australia is also ranked 6th in the world in terms of its 'soft power' and the question is whether it has effectively used it.

(2) We therefore recommend

that Australia expand its utilisation of Track 2 diplomacy and soft power in the region, with a special focus on countries such as Vietnam where democratic values and human rights advancement have failed to make any notable progress.

On the other hand, we express our concern that Australia is unwittingly at the receiving end of China's excessive use of soft power including the well disguised Confucius Institute as a State-sponsored propaganda tool.

Traditional diplomacy - Security and Defence

State and non-state (e.g. terrorist groups) actors abound in today's world which has become multi polar and where major players' national interests remain as divergent as ever.

Once the sole super power, the USA appears to be in decline as evidenced by former President Barack Obama's failed military rebalance and unfinished economic initiative i.e. the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) in the Asia-Pacific region. In spite of his rhetoric to make "America Great Again", President Donald Trump may weaken his country further with his 'isolationist' stance. In this new environment of uncertainties, new and powerful actors will emerge.

Apart from Japan which should remain Australia's close friend if not formally an ally, three of the current five BRICS members, namely China, Russia and India, will seek to play a more influential role in the next decade. China and Russia either separately and / or in partnership remain a long term threat to Australia and the likelihood of Xi and Putin stay in power after their next term in office cannot be ruled out. While this scenario may sound hypothetical, its probability would require long term enhancement of Australia's defence capabilities

There have been recently some forceful arguments by former politicians and some defence specialists in terms of re-orientation of Australia's foreign policy towards China, Australia's No 1 economic partner and a corresponding distancing from the USA, Australia's long term strategic allied.

Australia's defence partnership with the US has often been subject to change of presidency in Washington. Even though the current Donald Trump administration appears unprecedented with its narrower vision for the leadership role, the US-Australian alliance remains in our view a solid foundation for this country's security.

Of course, it would be a mistake for Australia to rely on any super power for protection, but it would also be a mistake, in our view, for Australia to move away from the USA. An imperfect allied is still far more preferable than a perfect enemy! Due to a strong system of check and balance and mature democratic institutions, the US will not, in our life time, turn around to be our enemy while Russia and China can, regardless of whether or not this country is an allied of the USA.

(3) We therefore recommend

(a) that the Australian-US alliance remain one of the crucial pillars of Australia's foreign policy;

(b) that, for its self-reliance, Australia enhance its defence capabilities by keeping its defence budget at the level of 2% of GDP or higher if possible, for the next 10 years;

(c) that Australia consider, in a consultative manner, re-activating the quadrilateral defence co-operation among the four democratic nations namely Australia, India, Japan and the USA;

(d) that Australia enhance defence cooperation with the ASEAN beyond its AMDD+ ;

(e) and separately that Australia consider raising the level of bilateral cooperation with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the same level as with Indonesia and the Philippines, if the SRV is more amenable to democratic reform.

Australia would need to develop closer relationship with the ASEAN as a whole and its individual members now that this grouping is facing the challenge of unity, as Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines and Najib Razak's Malaysia have joined Cambodia and Laos to explore new and closer friendship with China.

In making these above recommendations, we are influenced by the lesson of history relating to China's hegemony ambition. They are not a product of any desire for 'containment' of China or 'cold war' mentality.

In the conduct of traditional diplomacy, Australia would need at times to stand firmly on a matter of principle: the case in point is China's claim of 90% of the South China Sea aka the East Sea, its construction of artificial islands and its militarisation of the disputed Paracels and Spratlys potentially affecting Australia's national interest as a trading nation.

Non-Traditional Diplomacy:

Trade, Sustainable Development and Climate Change

While it would be desirable, Australia may not always be able to impose its democratic values, rule of law and transparency in the conduct of non-traditional diplomacy. But where there is a choice in the absence of a legal requirement, Australia should avoid taking part in

transactions, joint ventures or projects which are not consistent with the Australian standards.

As a trading nation, of course Australia should seek to widen opportunities for trade and investment in accordance with the WTO Rules and other international and national legislation. But where a trading partner – such as Vietnam or Bangladesh – exploits workers in violations of ILO's Conventions or places them under the political control of the Communist Party, then the question would be whether Australia or Australians could just ignore that abysmal exploitation and continue the business dealing regardless.

(4) We recommend

that this White Paper consider ethical trade and investment as part of the overall effort to improve Australia's international standing.

Likewise in the area of sustainable development, Australia should be more assertive because it is one of the major ODA donors and because its expertise is held in high esteem by recipient countries.

The case in point is the question of water resource in the Lower Mekong Sub-Region where 11 hydro-power dams (already built or in the process of planning) are causing irreversible damage to the eco system and livelihood of some 60 million people including 20 million in Vietnam's Mekong Delta.

(5) We recommend

that this White Paper spell out a principle requiring Australia's ODA to follow a human focus for any sustainable development in terms of their socio-economic benefits and respect to their rights.

In terms of climate change, after the failure of *Copenhagen*, the *Paris Agreement of 2016* provides high hope to combat its anticipated extremely negative effects, through many ambitious efforts to be undertaken by major polluting signatories. Since then however, a change of direction takes place in Washington DC and revisionist skeptics cast doubt on the accuracy of science.

Putting aside the debateable issues as to the real cause, climate change is happening and Australia – not only as one of the high polluters on per capita basis but also as a highly developed economy - has a moral obligation to provide assistance to minimise the damage, particularly in the South Pacific and in lowland areas of Bangladesh and Vietnam (e.g. the Mekong Delta).

(6) We recommend

that this White Paper include, as part of Australia's Foreign Policy in the next decade, a strategy for Australia by itself or through an international scheme to assist developing countries in terms of preventive measures.

Sydney, 27 February 2017

For and On Behalf of the Dong Nai & Cuu Long * Cultural Research Group Inc,

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* *Dong Nai* and *Cuu Long* are the names of the two important rivers in Vietnam. *Dong Nai* which includes *Saigon River* is the lifeblood for the whole area north of Saigon and *Cuu Long* which means literally the Nine Dragons, is the Vietnamese name of the Mekong River when it enters southern Vietnam.