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Special Analysis

Regional Security and Foreign Relations under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese

By
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The 31st Prime Minister of Australia of the centre-left Labour Party that defeated the Liberal-National Coalition led by Scott Morrison in the election of 21st May, and sworn in two days later, kicked off his premiership promising a journey of change, as well as emphasising climate change, tackling rising living costs and inequality. Whilst there were issues that were hotly debated during the election campaign and will be part of his domestic agenda, another matter that is certainly high on the agenda of Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is regional security and foreign relations. He has stated that he wants to reset Australia's foreign relations and repair its image overseas.

Just a few hours of being sworn in on 23rd May 2022, he flew off with his team to Tokyo to attend the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), colloquially referred to as QUAD, together with the other leaders i.e. United States President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Although an informal alliance, it is a platform for strategic security dialogue between the four member countries. It constitutes a diplomatic network with a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific and a rules-based maritime order in the East and South China seas, and a response to the economic and military build-up of China in the region.

In line with this, high on the QUAD agenda in Tokyo, was the further growing economic and military influence of China and its ever increasing presence in the region. The Chinese build-up and its growing influence in its backyard was also an issue during the Australian election campaign, especially the ruffling of Australian feathers brought on by the announcement of the security pact signed by Solomon Islands with China just weeks before the elections. Great

criticism was levelled against Scott Morrison for not doing enough to check the growing influence of China in the region.

The QUAD Summit of Tokyo seems to have set the stage for Anthony Albanese's regional security and foreign policy agenda. He can pride himself that he was part of the summit where members vowed to extend more than USD 50 billion in infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific over the next five years so to check the Chinese in the region. The QUAD leaders also launched the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (PDMA) to work with regional partners in responding to combat illegal fishing, as well as to humanitarian and natural disasters.

The question that arises is how China, Australia's largest trading partner, as well as its largest importer of iron ore, views the new Australian government?. Among the many congratulatory messages that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese received was a congratulatory message from Prime Minister Li Keqiang of the People's Republic of China, which the former has acknowledged. This has been viewed by some as a thawing on the year long freeze in diplomatic relations between the two nations, as well as providing an opening to the discussion on the sanctions that China has imposed on Australian imports as a response, as well as to many other Chinese grievances, including Australia's support of an international enquiry to the coronavirus leading the COVID-19 pandemic, preventing HUAWEI, China's telecommunications giant from building a 5G Network in Australia on security grounds, as well as arguing that China has been meddling in the internal affairs of Australia's through the internet.

The congratulatory message did not prevent Anthony Albanese from openly rebuking China in Tokyo for imposing hefty sanctions on Australian exports two years ago, including coal, lobsters and wine. He once again brought up the issue of sanctions again in Brisbane on June 14, where he stated that it was China that imposed sanctions on Australia and those needed to be removed to improve relations between the two countries.

A healthy development in Australia–China relations were the talks held between both countries in almost three years, where Australia's Defense Minister Richard Marles, who is also the Deputy Prime Minister, met Wei Fenghe, Minister of National Defense of China in Singapore on 12th June 2022, at the sidelines of the ShangriLa Dialogue. The former described the hour long talk as "an important first step".

All these developments are against the backdrop of the growing influence of China in the Pacific region, which has certainly become a focus of Anthony Albanese and his government. As mentioned earlier, national security of Australia were among the key election issues before Australia's polling day of 21st May, when only weeks before, a security pact was signed between China and The Solomon Islands, with the frightening prospect of a further Chinese military build-up in the region.

While Australia has generally been considered as a 'big brother' to many small Pacific nations (and as stated by Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, as being part of a Pacific family and not Australia's backyard), the issue of climate change leading to rising sea levels, cyclones and storm surges, have also be an area of concern to these nations.

Anthony Albanese and his government will indeed be relieved that the visits by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to the eight (8) Pacific nations of Solomon Islands, Kribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vananathu, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste, and it is said, video calls, with

Micronesia and the Cook Islands, failed to reach an agreement with these ten nations to sign a security pact with them. Before the visit of Wang Yi's trip, President Xi Jinping had relayed a message that China would 'be a good brother to the region' and stated that they shared a common destiny.

China had proposed a wide range of security deals as part of the pact to the 10 Pacific nations on the narrative that these were beneficial to the peace, stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region. These included Chinese offers to train Pacific island police forces, collaboration and engagement in cyber security, undertake sensitive marine mapping, access to natural resources on both land and sea, as well as offering to setting up Confucius institutions and learning infrastructure. In return, China has offered to the Pacific nations billions of dollars of financial assistance, the prospect of a China-Pacific free trade agreement, as well as opening up and tapping into the huge Chinese market of some 1.4 billion people.

As a response to the tour and engagement of these 10 Pacific nations, Anthony Albanese's government reacted, some argue, competitively, by sending Malaysian born Foreign Minister Penny Wong to Fiji, just days of taking up her appointment. This was followed by her trip to Samoa where she announced a new eight year partnership and made a donation of a new maritime patrol boat to the country. She also made a visit to the island kingdom of Tonga.

It is debatable whether Penny Wong's diplomatic moves and visits contributed significantly to the failure of the Chinese to secure a pact with the 10 Pacific nations, or whether this was a result on their own security concerns on the military build-up of China in the region. One could argue that it did so, even in a small measure, as these Pacific nations have been reassured that Australia is a partner that they can still count on.

However, despite the failure of China to successfully ink the proposed security part, China's influence in the Pacific region remains, even in not particularly strong terms. For instance, Kiribati and Solomon Islands broke with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 2018 and which the latter also announced the security pact with the Solomon Islands just weeks before the Australian elections. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was also able to sign a number of bilateral agreements during his 10-day diplomatic trip to the Pacific islands, including Solomon Islands on the first leg of his tour and Timor Leste on his final stop. It appears that China has already taken the first step in creating a new regional security architecture in the Pacific region. Chinese long term strategic intentions to strengthen its security presence in the Pacific are likely to continue in earnest.

In dealing with China, Anthony Albanese will also have to deal with the very sensitive issue of Taiwan which China considers a renegade province. China's position has become more pronounced in recent times with its heightened military activities around Taiwan's waters, increased use of gray zone tactics and regularly sending Chinese military aircraft into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ). Chinese Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe, during his stay in Singapore in conjunction with the Shangri-La Dialogue of 2012, warned that China will not hesitate to declare war if Taiwan declares independence from China.

The question that arises is whether Australia is taking on a big risk and gamble in strongly aligning itself with the United States and its allies against China in the Pacific region. US Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken in a speech recently, stated that China poses an even more serious long-term threat to the world than Russia, suggesting further hardening of positions in the Pacific region.

In this context, how is Australia going to reconcile the fact that it has to protect its own economic interests with China, and at the same time come to terms with the fact that China is growing its presence and influence in the Pacific region? It is a reality that it must accept. For that matter, Australia must also offer itself and be viewed as China's attractive economic partner, in spite of the geopolitical developments and tensions in the region.

New Zealand has always been Australia's close friend and this is unlikely to change under Anthony Albanese. It will continue to be buttressed by the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement (TTMRA), a non-treaty agreement between the two nations and represents a cornerstone of the single economic market, as well as a powerful driver of regulatory co-ordination and integration.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden was one of the first foreign leaders to congratulate Anthony Albanese over his election victory, who stated in her congratulatory message that the two countries would continue to work together "deepening our partnerships with our close friends in the Pacific and advancing our interests on the world stage".

Deepening engagement with Southeast Asian nations can also be viewed as a priority for Anthony Albanese. As a way of underscoring the point of wanting to strengthen alliances with these countries, accompanied by Penny Wong, he visited the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia. This he did in conjunction with his official visit to Indonesia from 5-7 June. He met His Excellency Lim Jock Hoi, General Secretary of ASEAN and announced a new envoy and office for the region.

Anthony Albanese's recent 5-7 June trip to Indonesia, Australia's closest neighbour and Southeast Asia's biggest economy, was in keeping with traditions, where engagement with Indonesia, is always one of the first things undertaken by any newly elected Australian Prime Minister. More importantly, the visit can be seen as an endeavor to revive and strengthen its strategically important relationship with Indonesia that has faced some challenges over the years.

Anthony Albanese is said to have had cordial discussions and wonderful rides on bamboo bicycles with President Joko Widodo of Indonesia in the city of Bogor. Talks included strengthening trade ties between the two nations, climate change and regional security. On the economic front, talks are said to have been dealt with the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA) which was signed in 2019 and ratified by Australia in November 2019 and Indonesia in February 2020, based on the pillars of economy, people, security and maritime cooperation.

Whilst Anthony Albanese stated that the two countries are not just linked by geography but by choice, differences do remain on regional security. Indonesia favors a non-aligned position on the Pacific rivalry between Beijing and Western powers. This is an important point that has to be noted by him and his Labour government. Equally important to be noted is that Indonesia has expressed concerns about the AUKUS security pact between Australian, the United Kingdom and the United States to counter Chinese military and economic ambitions, as well as its strategic moves in the region.

Closer to home Malaysia will be the Malaysia-Australia Joint Defence Programme (MAJDP) which formally commenced in 1992. It includes annual combined field exercises, training of military personnel in Australia, as well as the attachment of military personnel to each other's

country. This is expected to continue and perhaps be even strengthened further under the new Australian Labour government.

At the same time, Australia's relationship with Malaysia must be viewed not just in a bilateral setting but also in a multilateral context of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), which comprises Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Singapore. The FPDA was established in 1971 through a series of multilateral agreements between these countries. Its importance is likely to grow for Australia, more so with the developments in the region and rising regional tensions.

The defence ministers of the 51-year old FPDA met on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue 2022 in Singapore. Australia was represented by its Defence Minister Richard Marles. The five defence ministers stated that the pact was solid, relevant, as well useful to managing tensions in the region.

In the case of Europe, Anthony Albanese has to deal with some thorny matters with France and Russia. Australia's relationship with France soured under the previous government of Scott Morrison after the creation of AUKUS, a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America in 2021, so as to further their collective security in the Indo-Pacific region. Under this pact, both the United Kingdom and the United States will assist Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines, as well as providing other areas of security co-operation, including cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, electronic warfare on so on.

One of the outcomes of the AUKUS was the cancellation, without notice, of the French-Australia industrial collaboration led by the Naval Group, a French shipbuilding company, in which the French government has a major stake. Under the contract worth A\$50 billion, the Naval Group was supposed to supply 12 conventional diesel-electric powered submarines to replace Australia's Collin-class submarines. The then French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called it a stab in the back and led to France recalling its ambassadors from Australia and the United States. As outgoing France's Foreign Minister, he undiplomatically expressed his happiness over the election defeat of Scott Morrison. The announcement on 11th June of the decision government of Anthony Albanese that it was going young to pay A\$830 million to the Naval Group for aborting the submarine deal can perhaps be viewed, as a first step in mending Australia's broken ties with France.

Anthony Albanese also announced a few days ago that he will make a detour to Paris from Madrid, where he will be attending the NATO summit. He also stated that the visit is a very concrete sign of the repair that has already been done. He further stated that "it is important that a reset occur" with France, which he described as a central power in Europe, just like Australia is in the Pacific. Further, Australia under the new Labour government will have to continue to engage France, which has its own strategic interests and territories in the Indo-Pacific region, and which is equally concerned with the military and economic build-up of China in the region. It might be noted that the cancellation of the submarine programme will also cost the Australia tax payers a whopping A\$3.4 billion that had already been spent on the programme. However, it paves the way for Australia to push with vigour, its own nuclear submarine programme.

Australian foreign relations with Russia will also pose challenges for the new government. On the issue of the Russian-Ukraine war, Anthony Albanese has stated that Russia's illegal and immoral attack of Russia on Ukraine is an outrage and that the atrocities being committed on

Ukraine is not something that is expected to happen in the twenty first century. The issue of sanctions imposed on Russia by the international community, led by the United States and the European Union, as well as Australia sanctions imposed by the previous government, will certainly been on his radar. Sanctions by Australia on Russia includes targeted financial sanctions on certain commercial activities and sanctions on export and import of certain goods and services, as well as travel bans on several Ukraine separatists, members of the Russia Parliament, military commanders and associates of Russian President Vladimir Putin. As a retaliatory measure, Russia has also imposed sanctions on hundreds of Australian citizens, including defence officials, mining bosses, academics and journalists. Anthony Albanese has also stated his intention to attend the G20 Bali summit which Indonesia will host in November of this year. This is despite reservations that had been expressed by Scott Morrison about sitting on the same table with President Vladimir Putin over Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In the final analysis, the question that arises is whether the visits, engagements and statements by Prime Ministers Anthony Albanese, his Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles, indicates a major shift and departure of Australia's security posture and foreign policy of the new Labour government under Anthony Albanese, as compared to the previous government under Scott Morrison. It is perhaps too early to say, but it does certainly indicate a change in the tone of the new government that is working hard to rebuild and strengthen partnerships, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. A new approach to managing Australia's difficult relations with China is also beginning to take shape.

What is perhaps more certain is that Australia's regional security and foreign relations will be influenced and driven by three (3) pillars as stated by Anthony Albanese via:

- Alliance with the United States
- Engagement with the Indo-Pacific region
- Support of multilateral forums

Supporting and pushing these regional security and foreign policy agendas will be Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles. At the time of the writing this commentary, Penny Wong was making an official tour of Vietnam, to be followed by one to Malaysia, where she will be meeting Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah and Defence Minister Hishamuddin Hussein. Both these trips can be viewed as part of Australia's restrengthening of strategic ties with the ASEAN nations.

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