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New Australian Government Sets Fresh International Approach



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The Australian federal election on 22 May was a significant watershed for the country. It was not just that the Labor party was swept to power, banishing the Liberal-National coalition to the opposition benches after nine years in government. Labor’s win, along with the success of both the greens and socially progressive ‘teal’ independents, signalled that the electorate is looking to the new administration to pursue a markedly different approach to climate change. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s administration appears set to introduce deeper emissions cuts by 2030 and to introduce a more robust plan to deliver them.

Climate change diplomacy will also be the most significant area of change in Australia’s external approach, with Canberra now positioned to adopt a more influential role in future global negotiations on the issue. Even more importantly, a more forward-leaning approach to climate change is already helping reset Australia’s relations with the Pacific region. Countries of the region could not have made it any clearer that this is what they see as their overriding, existential challenge. Attempts by the previous coalition government to support climate change resilience in the Pacific were drowned out by an entrenched regional view that Australia was a laggard on this issue. The Morrison government’s rhetoric about the region also sometimes gave the impression that it was motivated only by a desire to combat Chinese encroachment rather than Pacific countries’ aspirations and concerns.

Pacific island leaders have responded very positively to the new government’s fresh emphasis on the importance of ‘listening’ to regional concerns. Newly appointed foreign minister Penny Wong, one of the Labor party’s strongest performers, has attracted positive feedback for her emphasis on climate change and style of engagement as she has criss-crossed the region in an intensive series of early visits – designed to underline Australia’s commitment at a time when China is strengthening its own regional outreach, including through an unprecedented visit to eight Pacific

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countries during May-June by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Albanese has also made a point of resetting the relationship with France, an important partner in the Pacific given its regional territory and military presence – this relationship sustained serious damage after the abrupt cancellation of a major bilateral submarine contract at the time of the AUKUS announcement.

Prime Minister Albanese was at pains from the very beginning of his term to signal his solidarity with western efforts to contain China. His first international visit, conducted less than 48 hours after his election, was to attend the Quadrilateral Dialogue Summit in Tokyo with his American, Japanese and Indian counterparts. Beijing nonetheless initially signalled its willingness to engage the new Australian Government more positively, and to begin moving on from what has been a very tense period in the bilateral relationship. Defence Minister Richard Marles held a ‘full and frank’ meeting with his Chinese counterpart in Singapore in mid-June, the first high-level engagement between the two countries in years.

But the realisation has now set in among Chinese authorities that Australia will continue to take a principled and assertive stand in its dealings with Beijing, and tensions have inevitably crept back in. Chinese state media outlets have expressed disappointment about Australia’s stance, and Australia has protested about ‘dangerous’ Chinese interceptions of Australian surveillance aircraft on routine patrols in the South China Sea.

Prime Minister Albanese’s visit to Ukraine last weekend was intended as a further signal of his government’s determination to join its traditional allies in standing up to the world’s autocracies. Albanese pledged more military aid to Ukraine after meeting President Zelensky. The package, worth A\$100m, includes drones and 34 additional armoured vehicles. He also announced sanctions and travel bans on a further 16 Russian ministers and oligarchs, and a ban on imports of Russian gold.

The new Australian government is otherwise focused on strengthening Southeast Asian partnerships and conducting early ministerial visits to key countries of the region, starting with an early prime ministerial visit to Indonesia, during which Albanese committed to attending the G20 Summit in Jakarta late this year. Foreign Minister Wong has now also visited Vietnam and Malaysia. Strengthening Australia’s relations with this complex region will require a range of actions beyond the additional A\$470 million it has promised in additional development assistance for Southeast Asia. This should involve close support for Thailand and Cambodia as they take on the chairing of the APEC and ASEAN groupings. As others have argued, the government will also need to elaborate on the purpose of the new position of special envoy for Southeast Asia, announced during the election campaign.

The early signs are that the Albanese government understands that work needs to be done at home to strengthen Australia’s external projection. There’s a need to counter declining ‘Asia literacy’ in Australia, which threatens the country’s long-term relationship with the region, especially Indonesia. The steady reduction in Indonesian language enrolments in Australian universities is a sign of the public disengagement that has crept in over recent decades. The government has announced new funding for in-country study in Indonesia, and prioritised business engagement during Albanese’s recent trip to Jakarta.

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