

*The Values of Australian Foreign Policy and the 2019 Election:  
A Potential Contest of Political Philosophies?*

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**Abstract**

Australia's political system is dominated by its two main parliamentary parties: the conservative Liberal-National Party (LNP) Coalition, which has been in government since 2013; and the social-democratic Australian Labor Party (ALP). Australian politics is therefore typically a contest of the rival political philosophies and values commonly observed in modern liberal democracies, that of conservatism versus social democracy. While Australia's electoral competitions usually sharply debate economic and social policies, foreign policy is generally considered to be a bipartisan field. Both Labor and the Coalition traditionally express mutual commitment to the core values of Australian foreign policy: maintaining the American alliance, expressing support for the values of the 'rules-based international order', and promotion of the neoliberal free trade agenda. However, as a national federal election was scheduled for May 18<sup>th</sup> 2019, several foreign policy issues were possible points of contention to influence the campaign, even if only slightly. These include: relations with the Pacific region and the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) program; participation in the US-led military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq; and diplomatic relations with important regional neighbours, especially China. Economic management policy issues were still expected to dominate the 2019 election; the leadership instability in both the Liberal and National Parties over the previous year was also exploited for political gain by the Labor opposition, which has consistently held an advantage over the Coalition government in opinion polling. At least partially differing visions for foreign policy were nevertheless important supplements to Australia's national electoral battle.

Keywords: Political Philosophy; Australian Politics; Foreign Policy

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## **The Australian 2019 Election and Foreign Policy**

Australia scheduled to hold its general national election to determine its 46<sup>th</sup> Parliament on May 18<sup>th</sup> 2019. The contest between its two major political parties, the Liberal-National Party Coalition, which has been in government since 2013, and the opposition Labor Party, reflects a rivalry between the two major wings of Western-origin liberal political philosophy they respectively represent; conservatism versus social democracy. After briefly reviewing the nature of the political philosophies of Australia's political parties, the theoretical basis and practice of contemporary Australian foreign policy will then be addressed.

Australian elections are typically fought over economic policy; foreign policy is rarely ever a major issue. The main reason for this is that Australian foreign policy is generally bipartisan, with the LNP and ALP typically holding similar positions on most foreign policy issues, in the name of the 'national interest', which is meant to be above domestic political dispute. This paper will examine the values underlying the foreign policy approaches of the Coalition and Labor. The remainder of the paper will then analyse some of the main foreign policy issues and potential differences which exist between the two major parties, specifically regarding relations with the Pacific, the United States (US) and the Middle East, and China.

### **The Philosophical Basis of Australian Political Parties**

The Liberal Party, founded in 1944, along with its Coalition partners the National Party (founded as the Country Party in 1920), represents its main philosophical basis of conservatism, through traditionally supporting values such as: support for large and small business, the US military alliance, neoliberal free trade, and 'traditional' family values and institutions, such as the churches (Miragliotta, 2010, 251). Founded in 1891, the Australian Labor Party, based in the trade union movement, has represented social democracy – sometimes also referred to as democratic socialism. This political philosophy promotes regulation and intervention in the economy, to protect wages and conditions of workers, and promote greater opportunity for women, migrants, and other disadvantaged groups in society (Singleton, 2009, 348-349).

Both parties attempt to magnify their differences during election campaigns in particular, in order to distinguish themselves from their opponents. There are some relative, and sometimes quite significant differences in difference areas of economic and social policy, such as tax rates, industrial relations, and mechanisms to address climate change (Garnett and Lewis, 2014). However, in the broad approach, both the Coalition and Labor essentially adhere to upholding a capitalist economy, with varying levels of government involvement (Fenna, 2010). Other minor political parties commonly end up holding the balance of power on the cross-benches of the Australian Senate, and therefore can have an important influence on the passage of legislation. They reflect respective ideologies which are more on the margins of Australian political philosophy.

For instance, the Australian Greens party is often considered 'socialist', particularly by its critics. An avowedly socialist-inclined faction does have a presence in the Greens (reflecting some serious internal divisions that have recently affected the party), but their policies are more properly a 'green' theory political philosophy,

which seeks to shift capitalism towards environmental protection, especially stronger action on climate change, as well as promote greater social justice. The Greens also advocate a more independent and pacifist stance on foreign policy, being often critical of Australia's reliance on and deference to its military alliance with the USA in particular (Ward & Stewart, 2010, 160-161). A tiny Communist Party still exists, but does not contest elections; so, Marxism has effectively almost disappeared from contemporary Australian political philosophy, at least as far as electoral contests are concerned (O'Lincoln, 2009, 224). At recent state elections in Victoria and NSW, the Socialist Alliance, the most outwardly Marxist party, garnered only miniscule support (0.32% of the vote in the 2019 NSW state election on March 23<sup>rd</sup>) (NSW Electoral Commission, 2019).

On the other end of the political spectrum, several far-right parties have emerged since the 1990s, and have managed to at least gain a small parliamentary presence. The One Nation Party, which recently managed to poll around 4% of the vote, and smaller ultranationalist parties such as the United Australia Party, the Liberal Democrats, and Australian Conservatives have also been present. However, this representation of anti-immigrant, economically protectionist populist political philosophy, which has substantially increased in other democratic systems, especially Europe and the USA, is relatively minor in Australia by comparison. On foreign policy, these xenophobic parties are openly hostile to Australia's participation in the global system, especially through trade treaties and provision of foreign aid, and are often critical of international institutions such as the United Nations (Packham, 2019). Recent attempts by extremist 'alt-right' groups to join or infiltrate conservative and ultranationalist parties, and thereby gain a presence in Parliament, have also emerged as a factor of concern for Australian politics (Mann, 2019).

### **Political Philosophy of Australian Foreign Policy**

Regarding foreign policy, a distinction has sometimes been made between the traditional approach of the Coalition and Labor. The ALP has generally been considered to be more supportive of multilateralism, particularly enthusiasm for international government organizations (IGOs), such as the United Nations and APEC (founded by the Hawke government in 1989). The LNP has by contrast tended to be more inclined towards a bilateral approach to diplomatic relations, preferring to pursue free trade deals and military cooperation with individual countries (especially the US, but also other important regional countries such as China and Japan). However, as with economic and social policy, differences between the major parties over foreign policy are largely matters of degree, rather than fundamental philosophical difference (Firth, 1999, 48-49).

Australian foreign policy has therefore generally been conducted in a largely bipartisan fashion; shared policies include maintaining the US alliance, promotion of free trade agreements, and upholding the 'rules-based' liberal international order, based around participation in IGOs and promotion of international law. Policy differences have typically emerged over specific issues and crises, most notably Labor's opposition to Australian participation in the Vietnam War and Iraq War (White, 2011, 246-248). Therefore, Australia's bipartisan foreign policy has generally upheld the cooperative, interdependent principles and practices generally in line with the 'Liberal' school of thought in International Relations (IR) Theory, particularly

free trade, international law and IGOs. Although, *realpolitik*, or ‘power politics’ is also often seen in the foreign policy actions of Australian governments, especially in the ‘band-wagoning’ behaviour of supporting the military actions of its key ally the US, reflecting the IR theory of Realism (Stears, 2010, 42-43, 57-59).

Tensions between the principles of Liberalism and Realism in Australian IR can often be seen in recent foreign policy positions of the major parties, as will be shown later on in the three case studies: ODA provision to the Pacific; the influence of the US alliance on Australia’s presence in the Middle East; and the dilemmas confronting Australia’s bilateral relations with China.

### **Foreign Policy Philosophy of the Morrison LNP Government**

The LNP returned to government in the September 7, 2013 election, when Tony Abbott defeated ALP leader Kevin Rudd, to become Prime Minister. Rudd himself had only just returned as Prime Minister, overthrowing Julia Gillard in a leadership contest, having been deposed by Gillard in a party room challenge in 2010. Rudd had defeated the LNP in the 2007 election, with then Prime Minister John Howard losing office. Despite Abbot’s 2013 victory, unpopular economic policies, particularly a harsh austerity budget in 2014, saw the LNP remain behind in opinion polls ever since the 2013 election; this led to former Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull overthrowing Abbott in a party room challenge, on September 15, 2015. Turnbull almost lost the July 2, 2016 federal election, managing to retain only the narrowest one-seat majority. The politically weakened Turnbull was in turn later challenged, resulting in former Treasurer Scott Morrison becoming Prime Minister on August 24, 2018 (Crabb, 2019).

In his first major foreign policy speech as Prime Minister, Morrison outlined some of the core values which would guide his government’s foreign policy interests, including:

freedom of speech, thought, association and religion.....peaceful liberal democracy; the rule of law; separation of powers; racial and gender equality.... We believe in standing by our mates, side by side with nations that believe the same things we do..... We believe in being good neighbours – regardless of whether there are differences in how we see the world and run our respective societies. We also believe this should be a two way street. We respect their sovereignty and their right to run their own show (Morrison, 2018).

Such rhetoric thus presumably allows Australia to pursue its foreign policy interests, including conducting relations with authoritarian states, particularly with ones where there are lucrative, mutually beneficial trade relations. Democracies like Australia have justified diplomatic and trade relations with authoritarian governments, particularly China, (but also other autocratically-inclined states, such as Cambodia, Thailand, and Saudi Arabia) by making the practical case that foreign policy can be conducted realistically, without compromising domestically-held liberal-democratic principles. The tension between principles of Liberalism and Realism, detectable in this formal foreign policy statement, become even more apparent in foreign policy practice.

## **Labor's Foreign Policy Philosophy**

Former union leader Bill Shorten led the ALP after its election defeat in 2013. More experienced in domestic portfolios, including having been Assistant Treasurer, Minister for Workplace Relations, and Minister for Education in the Rudd-Gillard governments, Shorten aimed to broaden his claim for wider expertise as Opposition Leader, in the lead-up to the expected 2019 election campaign, by delivering an address outlining Labor's foreign policy. The main values expressed in this speech included that:

Under a Labor Government I lead, Australian foreign policy will be independent, confident and ambitious. If I am elected Prime Minister, Australian foreign policy will speak with a clear Australian accent.....In a time of global disruption, much of the structure and content of Australian foreign policy will have to be new. But the principles that guide us are those which have always shaped my and Labor's view of the world.

1. We seek a peaceful world.
2. We seek a world in which power is tempered by justice.
3. We seek a fair world, where prosperity is shared.
4. We seek a sustainable world, where the environment is protected for future generations (Shorten, 2018).

Shorten's speech thus reiterated some of Labor's traditional core foreign policy principles, often aligned with Liberalism, particularly a commitment to multilateralism, and engagement with allies and neighbouring states; however, it also sought to project a partially nationalist image. At a time of flux and uncertainty in international relations, such a projection has the obvious intention of appealing to demands for greater security and stability among the electorate, which indicate an underlying Realist impulse. It will now be seen whether Labor's recent attitudes and policy stances towards important current issues in Australian foreign policy will match Shorten's rather idealist rhetoric, contrasted with the positions of the Morrison LNP government.

## **Case Studies: Relations with the Pacific and ODA**

One of the key shifts in the direction of Australian foreign policy that Morrison sought to make, distinguishing himself from his predecessors Abbott and Turnbull, was to pay more attention to the South Pacific region, which was termed the 'Pacific Step-up'. Some of the details announced in Morrison's foreign policy speech regarding the Pacific included: more Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) for the region overall; new embassies to be built, and a \$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility (AIFF), to support infrastructure construction projects is to be set up. An Australian Pacific Security College to train military and security personnel from Pacific countries is also to be established, based in Australia. The naval base on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (where asylum seekers have also been detained on behalf of the Australian government) will be upgraded, in cooperation with participation from the US. To emphasise the importance of this new emphasis in foreign policy, Morrison conducted his first official overseas visits as Prime Minister to Fiji and Vanuatu – the first such visits by an Australian Prime

Minister to those Pacific Island countries. This personal attention to Pacific diplomacy, outside of the annual Pacific Island Forum leaders' summits will remain one of the unique achievements of Morrison's foreign policy. Australia will also push for PACER Plus – a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) for the Pacific region, to be led by Australia and New Zealand (Dziedzic, 2019).

The Pacific Step-up continued with following visits to the region by Minister for the Pacific Anne Ruston, followed by Foreign Minister Marise Payne. The Chiefs of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) also accompanied these visits. The large component of the Pacific Step-up devoted to military and security areas is therefore an implicit message to Australia's traditional Pacific partners against moving too diplomatically close to China, which has outstripped Australia in its ODA provision and investment in the region, although the Morrison government has been careful not to make any explicit criticism of China's greater regional presence (Whiting, 2019). China has so far appeared undeterred, as Chinese scientific research vessels are already carrying out oceanographic surveys in the waters approaching the Manus Island naval base (Greene, 2019).

In its 2019 budget, the Morrison government announced increases in ODA of 6.6%, for the next financial year, before projected decreases of 11.8% by 2022-23. Aid is being redirected from Asia to the Pacific, which gains 35% of the ODA budget, its highest ever proportion, worth \$1.4 billion. The \$2 billion for the AIFP will also be taken out of the ODA budget. The ODA cuts to Asian countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, Indonesia and Cambodia have been criticised by aid groups and charities, as the proportion of ODA to GDP will fall to 0.19%, well below the UN recommended target of 0.7%, making Australia the 19<sup>th</sup> lowest ODA contributor among developing countries (Davidson, 2019).

Critics of the Morrison government's Pacific policy also maintain that the AIFP risks repeating the mistakes of the previous South Pacific loans scheme under the 1983-1996 Hawke-Keating Labor governments, where little direct benefit reaches the Pacific recipients, as most funding eventually flows back to tenders awarded to Australian-based companies and contractors (Martin, 2019).

In response to the 2019 budget, Labor's Foreign Affairs spokesperson (and likely Foreign Minister, should the ALP win government), Senator Penny Wong pledged that Labor would attempt to restore ODA funding, with even more being directed to the Pacific region than present. However, she warned that a future Labor government could not realistically catch up in the short term with the around \$11 billion that has been cut from the ODA program over the term of the LNP government (Wong, 2019).

### **The US Alliance and Wars in the Greater Middle East**

Under the Morrison government, Australia has continued to strongly defend and promote its military alliance with the USA, arguably the core diplomatic relationship around which Australian foreign policy has been structured since 1942. The importance of this relationship was reiterated in Morrison's first official meeting as Prime Minister with President Donald Trump, on the sidelines of the 2018 G20 leaders' summit in Buenos Aires (White House, 2018).

Labor has also long maintained the key importance of the US alliance, despite past disagreements over the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. However, should Bill Shorten become Prime Minister, he will have to awkwardly attempt some reconciliation with President Trump, given the unflattering remarks Shorten made during the US 2016 election campaign. Obviously not expecting him to win, Shorten considered Trump was “entirely unsuitable to be leader of the free world”, going so far as to say Trump’s views were “barking mad” (Grattan, 2016).

Should a Shorten-Trump meeting ever transpire, the President may be mollified by Labor’s bipartisan support for the ongoing participation of the ADF in the ongoing US-led wars in the greater Middle East. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the USA in 2001, the ADF has participated in the US-led coalition fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan since October 2001, reflecting the commitment to the war by successive Coalition and Labor governments. Following deployment of Special Forces, the ADF sent combat and supporting units in *Operation Slipper*, peaking at over 1,500 personnel by 2011. After combat troops were withdrawn in December 2013, around 300-400 personnel have been involved in training Afghan military forces ever since (Department of Defence, 2019a).

Despite Australia’s long-running participation, at one stage as the largest non-NATO contributor, Australia has not played any real role in the diplomatic attempt to resolve the conflict. This process remains incredibly fraught, with the latest round of Doha-based talks between representatives of the Taliban and Afghan government breaking down (although covert negotiations between the US and the Taliban are continuing) (Telegraph, 2019). Despite the reluctance of the Trump Administration to pursue the war, the scale of violence rising yet again may see the ADF personnel in Afghanistan placed at greater risk. Shorten visited the troops in Afghanistan in April 2018 to demonstrate his support, so a future Labor government is thus likely to continue the ADF’s training mission in this seemingly intractable conflict (Brown, 2018).

Labor opposed Australia’s participation in the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, with the Rudd government withdrawing ADF forces after 2007. However, the Shorten-led Labor Opposition has consistently supported *Operation Okra*, the ADF’s contribution to the US-led campaign against the Islamic State terrorist organization (also referred to as Daesh) in Iraq and Syria, since military operations commenced under the Obama Administration from August 2014. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) carried out airstrikes, as part of the military coalition, until the end of 2017. Military advisers, including Special Forces, returned to Iraq to train its armed forces in an ongoing mission as the Islamic State insurgency continues, despite the recent recapture of the territory in Iraq and Syria that it claimed as its self-styled caliphate (Department of Defence, 2019b).

Despite the overall bipartisan approach towards the Middle East, there remain a couple of points of contention which could result in policy changes if there is a change in government. One dilemma resulting from the fall of the Islamic State ‘caliphate’ is the fate of Australians who joined the extremist movement. Up to 200 Australians are estimated to have joined Daesh, with many killed in the ground counteroffensive mostly led by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by US-led airstrikes. Morrison is determined that no Australian former members of

Islamic State will be allowed to return, even to be dealt with by criminal prosecution. Shorten has raised the issue though of how Australia should deal humanely with family members, particularly the children of former Australian Daesh fighters, who were brought to (or were born into) the war zone through no fault or intention of their own, yet legally remain Australian citizens (McCullough, 2019a).

Another point of disagreement regarding the Middle East is the decision of the Morrison government in December 2018 to follow the Trump Administration's recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, raising the prospect of eventually shifting Australia's embassy from Tel Aviv (although there are no plans to commence the move at present). While both Labor and the Coalition avowedly support a 'two-state solution', Morrison's unilateral decision (made during the by-election for Malcolm Turnbull's seat, which was lost by the Liberal Party for the first time, to an independent) was quickly opposed by Penny Wong, claiming the decision further undermined the already largely moribund peace process (Keinon, 2019).

## **China**

The greatest foreign policy challenge of contemporary times that must be faced by any Australian government is the hegemonic rise of China, the second-largest economy in the world, and possessor of the second-most powerful military in the Asia-Pacific region, after the US. China is Australia's largest trading partner (as it is for many countries in the region, such as Japan and South Korea), the destination for around of third of Australian exports. Policy towards China has been generally bipartisan, seeking to maintain economic and diplomatic engagement with China, including joining the Chinese-founded Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (after some equivocation), while opposing China's unilateral territorial claims to the South China Sea (Rimmer, 2015).

Relations between the People's Republic of China and Australia have been fairly stable since the Cold War, as both Labor and Coalition governments have maintained a 'one-China' policy since 1972. The China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) finally entered into force in December 2015, after years of negotiations (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019). However, relations during the Turnbull and Morrison LNP governments soon ran into some difficulties. In July 2018, Australia announced it would join Japan in a US-led infrastructure investment initiative for the Indo-Pacific region, widely perceived as a (far less well-funded) attempt to rival China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (South China Morning Post, 2018). In August 2018, Australia announced it would ban Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE from providing any technology for Australia's planned future 5G digital communications network, citing national security concerns (BBC, 2018). The erratic attitude of the Trump Administration towards China by this stage also threatened a tariff war, which would certainly adversely affect Australia; a belligerent speech by US Vice-President Mike Pence in October 2018 accused China of threatening a new Cold War (Smith, 2019).

Defence Minister Christopher Pyne sought to downplay these rising tensions. In a more conciliatory speech in Singapore addressing China's role in the region in January 2019, followed up by a visit to China, Pyne sought to maintain Australia's delicate geopolitical balance, of standing by its US ally, while hoping to placate its

most important trading partner (McCulloch, 2019b). However, this attempt at diplomacy had been somewhat prematurely undermined, since Pyne had begun his final East Asia tour with a visit to Tokyo, where he welcomed Japan's continual increases to its defence budget, which now includes upgrading the helicopter carrier *Izumo* to accommodate F-35B strike aircraft, and plans to acquire cruise missiles. Pyne also expressed the hope that Australia might soon finally conclude a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Japan, which could allow an even greater degree of cooperation between the ADF and Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) (Sturmer, 2019).

Relations with China further cooled, when Australian immigration authorities revoked the residency visa of billionaire real estate developer Huang Xiangmo, after an adverse security assessment finding that the Chinese Communist Party-linked businessman had attempted to influence both the ALP and LNP, through organizing large donations to both parties, and lobbying prominent politicians (Bisley, 2019). Soon after, Prime Minister Morrison announced that the Federal Parliament had come under a cyber-hacking attack from a 'sophisticated state actor' – implying China (or possibly Russia); China denied any involvement (New Daily, 2019). Australian coal exports to China were then soon subject to seemingly arbitrary restrictions, with lower volume quotas and stricter customs inspections at Chinese ports suddenly being imposed. Such threatening developments therefore demonstrate the stark difficulties confronting present Australia-China relations, whichever party wins government (Bermingham, 2019).

### **Conclusions – Prospects for Australian Foreign Policy After the 2019 Election**

As the 2019 election campaign commenced, the ALP remained ahead of the LNP in opinion polling, 52%-48%, on a two-party preferred basis. The Coalition has been behind Labor in nearly every opinion poll since it has been in government from 2013, hence the narrowest of victories which kept the LNP in power in the 2016 election (Beaumont, 2019). A Shorten Labor government was therefore perceived more likely, depending on the outcome of the election campaign (in its second week at the time of writing). Foreign policy had little focus in the 2019 election, dominated as usual by domestic policies, such as tax rates, renewable energy and climate change, health and education, and overall costs of living. A more aggressive and effective campaigner than Turnbull, Morrison made winning the election more of a challenge for Shorten and the ALP (Martin, 2019).

Nevertheless, one of the prime reasons for the lingering dissatisfaction with the LNP among the electorate was the leadership instability which dogged its time in government, especially the replacement of Turnbull with Morrison, which dramatically exposed the factional and personal tensions within the ruling Coalition parties. The political demise of Turnbull similarly had an adverse impact on the foreign policy continuity of the LNP government (Megalogenis, 2019). His long-serving Foreign Minister Julie Bishop also stepped down in August 2018 (replaced by then Defence Minister Marise Payne), and went on to announce she would leave parliament at the 2019 election; Defence Minister Pyne (formerly Defence Industry Minister) also announced in the closing session of the 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament in March 2019 that he would not recontest his seat.

Should Labor be returned to office, given the broadly bipartisan position both parties take towards foreign policy, whether interpreted through either a Liberal or Realist perspective, any future changes are unlikely to be dramatic. Provision to the Pacific will continue to be the highest priority for Australia's ODA program. The US alliance will be maintained, and the ADF's advisory missions in Iraq and Afghanistan will likely continue, as long as those armed conflicts endure. Managing relations with China will remain the most challenging bilateral diplomatic relationship. The most substantial foreign policy change is likely to come if Labor reverses recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Should a Shorten Labor government come to pass, the greatest difference may come in the structural, institutional process. A more unified Cabinet would be in a better position to deliver greater certainty and consistent direction to Australian foreign policy. Such attention will be earnestly required across a range of security, economic, and environmental issues. The values and philosophy of Australian foreign policy, drawn from the philosophy of its political parties, will continue to be tested as they cope with ever more complex and challenging regional and international diplomacy.

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