

Just a Dash? China's Sharp Power and Australia's Value Diplomacy

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When supporters of China's President Xi Jinping point to his many accomplishments they highlight his impressive anti-corruption drive, the end of the one-child family policy, the intensive monitoring of social organizations and citizens, his reorganization of the party and its armed forces, the unilateral occupation and militarization of contested territories in the South China Sea, and the massive Belt and Road Initiative advanced under his administration. Among these larger accomplishments, one that is easily overlooked is his role in compelling the people and government of Australia to recalibrate their relationship with China. In particular, the actions of his government have triggered a major rethink on the place of values in Australian foreign policy and diplomacy. One measure of this recalibration is the Australian government's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, *In the National Interest*.

To be sure, strategic statements on foreign policy issued by Australian governments in recent decades have all paid deference to the values that underpin foreign policy. Statements about values in high-level strategic statements are not in themselves reliable indicators of whether values inform everyday foreign policy operations and diplomacy, or if they do, then how and to what degree they do so. Nevertheless, strategic foreign policy statements do signal significant shifts in government thinking and intentions to interested parties. Comparing the place of values across a historical series of foreign policy statements can provide a crude but useful measure of changes in Australian foreign policy thinking and of the factors that trigger and shape these changes, at the same time providing insights into the responses of governments likely to be affected by them.

In years past, statements on Australian foreign policy seeking to advance the national interest have generally taken the national interest to mean promoting national prosperity and security. Prime Minister John Howard (PM 1996-2007), who presided over the first two white papers, was inclined to speak highly of national values only to subordinate them to concern over jobs and security in his strategic thinking. Hence his first white paper focused on:

the hard-headed pursuit of the interests which lie at the core of foreign and trade policy: the security of the Australian nation and the jobs and standard of living of the Australian people. In all that it does in the field of foreign and trade policy, the government will apply this basic test of national interest.¹

A definition of the national interest that focused on jobs and security all but excluded values diplomacy from the Australian foreign policy tool box. In light of this experience, Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley describe the historical balance between national interests and values in Australian foreign policy in a way that many Australians would find familiar: "For Australia, as for most states, the national interest has invariably been defined as a combination of national security plus national prosperity, with the occasional dash of national values."²

The throwaway line on values in this textbook quotation is a fair indication of how values have historically been approached and perceived by Australian foreign policy practitioners and experts. In Australia, pragmatism has long been elevated to a second-order value in foreign affairs and diplomacy on the understanding that achieving a desired outcome is preferable to promoting a perfect moral framework that achieves little in the actual world.

Accordingly, values are customarily assigned an instrumental or supporting role in Australian foreign policy and diplomacy, chiefly bearing on the ways and means through which national interests are pursued, rather than touching on fundamental interests themselves, or being factored into assessments of the risks and opportunities facing the country.

Beijing's occupation and militarization of disputed territories in the South China Sea, its disregard for the arbitral ruling on the Philippines case, and its attempts to influence Australian public opinion and political judgments on these and related matters through sharp power—covert, coercive, and possibly corrupt interference operations—together prompted a major reassessment of Australian foreign, trade, and security policy under the administrations of prime ministers Tony Abbott (PM 2013-2015) and Malcolm Turnbull (PM 2015-2018). The process of strategic reassessment culminated in the passage of new legislation on foreign interference and espionage, and the publication of a new Foreign Policy White Paper in November 2017, which signalled a departure from earlier practice in elevating values to a position of pre-eminence in Australian strategic thinking and foreign policy planning.³

The 2017 statement is only the third Foreign Policy White Paper issued by an Australian government. *In the National Interest* appeared in 1997, and the second, *Advancing the National Interest*, in 2003. All three were initiated and published by conservative Liberal-National Party coalition governments.⁴

Although they did not produce any Foreign Policy White Papers, Labor governments did produce two Defence White Papers over this period, in 2009 and 2013. The 2009 Defence White Paper prepared under the direction of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (PM 2007-2010, 2013) was the first statement by an Australian government of any persuasion to take account the impact of China's growing wealth and power on Australia's shifting strategic environment (for which it earned a stern rebuke from Beijing.)⁵ Labor also produced an all-encompassing statement on Australia's place in the region, the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* (2012), which bore comparison with earlier foreign policy statements in its stress on trade and diplomacy but otherwise ignored the changing strategic environment attendant on the rise of China which had informed the same government's Defence White Paper.⁶ Under Labor, little effort was made to reconcile security concerns with trade issues within the framework of a single strategy document such as a Foreign Policy White Paper. This was the burden of the Turnbull government's 2017 White Paper.

In their evolving positions on values in foreign affairs and diplomacy, their definitions of the national interest, and their assumptions around national identity, the three Foreign Policy White Papers provide a window onto the shifting spectrum of Australian foreign policy thinking across a range of issues, chiefly arising from Beijing's foreign interference activities in Australia and its disregard for commonly-agreed rules for handling territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In all three white papers the values of a secular liberal democracy were said to be the core values that shaped Australia's approach. Although these values were clearly articulated in the first and second White Papers, they were subordinated to an ideal of the national interest that centered on trade and security and were overwritten with claims about cultural identity, which effectively divorced them from public diplomacy. The 2017 White Paper was no less concerned with trade and security and reflected growing

concern about China's role and intentions in the region and its use of sharp power in Australia. In the face of these concerns, however, values were no longer conflated with cultural identity or sprinkled like garnish on the hard-headed pursuit of national interests. Upholding values was declared a core national interest. From 2017 values began to matter in Australia's relations with China.⁷

Contrasting Canberra and Washington's Foreign Policy "Idealism"

For those unfamiliar with Australia, it may be helpful to point out that values diplomacy has rarely played a role in Australian foreign policy comparable to the place it occupies in American diplomacy. Neither the unapologetic realism of the Richard Nixon administration nor the bold idealism of Ronald Reagan found many adherents in Australian foreign policy circles. Australia has generally come down on the realist side of the spectrum and characterized its conduct as a down-to-earth or "practical" approach to foreign affairs.

Under President Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, the American national interest was defined with little regard to ideological or moral content. Ideology and regime type were largely overlooked in favor of assessing strategic risks and opportunities in light of an unending contest for international power and position. The idealist position associated with Reagan is remembered for repudiating amoral realism and giving prominence to ideology and regime type (along with good and evil) in assessing the risks and opportunities facing America. For Reagan, communism was evil along with the Soviet Union that embraced it. Liberal capitalism was good and America its global champion. Serving the national interest entailed denouncing communism as morally evil and promoting freedom and democracy in American diplomacy.

These two poles of realism and idealism did not mark out the extremes of foreign policy debates in Canberra as they did in Washington in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. This was partly a question of geography and scale. As a rule, Australian foreign policy has been less concerned with shaping the world to its liking than molding the immediate strategic environment to its advantage, whether this be defined as Asia, the Asia-Pacific, or, more recently, the Indo-Pacific.⁸ In practice this has generally meant supplementing a heavy dose of realism at the bilateral level with a measure of idealism at the multilateral level, with neither taken to extremes and each more or less complementing the other.

This is not to say that global perspectives have been neglected in Australian foreign policy thinking. As a middling liberal democracy, Australia has long recognized that it has a fundamental stake in the maintenance of a global, rules-based order capable of ensuring regional security, facilitating international trade and investment, and encouraging diplomatic initiatives to resolve matters of possible contention. This is recognized as one of the three foreign policy imperatives that governments of every persuasion confront on assuming responsibility for the conduct of Australia's international relations: sustaining and developing an international, rules-based order; allying with a strong global partner; and finding a place for Australia in its immediate neighborhood.⁹

Questions of scale and geography aside, Australian positions on the place of values in foreign policy have also been shaped by Australia's history as a parliamentary democracy, and by the parliamentarians who have risen to the top of the system from one year to the next. Prime Minister Bob Hawke (PM 1983-1991), for example, was a skillful negotiator and straight-talking union leader before taking a Lower House seat in 1980 and winning his first federal election for Labor in 1983. A likeable "larrikin," in the local idiom, Hawke made a point of deriding high-sounding moralists in public life. Before winning office, he enjoyed greater public credibility as the country's most senior labor-union leader than many of the elected politicians among his peers. Asked why this was so, Hawke responded "because I don't just exude morality!"¹⁰ As prime minister, Hawke presided over a cabinet that included a number of liberal internationalists including foreign ministers Bill Hayden and later, Gareth Evans. Perhaps the closest pairing between Australian and American foreign policy idealism was that between Jimmy Carter's liberal internationalism and Hawke's foreign minister, Gareth Evans. Even so, Evans' brand of liberal internationalism was tempered by practical considerations in a way that Carter's was not. Where Carter is regarded as having elevated human rights in American foreign policy to the point of treating America's traditional allies more harshly than some of its long-term enemies, Evans never proposed extending his brand of idealism beyond concrete instances, where he felt it could make a difference.¹¹

Another source of dissonance is to be found in the asynchronous rhythms of political life in Canberra and Washington. Australian prime ministers have often been out of synch with incumbent American presidents on questions of values and *realpolitik*. Conservative Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (PM 1975-1983) was a hardened realist in global geopolitics although a high-sounding moralist on other matters, notably apartheid in South Africa. Fraser won election as prime minister while Gerald Ford was president, he remained in office during Jimmy Carter's term, and he lost office during Reagan's inaugural term. On becoming prime minister, Fraser was alarmed by what he considered American naivety regarding the intentions of the Soviet Union and its behavior in regional theaters of interest to Australia, particularly the South Pacific and South China Sea. Soon after the American withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975, Soviet vessels began docking at Cam Ranh Bay in southern Vietnam, and within four years Moscow had secured a long-term lease of the naval base along with neighboring air and communications facilities. In light of these developments Fraser informed Republican Ford and, in turn, Democrat Carter that he felt America's principled policy of détente was dangerous for the U.S. and its allies in the Western Pacific because it freed the Soviet Union to rebuild its fragile economy while extending its already substantial military power.¹² Not surprisingly, he welcomed Reagan's ascent to office.

Fraser was succeeded as prime minister by the charismatic and pragmatic Bob Hawke, who was not at all sympathetic to Reagan's moral politics and was caught unaware, just days after he took office as prime minister in February 1983, when Reagan branded the Soviet Union an "evil empire." Hawke immediately faced pressure from factions within his party to dissociate the Labor government from Reagan's moral crusade and rearmament drive, to press for talks on international disarmament, and to commission a review of the U.S.-Australian joint defense communications facilities at Pine Gap and Nurrungar in central Australia (which he did). Although Hawke was unsympathetic to Reagan's visionary aspirations, he managed, with the help of his ministry, to handle these matters adroitly without risk to the facilities or damage to the alliance.¹³

How Values Entered Australian Foreign Policy Debates

Values entered Australian foreign policy debates by a roundabout route that detoured through a series of domestic political debates at some remove from American influence and concerns. National values, as they were known at the time, showed up among other contested topics in a wide-ranging public debate in the 1990s on the “Asianization” of Australia.¹⁴ When Paul Keating succeeded Bob Hawke as Labor prime minister in December 1991, he made a series of interventions on the topic. Within months of taking office, Keating gave a keynote address urging Australians to become more closely engaged with the states and societies of Asia while remaining true to their history, culture, and values:

We don’t go to Asia cap in hand ...We go as we are. Not with the ghost of empire about us. Not as a vicar of Europe, or as a U.S. deputy. But unambivalently. Sure of who we are and what we stand for. If we are to be taken seriously, believed, trusted, that is the only way to go.¹⁵

In retrospect, Keating’s remarks appear uncontroversial. At the time, however, his assertions appeared to preempt a decision on “who we are and what we stand for,” which his conservative opponents felt was not Labor’s prerogative to decide. Keating’s interventions accelerated a public debate on the “Asianization” of Australia that merged into a wider series of discursive battles that came to be known as the culture wars and the history wars.¹⁶ As a rule, conservatives who favored the idea that values were rooted in cultural traditions—whether Anglophone or “Judeo-Christian”—swore they would never surrender Australia’s identity or values to the imperatives of Asian engagement. Progressives who favored a culturally-agnostic mix of identity and values, including Keating and the Labor side of politics, saw little risk to Australian identity or values in closer engagement with Asia.

These domestic political tensions over national values and identity played out in the two strategic foreign policy statements produced under the direction of Howard’s conservative government in the wake of Keating’s electoral defeat in 1996. The first of Howard’s Foreign Policy White Papers, published in the following year, projected an ethnically-grounded national identity rooted in a distinctively European if not British social and cultural heritage. “The values which Australia brings to its foreign policy,” the paper stated, “have been shaped by national experience, given vigour through cultural diversity, but reflect a predominantly European intellectual and cultural heritage.” European heritage was not to be sundered nor those values surrendered in engagement with the Asian region, the paper continued. “The pursuit of Australia’s interests in the Asia Pacific does not require a surrendering of Australia’s core values.”¹⁷

The second White Paper was drafted during a period of intense domestic policy debate surrounding immigration and Islam in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S., and the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia, when eighty-eight Australian tourists were killed in terrorist bomb attacks along with over 100 victims of other nationalities. The second White Paper went further than the first in articulating the values that conservatives in government considered distinctively Australian:

Our fundamental values and beliefs are clear. Australians value tolerance, perseverance and mateship. These values form our spirit as a nation... This is the essence of our egalitarian society and our identity as Australia and Australians.¹⁸

The 2003 statement explicitly identified Australia as a cultural outlier with “predominantly European heritage” in an otherwise alien region:

Australia is a Western country located in the Asia-Pacific region with close ties and affinities with North America and Europe and a history of active engagement throughout Asia ... Maintaining a productive interplay between these two things—close engagement with Asia on the one hand, and the basic Western make-up of Australian society and its institutions and our wider international associations on the other—lies at the heart of our foreign policy.¹⁹

The second White Paper’s choice of “tolerance, perseverance, and mateship” as distinctively Australian values can be traced to domestic policy debates taking place around education, culture, and immigration ahead of these two foreign policy statements. Alongside the culture wars, which revolved around immigration and cultural heritage, a series of history wars unfolded during Howard’s term. These turned on the impact of the British colonial occupation of Australia dating from January 26, 1788 (now commemorated as Australia Day) and the associated dispossession and decimation of indigenous peoples of the continent.²⁰ Howard would have none of it. In an Australia Day address in 1998, two years into his first term, Howard made a pointed reference to the “values that are particularly important to all of us as Australians,” listing tolerance, perseverance, and mateship among them.²¹ On another occasion marking the Centenary of Federation (1901) he identified “four distinct and enduring Australian values,” which he termed “self reliance, a fair go, pulling together, and having a go.”²²

These domestic values statements later found their way into policy documents of every kind, often with Howard’s direct involvement. In 1999 he inserted reference to mateship in a mooted preamble to the Australian constitution, and in 2006 he ensured that a question on mateship was included in tests for immigrants intending to take out Australian citizenship.²³ Over time, a number of idiomatic expressions emerging out of these partisan domestic policy debates, including “mateship,” “fair go,” “tolerance,” and “perseverance” found their way into foreign policy statements. The idea of a “fair go” appeared in the first Foreign Policy White Paper *In the National Interest* (1997), and the values of mateship, tolerance and perseverance appeared in the Howard government’s statement of values in its second Foreign Policy White Paper, *Advancing the National Interest* (2003).

Although the Howard government acknowledged the place of values in foreign policy, it framed national values in a language that alienated broad sections of the Australian community and at the same time precluded international values advocacy.²⁴ His administration’s statements of values derived from highly-partisan domestic policy debates from which many key players were excluded, including the opposition Labor Party. Further, they had limited appeal or application beyond Australia. Embedding values in ethnically-

centered national identities and articulating them in a folksy idiomatic style inhibited their translation into effective values diplomacy. Perhaps this was the intention. “We eschew the soap box,” the 2003 White Paper declared, in favor of “effective” diplomatic solutions.²⁵

Still, the lack of bipartisan support for the values statements in the two White Papers and the colloquial nationalization of universal values presented problems for managing Australia’s most important relationship in the region: its relationship with China. This called for a new commitment to values diplomacy.

Values in the 2017 White Paper

The 2017 Foreign Policy White paper marked a significant break from those that came before it in the way it articulated the place of values in Australian foreign policy. Again, Canberra was out of synch with Washington. As “national values” first entered foreign policy debates by way of a domestic political agenda, unrelated to American conduct and concerns, the later elevation of universal values in Australian foreign policy came at a time when liberal values were being subordinated in American diplomacy to the “America First” agenda of Donald Trump.

Allan Gyngell captured the difference between earlier and later white papers succinctly:

Values have taken on a new centrality in this document. They hardly featured in the 1997 White Paper. They were given greater prominence in 2003, but in distinctively Australian terms: “Our fundamental values and beliefs are clear. Australians value tolerance, perseverance and mateship.” In 2017, however, values are expressed emphatically and defined in classic liberal forms.²⁶

The 2017 White Paper did more than this. It challenged some of the assertions found in earlier White Papers that Australian identity and values were grounded in a particular ethnic heritage, first by emphatically dissociating national identity from race and religion (“Australia does not define its national identity by race or religion”), and then by omitting the terms “Western heritage” and “European heritage” from statements surrounding values altogether.

Other culturally-loaded terms were also omitted from claims about national identity. Where the 2003 White Paper claimed “Australia’s cultural identity draws heavily on our predominantly European heritage. Nearly 90 percent of Australians have European ancestry,”²⁷ the 2017 White Paper made the markedly different claim that “one in four Australians were born overseas and almost half of all Australians were either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. We come from virtually every culture, race, faith and nation.”²⁸

Having dissociated Australian national identity from a particular cultural or ethnic heritage, the 2017 statement shifted the locus of national identity from one based on heritage to one grounded in values: “Australia does not define its national identity by race or religion, but by shared values.”²⁹ In this way, values were elevated in foreign policy thinking from secondary attributes of a particular ethnic heritage to primary markers of Australian national identity.

Finally, the values that Australians were said to share were described not in the folksy colloquialism of earlier statements but in the universal language of liberal values—specifically, by reference to “shared values including political, economic and religious freedom, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality and mutual respect.” By elevating values to the core of national identity and reframing them in commonly-understood terms, the 2017 White Paper signaled that Australia’s values had salience beyond Australia’s borders. Earlier White Papers nationalized values in the service of a “practical” diplomacy which effectively removed them from public diplomacy. In contrast, the 2017 White Paper affirmed the pragmatic function of values advocacy:

Australia is pragmatic. We do not seek to impose values on others. We are however a determined advocate of liberal institutions, universal values and human rights. The Government believes that our support internationally for these values also serves to advance our national interests.³⁰

“Australian values,” now understood as universal values that Australians shared with one another and with like-minded partners abroad, could no longer be secured by confining them to Australia’s national borders. To the contrary, securing Australian values required international values advocacy:

Our adherence to the rule of law extends beyond our borders. We advocate and seek to protect an international order in which relations between states are governed by international law and other rules and norms.³¹

Where values were assigned a secondary instrumental role in earlier Australian foreign policy statements—essentially framing the methods through which the national interest was to be pursued—they were reassigned in the 2017 White Paper to the heart of national identity and to the core of the national interest. Supporting and securing values through international relations and diplomacy was made a legitimate goal of Australian foreign policy, and more so where it helped to sustain an international order based on commonly-accepted rules and norms.

Response to Sharp Power

The elevation of values in Australian foreign policy was triggered by changes not in Australia but on China’s part in launching a series of interference operations threatening the sovereignty and integrity of Australian institutions and, with respect to the values associated with rule of law, in China’s challenges to the international order in the South China Sea.

In a new section, entitled “Guarding against foreign interference,” the White Paper stated:

The Government is concerned about growing attempts by foreign governments or their proxies to exert inappropriate influence on and to undermine Australia’s sovereign institutions and decision-making. Such attempts at foreign interference are part of a wider global trend that has affected

other democracies. Foreign interference aims to shape the actions of decision-makers and public opinion to achieve an outcome favourable to foreign interests.³²

The White Paper distinguished legitimate diplomacy by countries seeking to advance their national interests “by persuading others to their point of view” from what it called “foreign interference,” which went beyond persuasion “by using clandestine or deceptive means to affect political, governmental or even commercial processes to cause harm to Australian interests.” Evidence for these claims had been mounting in the serious media on many fronts—including the media itself, business appointments, political donations, community organizations, and educational institutions—reinforcing domestic intelligence reports about undue foreign interference and emboldening the federal government to do something about them.³³

The 2017 statement warned as well about “new media platforms” that provided foreign states with “opportunities to sow misinformation,” and pointed to growing dangers of espionage and state-sponsored intellectual property theft. It concluded the section on threats to “our security, our freedom and our values” by referring to the need for vigilance around institutional sovereignty, integrity and transparency, and promising to “ensure that national decision-making and institutions remain free from foreign interference. This is one of our most important national interests.”³⁴

The paper also indicated grave concern about China’s conduct in the South China Sea, which it described as “a major fault line in the regional order.” Although Australia is not a claimant state and does not take sides among competing claims, it noted, the country retains “a substantial interest in the stability of this crucial international waterway, and in the norms and laws that govern it.” It went on to state that

Australia is particularly concerned by the unprecedented pace and scale of China’s activities. Australia opposes the use of disputed features and artificial structures in the South China Sea for military purposes. We support the resolution of differences through negotiation based on international law.³⁵

A third factor contributing to the turnaround in tone and language of the strategic statement was the leadership shown by Malcolm Turnbull, a liberal humanist presiding over a deeply-divided conservative coalition government. The two earlier White Papers were also drafted and published by conservative coalition governments, but where the 1997 and 2003 statements were introduced by the incumbent foreign and trade ministers, Turnbull introduced the 2017 White Paper himself, ahead of the sitting ministers for foreign affairs and trade. The statement was certainly not Turnbull’s work alone—the drafting process involved more extensive public consultations and submissions than any that preceded it—but Turnbull initiated and guided the process, and he set the tone for the document in his opening remarks: “These are the most exciting times, the times of greatest opportunity, but they are also times of uncertainty, of risk, indeed of danger. But in the midst of such change, Australia’s values are enduring.”³⁶ The White Paper was clearly intended to be an affirmation of those values and of the institutions that upheld them.

Bipartisan Support

For some decades after Howard first appropriated values for partisan advantage in domestic policy debates, the Labor Party has felt uncomfortable discussing values in relation to Australian foreign policy. Under prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard (PM 2010-2013), Labor leaders and ministers generally ascribed the differences separating China and Australia, in their formal meet-and-greet statements, to the two countries' respective cultures and histories, rather than to their distinctive values. On the Labor side of politics, recourse to values in domestic and foreign policy has long been regarded a conservative ruse.

Certainly, little attention was paid to values in the Labor government's major foreign policy statement of the period, *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* (2012). This extensive 312-page document carries occasional reference to "values of fairness and tolerance" in touching on Australia's demographic diversity, and it refers to the "shared values" underpinning relations with the U.S. and Japan without stating explicitly what these values happen to be. It treads lightly around values generally.

The reason for Labor's relative silence on the matter can be found in a revealing reference in the *Asian Century White Paper* to the "values" of an earlier generation of Australians who were "oriented mainly towards the British Empire and Europe," and whose conduct and beliefs reflected "the values and attitudes of a time when many Australians defined themselves as distant and separate from Asia."³⁷ These were the particularistic ethnic values that Labor was seeking to leave behind with its *Asian Century White Paper*, intended as it was to move Australia beyond the values and attitudes of an earlier era into the "Asian Century." Its authors opted to do so, not by updating the values of an earlier time, but by treading lightly on values altogether.

Again, this approach appears to have been grounded in the domestic national values debate, the terms of which had been set by conservative politicians, think-tanks, and like-minded columnists who added a folkloric touch to values they traced to a distinctively British or European cultural heritage. Rather than contest these domestic value claims, Labor leaders and progressives yielded the values question to their opponents, conceding to what one scholar has called the conservatives' "hegemony of values."³⁸ The authors of the *Asian Century* statement were reluctant to weigh in values on foreign policy for fear it would stoke the embers of a divisive domestic debate. Better in their judgment to ignore values altogether than risk stirring the old beast in the basement.

In 2017, however, Labor's foreign affairs spokesperson Senator Penny Wong broke the mould with a hard-hitting statement on the place of values in Labor foreign policy, which was no less important for the progressive side of politics than the 2017 White Paper for the conservatives. In an address at the Griffith University Asia Institute in Brisbane, in August 2017, Wong shunted aside party members and supporters who feared a values debate could prove divisive. "There are, of course, those who dismiss values as a 'trap' that only encourages contention and conflict," she said.³⁹ As noted, it was her Labor colleagues who feared being ambushed in a national values debate. John Howard consistently provoked his critics to match his homilies on national values, relishing the contention and conflict that

accompanied the debates on national values that followed. Two decades on, Wong was addressing those on her own side of politics who felt intimidated by the terms of a debate designed to ensnare unwary critics of homegrown values, such as “mateship” and the “fair go,” in a series of traps laid out by their conservative opponents.

In 2017, Wong accepted the values challenge head on. From the tone of her speech, she was emboldened to break the Labor mold for reasons similar to those that compelled Turnbull’s Liberal-National coalition government to break with conservative tradition. These include threats to the “rules based order,” signs of growing racial and national intolerance, and evidence that countries such as China were acting to undermine the postwar security regime.

In a wide-ranging *tour de force*, Wong began with a personal anecdote and ended with a bold affirmation of the place of values in Australian foreign policy, dismissing both the “Asian values” and “Western values” schools of thought along the way, and positing in their place an international order founded on the principle of equal human dignity and secured by the rule of law. “One can be born lucky,” she said:

It was my good fortune to have been born into a family having two “values” traditions—those of China and what we loosely term “the West.” So it will not surprise you that I do not accept the view that some former Asian leaders have propounded that “values” are an artifact of Western imperialism. Values are not some kind of stalking horse behind which “the West”—and many people see that as code for the U.S.—seeks to assert and defend a form of political dominance. Nor are they simply the legacy of what some describe as the Judeo-Christian tradition.

With this personal reflection, Wong challenged two decades of Asian and Australian conservative insistence on the “Western” character of universal values and opened space for a different kind of conversation on values than any which had taken place in Australia to date, a conversation founded on an ideal of equal and indivisible human dignity, and grounded in law and institutions rather than in arguments for a particular cultural or religious heritage.

Turning to foreign policy and diplomacy, Wong highlighted the rule of law as a foundation for democratic societies and for an international rules-based order. The two were related in so far as “the rule of law must inform the extension of law and politics into the international system.” Australia as a middle power was particularly susceptible to threats to an international order from which the country had benefited historically. For countries such as Australia “there is no alternative to a foreign policy that is built on values” because a foreign policy guided by clearly articulated values helped to consolidate an international rules-based order in preference to a “purely power-based foreign policy” from which middle powers such as Australia could only suffer. Senator Wong concluded her discussion of rule of law with the observation that “values, as a core element in the construction of a foreign policy, are not just desirable, but necessary.”

China's Response and Australia's resolve

One of the many purposes of strategic foreign policy statements is to alert domestic actors and other states to significant shifts in the thinking and concerns of national governments. Recent adjustments in the language surrounding values and interests in Australian foreign policy statements signal changes that are guiding the responses of relevant actors within the country and informing the responses of governments outside it.

For the government of China, the folksy ethnocentric tone of the 1997 and 2003 White Paper statements on identity and values was reassuring on several counts. In the first place, it implied that Australia had little intention of promoting values beyond its borders. Further, it suggested that Australian governments believed values were based on national cultures and traditions, rather than on universal principles, in effect endorsing the authoritarian values of the communist government as authentic expressions of China's national values. And as far as bilateral relations were concerned, Canberra's relativist line on values and its stated commitment to a pragmatic style of diplomacy, which "eschewed the soap box," meant that each side could leave its national values at the door and get on with the hard-headed business of promoting complementary national interests—the pursuit of wealth and power in China's case, the pursuit of jobs and security in Australia's.

The different tone of the 2017 White Paper elicited a cool response from Beijing. A Foreign Ministry spokesperson made a few positive comments on the bilateral relationship but took issue with the paper's understanding of the "rules-based order" that Canberra was keen to preserve and condemned as "irresponsible" those sections of the paper dealing with China's actions in the South China Sea.⁴⁰

A deeper level of disappointment was revealed in an academic paper by Chengxin Pan, an Australian foreign policy analyst with an empathetic understanding of Beijing's position. Pan took issue with the 2017 White Paper for defining Australian identity and interests in terms of liberal values and the international rules-based order rather than in the earlier culturalist style to which China had grown accustomed. China's concern, he noted, was triggered by Australians' apparent lack of gratitude towards the Chinese government for lifting their country's economy out of the doldrums but motivated at a deeper level by the White Paper's attempt to "essentialize" national identity in terms of values that contrasted starkly with those professed by China's Communist Party government.⁴¹

Pan evoked nostalgia for an earlier style of ethnocentric national identity stretching back to White Australia which was less "essentializing" and problematic for China. "A quick comparison of the 2017 White Paper with its 2003 predecessor helps illustrate this point," he notes:

In the 2003 White Paper, a residual cultural flavour was still palpable in the articulation of the Australian identity, which was defined above all in terms of "tolerance, perseverance, and mateship", as well as "liberal democracy" and "economic freedom." But such emphasis on Australia's "own distinctive culture" is nowhere to be seen in the latest White Paper. Instead, it states

that “We come from virtually every culture, race, faith and nation” (p. 12); therefore, “Australia does not define its national identity by race or religion, but by shared values” (p. 11). Gone, it seems, are ways of defining Australia in terms of race (‘White Australia’), culture (‘Britishness’), power status (‘middle power’), or even ‘geographical’ location (‘Western’ or ‘Asian’).⁴²

Although the phrase “White Australia” made its last affirmative appearance in a Commonwealth policy document six decades ago, Pan was correct in spotting White Australia’s ethnographic kinship with the identity markers popularized in the Howard era such as “Britishness,” “Western,” and “European.” Each marked a different phase in the assertion of ethnic and cultural particularity reaching back to White Australia.

In its day, the White Australia policy embodied a driving vision of Australian national identity that no amount of discriminatory legislation could ever capture in full. Hence doing away with discriminatory legislation or deleting the word “White” from policy documents went only part way in dispelling the legacy of White Australia.⁴³ In this respect, the 2017 White Paper and Penny Wong’s 2017 Griffith Asia Institute presentation each represent long overdue restatements of identity and values expressed in universal rather than particularistic cultural terms harking back to White Australia.

A style of Australian nationalism that echoes White Australia had the additional benefit for Beijing of facilitating its abrasive style of Leninist values diplomacy. To this day, one of the standard rebuffs issued by senior Chinese embassy and consular officials, when responding to unfavorable media treatment of China in Australia, is to attribute such coverage to racism and bigotry. In December 2017, for example, China’s embassy in Canberra attacked Australian media for making “unjustifiable accusations against the Chinese government” and “unscrupulously vilifying Chinese students as well as the Chinese community in Australia with racial prejudice.”⁴⁴ In March 2018, the embassy issued a statement claiming that Clive Hamilton’s book *Silent Invasion* was imbued with “racist bigotry.”⁴⁵ And Ambassador Cheng Jingye, referring to the passage of legislation to limit foreign government interference in Australian public life, urged Australia to put an end to “bigotry” in its bilateral relations.⁴⁶ This style of public diplomacy, familiar to Australians over many years, was applied to Canada and elsewhere by China’s embassies and consulates in 2019.⁴⁷

Within China, experts among China’s small cohort of Australia specialists in universities and think tanks have also pressed claims of anti-China bigotry in Australia and expressed regrets similar to those of Chengxin Pan over the demise of the Howard consensus, which once served the relationship well.⁴⁸ Sensitive to nostalgic sentiment of this kind, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop invited former prime minister John Howard to lead the Australian delegation to the fifth Australia-China High Level Dialogue in Beijing, in December 2018, in an effort to breath warmth back into the relationship at an awkward moment.⁴⁹

Welcome as it was, this gesture is unlikely to turn back the clock. Current concerns in the Australian community and government are not over the rise of China but about the growing reach and authoritarian aspirations of a powerful Leninist state that seeks to set the ground rules for others in the region to follow, and to interfere where it can to ensure that they do. Australia does not see China as an enemy or as a hostile power. But neither does it regard a country practicing and espousing Leninist values abroad as a benign or neutral player.

In January 2019, this critical distinction was highlighted by former Foreign Affairs and Trade Department Secretary Peter Varghese, AO, in a major speech presented in Singapore. “For Australia,” he noted, “a democratic China becoming the predominant power in the Indo Pacific is a very different proposition to an authoritarian China occupying this position.”⁵⁰ Varghese was influential in framing the connection between values and interests in Australian foreign policy thinking from the inception of the first Foreign Policy White Paper in 1997 to the 2017 White Paper.⁵¹ If an authoritarian China were to become the dominant power in the region, he argues, “that, by definition, would make it the single most important shaper of the region’s strategic culture and norms. So whether it is a democracy or a one-party state matters.”⁵² Australia’s differences with China turn, not on China’s rise, but on China’s values.

Australian governments no longer have the luxury of assuming that China will one day conform to the norms of the postwar order or reform itself domestically to conform with the rule of law. Under Xi Jinping, the Communist Party has confirmed that it sits above everything, even the law, and that it has no plans to reform. This was the take-away message of Xi’s keynote address as party general secretary to the 19th party congress, in October 2017, delivered under the title “Remain true to our original intentions and hold firm to our historical mission.”⁵³ China’s ruling party has told the world that it intends to remain true to the theory of Karl Marx, faithful to the Leninist party model, mindful of the lessons of Maoism in the Chinese revolution, committed to strengthening the hold of proletarian dictatorship over the people of China, and prepared to challenge the position of private capital and liberal democracy in the world at large. Australia has listened and acted accordingly.

There is little point expecting change. “The West is too arrogant and must stop lecturing us and trying to change China,” Fu Ying warned in 2011. “Unless you can accept China as it is, there is no basis for a relationship.”⁵⁴ Beyond its borders, China has demonstrated the kind of government that it is by making extensive claims of maritime sovereignty over international waters within its self-described nine-dash line; unilaterally enforcing its claims in the South China Sea; occupying and militarizing contested islands; ignoring the judgement of the arbitral tribunal on its disputed maritime claims with the Philippines; and using a variety of covert, coercive, and possibly corrupt means to win support for these positions from within Australia itself.

Xi Jinping’s reversion to hard-line Leninist values has prompted Australians to reconsider their own. Paul Dibb, an Australian pioneer of strategic and security studies during the Cold War, brought this message home in a widely circulated article in January 2019:

It is true that in relations –between states, national interests generally trump values. But at the centre of why Australia’s values are so different from those of China is the role of the Communist Party and its abuse of basic human rights. These matters are too rarely raised as a critical –impediment in our relationship—yet the main reason we need to be wary of China as an –adversary is because our values are not compatible.⁵⁵

To show the kind of country Australia is, the Turnbull government’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper makes a number of bold statements about values and affirms the Australian government’s resolve to confront imminent challenges to the nation’s security, well-being

and values, in challenging and uncertain times. As Turnbull noted in his forward, “our focus is on ensuring that Australia remains an open, inclusive, free and safe society.”⁵⁶

How affirming liberal values translates into foreign policy practice remains an open question.⁵⁷ The White Paper signaled an all-of-government effort to build “economic resilience, military weight, an intelligence edge, development assistance, a cohesive multicultural society, democratic institutions free of interference, and the credibility to attract and sustain partnerships with other nations in support of these values.”⁵⁸ Whether these efforts can be realized as well is a further question.

Whatever the answers, there can be little doubt that placing the fundamental principles which Australians value and share onto the national foreign policy agenda, and promoting them through public diplomacy, brings greater clarity to the differences separating Australia from China that are patently in need of protection in Xi Jinping’s new era.

Endotes

¹ *In the National Interest: Australia’s Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, iii.

² Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley, *Making Australian Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 25-26.

³ New legislation covering foreign interference, espionage, and political donations include the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018, which amended the Federal Criminal Code to introduce the new national security offenses; the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act 2018, which created a registration scheme for communications activities undertaken on behalf of or in collaboration with certain categories of foreigners; and the Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Act 2018, which among other amendments banned foreign political donations.

⁴ See Michael Fullilove, “Seeking clarity in Australian foreign policy,” *The Interpreter*, February 15, 2017, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/the-interpreter/debate/australia-s-foreign-policy-white-paper-2017>.

⁵ On the history of the seven Defence White Papers produced between 1976 and 2016 see Peter Edwards, “Defence White Papers at 40,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), December 2016.

⁶ *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, October 2012), discussed below. The paper was produced by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, not Foreign Affairs and Trade, and ventured well beyond foreign affairs into areas of domestic policy.

⁷ The argument that values *should* matter in Australia-China relations was made in June 2014 in *The Asan Forum*. See John Fitzgerald, “Why Values Matter in Australia’s Relations with China,” <http://www.theasanforum.org/why-values-matter-in-australias-relations-with-china/>

⁸ Rory Medcalf, “The Indo-Pacific: What’s in a name?” *The American Interest*, October 10, 2013, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2013/10/10/the-indo-pacific-whats-in-a-name/>

⁹ Gyngell argues that these have been the three over-riding considerations in Australian foreign policy since WWII. Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2017), 11.

- ¹⁰ First cited in *The Bulletin*, 1977.
- ¹¹ Robert G. Kauffman, "First Principles Series: The First Principles of Ronald Reagan's Foreign Policy," The Heritage Foundation, no. 40 (2011), 5; Gareth Evans, *Incorrigible Optimist: A Political Memoir* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2017).
- ¹² Malcolm Fraser, *Dangerous Allies* (Carlton Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2014). Fraser conveyed similar views to Washington on behalf of Beijing. Philip Ayres, *Malcolm Fraser: A Biography* (Richmond, VIC: William Heinemann, 1987), 338-40.
- ¹³ The Hawke government did however turn down an invitation to participate in Reagan's Strategic Defence (Star Wars) Initiative. Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2017), 177-8, 182.
- ¹⁴ Stephen FitzGerald, *Is Australia an Asian Country?* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997).
- ¹⁵ Paul Keating, "Australia and Asia: Knowing who we are," April 7, 1992, <http://www.keating.org.au/shop/item/australia-and-asia-knowing-who-we-are---7-april-1992>
- ¹⁶ Jim George and Kim Huynh, eds., *The Culture Wars: Australian and American Politics in the 21st Century* (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2003); Anna Clark, *Private Lives, Public History* (Carlton VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2016).
- ¹⁷ *In the National Interest*, 1997, 11.
- ¹⁸ *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, vii.
- ¹⁹ *Advancing the National Interest*, 2003, 99.
- ²⁰ Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *History Wars*; Anna Clark, *Private Lives*.
- ²¹ Howard also listed "optimism" as "one of those values." "Transcript of the Prime Minister the Hon. John Howard MP speech at the 1998 Australian of the year award Government House," Perth, January 25, 2018, <http://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-10942>
- ²² John Howard, "Four Distinct and Enduring Australian Values," text of a speech by Prime Minister John Howard to the Melbourne Press Club, November 22, 2000, <http://australianpolitics.com/2000/11/22/john-howard-distinct-enduring-australian-values.html>
- ²³ Mark McKenna, "First Words: A Brief History of Public Debate on a New Preamble to the Australian Constitution 1991-99," Parliamentary Library Research Paper 16, 1999-2000. Canberra: Parliament of Australia, April 4, 2000, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp9900/2000RP16; "Migrants need to learn mateship: PM," *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 13, 2006, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/migrants-need-to-learn-mateship-pm-20061213-gdp18m.html>
- ²⁴ Use of the word "mateship" was so widely condemned that Howard dropped it in the final text of the proposed constitutional preamble which went to the vote in 1999. He retained the term in the subsequent Foreign Policy White Paper for international application. See Nick Nick Dyrenfurth, "Mateship: Secular Australia's religion and how John Howard hijacked it," *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/mateship-secular-australias-religion-and-how-john-howard-hijacked-it-20141217-129c7t.html>
- ²⁵ *Advancing the National Interest*, 2003, xviii.
- ²⁶ Allan Gyngell, "The Uncertainty Principle: The 2017 Australian Foreign Policy White Paper in Historical Context," *Security Challenges* 14, no. 1 (2018): 6-12.

- ²⁷ *Advancing the National Interest*, 2003, 99.
- ²⁸ *Opportunity, Security, Strength: 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, Australian Government, 2017, 12.
- ²⁹ *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 11.
- ³⁰ *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 11.
- ³¹ *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 11.
- ³² *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 75.
- ³³ See John Garnaut, "How China Interferes in Australia," *Foreign Affairs*, March 9, 2018; Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 2018); John Fitzgerald, "Overstepping Down Under," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018): 59-67.
- ³⁴ *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 76.
- ³⁵ *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 47.
- ³⁶ "Prime Minister's Introduction," *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*.
- ³⁷ *Australia in the Asian Century*, 78.
- ³⁸ Nick Dyrenfurth, "John Howard's Hegemony of Values: The Politics of 'Mateship' in the Howard Decade," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 2 (2007): 211-230.
- ³⁹ Penny Wong, "Australian values in a time of disruption," Griffith Asia Institute "Perspectives: Asia" Lecture, Griffith University, August 3, 2017, <https://www.pennywong.com.au/speeches/australian-values-in-a-time-of-disruption-griffith-asia-institutes-perspectives-asia-lecture-griffith-university-brisbane/>
- ⁴⁰ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Remarks on the Reports of Australian Foreign Policy White Paper," November 23, 2017. au.chinaembassy.org/eng/sgjs/sghd/t1513635.htm
- ⁴¹ Chengxin Pan, "Identity Politics and the Poverty of Diplomacy: China in Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper," *Security Challenges* 14, no. 1 (2018): 13-20.
- ⁴² Chengxin Pan, "Identity Politics and the Poverty of Diplomacy."
- ⁴³ John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Kensington: UNSW Press 2007), Ch. 1.
- ⁴⁴ 中国驻澳使馆发言人谈话, December 6, 2017.
- ⁴⁵ Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks, March 1, 2018, <http://au.china-embassy.org/eng/gdxw/t1538617.htm>
- ⁴⁶ Channel Nine News, June 19, 2018, <https://www.9news.com.au/national/2018/06/19/11/09/what-china-really-thinks>
- ⁴⁷ "China's Ambassador to Canada Blames 'White Supremacy' for Feud Over Arrests," *New York Times*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/world/asia/china-ambassador-canada-white-supremacy.html>

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- ⁵⁰ Peter Varghese AO, "The Indo Pacific and its strategic challenges: An Australian Perspective," Speech to the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore, January 8, 2019.
- ⁵¹ Caitlin Byrne, "Charting Australia's Diplomatic Future," Australian Institute of International Affairs, November 27, 2017, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australias-diplomatic-future/>
- ⁵² Peter Varghese, "The Indo Pacific and its strategic challenges."
- ⁵³ "大会的主题是：不忘初心，牢记使命，高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜，决胜全面建成小康社会，夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利，为实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦不懈奋斗。" "Xi Jinping, Report to the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, 18 October 2017." The expression 不忘初心 is drawn from the Avatamsaka or Flower Garland Sutra (华严经 Huayanjing in Chinese) of the Chinese Buddhist canon.
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- ⁵⁵ Paul Dibb, "Trust is in short supply when there are no shared values," *The Australian*, January 23, 2019.
- ⁵⁶ "Prime Minister's Introduction," *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*.
- ⁵⁷ Caitlin Byrne, "Charting Australia's Diplomatic Future."
- ⁵⁸ Rory Medcalf, "Why China doesn't like the Indo-Pacific and why it matters," *Australian Financial Review*, May 21, 2018, <https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/department-news/12613/why-china-doesnt-indo-pacific-andatters>