

Identity Politics and the Poverty of Diplomacy: China in Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper¹³

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In Fear of China, Again

Australia's long-awaited 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper came on the eve of the 45th anniversary of Australia-China diplomatic relations. As its largest trading partner and a rising regional powerhouse, China features prominently throughout this policy blueprint. The White Paper notes the need to strengthen the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China, partly because of "China's growing influence on the regional and global issues of greatest consequence to our security and prosperity" (p. 37).¹⁴ Yet, if the White Paper is any guide, China's growing influence is also what worries Australian leaders the most at the moment.

On its very first page, we are told that "Today, China is challenging America's position" (p. 1). With the United States seen as vital to Australia's security and prosperity, one can hardly escape the conclusion that this China challenge also poses risks to Australia's key interests. As China seeks influence in the region, Australia will "face an increasingly complex and contested Indo-Pacific" (p. 26), in which "the potential for the use of force or coercion in the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait" is seen as disconcerting (p. 47). Describing the South China Sea as "a major fault line in the regional order" (p. 46), the White Paper is "particularly concerned by the unprecedented pace and scale of China's activities" along this "fault line" (pp. 46-47). Though not directly naming China, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull also repeatedly warns of "risk", "danger", and "threats to our way of life" in his brief introduction to the White Paper (p. iii).

Many Chinese commentators are puzzled by Australia's alarmist views of their country. Responding to the White Paper, an editorial from China's *Global Times* opines that each year Chinese students and tourists pour a large amount of money into Australian coffers, not to mention China being the main customer of Australian minerals and beef, and yet Australia treats China in a manner like "eating the meat from the bowl, and then abusing the

¹³ The author would like to thank Christopher Farnham and the two anonymous reviewers for their positive and constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper. The usual disclaimers apply.

¹⁴ All page numbers provided in the main text refer to the 2017 White Paper.

mother.”¹⁵ Certainly we may dismiss such Chinese puzzlement as a reflection of their somewhat autistic way of looking at the world and China’s role in it. Still, it is remarkable that such puzzlement exists not only among many Chinese, but also among those Chinese elites who otherwise had a soft spot for Australia.¹⁶ In this sense, we might as well owe ourselves some explanation about this puzzle: Why, indeed, is Australia so fearful of a country which has contributed the most to its best terms of trade in more than a century?

Identity Politics in the White Paper

I contend that Australia’s negative perception of China has much to do with the way Australia constructs itself, which features front and centre in the White Paper. Producing a foreign policy white paper, like making foreign policy in general, involves first and foremost the making of something ‘foreign’.¹⁷ Without the existence of the ‘foreign’, then by definition it does not make much sense to speak of ‘foreign policy’. One reliable way of making something foreign is to talk oneself up in a way that sets oneself apart from that ‘foreign’ object. This is precisely what the White Paper has done, which kicks off with a chapter on ‘Australia’s values’: “political, economic and religious freedom, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality and mutual respect” (p. 11). As soon as those values are used to define what Australia is, China’s ‘Other’ or ‘foreign’ status becomes almost assured. Understood this way, the depiction of China as a threat in the White Paper is neither a pure reflection of hard reality on the ground, nor a product of some inexplicable ‘anti-China’ mentality. It is a function of international identity politics that underpins Australian foreign policymaking.

While domestically Australian identity has been contested in the so-called ‘culture wars’ to define Australia and its history, citizens, and public policy agendas,¹⁸ its *international* face has gradually, and much less controversially, shifted to a narrative that accentuates liberal democratic

¹⁵ Editorial: Australia Eats the Meat from the Bowl, and Then Abuses the Mother Who Cooked the Meal’ [Sheping: Aodaliya duanqiwán chirou, fāngxia kuaizi maniang], *Global Times*, 23 November 2017, <opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2017-11/11397335.html> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

¹⁶ James Laurenceson, ‘Rising China as Rule-Taker or Rule-Maker?’ *Australian Outlook*, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 27 November 2017, <www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/china-rule-taker-rule-maker/> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

¹⁷ Simon Dalby, ‘Geopolitical Discourse: The Soviet Union as Other’, *Alternatives*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1988), p. 419; similarly, ‘security’ is one of the three keywords appearing on the cover of this White Paper, and according to Ronnie D. Lipschutz, “security appears to be meaningless either as concept or practice without an ‘Other’ to help specify the conditions of insecurity that must be guarded against”. Ronnie D. Lipschutz, *After Authority: War, Peace, and Global Politics in the 21st Century* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 49.

¹⁸ Carol Johnson, ‘John Howard’s ‘Values’ and Australian Identity’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2007), 195-209; Jim George and Kim Huynh (eds), *The Culture Wars: Australian and American Politics in the 21st Century* (South Yarra: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

values as opposed to geographical, cultural, racial or religious characteristics. A quick comparison of the 2017 White Paper with its 2003 predecessor helps illustrate this point. 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”.¹⁹ But such emphasis on Australia’s “own distinctive culture” is nowhere to be seen in the latest White Paper.²⁰ 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’).²¹

This particular way of defining the Australian self comes with some advantages: it helps Australia both circumvent the uncomfortable question of whether Australia is part of Asia,²² and de-emphasise its ‘Western’ heritage in the Asian region and age so as to allow it to better blend in, such as joining the East Asia Summit. More importantly, this values-based identity ties Australia firmly to the so-called “rules-based international order”, which is believed to be underpinned by, as well as essential to, “the values that reflect who we are and how we approach the world” (p. 11).

Australia’s Values-based Identity and the Othering of China

Defining Australia’s identity and interests in terms of liberal values and the rules-based order lays the groundwork for Australia to think about and deal with the United States and China in particular ways. It is in this context that I take issue with certain aspects of the White Paper in terms of its framing of Australia’s interests, its characterisation of key international relationships, and its prescribed policy responses.

To start with, putting fixed values at the centre of Australia’s identity allows the Australian Government to take an essentialist view of the country’s identity, interests and strength. Here, not only are Australia’s interests defined almost exclusively in terms of values and the rules-based order, but

¹⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Advancing the National Interest: Australia’s Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 2003), p. vii.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ As soon as the Coalition Government led by Tony Abbott was elected in 2013, the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper developed under the previous Gillard Labor Government was consigned to archive. Brendan Nicholson, ‘Asian Century Plans Consigned to History’, *The Australian*, 28 October 2013, <www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/asian-century-plans-consigned-to-history/news-story/a5b161575556c1120ee480bb27c01f69> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

²² Stephen FitzGerald, *Is Australia an Asian Country? Can Australia Survive in an East Asian Future?* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997).

its strength and prosperity are believed to be almost exclusively endogenously generated, as if Australia as “a stable and peaceful democracy” somehow automatically sustains and reproduces itself and its “strong economy”.

If Australia’s success does have something to do with the “more interconnected and interdependent” world (p. 1), the credit is given exclusively to the United States and the US-led order. For instance, it is argued that “The principles embedded in the post-war order have strongly supported Australia’s interests and our values”, and that “we have benefited significantly from an international order shaped by US power and global leadership” (p. 21). While it does acknowledge that China’s emergence as “an economic powerhouse” has contributed to “boosting our economy and increasing our living standards” (p. 22), the White Paper sees China’s economic growth itself as a product of the US-led order.²³ Further, in the words of then Prime Minister Tony Abbott, “China trades with us because it is in China’s interest to trade with us”.²⁴ Consequently, while Australia owes a lot to itself and the United States, it does not owe much to China. Through the discourses of ‘Australian values’ and the ‘US-led rules-based international order’, China’s role in Australia’s recent prosperity is explained away.

If anything, as China’s rise continues, it has come to increasingly symbolise danger, risk and threat. Given that Australia defines its identity, interests and strength in terms of liberal values, in Australia’s eye China is also inevitably values-based, except that it is almost the direct opposite of what Australia stands for. What matters most, then, is not the fact that China is by far Australia’s largest trading partner, but that this largest trading partner is for the first time “not a democracy”, but rather “a one-party authoritarian state with a fast-growing economy, a rapidly modernising military and global ambition”.²⁵ Even as terrorism, North Korea and other pressing issues continue to cause unease and fear, none seems able to remotely match the scale and comprehensiveness of China’s Otherness, not to mention the much longer history of its dark presence in Australia’s national self-

²³ For example, at the launch of the 2017 White Paper, Malcolm Turnbull insisted that the international rules-based order had served Australia and other countries well, including China itself. Andrew Tillet, ‘Foreign Policy White Paper: Shorten Says China’s Rise Nothing to Fear’, *Australian Financial Review*, 23 November 2017, <www.afr.com/news/foreign-policy-white-paper-bill-shorten-says-chinas-rise-nothing-to-fear-20171123-gzrea8> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

²⁴ Mark Kenny and Philip Wen, ‘Tony Abbott Refuses to Back Down over China Comments’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 2013, <www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-refuses-to-back-down-over-china-comments-20131128-2ydw1.html> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

²⁵ James Reilly and Jingdong Yuan, ‘Australia’s Relations with China in a New Era’, in James Reilly and Jingdong Yuan eds., *Australia and China at 40* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2012), p. 2.

imagination since Federation.²⁶ In a recent speech in Canberra, the Australian Ambassador to Washington Joe Hockey drove home this point: Chinese influence in Australia “represents a threat to what many Australians fought and died for and that’s a free and transparent, open democracy”.²⁷ From the identity politics perspective, little wonder that Chinese economic and political influence has aroused increasing suspicion and trepidation in Australia.

The Poverty of Diplomacy

Isn’t China indeed “a party-state that institutionalises Leninist authoritarianism, a Communist vision for modernisation, and a hard nationalism”?²⁸ There is certainly some truth to this popular China imagery, but it does not necessarily capture the complete picture of China as a complex international actor, nor does it necessarily constitute the most important or the most relevant fact as far as Australia’s foreign policy and national interests are concerned. Otherwise, Australia could never have justifiably formalised its relationship with Communist China during the height of the Cold War. Rules and values are no doubt important, particularly for a middle power like Australia. The values-based politics of identity might have allowed Australia to conjure up a clear sense of ‘who we are’, but international politics is not always a realm for clear-cut dichotomies and either/or moral choices. Foreign policy, like politics in general, is the art of the possible, not the absolute. As the 2003 White Paper makes it clear, “There is nothing inevitable about this and other rules. Their conception and enforcement are the result of long and hard negotiation among governments.”²⁹ In this sense, as far as its China policy is concerned, I argue that the 2017 White Paper has failed its own test, namely, “chart[ing] a clear course for Australia at a time of rapid change” (p. 1). This era of rapid change demands a more flexible and pragmatic approach to identity and foreign policy, not an absolutist values-based straightjacket. It calls for ‘old-fashioned’ diplomacy that is based on reciprocity, negotiation, and practical wisdom in navigating through complex common challenges facing the world. China, for all its failings, needs to be part of the solution to those challenges. The values-based identity politics, however, leaves little room for imagining such diplomatic possibilities.

²⁶ See Chengxin Pan, ‘Getting Excited about China’, in David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska (eds), *Australia’s Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2012), pp. 245–66.

²⁷ Caitlyn Gribbin and Henry Belot, ‘North Korea: Joe Hockey Warns Against “Tickling the Tummy” of Kim Jong-un’, ABC News, 9 December 2017, <www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-08/joe-hockey-warns-against-tickling-tummy-of-north-korea/9241690> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

²⁸ Mark Harrison, ‘Saying the Unsayable in Australia’s Relations with China’, *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 15 December 2017, <www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/saying-unsayable-australia-s-relations-china> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

²⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Advancing the National Interest*, p. 51.

Here, my point is not to let China off the hook easily. Rather, the 'values-cum-rules' foundation upon which Australia's identity and foreign policy are allegedly based is from the beginning unstable at best and illusory at worst. Despite its unequivocal claims to universal values and norms, Australia has rarely allowed values to stand in the way of its perceived national interests. Canberra's treatment of asylum seekers, for example, has been widely condemned for its breach of its international legal obligations. And its recent maritime boundary agreement with Timor-Leste, touted as "an example of the rules-based order in action" (p. 105), does not negate the fact that Australia's dealings with Timor-Leste have been anything but rules-based or values-based.³⁰ Meanwhile, America's track record on following international rules and norms is no better. Arguably the biggest blow to the rules-based international order in recent memory is the US invasion, without either UN authorisation or Congressional approval, of Iraq, in which Australia also took part. In fact, on the few occasions when the phrase "rules-based international order" was invoked in the first decade of this century, it was primarily to denounce US unilateralism under George W. Bush. Today, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Iran nuclear deal is just the latest evidence of a United States which often takes a rather cavalier attitude towards rules and norms. Even as the United States implores China to respect the "rules-based order" in the South China Sea, it has not itself ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

To highlight Australia's and the United States' rules-breaking behaviours does not justify China's breach of rules and norms, but it does call into question the wisdom of banking on values and rules as a marker of identity and difference. China, after all, is widely believed to be one of the biggest beneficiaries of the existing rules-based order. If this is true, then it defies logic that China both benefits from and actively undermines the same rules-based order. It also demands explanation if the rules-based order greatly benefits a country which has not followed its rules. Lack of space prevents any detailed analysis of China's relations with international law and rules, but suffice it to say here that treating China as the complete opposite of what Australia stands for distorts more than it illuminates.

In this sense, putting Australia's values and the rules-based international order front and centre in the Foreign Policy White Paper is more about identity politics than about effective diplomacy. Importantly, Australia's fascination with its values and the rules-based order may turn out to be merely wishful thinking when it comes to designing and executing its foreign policy. One of Australia's key values-based foreign policy projects is the

³⁰ Paul Malone, 'Australia's Agreement with Timor Leste Does not Have a Positive History', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 2017, <www.smh.com.au/comment/australias-agreement-with-timor-leste-does-not-have-a-positive-history-20170908-gydn6v.html> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or the 'Quad') among Australia, India, Japan and the United States, all 'like-minded' democracies.³¹ One problem with the Quad is that even though they are all democracies, they are not necessarily like-minded when it comes to foreign policy. Democracy, by definition, allows a diversity of views to coexist, and different democracies naturally hold different interests and policy agendas. For example, in countries like India, 'democracy' may not be seen as an end in itself, but also as a means to attract investment (as in Narendra Modi's three Ds: democracy, demography and demand). And for that reason, there may be limitations as to how far India is willing to go along with Australia's and the United States' strategic policies on China.³² The different emphases in the separate statements issued individually by the four democracies after their first 'working-level' meeting in November 2017 are a case in point.³³ Furthermore, democracies face regular elections and a new administration may well have different ideas when it comes to their foreign policy concerns and priorities (for example, Australia withdrew from the Quad after the election of Kevin Rudd in 2007).

Nor is democracy necessarily prone to peace and order: witness the disruptive and disastrous consequences of Washington's regime change in the Middle East on behalf of democracy. Malcolm Turnbull himself held no illusion about democracy before he became the Prime Minister. As he wrote in 2012, "Anyone who thinks democracies are not belligerent is a poor student of history, ancient and modern."³⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, this brief analysis is not to dismiss the importance of values and rules for foreign policy. Far from it. These factors have always and will continue to play a part in international relations. What is inadequate in the new Foreign Policy White Paper is that it adopts a fundamentalist or essentialist approach to values and rules, whereas both, to the extent that

³¹ While the 2017 White Paper does not directly mention the Quad, it hints at its willingness to work with "our Indo-Pacific partners in other plurilateral arrangements" (p. 40). For a debate on the Quad, see Euan Graham, Chengxin Pan, Ian Hall, Rikki Kersten, Benjamin Zala and Sarah Percy, 'Debating the Quad', *Centre of Gravity* series no. 39 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 10 March 2018), <sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/5996/debating-quad> [Accessed 20 March 2018].

³² K. S. Venkatachalam, 'India Reconsiders China Relations and Looks to a Future of Mutual Benefit', *South China Morning Post*, 17 December 2017, <www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2124481/india-reconsiders-china-relations-and-looks-future-mutual> [Accessed 15 March 2018].; Khurram Husain, 'The China-India Tango', *Dawn*, 8 March 2018, <www.dawn.com/news/1393790/the-china-india-tango> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

³³ Ankit Panda, 'US, Japan, India, and Australia Hold Working-Level Quadrilateral Meeting on Regional Cooperation', *The Diplomat*, 13 November 2017, <thediplomat.com/2017/11/us-japan-india-and-australia-hold-working-level-quadrilateral-meeting-on-regional-cooperation/> [Accessed 15 March 2018].

³⁴ Malcolm Turnbull, 'Power Shift' (Review of Hugh White's *The China Choice*), *The Monthly*, August 2012, p. 55.

they are human-made, are subject to change and cannot be considered independently of their practical consequences or specific circumstances to which they are applied. This caution may disappoint those who truly believe in the superiority and universality of Australia's values and the rules-based order Australia promotes, but it is better than blindly following one's moral conviction only to be met with disastrous consequences (the Iraq War comes to mind). For this reason, I argue that the "national foundation" in which the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper is grounded should give us more sober pause for thought than confidence.

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