

Anthony Albanese can set the right tone in Asian relationsJohn McCarthy & Anthony Milner

The Albanese government has made a strong impression in foreign policy since its election in May, and can do so again in this month's international summit season.

The Quad grouping of Japan, India, the US and Australia have maintained cohesion. This mattered given worries over India's bland response to Russia's war on Ukraine and the renewed quasi-romance between Russia and China. The government has also laid to rest concerns among Australia's partners, used to mighty mouse rhetoric from the Morrison government, that we might go soft on China.

Foreign Minister Penny Wong has developed a reputation for competence with our partners in South-East Asia – a bonus given the view in that region that Australia's travails with China were largely self-inflicted, and aggravated problems between China and its regional neighbours.

While many in Australia wonder whether it is necessary for Australia to continue with the policy to acquire nuclear submarines and other advanced military technology under the new AUKUS grouping, our decision to stay the AUKUS course has not yet eroded our interests.

But globally things are pretty bad. When international issues are grave enough – war, serious economic downturn, climate change, pandemics – they also become serious domestic issues. Since May, Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and the Chinese chest-beating that followed have heightened regional anxiety. Then add the increasingly futile and grinding Russian invasion of Ukraine which has caused turmoil in Europe and exacerbated other global difficulties.

Between November 10 and 19 a series of meetings will be held in South-East Asia – including three summits – all addressing these problems from different angles.

The first, the 18-strong East Asia Summit, to be held in Phnom Penh, effectively includes all major states (including Russia) between India and North America. The summit will seek to address regional security issues as broadly interpreted.

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The second meeting – the Group of 20 – a mix of the most powerful and wealthiest developed countries and large and influential developing countries, will take place in Bali. The agenda is usually wide, but will be heavily influenced by the Ukraine war, with China/Taiwan confrontation running a close second.

The final meeting will be APEC, attended by the bigger Pacific Rim countries, in Bangkok. It is the oldest and some would say the tiredest of the three groupings. Its focus is mainly but not exclusively economic. Given global energy and food issues, it is an important gathering too. It will also be the only one attended by Vice President Kamala Harris rather than Joe Biden, seen as reflecting the weight attached by the Americans.

During the nine days of meetings, Australia will be rubbing shoulders with nearly all the bigger countries that matter to us. But the key events will be bilateral meetings between leaders. Almost as important will be the meaning of who decides not to meet whom (as when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided not to meet President Xi Jinping at a conference a few weeks ago in Samarkand).

So, what is Mr Albanese's main role as we enter the thorniest cluster of global and regional security issues in recent times? Australia's friends and its opponents will be watching our external policy take shape – whether based on deterrence such as ANZUS, the Quad and

AUKUS – or more on an understanding that most South-East Asian countries see advantage in careful engagement with China on their own part.

We are fortunate in having a prime minister whose main objective is not to cut a dash internationally – or, more to the point, for domestic advantage. He is not by nature a loud man. On this first summit circuit, Albanese's preparedness primarily to listen rather than to pronounce will prove an ideal quality in Asia.

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His primary, if amorphous, objective must be genuine and resolute peace-building work with others, perhaps the most important of these being the abler South-East Asians and the diplomatic if increasingly tough-minded Japanese.

We do have assets to bring: serious experience in multilateralism, as demonstrated by our role in the Cambodia peace process, our leadership in the Chemical Weapons Convention and the creation of the Cairns Group of agricultural producers.

Above all, Mr Albanese will need to demonstrate balance. China is now our opponent. But in opposing it, we must take account of the views of our regional friends. It is South-East Asia, along with Taiwan and the South China Sea, which even after the Solomon Islands row is the area of greatest contestation.

We must work with the ASEAN nations even if some in Canberra think they are too soft, and who prefer to display Australia's teeth while forgetting others have that ability.

The Ukraine war added complications to our already fraught set of problems. Justifiably, we should wear the right team colours. But much of these three meetings, particularly the G20, will be taken up with Ukraine. We should remember that this war still remains a European war and our preoccupation with it causes some bewilderment among our neighbours about exactly where we belong.

Much of the non-European developing world and even some Europeans see anti-Russian sanctions policy as responsible for many of their economic problems. This breeds anti-Western sentiment, which may not benefit China directly but takes some of the heat off Beijing.

In these meetings, Albanese has the opportunity to highlight Australia's Asian regional priorities. He may wish to consider whether too much emphasis on Ukraine in the G20 may actually be detrimental to our efforts to restrain China.

In these November summits, there is potential for Albanese to develop a reputation for regional statesmanship. He can highlight not only Australia's regional priorities, but some of the sensitivity to Asian – especially South-East Asian – perspectives, which Australia has gained over the eight decades since the Pacific War.

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