

WATCHING BRIEF 17-6: 2017 FOREIGN POLICY WHITE PAPER

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

This Brief outlines the background and process that led to the White Paper, explains the content of the document, and gives a Quaker perspective on its direction and implications.

Background

In December 2016 the Government invited interested organisations and individuals to offer input into Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper through the public submissions process. Between December 2016 and May 2017 the Taskforce (based in the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade) convened 24 roundtable discussions and 107 regional visits across the country. They also met with more than 60 subject-matter experts and received over 9,200 written submissions. A summary report of these consultations was issued on 9 November 2017 and is available on the DFAT website at <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/publi-consultations>

The public submissions are also available at that web address. QPLC made a submission on behalf of Australian Friends. Victorian Friends also made a submission.

The White Paper

The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull MP, launched the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper on 23 November. In his introduction, the Prime Minister included the following words:

"More than ever, Australia must be sovereign, not reliant. We must take responsibility for our own security and prosperity while recognising we are stronger when sharing the burden of leadership with trusted partners and friends".

The Paper's *Overview* says that the Government is charting a clear course for Australia over the next ten years at a time of rapid change, in which Australia will need to pursue its interests in a more competitive and contested world. The following points emerge:

- The world is characterized by greater interconnectedness and

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interdependence than ever, which has brought many benefits but also generated concerns about globalisation and political alienation.

- In the Indo-Pacific the former dominance of the USA is being challenged by China. At the same time, state fragility, demographic shifts, protectionism, and security threats are reshaping the international order and challenging Australia's interests.
- The rules and institutions that help maintain peace and security and guide global cooperation are under strain, as major powers ignore international law. Australia will need domestic and international policies that maximize our influence.

The White Paper's three basic themes are opportunity, security and strength. It asserts that Australia should approach change with confidence in our strength to shape our own future. The reasons for this confidence include:

- Our economy has grown for 26 years and our standard of living is high. We have the minerals, energy, goods and services sought by others. A growing economy helps maximize our weight in the world.
- We have strong diplomatic, defence and security capabilities, and our aid programs help build a stable and prosperous world. Our dynamic commercial sector, reliable trading policies and excellent institutions magnify our international influence.
- Our liberal democratic values support our political, economic and religious freedoms and the rule of law, underpin a cohesive society, and offer a strong base for our approach to the wider world.

The White Paper identifies five objectives:

- Promote an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific region in which the rights of all states are respected.
- Deliver more opportunities for our businesses globally and stand against protectionism.
- Ensure Australians remain safe, secure and free in the face of threats such as terrorism.
- Promote and protect the international rules that support stability and prosperity and enable cooperation to tackle global challenges.
- Step up support for a more resilient Pacific and Timor-Leste.

Each of these objectives is then examined. In relation to a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific, the Paper highlights:

- The region encompasses our most important economic partners, cultural, educational and people-to-people links. We want a neighbourhood in which allegiance to rules supplements open markets and flow of trade.
- The alliance with the USA is critical, and we seek to broaden and deepen it to help achieve the levels of stability and security we seek. At the same time, we seek constructive ties with China, Japan, Indonesia, India and South Korea. We also seek to strengthen regional forums that promote cooperation.
- Australia will boost defence engagement to manage security challenges in the region, as part of our commitment to the USA's extended deterrence policies.

On maximizing global opportunities, the Paper encompasses:

- Australia will use science and technology to improve our productivity and harness new sources of economic growth within the global economy. This will involve stronger economic partnerships with Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

- The trends in digital platforms and automation will add competitive pressure for many industries, and Australia will need to be agile to innovate and compete. We will assist workers to ensure access to the opportunities offered by a growing economy. Bilateral and regional free trade agreements will be pursued, and Australia will continue its support for agencies like G20, IMF and WTO.

To keep Australians safe, secure and free, the Paper covers these points:

- Whilst Australia is one of the safest countries in the world, globalization and technological change (eg in cyberspace) pose potential threats. Community cohesion and resilience are vital to our ongoing security and freedom.
- Australia will work with international partners regionally and globally to address any threats at their sources. This includes cooperation with the Five-Eyes intelligence partners – USA, UK, Canada and New Zealand.

To strengthen international rules, the Paper draws attention to the following:

- It is difficult for Australia to influence an international system that is mainly shaped by the actions of much larger nations. However our long term interests are best served by working with others to promote an international order based on rules rather than power alone. We benefit best when there is collective action on global problems such as weapons of mass destruction, climate change, and sustainable development.
- Australia will continue to support US global leadership to ensure its engagement in sustaining a liberal rules-based international system. At the same time Australia will support reforms that give emerging powers a greater role internationally (especially within the United Nations) and reinforce the principles of good governance, transparency and accountability.

On security and prosperity, the Paper identifies this new approach:

- Australia is committed to working with Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and other Pacific island countries to support their economic growth and stability. This includes integrating Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and security institutions.

Finally, the Paper speaks of working with partners as follows:

- The Government will work with business, development agencies, and state and territory governments to advance foreign policy. This will include how we market our commercial, educational and cultural credentials in a competitive global market.
- Australia will welcome many more students from the Indo-Pacific under the New Colombo Plan, and encourage more Australians to study and work in the region and enhance their understanding.

The complete White Paper can be found at <https://fpwhitepaper.gov.au/foreign-policy-white-paper>

Quaker Perspectives

The QPLC submission emphasized these overall points:

- Foreign policy should seek to remove the causes of war and create the conditions of peace. The focus should be on nonviolent approaches, the rule of law, and democratic

governance. Australia should be independent and transparent in its policies and not be party to aggressive moves that threaten good relations in our region. Australia should maintain its membership of regional bodies such as ASEAN, the East Asia Summit, and the Pacific Islands Forum.

- Australia should increase the human resources allocated to United Nations work, especially in relation to refugees, environment, and responsibility to protect. It should build upon its experience on the United Nations Security Council in supporting moves that strengthen international cooperation, and should use its time on the Human Rights Council to advance the rights of women and girls, strengthen national human rights institutions, work to abolish the death penalty, and support the rights of indigenous peoples.
- In working for fairer trade, Australia should ensure that trade agreements do not include investor-state dispute settlement clauses that challenge established human rights and environmental principles. Its aid policies should seek to reach the UN target of 0.7% of GDP.
- Australia should reverse its opposition to the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty, encourage all states (including nuclear weapons states) to support the treaty, work for stronger arms reduction strategies, and move away from its commitment to Extended Nuclear Deterrence. Peace-related research on alternatives to war (including civilian-based defence) should be better funded.

The White Paper reflects a wider perspective than previous public statements on foreign affairs, and attempts to balance confidence in approaching challenges with caution about uncertain times ahead. This appears to be the result of the broader consultation process that has been used in drafting its contents, and the level of participation in that process. The complete document is a valuable resource manual of ideals and actions that are generally consistent with Australia being a 'good international citizen'. There clearly are many Australians involved in reaching out constructively beyond our shores, whether they be diplomats, business people, NGOs, humanitarian workers, educators, scientists, politicians, health professionals, or other concerned individuals.

Given the energy and vision that has characterized much Australian contribution to the international community over the years, it is surely worth putting more effort into shaping a foreign policy that demonstrates the 'confidence' mentioned in the Paper. Our values of freedom, respect, equality and democracy provide a solid basis for creative initiatives to build peace and justice. As it stands there is a tendency for the security and threat aspects of current world trends to dampen prospects for positive change through nonviolent means. The Paper gives the impression that foreign policy success depends greatly on an underpinning of defence policy, and this approach will undoubtedly limit what might be attempted. A specific example is that Australia's position is seen as secondary to the USA ('deputy sheriff'), thereby harnessing our foreign policy to American objectives.

The Paper does outline a range of valuable developments in trade, aid, people-to-people links, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. It affirms the value of regional and international institutions as important vehicles for dialogue and constructive change. What would enhance these opportunities would be strong advocacy on strengthening conflict resolution processes through the United Nations, offering mediation training to diplomats, building the diplomatic capacity of DFAT, and supporting moves to de-escalate tension and reduce the arms race. Australia could become known for offering human resources to create dialogue and peace-building among other nations so that

the causes of unrest, crisis and war are brought to the surface and dealt with through constructive responses. This would be in tune with the ideals that led to our close engagement in the formation of the post-World War international architecture.

There remains inconsistency in the way Australia practices what it preaches. The flagrant abuse of asylum seekers and refugees betrays an appalling affront to the principles of international refugee law and undermines formal support for UNHCR's work. The refusal to sign on to the new treaty to abolish nuclear weapons shows poor judgement about the global mood to move more quickly towards nuclear disarmament, and an unwillingness to advocate action by nuclear-weapon states for real progress. The continued willingness to expand arms production and sales stands in contrast to official pledges to reduce the arms trade. The substantial reduction in development assistance overall counteracts the positive commitment to empower women and to reduce poverty.

Conclusion

As with many things involving the Australian Government, there are features of the White Paper that are encouraging in the way they are expressed. At the same time there is quite a gap between the performance of Australia on the international scene and the policy. Assertions of independence ring a little hollow when so many of our foreign and defence policies appear to be tied to US priorities and engagement in our region.

Given the tendency for foreign and defence policy to become ever more closely linked, foreign policy is in danger of losing its edge as a means to re-shape the world into a more humane and compassionate place for all people. The points made in the QPLC submission (see above) remain valid. Friends are encouraged to reflect on the issues covered in the White Paper and give QPLC feedback to help inform our ongoing work for peace.

Canberra
December 2017