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# Shaping Australian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Thoughts on a Reflective Framework of Analysis

Joyobroto Sanyal\*

Domestic policy can only defeat us; foreign policy can kill us.<sup>1</sup>

In the twentieth century, foreign policies of nations have rarely evolved gradually, let alone smoothly. In fact, the present international system is more a product of shocks than design. Whereas these shocks were somewhat spread out over the previous century, the present century can claim to be more eventful than its immediate predecessor, judging by the variety and magnitude of shocks it has experienced in the first two decades. The significance of these events, the underlying trends they indicate, and the multi-level challenges they pose to Australia have been described as a state of “accelerated warfare” by the Chief of the Australian Army in his 2019 *Strategic Guidance*.<sup>2</sup> Like other countries, near and far, Australia has to prepare in order to cope with the combined and unfolding effects of such changes and adapt to an external environment through a foreign policy that connects the tactical with the strategic in a timely and efficient manner. The blueprint of Australia’s response can be found in the 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper*.

The significance of geopolitical changes and geostrategic shifts resulting thereof have called for a rethink of Australian foreign policy. Discussions on a so-called Plan B for Australia’s foreign, security and defence policy are slowly but steadily gathering shape.<sup>3</sup> However, it is worth noting that Plan A has not completely run out of steam but perhaps needs reinvigorating, reinforcing and redesigning, using a reflective framework—an attributional

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\* The views expressed here are personal and they do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Australian Army, the Department of Defence, or the Australian Government.

<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy, ‘John F. Kennedy—Foreign Affairs’, President Profiles, <[www.presidentprofiles.com/Kennedy-Bush/John-F-Kennedy-Foreign-affairs.html](http://www.presidentprofiles.com/Kennedy-Bush/John-F-Kennedy-Foreign-affairs.html)> [Accessed 1 March 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant General R. Burr, ‘Army in Motion – Chief of Army’s Strategic Guidance 2019’, Australian Army, <[www.army.gov.au/our-work/from-the-chief-of-army/chief-of-armys-strategic-guidance-2019](http://www.army.gov.au/our-work/from-the-chief-of-army/chief-of-armys-strategic-guidance-2019)> [Accessed 1 March 2019].

<sup>3</sup> For example, see, John Blaxland, ‘Plan B: Australia’s Foreign Policy White Paper’, *ASPI The Strategist*, 10 February 2018; Mike Scrafton, ‘Australia’s Strategic Policy: What’s Plan B?’ *ASPI The Strategist*; Peter Jennings, ‘With Trump at large, Australia Needs a Plan B for Defence’, *ASPI The Strategist*, [Accessed 7 March 2019].

mirror of self-reflection—that gives more agility, clear direction and higher return on investments. This comment discusses five key elements that can help shape the reflective framework and lead the way for a rethink of Australian foreign policymaking using a timely strategy that can help in dealing with increasing uncertainty, complexity and risk.<sup>4</sup>

## National Power: Perception vs Reality

National power is the fuel that runs all national policies and shapes a nation's destiny. The pursuit of foreign goals no matter how ambitious or important is impossible without harnessing the strengths of all the elements of national power. In this context, an approach that relies on an unambiguous and honest evaluation of Australia's national power is more useful than that which is based on perception. What is it that Australia has and how it can be used effectively to get what it wants are key questions that need considering first. For over sixty years, political decision-makers have referred to Australia's power ranking as one of middle power without either defining or refining the concept based on a thorough and objective analysis of the capabilities (potential and actual) that constitute national power.<sup>5</sup> Dr Herbert Evatt, who during his tenure as Australia's External Affairs Minister first used the term 'middle power' in public discourse to describe Australia's foreign policy tradition, stressed three attributes of Australia's middle power tradition: nationalism, internationalism and activism.<sup>6</sup> But these attributes are more vocational in nature than an objective reflection of Australia's power capabilities in any given period of time. Australia's longest-serving foreign minister Alexander Downer's use of the term "pivotal power" reflected more ambition-coated aspiration than reality.<sup>7</sup> Some academic experts have even gone to the extent of using descriptors such as "dependent middle power" and even "awkward partner".<sup>8</sup> But the building blocks of Australia's national power have so far escaped a critical analysis. Thus, the 'middle power' descriptor does not reflect a reality and is more a matter of perception. The ever-changing nature of power is worth stressing here. As the world changes and societies age, some old elements wither and some transform, the elements of national power evolve. It is, therefore, essential, to take stock of national power assets in any given period before aspirations are expressed, goals are set, and policies put in place. It is worth noting that whereas availability of key assets can offer more choices, their absence or inaccessibility can seriously constrain policy manoeuvring.

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<sup>4</sup> A shorter version of this article entitled 'A Strategy for Australia's Foreign Policy: A Game of Means and Ends' was published in the *Australian Outlook*, 9 March 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Ungerer, 'The "Middle Power" Concept in Australian Foreign Policy', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 53, no. 4 (2007), pp. 538-51.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 542-43.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Ungerer, 'The "Middle Power" Concept in Australian Foreign Policy', p. 548.

<sup>8</sup> Allan Patience, *Australian Foreign Policy in Asia Middle Power or Awkward Partner?* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

## **Strategic Narrative: Fragmentation vs Integration**

Australia lacks a national narrative when it comes to foreign, security or defence policy. A national narrative is a powerful self-reflecting tool that unites the nation with its institutions to help steer the state forward. Without it, a nation can lose its *raison d'être* which has implications for its policy settings not least for its foreign policy. A fragmented social consciousness developing along the fault lines of a divided society is a detriment to the fulfilment of aspirations let alone ambitions and interests.<sup>9</sup> In order to face the challenges of an emerging world that is not just diverse, but also an increasingly divergent place of conflicting interests, ideas and actions, a coherent and integrated narrative is necessary. However, a serious national effort is yet to emerge. Unless there is some coincidence between national aspirations and social expectations, there is a risk of policy failure. Henry Kissinger's warning could not be more relevant:

No foreign policy—no matter how ingenious—has any chance of success if it is born in the minds of a few and carried in the hearts of none.<sup>10</sup>

A contributing factor to the deficiency of a narrative is perhaps best demonstrated by Australia's reluctance to define its international identity in the community of nations. Whereas the 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper* discusses the values Australia advocates, there is no corresponding display of political will to project its liberal democratic values in the region and beyond through which Australia can shape its strategic environment. A pertinent question to ask in this regard is how does Australia look at itself and what does it want to do with that image? Contrast this with the image that the United States built in the immediate aftermath of World War Two through, for example, the Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods system, to promote a liberal international order.

Another closely related point is about Australia's place in the Indo-Pacific. The 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper* has reiterated the importance of the Indo-Pacific region as Australia's external strategic setting but has not answered the question: how does Australia fit into this setting? There needs to be first an agreement on accepting a middle power status followed by a narrative about how this status can be sustained and strengthened and the need to do so. The next step involves bringing the rest of the nation on board. A pertinent question to ask here is about Australia's role in Asia. Here Australia seems to be lacking in clarity, confidence and direction.<sup>11</sup> For geographical reasons Australia does not belong to Asia, yet Australia seems

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<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Jakub Grygiel, 'Educating for National Security', *Orbis*, vol. 57, no. 2 (Spring 2013), pp. 201-16.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Kissinger, 'Kissinger Urges Bipartisan Policy', *New York Times*, 3 August 1973, <[www.nytimes.com/1973/08/03/archives/kissinger-urges-bipartisan-policy-asks-that-watergate-not-cut-unity.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1973/08/03/archives/kissinger-urges-bipartisan-policy-asks-that-watergate-not-cut-unity.html)> [Accessed 1 March 2019].

<sup>11</sup> Patience, *Australian Foreign Policy in Asia Middle Power or Awkward Partner*

to have come to accept the view that its economic destiny—most notably the pursuit of prosperity—lies with Asia. Developing a sub-narrative about this reality using culturally appropriate references and symbology can significantly refine and strengthen the strategic narrative. As results from the 2016 Census of Population and Housing reflect growing cultural diversity, the need for a strategic narrative that not only incorporates this reality but is also used to shape Australia's international identity and project soft power in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond cannot be stressed enough.<sup>12</sup> Multiculturalism can only be the starting point in this discussion. As a nation with an ancient past and an increasingly diverse population that is shaping its present there is an opportunity to unpack this system of values in order to create a distinct national outlook and voice that are resilient to adverse social forces, for example, the persistent challenge posed by extremist forces. Australia's foreign policy identity in the twenty-first century needs an inclusive, cohesive and forward thinking narrative to better reflect the emerging social reality and also strategically project its soft power.

### **National Security: Hard Security vs Holistic Security**

The Australian thinking around national security has long remained focused on hard security. While defence of territorial sovereignty is fundamental to national security, it is not sufficient. Granted that in the post-9/11 world where violent extremism is perpetrated by predominantly sub-national actors, the physical dimension of security has taken precedence over other dimensions of security challenges. We the people have given in to the line of thinking that physical security is all that matters. And this is reflected in investments that are being made in building capability as shown by, for example, the 2016 Defence Integrated Investment Plan. But the prosperity of Australia as 'the lucky country' is vulnerable to the security challenges that are not restricted to the physical domain of security. In a speech, Dwight Eisenhower noted: "We do not keep security establishments merely to defend property or territory or rights abroad or at sea. We keep the security forces to defend a way of life".<sup>13</sup>

Winston Churchill voiced similar sentiments in the Iron Curtain Speech of 5 March 1946. As strategic risks to national security have accelerated over time—particularly in the first two decades of the twenty-first century—the need for a holistic approach to security is more than ever. However, Australia is yet to develop such an approach and incorporate this into a coherent and balanced national security strategy.<sup>14</sup> The call for such an

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<sup>12</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Census Reveals a Fast Changing, Culturally Diverse Nation', <[www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/Media%20Release3](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/Media%20Release3)> [Accessed 7 March 2019].

<sup>13</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, Dwight D. Eisenhower Archives, <[www.eisenhower.archives.gov/all\\_about\\_ike/quotes.html](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/all_about_ike/quotes.html)> [Accessed 1 November 2018].

<sup>14</sup> Joyo Sanyal, 'A National Security Strategy for Australia, Parts 1 & 2', *Land Power Forum* (blog), 13, 16 November 2018, <[www.army.gov.au/our-future/aarc/blog](http://www.army.gov.au/our-future/aarc/blog)> [Accessed 26 March 2019].

approach is, however, not new.<sup>15</sup> For example, in 2004, a report tabled by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade of the Australian Parliament argued for Australia's national security objectives that encompassed business, leisure, diplomatic, economic, social and environment. The report notes:

What is needed, in addition to the NSCC (National Security Committee of Cabinet) and SCNS (Secretaries' Committee on National Security), is a clearly articulated policy which sets out Australia's interests and challenges as we enter the 21st century and the government institutions that we can bring to bear in promoting our interests.<sup>16</sup>

The relevance of a 'diversified agenda' to national security, as argued by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, for example, has influenced the security thinking of Australia's close neighbours and allies.<sup>17</sup> For example, New Zealand's 2018 Strategic Defence Policy Statement presents a more holistic approach to national security thinking that lays out the foundation for a more robust engagement with other countries, regionally and globally.<sup>18</sup> It is true that Australia's emphasis on hard security has helped in the past to build enduring alliances and partnerships which, in turn, has helped to respond to security challenges. But this approach will not be sufficient for future security challenges. Already nations from all over the world are facing security challenges from a wide range of areas. Therefore, Australia's decision elites will be wise to appreciate the wide variety and range of risks to national security in the short-to-long term that may not affect allies in the same way. Australia's continental status as well as its richness of biodiversity are facts to be reckoned in this context. Against the backdrop of emerging and future global strategic trends as discussed in key documents such as the UK Ministry of Defence's *Global Strategic Trends*, it is worth asking, if a somewhat exclusive focus on hard security makes the country exposed to greater strategic vulnerabilities and also stands in the way of deeper strategic international engagement.<sup>19</sup>

## **National Character: Toughness vs Smartness**

Australia is generally viewed internationally as a land of the fair go and its people seen as proud, dynamic and resilient. These aspects have translated

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<sup>15</sup> Winston Churchill, 'The Sinews of Peace ("Iron Curtain Speech") [5 March 1946]', International Churchill Society, <[winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/](http://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/)> [Accessed 1 November 2018].

<sup>16</sup> Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Australian Parliament, *Australia's Maritime Strategy*, 21 June 2004, Canberra, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> See, Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> New Zealand Defence Force, 'Strategic Defence Policy Statement', 6 July 2018, <[www.nzdf.mil.nz/corporate-documents/strategic-defence-policy-statement-2018.htm](http://www.nzdf.mil.nz/corporate-documents/strategic-defence-policy-statement-2018.htm)>, [Accessed 1 November 2018].

<sup>19</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, *Global Strategic Trends: The Future Starts Today*, 6th edition ([London]: Ministry of Defence UK, 2018).

into a national image that has served Australia well particularly in the twentieth century. The Australian Defence Force's expeditionary military operations (for example, in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria) and contributions to UN peacekeeping missions for over fifty years, among other factors, have helped to forge this image.<sup>20</sup> Australia is also well regarded as a partner in its security partnership with the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand and in the Five Eyes intelligence community. But the image of Australia's national character is susceptible to the significant social changes that are shaping the country in the twenty-first century. For example, Australia is facing the challenges of an ageing population that is increasingly diverse (26 per cent born overseas, according to the 2016 Census of Population and Housing) and a growing prevalence of distrust in political institutions and processes.<sup>21</sup> When it comes to harvesting the knowledge Australia requires to meet its future economic, social and security needs, there is also some concern. For example, Australia is seen as falling behind in educational achievements particularly for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects. On the health front it is not all promising either: just under half (47.3 per cent) of Australians had one or more chronic health conditions in 2017-18, an increase from 2007-08 when two-thirds (42.2 per cent) of people had one or more chronic conditions; and two-thirds (67 per cent) of Australian adults are overweight or obese (increase from 63.4 per cent in 2014-15).<sup>22</sup>

The emerging social face of Australia does not reflect solely the image of a tough nation. Like other countries, Australia remains vulnerable to demographic and related challenges and is exposed to changing societal dynamics. This has implications for Australia's national character and morale and should be taken into account while shaping the future of Australia's foreign and defence policies. As an increasing number and variety of disruptive technologies come to shape our lives and way of thinking, it is a timely reminder that it is smartness that Australia should seek when developing solutions to its security and other national challenges. Australia needs a comprehensive strategy that is backed by whole-of-government coordination and focus, with sustained investment in critical areas of: (1) manufacturing of smart technology; (ii) its application to solving problems of public interest, and (iii) export to other countries. A foreign

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<sup>20</sup> Australian War Memorial, 'Australians and Peacekeeping', <[www.awm.gov.au/articles/peacekeeping](http://www.awm.gov.au/articles/peacekeeping)> [Accessed 1 March 2019].

<sup>21</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia—Stories from the Census, 2016', cat. no. 2071.0, <[www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Ageing%20Population~14](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Ageing%20Population~14)>; J. Irvine, 'The Policy Chaos Eroding Our Faith in Democracy', *The Future Fix*, 19 November 2018, <[www.smh.com.au/national/the-policy-chaos-eroding-our-faith-in-democracy-20181115-p50g8l.html](http://www.smh.com.au/national/the-policy-chaos-eroding-our-faith-in-democracy-20181115-p50g8l.html)> [Accessed 1 March 2019].

<sup>22</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'National Health Survey: First Results, 2017-18', cat. no. 4364.0.55.001, <[www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4364.0.55.001~2017-18~Main%20Features~Key%20Findings~1](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4364.0.55.001~2017-18~Main%20Features~Key%20Findings~1)> [Accessed 1 March 2019].

policy that is fuelled by smart power seeks to be proactive in shaping its strategic interests and is also recognised for its technological know-how and rich human capital (like for example, Japan and Israel). Smart power has its asymmetric advantage and synchronises well with the trajectory of future cognitive growth. Applied smart capability in the form of futuristic technologies and thinking style will have a high premium in the knowledge-driven economies of the information age. Smart technology can also be a key enabler of at least two critical capabilities Australia will need for the future: resilience and agility. The decision-makers and policy elites should not, therefore, exclusively focus on toughness alone but also strive for smartness in all areas of national life. This does not necessarily mean relying solely on STEM capability but rather striving for cognitive diversity for greater intellectual agility to make the most of a future where all nations will have to deal with a quite complex operating environment, whether in peace, or at war, or somewhere in-between on the conflict spectrum.<sup>23</sup>

### **National Approach: Incrementalism vs Big Leap**

The emerging strategic scenario inside and outside of Australia strengthens the need for a re-orientation in policy thinking. The question then is what steps are necessary and how they should be taken. Changing national practices, policies and systems is no easy task and it should be approached carefully and methodically. There is perhaps no perfect time in national affairs to make significant changes. Therefore, Australia needs to take incremental or small steps that are informed by hard facts and not rhetoric and shaped by a strategic outlook instead of an exclusive reliance on tactical considerations. Adopting this approach can be a big leap for the future of Australian foreign policy. After all, exploiting every opportunity for the nation while ensuring security through strength (as professed in the 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper*) cannot materialise without some big decisions that can be implemented through small, calculated but decisive steps. As current discussions for a Plan B for Australia's foreign, security and defence policies gather momentum, there is an opportunity for Australia to be a true middle power and not just a dependant middle power or an 'awkward' regional partner.<sup>24</sup>

A national approach that involves big decisions requires the whole nation to be on board. A new model of partnership with the civil society which involves not just the parliament but representatives from all corners of the society is necessary to embed the fundamentals of the policy in the public psyche. Perhaps a platform along the lines of the Australia 2020 Summit that was launched in 2008 to forge stronger ties between society, nation and

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<sup>23</sup> Joyo Sanyal, 'To STEM or not to STEM? Is It the Right Question?', *Land Power Forum* (blog): Cognitive Edge, 21 March 2018, <[www.army.gov.au/our-future/blog/cognitive-edge/to-stem-or-not-to-stem-is-it-the-right-question](http://www.army.gov.au/our-future/blog/cognitive-edge/to-stem-or-not-to-stem-is-it-the-right-question)>, [Accessed 1 November 2018].

<sup>24</sup> Patience, *Australian Foreign Policy in Asia Middle Power or Awkward Partner*, p. 133.

policy can have some relevance in this context.<sup>25</sup> Such a process can help the nation to tune in to the emerging foreign policy choices that Australia faces in the short term and in the years beyond. Granted that foreign policy occupies a place *sui generis* among types of public policies formulated and governed by the government. But in order to shape the direction which the government of the day wants Australia to take in an environment of relentless competition between states and in view of growing scarcity of economic and other vital resources, Australia needs a new model of civil partnership. Without such a partnership, the challenge of taking small or big steps will remain vulnerable to short-term thinking and other tactical considerations. This can create gaps in the identification, analysis and understanding of, for example, strategic risks to national security.

### **Conclusion: A New Style of Thinking**

As Australia's strategic environment gets more complex and new forces shaping the actions of and interactions between states and non-state actors emerge, a new style of thinking is the first step towards defining Australia's role in this world. This article has stressed the importance of using a reflective framework for policymakers to set the tone for Australia's foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Investing in the creation of a distinct foreign policy identity which the nation can be proud of and confident about while facing emerging challenges should be a national priority. It is time for decisive action in order to make Australia future ready. The strategic window of opportunity does not stay open indefinitely: without a brutal and honest appraisal of the means and ends, there is a real risk that Australia's power status will decline in relative terms; it will run out of meaningful options and be forced to come to accept a challenging reality at a cost to its national interest.

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<sup>25</sup> Australia 2020 Summit, *Australia 2020 Summit: Final Report* (Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, May 2008).