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LABOR'S FOREIGN POLICY FRAMEWORK

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(ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS OMITTED)

I want to thank the Institute for inviting me to speak at this national conference.

I've been in the foreign affairs portfolio now for just over three months, and have been engaging with a range of stakeholders – diplomats, academics, experts, think tanks, and NGOs – who have all been very generous with their time.

For any Labor person, holding this portfolio is an honour and a privilege.

It means following in the footsteps of Labor heroes who have made enormous contributions to Australian foreign policy and Australia's place in the world.

Holding the portfolio is also a privilege because the issues are fascinating, complex and challenging – and they are critically important for our country and indeed the world.

Foreign policy is always a key portfolio for a party of government, but perhaps even more so at this time.

It seems to me that we are in a period in history where foreign policy, its challenges and its dilemmas, will be more important for our country than it has been for some decades.

Foreign affairs issues were front and centre in Australian political debates from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Think of the playing out of Cold War tensions in domestic politics, the impact of decolonisation on our region, the Vietnam War, and our citizens marching in the streets on issues like apartheid and nuclear disarmament.

But with the end of the Cold War, the shift from a bipolar to a unipolar world order, and the increased focus on economic issues, foreign policy was not so often front of mind.

Now, however, we are seeing historic changes in the geopolitical balance of power.

Changes like the rise of China; the shift in the world's economic centre of gravity to the Asia-Pacific; Russia's aggressive nationalism; and the threat posed by radical Islamist terrorism.

As well as consequential political shifts in western democracies, from the election of Donald Trump to the Brexit vote, with major implications for international affairs.

Trends like these mean the coming period will be one where international relations will be both more important and more challenging than in the recent past.

And foreign policy issues are more likely to be front of mind for the general public.

A multipolar world order is more complex and difficult to manage than either a bipolar or a unipolar system.

It's a reversion to the kind of order seen in Europe in earlier centuries, where the concepts of statecraft, diplomacy and the concert of powers had their origins.

Furthermore, in an era of globalisation, the distinction between domestic and foreign issues is no longer as sharp as it has been in the past, with issues such as economic growth, climate change and energy security now questions for both domestic and foreign policy.

Yet this is also a time when openness is increasingly being questioned.

As a middle power in the dynamic Asia-Pacific region, Australia has significant interests in influencing and shaping the coming shifts in the balance of geopolitical power.

And as a country which has, by and large, got the balance right between economic growth and social fairness, Australia also has a strong interest in maintaining an open international system.

So, all in all, your chosen field looks set to be at the centre of political, policy and public debates in the coming period.

I want to speak to you today about Labor's approach to international issues – the values and intellectual tradition we bring to this space, and our views on contemporary issues.

LABOR'S FOREIGN POLICY FRAMEWORK

There is a long and proud Labor legacy in foreign policy.

The war-time leadership of Curtin and his turn to America at a time of existential crisis for the nation.

The deep engagement of Chifley and Evatt in forging a new international architecture in the aftermath of the war.

Whitlam's expansive, optimistic, outward-looking view of Australia's place in the world, his opening to China and his activist approach towards international treaties and conventions.

Hawke and Keating's recognition of the importance of Asia, their formation of APEC and development of deeper bilateral relations in the region.

Gareth Evans' formidable contributions both intellectual and practical over many years.

And, in the most recent period of Labor Government, Rudd and Gillard elevated the G20's role; advanced our traditional relations with countries like the United States and our developing relationships with countries like China and India; supported international action on climate change; and significantly increased Australia's aid budget.

What are the principles that underpin the Labor foreign policy tradition?

The starting point is the responsibility of national government to protect and advance the welfare of Australia – the territorial integrity of our country, the security of our people, the prosperity of our economy and the values of our society.

We see Australia as a strong, outward-looking, independent nation that acts in the international arena both to secure our national interests and to pursue a better world in partnership with other countries.

We do not accept that there has to be an unbridgeable dichotomy in international affairs between realism and idealism, or between nationalism and internationalism.

A country's foreign policy is axiomatically the protection and advancement of its national interest.

However, foreign policy also involves the expression of national identity and the projection of national values.

For Labor, these two facets of foreign policy are not an either/or proposition – in fact, we see them supporting and reinforcing each other.

We see strong international engagement and good international citizenship – our take on internationalism – as critical drivers in achieving Australia’s interests.

We understand that Australia’s national security and prosperity will improve when there is greater international security and prosperity.

Just as we see citizenship at home as encompassing the rights, responsibilities and values that bind us together as a community, so we see a role for nation states to work together, developing international rules, norms and values, and resolving global problems.

Labor’s principle of good international citizenship in foreign affairs aligns with our values of fairness, equality and inclusion when it comes to domestic policy.

We believe Australia needs to do its fair share to tackle international challenges, to reduce poverty and inequality, to secure a peaceful and stable world and to advance democratic freedoms and human rights.

By supporting a rules-based international order, promoting respect for human rights and cooperating with other countries on global problems, we improve the prospects for peace, stability and prosperity for Australians.

By contrast, pursuing policies of isolationism and insularity would undermine Australia’s security and prosperity.

Winding back our international engagement means less ability to shape events in our interests.

Erecting unnecessary barriers against international trade and investment means slower economic growth.

Turning our back on problems like climate change or global poverty permits the accumulation of risks and threats which will sooner or later reach our own shores.

While idealism will always inform Labor’s goals, we also realise that hard-headed realism and pragmatism are needed to deliver real-world outcomes and practical progress.

That is as true of foreign affairs as it is of domestic reforms.

How do Labor’s values translate into policy priorities in the contemporary environment?

There are three pillars to Labor’s foreign policy – the US alliance, engagement with our region, and multilateralism.

The alliance with the US was forged in the crisis of war 75 years ago and has been fundamental to Australia’s security and defence ever since Labor, under John Curtin, took that pivotal turn.

The alliance's enduring nature reflects the fact that Australia and the US have shared histories, mutual interests and common values.

Those values include our commitment to democratic political systems, open economies and free and just societies.

The alliance remains as central to Australia's security today as it was in John Curtin's time.

It acts as a deterrent to potential aggressors, provides our defence forces with leading edge technologies and opportunities for cooperation, training and intelligence sharing, and gives Australia an ability to influence the world's leading great power.

For Labor, Australia must support the alliance, including through military, security and strategic contributions, while maintaining its independence as a middle power with interests of its own.

As Kim Beazley has said, Australia is a more valuable partner to Washington when we are prepared to provide independent, frank and fearless advice.

For the US, Australia is a trusted partner with a sophisticated and professional defence force capable of taking part in joint operations, a source of independent advice and counsel, and an important country in a region which is critical for world affairs.

It is in the US's best interests for Australia's voice to be an independent one, and for our perspective on the region to be unique.

The US is better served in this region by an independent and confident Australia, able to provide it with valued counsel on the challenges and opportunities in our region.

Strong relationships with the nations of Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region are also central to Australia's future.

For Australia to thrive in the Asian century we need to deepen our relations and our understanding of the countries to our north.

And we need to encourage the continuing peaceful rise of countries like China and India to support security and stability in our region.

This requires strong bilateral relations with countries in our region as well as engagement with regional institutions like APEC, the East Asia Summit, ASEAN, the Pacific Islands Forum and the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

We also have our own responsibilities as a major Pacific power to Papua New Guinea and the island nations of the Pacific, countries which face economic, security and governance challenges and which are severely exposed to the risks of climate change.

The third pillar for Labor is an international order based on rules and institutions, and the principles of multilateralism, rather than on hard-line doctrines of might is right or the unilateral exercise of power.

This means supporting the United Nations, multilateral economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation, and development institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

The UN is far from perfect.

It faces its own reform challenges and imperatives.

Yet it has contributed a great deal to global order and is still the main game when it comes to cooperating on security and development, maintaining international norms, and preserving peace.

Evatt's vision of a United Nations where every nation has a voice, not just the great powers, remains as important for Australia today as it was when he helped draft the UN Charter at the 1945 San Francisco conference.

That is because some of the most pressing international challenges cannot be solved unilaterally, bilaterally or even regionally – they require global action.

And it is because multilateralism provides a platform for a middle power like Australia to project its voice and interests, and to exert influence, beyond the size of our population or the weight of our security and military resources.

And while Australian foreign policy enjoys a large degree of bipartisanship, this emphasis on multilateralism and internationalism is one of the principled overarching points of difference between the Labor and the Liberal traditions.

The Liberals are lukewarm at best, and some are spoilers at worst, when it comes to multilateralism and the UN.

At times this is a matter of playing domestic politics, with Liberal Governments appealing to their hard Right gallery by engaging in UN-bashing rhetoric.

But there have been times when the Liberal hostility to the UN has undermined Australia's national interests.

The Howard Government's decision to join the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, without a UN mandate, a sound basis in international law or an effective plan for reconstruction, has had devastating consequences for stability in the Middle East and has increased security risks to Australia.

In Opposition, Tony Abbott and Julie Bishop disparaged the Labor Government's campaign to win a seat for Australia on the UN Security Council.

It is pleasing that in government they have seen the light and are now campaigning for Australia to return to the Security Council in the 2029-30 term – a prospect for which I am happy to offer bipartisan support.

INCOMING TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

The election of Donald Trump as US president earlier this month is a significant change, not only for America but for the rest of the world.

The size and influence of the US ensures that changes in its leadership or policy direction will impact global affairs.

It will take time for the world, and for Australia, to understand the specific policies that the new President will adopt – as distinct from the campaign rhetoric.

In Australia we need to remember certain principles about how we engage with the US.

The first is that the US alliance remains a critical aspect of Australia's foreign and defence policy.

We have navigated this alliance over seven decades through many changes of presidencies and prime ministers.

The second principle, certainly for Labor, is that Australia must pursue an independent foreign policy and its own national interest within the alliance framework.

We have our own interests and objectives that we have historically pursued, and will continue to pursue, through our well-established bilateral and multilateral relationships and partnerships in our region.

For Labor, the US alliance has never meant that we reflexively agree with aspect of US policy.

Gough Whitlam did not agree with the US on the Vietnam War and Simon Crean did not agree with the US on the invasion of Iraq.

These Labor positions were subject to vicious attacks by conservatives at the time, but history has vindicated our positions.

In the coming period, we need to consider how best to continue to effect Australia's foreign policy and global interests within the framework of our alliance with the United States.

The third principle is the fact that we share an alliance doesn't mean we trade away our values.

Labor's values include respect for women, racial and religious tolerance, human rights, and economic and social openness and we will assert those values and disagree with leaders of other countries who make statements contrary to those values.

There is, and will continue to be, strong bipartisan support for the alliance.

And the alliance must continue to be defined by shared values and interests with the United States.

The values of democracy, freedom and human rights.

And the common interests of support for a strong alliance network and security system in Asia; an open, global trading system; and a commitment to deal collectively with global threats and challenges.

In terms of the change in Washington, we should, as we always have, engage with the incoming administration on the things that matter to us, including the need for continuing US engagement in Asia and a constructive relationship with China.

US engagement in Asia has been a powerful force for stability, security and prosperity.

Australia should encourage Mr Trump and the new administration to maintain American engagement in the region and in international affairs more broadly.

We also need to work harder in our region ourselves.

The region must be even more of a priority for Australia because the political change in the US means there will be a period of uncertainty until it is clear which of Mr Trump's campaign pronouncements will be pursued and how they might translate into American foreign policy.

In that context it becomes a greater imperative for Australia to engage with the region – and in doing so, we will be well served by our own pivot to Asia, which Australia commenced in the Hawke-Keating era.

We need to step up our engagement with Asia on economic and development issues.

We need stronger dialogue on human rights and deeper political, strategic and security cooperation.

And we need to work with our partners in the region to encourage the new US administration to maintain and deepen constructive American engagement in Asia.

It's disappointing that Labor's articulation of this measured and sensible approach to the change of administration in Washington has been misrepresented by the Prime Minister.

The man who once called for “a style of leadership that respects people’s intelligence” does himself no credit by engaging in such partisan and misleading behaviour.

Australians do want our political leaders to consider questions of the national interest carefully – they want a sensible and mature discussion, not confected partisanship.

FOREIGN POLICY WHITE PAPER

Ideas, strategy and focus matter in foreign policy.

Yet, all too often, the need to react to unexpected events can crowd out ideas, blow strategies off course and divert resources from planned activities, creating a reactive rather than a proactive approach.

So it is good news that Ms Bishop has announced that her Department will produce a White Paper.

I think it is fair to say that the Abbott-Turnbull Government’s track record to date on a strategic approach to foreign policy has, at times, been less than optimal.

Rather than strategy and ideas, there have been episodes of knee-jerk partisanship (abandoning the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper), missed opportunities (treating chairing the G20 as a vehicle for domestic political messages), and policy contradiction (cutting trade barriers while increasing investment barriers with Asian economies).

Nonetheless, Labor welcomes the initiative to produce a Foreign Policy White Paper at this time of great change.

While no historical period is static, the economic, political and strategic shifts now unfolding are transformational in their scale and nature.

They represent a challenge to the established orthodoxy and institutions which have dominated international relations for the last half century or more.

At the heart of these changes is the growth of Asia and, within Asia, the rise of China, and the consequent rebalancing of geopolitical forces.

These shifts are giving rise to a number of pressures: strategic competition between the world’s incumbent and emerging great powers; border disputes and tensions over access to resources; a strained multilateral system; risks to the international rules-based order; the rise of political populism and nationalism in reaction against globalisation; and threats posed by extreme Islamist terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

For Australia, the reshaping of the global order raises questions about our place in the world, our identity, our national interest and our ability to influence developments.

The White Paper needs to analyse the implications and develop an articulated framework for how Australia engages with these changes.

Much discussion will continue about what the future will look like.

But ultimately predictive accuracy is less important than the question of what we should do to further Australia's interests under a range of plausible scenarios.

The starting point should be to identify our vital interests and key opportunities.

Allan Gyngell has suggested that Australia's interests are in ensuring our region is peaceful, economically open, and stable in the sense that the behaviour of nation states is governed by agreed international norms.

To those interests, we might add continued US engagement, ensuring China is a constructive participant in the international order, deeper bilateral relations with our Asian neighbours, and stability and development in the Pacific.

The opportunities are there to deliver greater prosperity and continued security for Australians.

Asia's economies are not only growing faster than the developed world.

They are also maturing and diversifying as their populations grow more affluent and demand a wider range of goods and services, and as their policy-makers shift from investment and export-led growth strategies to consumer and service-based models.

Australia's proximity to this dynamic region will create major opportunities at a time when many advanced economies are experiencing a growth slowdown.

Continued security in our region will depend on cooperation and positive relationships between major powers, including the US, China, India and Japan.

Australia also has opportunities to enhance its role as a middle power and to work with like-minded countries on regional issues such as poverty, climate change and human rights.

To contribute to Australia's ability to secure our interests and realise the opportunities, the White Paper will need to grapple with a number of hard questions.

How should Australia respond as the global centre of gravity shifts from the Trans-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific?

Is the world moving from a unipolar to a bipolar or multipolar system and how would Australia fit into each of these structures?

How should Australia work to maintain the US alliance and Washington's focus on Asia in the changing international and domestic political environments?

What would be the consequences of a breakdown in multilateralism for a middle power like Australia?

What changes are needed to the UN and other post-war Bretton Woods institutions to engage emerging powers in the international rules-based order?

There is a tension in foreign policy between the need to respond to the events which press in constantly, from all sides, and the need to pursue the long-term issues that really matter.

Successful pursuit of the national interest requires handling both the urgent and the important.

The White Paper needs to guide our responses to immediate events while providing a road-map to our longer-term objectives.

It will only achieve this if it grapples with the difficult questions and adopts a clear set of strategic priorities.

CONCLUSION

So let me conclude by thanking you again for the opportunity to outline Labor's views.

One of the things I have appreciated since taking up this role is the wide range of people who have been willing to share their insights and analysis and offer their assistance.

Australia is well-served by this lively and intelligent foreign policy community.

And the Australian Institute of International Affairs is one of the leading organisations supporting this community and fostering debate and discussion.

In today's world, in which change and flux are the new normal, it is more important than ever that we find the space to consider Australia's place in the world and how best to advance our national interests.

For the polity to find the maturity for that discussion will require your engagement and your participation.

On that note, I wish you well for this year's conference.

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