

Australia lacks the diplomacy to win friends & influence | John McCarthy & Allan Gyngell

As the Prime Minister heads off to meetings of the G20 and the Glasgow climate change conference there seems to be universal agreement that Australia faces, in Scott Morrison's words, "multiple challenges and radical uncertainty" in a permanently changed world. As observers of Australian foreign policy for more than half a century each, we agree. Those challenges do not necessarily bring greater danger (the Cold War was perilous, too) but in their number and complexity they are unprecedented.

China's growing power has generated sharp geopolitical competition with the United States. International bodies such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation have failed to rise to new challenges. Climate change is reshaping the biosphere. New technologies are disrupting industries and changing behaviour. Australia's principal ally, the United States, is grappling with political and social dysfunction. And the long tail of the COVID-19 pandemic will reshape the global economy and individual societies in ways we cannot foresee.

The question facing Australians is how we can prosper and remain secure in such a world. The government's principal response so far has been on the defence side. The 2020 Defence Update promised \$270 billion in defence expenditure over the next decade. The AUKUS announcement in September added new elements, including a possible nuclear submarine project worth more than \$100 billion, to the mix.

Australia needs a strong defence force, and policies that work in partnership with allies and friends. But who can doubt that Australia's principal policy objective has to be to find ways of advancing our interests, protecting our values and prospering in a world where wars are avoided?

That is the role of foreign policy. Nuclear submarines and Joint Strike Fighters can deter aggression and respond when deterrence fails, but they don't do much to address trade coercion, respond to climate change or set global rules for emerging issues such as cyber.

Foreign policy is the part of statecraft that manages the differences between states and helps create space in the international system so our country always has options and choices. Foreign policy is how we seek to shape the world we want to live in.

That, in turn, requires an intimate understanding of the countries a nation is trying to influence. This is a particular challenge for Australia. As a Western democracy of primarily Anglo-Celtic background, whose neighbours have different ethnic and historical backgrounds, we are in a different position to most other Western states. We have to try harder than they do.

We need to understand the interests of regional countries, and who holds the levers of power and how to persuade them, alone or in partnership with others. The best source of such advice is a first-rate foreign service.

Unfortunately, Australian foreign policy has few friends to rally around it. Its voice in the national discourse is un-amplified by the interests of defence manufacturers and lobbyists. And the term is often used interchangeably with "diplomacy", which sounds soft and unassertive to Australian ears.

But foreign policy and diplomacy are different. Diplomacy is the methodology through which we achieve the strategic objectives of foreign policy by persuading (or if necessary, pressuring) others to work to a common end. It is certainly not just being nice to people. And although foreign policy has particular diplomatic forms and language, the practice itself is familiar in every human interaction from the schoolroom to the boardroom.

One consequence of the marginalisation of Australian foreign policy, as the Lowy Institute has frequently noted, is that the budget of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is shrinking. It will be smaller in 2022 than it was 15 years earlier. Australia ranks thirteenth in the world for defence expenditure but has only the twenty-seventh largest diplomatic network. The

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increase in the size of the Australian Defence Force announced in the 2020 Defence Update was bigger than the entire Australian diplomatic service.

Former politicians can bring important attributes to diplomatic jobs in some circumstances, but the current record number of such appointments can only be interpreted as a signal that the government lacks faith in the capability of its DFAT staff, or believes that no particular knowledge or training is necessary for the job of handling foreign policy, or sees ambassadorial appointments as a costless perk to share with its friends.

For much of the period since World War II, Australian policymakers and diplomats worked skilfully to blend the instruments of statecraft in ways that served us well. Australia helped build the global trade system, create institutions such as APEC and the East Asia Summit, codify the law of the sea and establish international rules to protect Antarctica.

It helped secure East Timor's independence and stability in the Solomon Islands and Bougainville. Above all, it worked with the region rather than relying on older, easier friendships (of which the enlargement in practice of the mandate of the Five Eyes intelligence grouping is a recent example).

This month marks the 30th anniversary of one of Australian foreign policy's great achievements, the Paris Peace Agreement, which brought a settlement to the civil war in Cambodia. It closed the final chapter of the Indochina wars, which had caused such deep fissures in the region since the 1950s.

Drawing on the specialist knowledge of a wide range of DFAT officials, working closely with regional partners such as Indonesia and Thailand, and leaders from the ADF such as General John Sanderson, Gareth Evans was able to help resolve an intractable problem.

The relative lack of big power tension in the 1990s made constructive international work easier. Nonetheless, Australia's leadership and the Cambodia settlement – using DFAT's knowledge, complemented by the Australian Army's competence on the ground – showed what a strong foreign policy could do.

This is not to look nostalgically backwards to some golden age. The solutions to today's problems are not those of the past. The world is in a constant state of change.

But if foreign policy and diplomacy fall away, if Australia believes military power alone is the answer to our needs, if we retreat to the comfort of our oldest friendships, if foreign policy is not central to our objectives, and skilful diplomacy not employed in its service, then Scott Morrison's vision of a post-COVID world that is "poorer ... more dangerous and ... more disorderly" will be all that is on offer.



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