

Next government must find Australia's place in a turbulent and rapidly changing world

Written by Susan Harris Rimmer, Australian Research Council Future Fellow, Griffith Law School, Griffith University

This is part of a major series called [Advancing Australia](#), in which leading academics examine the key issues facing Australia in the lead-up to the 2019 federal election and beyond. Read the other pieces in the series [here](#).

The 2019 federal election, like most before it, is unlikely to be won or lost on foreign policy. Yet diplomacy is increasingly crucial to ensure the everyday well-being of Australians.

Foreign policy is no longer an elite, secret activity that affects only the powerful or political. For an open economy like Australia's, with mobile citizens in a shifting but interconnected region, it is the stuff of everyday life.

As 2019 began, [I outlined](#) the volatile events that lay on the immediate horizon for Australian foreign policy. I dealt with big meetings like APEC in Thailand and the G20 in Japan, and elections for Australia's partners in some of our most important relationships, like India and Indonesia. I noted the difficulties of implementing big policy ideas like the ["Pacific pivot"](#) and the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#).

And, of course, there is the delicate business of crafting independent foreign policy positions while acknowledging the giant panda/bald eagle in the room.

Read more: [***Australia should brace for a volatile year in foreign policy in 2019***](#)

When the then foreign minister, Julie Bishop, commissioned the [2017 Foreign Policy White](#)

[Paper](#), she [noted](#) it was designed to help Australian diplomacy be more proactive. She said:

... it's about looking at the kind of framework that needs to be in place so that we're not reacting to events, we're strategically positioned to manage, maybe even shape, events.

Invest in shaping our region's future

One key election issue should rest on who is most willing to invest in Australian diplomacy. We must increase our capacity to be nimble if we wish to shape events instead of being hostage to American and Chinese fortunes.

It is difficult with limited resources, but we must create as many diplomatic options as possible to reframe problems and create non-military solutions over the next decade. That means heavy engagement in international forums.

Moreover, Australia must become a state that helps the international community solve problems associated with climate change in our region and at home through [climate diplomacy](#). There is simply no more time to waste.

Sophisticated soft power

Australia should invest in a sophisticated soft power strategy, pending the wisdom gained by the [DFAT Soft Power Review](#). Uncertainty in international relations creates opportunities for smart pivotal powers. Now is the time to invest in innovation in public diplomacy and focus on a strategy that harnesses the strengths of our First Australians, our migrants, the business community, universities, charities, creative industries, cities and regions.

Australia needs a sophisticated soft power strategy that connects our well-travelled and outward-facing multicultural citizenry to our nation-branding. We should [lead with our values](#). This approach is certainly not doing New Zealand any harm. Photos and videos of NZ Prime Minister Jacinda Arden addressing the United Nations with her baby created a diplomatic moment in 2018.

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We also need to [be principled and decent](#) in our international interventions. We need our face to the world to be more diverse and reflect our citizenry.

DFAT should continue to focus on delivering the [Gender Strategy](#) and the [Women in Leadership Strategy](#)

as matters of key importance, as well as consolidating the success of the [Ambassador for Women and Girls](#)

. Whatever the election result, the foreign minister, Marise Payne, and shadow minister, Penny Wong, are both excellent emblems of Australian commitment to equality on the world stage.

Some ideas to enhance our soft power include:

- DFAT to be more creative in [digital diplomacy](#)
- DFAT developing a youth strategy and creating a new thematic ambassador to reflect the youth of our region
 - the foreign minister convening a meeting of Australian mayors to map diplomatic activity and coordinate a strategy. More broadly, DFAT should consider the rise of [cities as diplomatic actors](#) in our region
- DFAT to support and engage more with [international students](#) and [diaspora](#) in Australia
- Australian universities to increase their investment in international relations and diplomatic skills, which are useful for many global professionals.

Free and fair trade

The Australian Bureau of Statistics recently released data showing Australia recorded a [A\\$22.2 billion trade surplus](#)

in 2018, the highest ever for a calendar year.

Metals, ores and minerals (A\$94.9 billion) and coal, coke and briquettes (A\$66.7 billion) were our biggest exports, followed by natural gas and rural goods. Service exports are growing, but a transition away from reliance on extractive industries towards services and the digital economy may be a painful one.

Moreover, modern trade deals go deep into standards and consumer services. Most Australians

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still do not realise the [implications for domestic policy](#) raised by the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal, the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#) and other free trade agreements.

The next government should commission a Trade White Paper and think seriously about better ways to involve the community in trade negotiations.

Tell the story

We must increase efforts to explain Australian foreign policy in accessible and transparent ways to all kinds of domestic audiences. Foreign policy must be reframed as a non-elite issue. Bill Shorten noted this in a [headland speech](#) designed to connect DFAT more with everyday conversation. He said:

John Curtin and Ben Chifley knew this, they understood the connection between the lives of working Australians and the corridors of international diplomacy.

Read more: [Australia should brace for a volatile year in foreign policy in 2019](#)

At the same time, we have to rewrite the current international narrative that Australian democracy has lost its way because the constant changes of PM give the impression of political instability.

I recently saw a tote bag that said "Ban the Single Use Prime Minister". [I have written](#) previously about the idea of reversing some of the churn damage caused by our revolving prime ministers to our foreign policy reputation by using Bishop, Payne, Julia Gillard and Malcolm Turnbull as envoys on particular issues.

Signature ideas – Australian conflict resolution

We need bigger ideas that the Australian public and people around the world can connect with. The time has come to support John Langmore's idea of a [specialised mediation unit in DFAT](#).

Australia must invest more in preventive diplomacy as volatility increases – perhaps in partnership with New Zealand. Many scholars and practitioners have argued that Australia should build our negotiation and mediation capacity through DFAT. We have the talent – both here and inside the United Nations.

Vote global

DFAT clearly needs more resources to undertake the role Australians need it to accomplish in the next decade. Increased DFAT investment should be coupled to the Defence White Paper investment targets. To shape the future, we need to invest now.

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