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Press Club Address

24 June 2026

Introduction

Members of the diplomatic corps, parliamentary colleagues, distinguished guests, and friends.

Foreign Affairs has often been the domain of great scholars and long term political operators.

I confess to be neither….at least not yet

While I may carry a few degrees, I’m more a practitioner than an academic. And while I’ve been in parliament now for 10 years, I still consider myself more a businessman than a politician.

Before politics, I spent more than 20 years in the commercial world, much of it in Asia – from working in Hong Kong bakeries

in my late teens and moving to Taiwan to live at the age of 20. While my mates back home were enjoying a run of 21st birthday parties, I spent mine negotiating my first joint venture in Tainan City. By my mid-20s, I was selling Australian rice to Japan's largest trading houses. And in my 30s, I spent much of my time negotiating technology deals across the region, including with names you'd recognise from America's Microsoft to China's Huawei and ZTE.

Living abroad as an Aussie expat taught me a lot about the world, and what it means to be an Australian.

Wherever you find them, Australians are go-getters.

There is something unique in our DNA.

And it is here where I want to begin today's address – my first as the Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs.

A nation's foreign policy is an outward expression of its values and interests: a reflection of its people, their beliefs and aspirations – which begs the question: who, then, are we?

Australians live in the world's greatest nation and, I believe, the world's most successful liberal democracy.

We believe in freedom, equality and a fair-go; reward for effort; the rule of law; and, rights with commensurate responsibilities. We are patriotic. We love our country, our local communities, our families and our mates.

Many of these values we share with other liberal democracies of course, but it's how we express them that makes us different.

A quintessential Australian-way has emerged, and you see it in how Australians go about their business overseas.

Australians make things happen, not with loud arrogance but usually with quiet confidence.

I put this down to the way our history has etched distinctive traits into the Australian character - things like humility, pragmatism and positive aspiration.

We're a humble lot. Our convict roots gave us a lack of vanity and a suspicion of authority, while our rejection of aristocracy embedded a deep belief in equality and the idea of a fair go. We've never run the world nor ruled an empire, and we have no plan to do so.

We are pragmatic. We have never been ones for pomp and ceremony, and we typically speak plainly and directly. We are more practical rather than ideological, and we like people who go about their business getting stuff done.

And we are aspirational. Not weighed down by the orthodoxies of an "old world", we back ourselves and we have a go. And because we come from all corners of the world, we can get on with almost anyone, anywhere.

Whether it's leading teams, forging relationships or striking deals, put an Australian in charge and they get the job done.

I saw this time and again when I lived abroad.

And I also witnessed the same traits in Australian statecraft.

When I was living and working in Asia, Australia was a standout economic performer.

We were shaping regional institutions.

Australia was a safe-haven for investment and leading the way in expanding trade relations as Asia awakened.

We were forthright defenders of human rights, and we were a proven and trusted partner.

I'm not saying we were perfect, no country is. But, we did "punch above our weight" – an expression I never liked, but it was true at the time.

And it was clear the more influence we had abroad, the greater the dividend it would pay at home.

Recently, however, I fear Australia's influence and ambition has diminished.

Our nation seems to have lost its mojo - as if our quiet confidence has given way to nervous timidity.

Given the seismic shifts underway in global affairs, this is not the time for Australia to have a crisis of confidence.

A New Age

Today, Australia is experiencing the greatest global economic and strategic realignment since the Second World War.

We have entered a new age.

It is an age of entrenched competition – between the two largest powers, the United States and China; an age of rapid

convergence - between economic and security domains. And this is occurring in an age of great technological change.

These defining features of our strategic environment are intertwined, unfolding simultaneously, often without warning – adhering to no discernable pattern. The sheer complexity of this age is unchartered territory for Australia.

I believe strategic competition between the United States and China will be a longstanding feature of the international environment – because, just as China is bigger than Xi Jinping, so too the United States is bigger than Donald Trump.

Xi is the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao Zedong, and Trump is the most consequential American leader in decades.

But overstating the influence of either, risks underestimating deep shifts underway in both countries - shifts that started before Xi and Trump came to power, with implications that will continue well after they’re gone.

One of these shifts is the convergence of security and economics in how both powers formulate their policies and project their strategic weight.

In the People's Republic of China, security and economics – or government and business - have been steered by the one hand for a very long time: the hand of the Chinese Communist Party.

President Xi has taken this further by, for example, introducing laws that oblige Chinese companies to assist Chinese intelligence services when required.

For the most part, the United States has traditionally sought to separate security from economics - government from business - but this too has changed.

President Trump, for example, makes no secret of his preference for tariffs and his willingness to use them to achieve political ends.

Where we most clearly see an intersection between US-China competition and the convergence of security and economics, is in highly sensitive areas driven by advances in technology.

Developments in artificial intelligence, cyber and space, for example, are changing most aspects of our life from the battlefield to the marketplace to our dinner table.

And just as these technologies are of huge strategic significance, so too are their key inputs such as energy and critical minerals.

It is here – at the high-tech end of the economy – where the contest between the US and China is most acute, and it is where both are scrambling to decouple their supply chains.

Challenge and Opportunity

So where does Australia fit in this new age? What role do we assume?

As a middle power, we do not have the military or economic might to unilaterally determine the outcome of the strategic shifts underway, let alone the contest between the world's largest powers.

But that doesn't mean we lack agency.

Australia is still responsible for its own destiny, and we must be clear about where we stand on the big issues.

Firstly, no matter what the future holds for the US-China relationship, we should never view our foreign policy through a binary prism.

The notion that Australia must choose between the US or China is offensive. It implies a weakness in our national character that does not exist.

The United States is our primary ally and China, our key trading partner. That won't change.

I reject any suggestion that Australia should decouple our entire economy from China, but we do need to diversify as our trade is overly concentrated in too few sectors, and we are overly exposed to the China market.

And when it comes to sensitive areas of strategic importance – such as digital infrastructure and artificial intelligence, cyber security, defence and space - we should adopt new models of statecraft by pursuing a series of next generation strategic partnerships with the United States and other friends, otherwise we risk being left behind.

As someone who has lived and worked in China for many years, I have deep respect for their culture and people.

And here in Australia, I see our Australian-Chinese communities as an invaluable part of Team Australia.

I reject any attempt to drag Australian-Chinese into disagreements that may arise from time to time between the

government of the People's Republic of China and the government of Australia.

I also reject any attempt on the part of the People's Republic of China to expand the notion of sovereignty beyond territoriality and nationality to include claims based on ethnicity or ancestry.

Secondly, it is true that the rules-based order is fraying and the convergence between security and economics is seeing liberal rules give way to more illiberal behaviour.

I believe the world's major institutions, which were created to support an international order based on liberal values, and sick and suffering a crisis of legitimacy.

But I reject calls for Australia to abandon these institutions. If liberal democracies like ours vacate the field, the vacuum will be filled by others whose world view and values do not necessarily align with our own. This would be against our national interests.

Refurbishing these institutions so they are truly fit for purpose would require an international bargain as ambitious as Bretton Woods. Candidly, I don't see that happening.

But Australia should still fight the good fight by working with like-minded countries to help preserve that which works and change that which can be practically fixed or improved.

I also reject the lure of protectionism. We should not turn our backs on decades of economic liberalization. Protectionism makes you poorer, not richer.

With that said, we cannot naively assume that the Washington Consensus still reigns supreme. Those days are over.

Australia cannot blindly pursue globalization at the expense of our own sovereign capabilities – especially in energy, mineral processing and those sensitive areas of strategic importance I've already mentioned.

I have not seen any serious attempt by the Albanese Government to truly make sense of this new age and what it means for our future.

It is again time for Australia to define its view of the world and our place in it, including the direction our nation should take, the relationships that matter, the threats we must manage and the opportunities we must capture.

And this is where Angus Taylor's commitment to a National Security Strategy comes in - to help set Australia's direction for the future and map out a viable plan to get there – and what's more, align a whole-of-government effort to make it happen.

With a clear direction, and our national confidence restored, Australia will start seeing not just threats in this new age but also opportunities.

We will again start building the future rather than managing a decline.

And build we must – for the job for our generation is to build for the next: not to recreate the world as it once was, but to build a nation fit for the world our children and grandchildren will live in.

And we start by getting our own house in order.

Foreign Affairs starts at home

If a nation's foundations at home are fragile, its ability to uphold its values and pursue its interest are jeopardized.

If we Australians have learnt anything from the Iran War, it is how fragile our own foundations are and how ill-prepared we were for an external shock.

It has underscored the need to prioritise three imperatives - our economy, our resilience, and our national unity.

Earlier this century, we entered the Global Financial Crisis and COVID from a position of strength because our fiscal position -

low debt and balanced budgets - gave us maximum flexibility to protect Australians' living standards.

But not so when the Iran War began this year.

The federal budget was out of balance, debt was nearing $1 trillion, inflation and interest rates were rising, government spending was uncontrolled, insolvencies were at a record high, productivity was falling, taxes were increasing, real wages were down and the sole driver of growth was record high immigration.

This government has overseen the sharpest fall in living standards in the developed world. It's a fact.

And the Australian people have been living it.

A decline in our living standards, relative to our international peers, is a decline in our standing in the world.

It explains why, unlike the days when I was an expat, peers from across the region no longer look to Australia to learn what a pro-growth environment looks like.

As Labor manages our decline, the region's economies, relative to our own, are growing at speed.

This means we have less to offer Australians - and Australia has less to offer our region.

This is why the ambitious economic agenda Angus Taylor has put forward is so important: a plan to reduce tax, cut red tape and encourage investment – the very things we need if we're to attract capital to invest in building a more productive economy.

It's the only way to restore living standards. Attracting investment into Australia ultimately puts more money in worker's pockets each fortnight, helps people save to buy a home they can call their own, and to have options for how best to care for the kids or look after ageing parents.

The Iran War also exposed our lack of resilience.

The pain felt at the bowser is symptomatic of a deeper weakness in our energy security and, by extension, our industrial capacity.

Australia entered this century with some of the lowest energy prices in the developed world, underpinned by abundant coal and gas, along with refining and storage of most crude oils.

But abundant affordable energy is no longer our strength.

The closure of the Strait Hormuz exposed how far we have slid into strategic weakness due to an ideologically driven energy policy, and an obsession with an uncosted 2050 net-zero target that isn't decarbonizing our economy, but deindustrializing it.

As the world grapples with reconfiguring global energy supply chains in the wake of this crisis, Australia should be seizing an opportunity to provide a larger share of global gas and unlock our uranium reserves.

Energy is geopolitical currency, and nations that produce, process and supply it hold a decisive strategic advantage.

By that measure, Australia should be strong.

Instead, we are weak.

When it takes 17 years to build a mine in Australia – from discovery to production - and more than a decade to develop a major oil or gas project, we have a problem.

This is why the Coalition's plan for abundant affordable energy is key - by using every possible technology available, and yes that includes lifting the ban on nuclear energy.

Rebuilding our economy and strengthening our resilience is essential, but neither can endure without a third imperative - that is, national unity.

Despite Australia riding a wave of national pride at the start of this century, fast forward to 2026 and we see conflicts abroad flowing directly into Australian society.

Australians no longer feel that we are all on the same team.

And this government hasn't helped. It has left progressives who cast our history in a negative light, unchallenged, it backed a referendum that undermined equality, and it failed to tackle the scourge of antisemitism head on.

Mind you, I don't blame the Albanese Government alone.

There has also been a rise in foreign interference - cyber operations, disinformation, and the targeting of diaspora communities – aimed at dividing us.

So, how can we come together?

In a nation as diverse as ours – where 32% of our population is born outside Australia – a fair question to ask is: what has the capacity to unite us all?

Clearly, it is not from where we come – it's not our ethnicity, it's not our religion, it's not the colour of our skin, the food we eat or the way we talk.

There is only one thing that has the capacity to unite all Australians and that is a common set of values – Australian values: values of freedom, of equality and of a fair go.

These are not some feel-good sentiments. They matter.

It is why the Coalition's immigration policy is values-led.

Our policy will lower the numbers and increase the standards but, what's more, by putting values at the centre, it has the capacity to strengthen social cohesion and rebuild our national unity.

Getting these foundations right – our economy, resilience and national unity – is a must if Australia is to rediscover our strategic ambition.

And it is why I argue that Foreign Affairs starts at home.

But home, of course, is not where it ends.

I don’t plan to comprehensively cover every region of the world in this one address today.

In fact, even on our primary region of concern – the Indo-Pacific – I will have more to say at a later date.

But I do want to speak about the neighbourhood in which we live, together with our Pacific family.

Pacific Island Potential

Last week I visited Papua New Guinea and Fiji on my first trip abroad as Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, signaling the

importance the Coalition places on Australia's friendship with Pacific Island nations.

As I said to whoever would listen, no matter who is in government in Australia, we will always seek to be the Pacific's most trusted partner.

This sort of message, I might add, is the opposite of that delivered by the Albanese Government which is happy to play domestic politics in the Pacific whenever they can.

The Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Defence Minister – all of them – have parroted the line "Australia is back", as if, under the Coalition, Australia had gone missing.

Labor can criticise the Coalition all it wants here in Australia – it's part of the rough and tumble of our politics - but don't take the sledging offshore, especially into the Pacific.

Firstly, their claim that Australia went missing under the former Coalition, is completely untrue.

Let us not forget that it was under the Coalition that Australia launched the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility to provide transformational infrastructure investments into the region. We initiated the Pacific Step Up: elevating the Pacific to one of Australia's highest foreign policy priorities. We boosted ODA funding to record levels, and helped turbocharge digital connectivity. I could go on.

But, secondly, and more importantly, for an Australian Government to suggest to our Pacific neighbours that Australia had gone missing from the region – that we had checked out for while – weakens Australia's standing.

It is an own goal for our strategic future.

It jeopardises that which should be our shared goal – to assure our Pacific family, that Australia has been – is – and always will be – its most trusted partner.

Labor would serve our national interests better if they left their dishonest partisan attacks at home.

Australia is, after all, in a long-term strategic contest with the People's Republic of China in the Pacific.

But it's not a contest where we are both in pursuit of the same thing.

For Australia, we are not an external power looking in on the Pacific – we are part of the Pacific.

It's a region we share with our Pacific neighbours and we don't believe it should be dominated by any one power.

We should engage with the Pacific: with humility, respecting the sovereignty of each island nation; with pragmatism, focusing on

getting stuff done together; and with aspiration, thinking big about our shared future and going after it.

Thinking big includes the idea of establishing a formal regional security agreement between member states of the Pacific Island Forum.

Mind you, not all big ideas are new ideas.

In fact, the idea of a broader Pacific security agreement is one with historical roots with Australian Prime Ministers of the liberal tradition.

There was Deakin's push for a Pacific Agreement in 1909, and then we had Bruce's 1923 vision for a League of Nations for the Pacific. But it wasn't until 1937, under Lyons, that the idea of a framework for a Pacific Treaty really got legs.

None of these proposals came to fruition of course, and those were very different times.

For starters, the islands that now make up the Pacific Islands Forum were almost entirely under the control of a handful of foreign imperial powers when these earlier proposals were put.

Whereas today, the Pacific Islands rightly govern themselves.

Furthermore, the idea of a regional security agreement that's now being discussed isn't one that was born here in Canberra, but elsewhere in the region.

And it reflects the age of convergence, because it's not just about security alone.

It is being discussed in terms of Pacific security and economic development working hand in hand.

As the new Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Matthew Wale, said in a press conference on his recent visit to Australia, the "first reference point in these matters is within the region".

And that is how it should be.

It should be owned by the region: built on trust and leveraging existing security collaborations.

Today I'm pleased to announce that in government the Coalition would work with our other PIF member states on a regional security agreement covering the South Pacific, if this is something they wish to co-design. Indeed, in his forthcoming visits to the region, I encourage Prime Minister Albanese to also canvas the idea with Pacific peers and provide the necessary support to back-in those who wish to progress it.

In fact, I believe it's in the Albanese Government's interest to do so, as it would give greater strategic clarity and purpose to their own positive, yet piecemeal, attempts to formalise deeper bilateral agreements between various Pacific states.

A regional security agreement would help preserve the status quo of the Pacific, and provide stability for the future by giving

confidence to even the smallest Pacific state among us, that they have the backing of us all

But, to be clear, my enthusiasm for this proposition goes well beyond any contest with the People's Republic of China or any other power external to this region.

The biggest takeaway from my visit to PNG and Fiji last week was the human impact resulting from a maritime drug highway for cocaine and meth that goes from Asia and the Americas through the Pacific down to, sadly, the lucrative markets of Australia and New Zealand.

Just this week, the Australian Federal Police made their largest seizure of cocaine bound for Australia on record - a shipment that had travelled via Solomon Islands.

When I visited a hospital in Suva last week, a local doctor explained to me that one in every 10 pregnant women now

presenting to her have HIV, due to their drug-taking partners sharing needles.

You see the drugs don't just transit through the Pacific to the streets of Australian cities. Local distribution networks are also used to spread the scourge of addiction to the streets of Suva, Honiara, Port Morsby and beyond..

A regional security agreement would help the Pacific tackle challenges such as this, by lifting capabilities across law enforcement and intelligence operations, maritime surveillance and countering transnational crime.

It was Victor Hugo who said: "There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

And I believe the time has come for this new type of partnership.

And Australia should back it in – and do so in our quintessential Australian way: with quiet confidence and with humility, pragmatism and aspiration.

Thank you and I look forward to the discussion that lies ahead.
