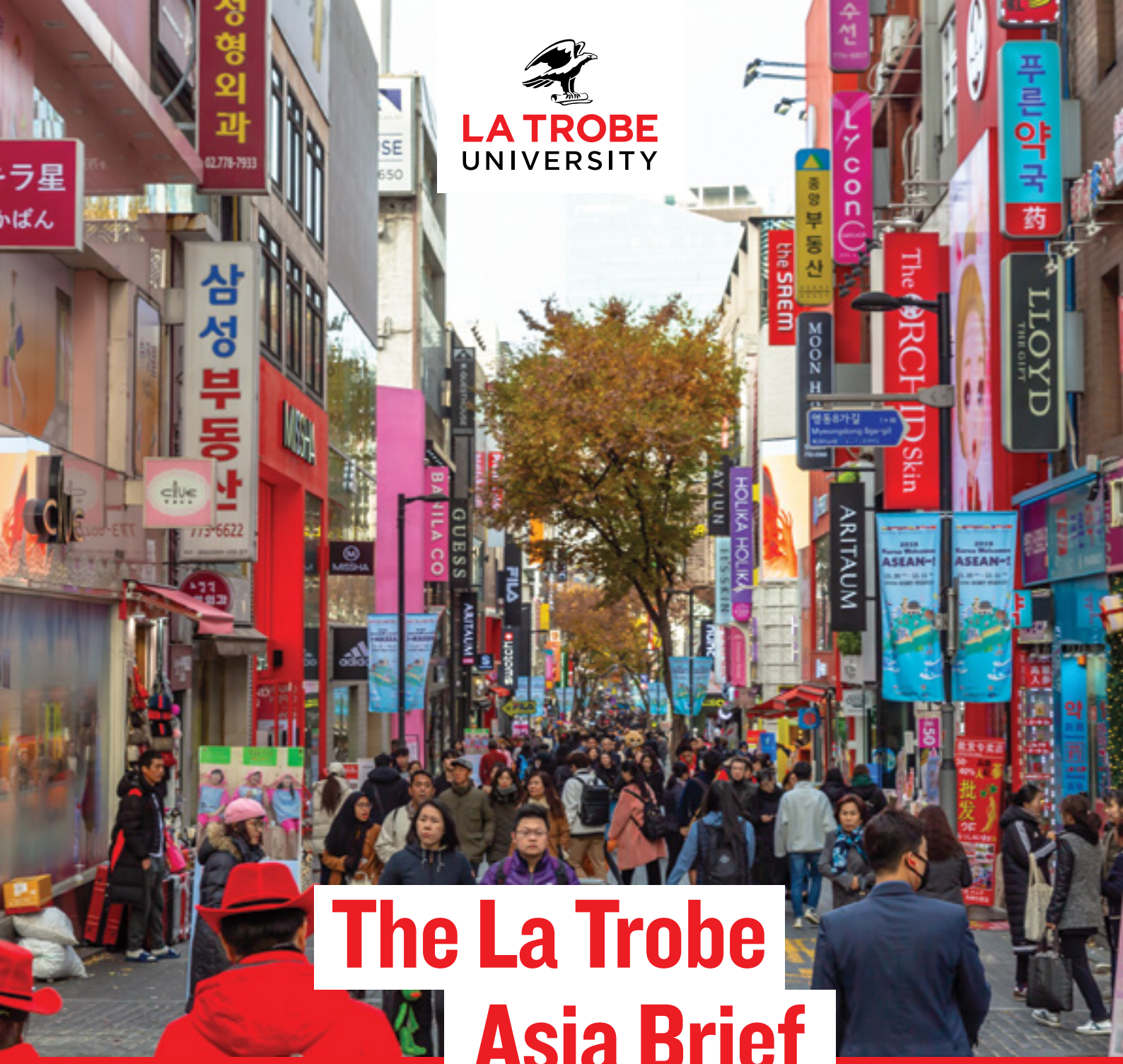


The La Trobe Asia Brief

Fresh perspectives on the Indo-Pacific

Emerging leaders discuss critical issues facing the region

"Participation of women in conflict and its resolution is crucial for achieving just and sustainable peace."

Isadora Vadasz

"Investment in diplomacy would have Australia in a better position to deal with regional power dynamics "

Tom Barber

"Many of Australia's Pacific policies fall short on collaborative engagement with the Pacific."

Kate Clayton

With contributions from Philippa Cordi, Lachlan Cropley, Jazmin Wright, Alexander Hynd and Callum Burkitt.

Issue No. 6 – 2022 | Policy Brief | La Trobe Asia

Message from the Executive Director

I'm delighted to introduce the sixth La Trobe Asia brief.

This edition features articles by Australia's emerging leaders in foreign, defence and strategic policy. It is a showcase of the issues that they consider most pressing in the Indo-Pacific and potential solutions for addressing these challenges.

As you will see, they are interested in a diverse range of areas, ranging from the high politics of great power competition, conflict and trade to 'unconventional' security challenges presented by climate change, the pandemic, and maritime crime. I would like to sincerely thank our contributors for offering their views on how policy-makers, communities and individuals can grapple with the wider problems facing the Indo-Pacific.

The publication is a product of La Trobe Asia's Emerging Leaders Program held in the second half of 2021. This program – featuring an academic dialogue and a series of masterclasses on the Indo-Pacific – was supported by the United States Embassy in Canberra, and we are grateful to the US Department of State for funding this program.

On behalf of the partners, I sincerely hope you enjoy reading these insights into contemporary challenges and opportunities across the Indo-Pacific. You can find more articles from our program participants on the La Trobe Asia website.

Dr Rebecca Strating
Director, La Trobe Asia

About the series

The La Trobe Asia Brief is a publication from La Trobe Asia, based at La Trobe University. This series provides a platform for commentary, research and analysis of policy issues that are of key importance in the Asian region. The papers in The La Trobe Asia Brief series are written for an informed audience. Authors will be invited by La Trobe Asia to contribute to this series.

Photos

Front cover: Seoul, South Korea (Photo: Subodh Agnihotri).

Inside issue: Pradeep Praja, Dmitriy Miller, Robert Bociaga, ymgerman.

Back cover: Indo-Pacific network. (Photo: Anton Balazh).

Editor

Matt Smith

The La Trobe Asia Brief #6

Supported by the United States Embassy in Canberra

In partnership with:

Supporting gender-inclusive conflict resolution in the Indo-Pacific region

In 1991, the Paris Peace Accords in Cambodia were facilitated by Dr Pung Chhiv Kek, the only woman even remotely involved in the Cambodian peace process. Though she was not invited to the negotiations, she and her husband orchestrated meetings between Prime Minister Hun Sen and Prince Sihanouk, and resulting peace talks led to end decades of civil war.

Whilst a staff member at an NGO chaired by Dr Kek, I had the honour of meeting her on several occasions. Though I was awed by her intelligence and experience then, her feats are even more remarkable in light of what I now know about the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

Women's voices have long been excluded from the arena of conflict and its resolution, but their participation is crucial for achieving just and sustainable peace. Since its inception in 2000 with UNSCR 1325, the WPS agenda has sought recognition of the diverse roles that women play as agents of change in preventing and resolving conflicts and building post-conflict peace and stability.

It's now well established that a peace agreement is likely to last longer if women participate meaningfully in its development, and that gender equality is a strong predictor of peacefulness in a society. Women's meaningful participation in peace processes can also lead to a more inclusive post-conflict society.

On top of a lack of women present during negotiations, there were very few references to gender balance and none to gender mainstreaming in the Peace Accords in Cambodia. Despite Dr. Kek's work and the active role of women's civil society organisations (CSOs) in Cambodia at the time, the incorrect stereotype persisted that women and war don't mix. Cambodian women would likely experience less of the discrimination, violence and state oppression plaguing the country today had the Paris Peace Accords harnessed the opportunity to pursue a transformative social agenda.

More recently the Indo-Pacific has seen encouraging adoption of WPS principles in conflict resolution and security issues. For instance, in the Philippines' Comprehensive Agreement for the Bangsamoro (2014) almost a third of negotiators were women. The agreement is a model for women's meaningful participation and an agenda of transforming gender relations in ethnic, religious, and culturally diverse settings.

Though each conflict presents unique complexities, lessons from Cambodia and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific should guide Australia to support gender-inclusive peace in other conflict-affected contexts, such as in Myanmar.

The unrest resulting from the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar has pervasive gendered underpinnings and implications in a country already battling stubborn traditional gender roles.

2021 saw significant public resistance to Myanmar's armed forces, with the Women's League of Burma estimate that women have made up approximately 60 percent of protesters. This is a significant symbolic rejection of the removal of Myanmar's female leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was replaced by the resolutely patriarchal Tatmadaw. The military also has a long track record of targeting women and children, including sexual and gender-based violence against ethnic minorities.

It's been reported that approximately 250,000 people have been forced to flee their homes since the coup, and a large proportion are women and children. The negative economic effects of the conflict are also gendered, seen in the contraction of the country's $6bn garment industry, which employs mostly women. In a welcome development, women and people from Myanmar's ethnic minorities form a significant part of the opposing National Unity Government, a coalition of democratic forces in Myanmar.

Considering this context, steps towards peace must account for and address the gendered nature of the issue, or risk setting the objectives of gender equality and democracy back decades.

By supporting gender equality both before and during peacebuilding processes, Australia can encourage countries in the Indo-Pacific region to not only achieve peace, but ensure it includes and empowers women in all their diversities. Women's CSOs are potent agents of change across the region, and should be supported according to their needs. As the WPS agenda shows, gender equality is a strong precursor to stability, and an important building block for countries to be able to achieve and sustain inclusive peace. By supporting women's CSOs Australia can invest in regional women's social, political and economic empowerment during ongoing conflicts, thereby reducing unequal gender norms which underpin conflicts. Support should also enable women and CSOs to gain a seat and a voice during future peace negotiations.

For many countries, there is no clear path out of conflict. What is clear, however, is that gender and ethnic diversity needs to be a key factor in the road to peace. Without this representation and inclusion, regional states risk repeating Dr Kek's lament all this time after the Cambodian conflict: 'I want to see my nation enjoy long, true peace.'

Isadora Vadasz works on criminal law policy for the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety.

Countering Cambodia's economic reliance on China

Out of all the ASEAN member states, Cambodia has proved the most willing to align its interests with the People's Republic of China (PRC). When the country held the position of ASEAN chair in 2012 (a title they will hold once again in 2022) they blocked the use of language implying that China was taking aggressive action in the South China Sea, resulting in no consensus on the region being reached.

This was the first time ASEAN failed to draft a joint communique since the grouping's inception in 1967. Furthermore in 2009 the Cambodian government made a decision to deport twenty Uyghur refugees to China, an action which was met with strong condemnation by human rights groups. Through an assessment of Cambodia, we can see why the PRC's heavy influence over Southeast Asian nations matters, how this influence is attained and how it therefore can be countered.

Cambodia's industrialisation process over the last twenty-five years, from a small agricultural economy to now one of the fastest growing economies in the world, is largely reliant on Chinese assistance. According to the Cambodian transport minister, over 70% of roads and bridges in the country have been funded by China.

Moreover, the county's amassed debt to China is estimated to be over 25% of Cambodia's GDP according to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, which puts the country at severe risk of being compromised by debt.

The PRC's dominance over South-East Asia is contingent on the value nations within this region see in utilising Chinese economic aid and development programs to fulfil their own development goals. For this reason, Australia must attempt to provide viable alternatives to what has been described as the PRC's 'debt trap diplomacy'.

We can pinpoint the beginning of Cambodia's close relationship with China to 1997. This was when Hun Sen, who remains the prime minister of Cambodia today, embraced Chinese economic assistance following the withdrawal of Western donors from the country, and a suspension of ASEAN member status.

The China-Cambodia relationship was further intensified in 2006, when eleven bilateral agreements between the two countries were formalised and over $600 million in aid pledged to Cambodia, a figure which has increased drastically since. This 1997-2006 period can therefore be described as the point at which the economic growth and development enjoyed by the country now was set off.

While the relationship between Cambodia, ASEAN and the West has evolved in the past two decades, any support provided to Cambodia by Western nations, including the most recent Mekong-Australia partnership wherein Cambodia represents one component, is dwarfed by the stability in infrastructural and economic development that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides.

According to the University of Southern California's US-China Institute, $5.3 billion USD is invested in Cambodia alone through the BRI. Notable BRI projects in the country include investment into a new international airport in Phnom Penh and the construction of Cambodia's first ever controlled access highway, which will connect the capital of Cambodia Phnom Penh to the coastal province Preah Sihanouk 190km away.

Conversely, Australia's total budget for overseas development is $4 billion, with Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's budget estimate for overseas development assistance to Cambodia each year remaining

in the tens of millions. Furthermore, the only formal bilateral agreement Australia has with Cambodia is an open market access agreement drafted in 2004.

This can be contrasted with the aforementioned eleven bilateral agreements between Cambodia and China. From this assessment Australia should be looking to the developing nations of Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region and attempt to play a pro-active part in their development as China has done. Stronger ties with Cambodia itself should also be cultivated in the form of our own bilateral agreements in order to balance the influence of powers in the country.

While Australia's overseas development assistance budget is small compared to its defence budget, the government is no stranger to using overseas development assistance as a geopolitical tool. We can see this especially in the Pacific Islands, through initiatives such as the $2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, and the provision of police to nations such as the Solomon Islands, with a proactive role being taken in the development of these nations' institutions of governance.

While Cambodia is one example, Australia should also look to countries such as Laos. While not as close to China as Cambodia it is certainly moving in the same direction. It's as much in Australia's interest to increase its aid and investment in these countries, creating a balance in their soft power influence, as it is to maintain a rules-based order in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia Pacific.

Callum Burkitt is studying a Bachelor of International Relations at La Trobe University.

Can South Korea match blue water ambitions with regional strategy?

South Korea has long faced a range of complex security challenges in its immediate maritime zone, from contested maritime borders, territorial disputes and illegal fishing, to the persistent threat posed by North Korea. Yet, over the last three decades, the Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) has also expanded its role steadily away from coastal waters to the regional level and beyond.

The ROKN has increased its participation in joint naval exercises and port visits, providing key public goods in the form of Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR), anti-piracy operations and conflict zone evacuations. This activity has been enabled by substantial government investment in new platforms such as its Aegis-equipped KDX-III destroyers, capable of acting as comfortably on the high seas as they do in peninsula waters.

For South Korea, preserving a maritime 'rules-based order' at the regional level is essential. The country is endowed with few natural resources, and effectively functions as a geostrategic island sealed off from the rest of continental Asia along the inter-Korean border.

Consequently, South Korean trade is predominantly maritime based. A large percentage of the country's commerce flows through hazardous sea lanes in the Indian Ocean Region and maritime Southeast Asia, with over 90% of its strategically important crude oil imports passing through the fiercely contested South China Sea.

Despite this, the country's foreign policy elites have displayed ambivalence towards one contemporary attempt to articulate and strengthen a vision of a regional maritime 'rules-based order' – the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This is because South Korea is wary of alienating its largest trade partner, China, and suspicious of the historic links between the FOIP concept and Japan.

At the same time, one of the core strategic gambits behind South Korea's evolving regional strategy is the desire to maximise its own autonomy at home and abroad, an aim that would be undermined if it were perceived to be following one great power while antagonising another.

In place of the FOIP, South Korean President Moon Jae-in has pursued his own distinct regional vision, the New Southern Policy. Since 2017 this flagship initiative has sought to elevate Seoul's relationships with the ten ASEAN states and India, focused around pillars known as the 3Ps: People, Prosperity and Peace. The 'peace' pillar, currently the least developed of the three, considers some non-traditional maritime security concerns but has little to say on securing the freedom of maritime routes, and is not sufficiently in sync with Seoul's contemporaneous drive to develop and deploy a blue water navy.

One case in point is the country's anti-piracy Cheonghae Unit, which has been continuously deployed on the fringes of the Indo-Pacific as part of a multilateral force protecting international shipping in the Gulf of Aden since 2009.

This deployment consists of a 4,500 ton destroyer, a rigid inflatable boat, a military helicopter, and a 300-strong staff including special forces personnel. The material commitment involved is magnified due to the distance from Korea and the need to maintain a constant deployment – as one destroyer is active another is typically sailing to or from South Korea, while a third may be undergoing repairs.

The Cheonghae Unit has provided valuable public goods and defended Seoul's interests admirably over the last decade, but it is not incorporated within the country's regional strategy.

As incidences of piracy in the Gulf of Aden decrease, South Korean policymakers have instead looked to the global level in search of a new mission to satisfy their blue water ambitions. In 2019 South Korea flirted with the idea of redeploying the unit to join a US-led coalition in the Strait of Hormuz, and in mid-2021 the entire staff had to be airlifted home from active deployment after 90% contracted COVID-19 during an anti-piracy mission off the west coast of Africa.

South Korea needs a blue water naval mission that is better aligned with its regional priorities, avoiding over-extension to the global level. The Cheonghae Unit and other existing ROKN assets can be harnessed to secure vital trade routes throughout the Indo-Pacific region as part of a more comprehensive regional strategy.

This does not mean that Seoul should, or would, countenance a role in the US' Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). Instead, the ROKN should play a larger role in boosting the naval capabilities of its Southeast Asian partner states, providing the training and equipment necessary to create greater balance between the region's naval forces.

Additionally, by focusing some of its blue water efforts on non-state challenges to good order at sea such as piracy and armed robbery, Seoul could develop a distinctive long-term role for its new blue water capabilities, while maintaining its strategic autonomy and freeing up resources for other states similarly concerned with strengthening the regional maritime order.

Alexander M. Hynd is a PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), and a research associate at UNSW's Korea Research Initiatives.

Fitting the Pacific into Indo-Pacific

In 2017 former Samoan Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi stated that "the sheer factor of our geography places the Pacific at the centre of contemporary global politics". However, a glance at the policies of regional powers will reveal that for many, the Indo-Pacific is at the centre of new power competition.

As China rises, US primacy in the Asia-Pacific is being challenged, leading the US and its allies to remap the Asia-Pacific into the new Indo-Pacific region in an attempt to centre US dominance and counter regional compeition. A maritime concept, the Indo-Pacific joins the Indian and the Pacific oceans together into a single strategic region. Key multilateral groupings in the region, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, India, Australia and the US, aim to create a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' under a 'rules-based order'. However, for many states in the region, US-China competition is not their biggest security concern - climate change is.

Alongside Indo-Pacific strategies, Pacific leaders are pushing for a reframing of their region to the Blue Pacific, centring Pacific voices and climate change as key to regional dynamics. The Blue Pacific concept aims to re-define the region from small island states to large ocean states. It pushes for a more assertive Pacific diplomacy, where climate change and other non-traditional security concerns as laid out in the 2018 Boe Declaration.

Historically, interest in the Pacific Islands has ebbed and flowed alongside geopolitical trends. With increased Chinese engagement, the region has seen an influx of attention from regional and extra-regional players. This includes Australia's 'Pacific Step Up', New Zealand's 'Pacific Reset', Indonesia's 'Pacific Elevation', US 'Pacific Pledge', UK's 'Pacific Uplift', and India's 'Act East'.

For France, Japan and other states in the region, the Pacific fits into their broader Indo-Pacific policies. These strategies have seen an increase in diplomatic footprints, more cooperation and aid to the region. However, the perspectives of Pacific Island nations and ensuring genuine two-way collaboration is often left out of policymaking.

Many of these Pacific policies fall short on collaborative engagement with the Pacific. Australia, the biggest aid donor and largest state in the region, has faced criticism from Pacific leaders for its climate change inaction.

While Australian aid contributes to climate adaptation, Australia has not joined the Green Climate Fund, which is a priority in the Kainaki II Declaration that Australia signed. Further, Pacific leaders have criticised Australia's domestic climate policies. In a 2020 open letter to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, fourteen Pacific leaders condemned Morrison's climate policies as "weak", urging Australia to fulfil its obligations under the Paris Agreement.

At the September 2021 Quad Leaders Summit, the Quad committed to "enhanced climate adaptation, resilience and preparedness". These commitments need to be supported by inclusive climate policies that empower and centre Pacific voices. For Pacific policies to succeed, Indo-Pacific states must engage with Pacific Islands on climate change and recognise the Blue Pacific.

A key theme across both the Indo-Pacific and Blue Pacific mapping is the centring of the Ocean. For Indo-Pacific strategies, a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' emphasises international norms, ensuring that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is upheld and maritime trade is protected.

However, the Blue Pacific centres climate change and Pacific voices. Cultural connections to the ocean are essential to Pacific identities and ocean resource management. The Blue Pacific emphasises the "shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean and reaffirms the connections of Pacific peoples with their natural resources, environment, cultures and livelihoods".

The Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific are not competing frameworks. They can work in tandem so long as Pacific voices are not being pushed out in favour of bigger states. Indo-Pacific states can demonstrate their commitment to Pacific concerns by centring climate change action in their Indo-Pacific strategies.

Under the Biden Administration, there is renewed hope for climate change to become central to the Indo-Pacific. Biden's foreign policy has been climate-focused since re-signing the Paris Agreement on his first day in office. At the 50th Anniversary meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting in 2021, Biden "committed to being a global leader in climate change".

In the same way ASEAN centrality asserts ASEAN as the key regional institution in the Indo-Pacific, the Blue Pacific must be given the same level of importance in regional architecture. The Pacific Island region is one-third of the world's total surface. The contribution of Pacific voices to global politics and oceanic management is vital to securing a free and open Indo-Pacific.

There is no Indo-Pacific future without the Blue Pacific, and a free and open Indo-Pacific must centre climate change and ensure Pacific voices are being elevated. Indo-Pacific leaders face the dual challenge of a rising China and combating climate change. However, whilst conflict with China is not inevitable, climate change is.

Kate Clayton is a Research Officer at La Trobe Asia and a post-graduate student of La Trobe University.

Reviving rules for trade in the Indo-Pacific

The global trading system is currently under pressure from rising protectionism, unilateral and coercive trade measures, and concerns about the relevance of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). These conditions have been exacerbated by COVID-19 driven shocks to demand and supply.

To revive the global trading system post-pandemic amid these conditions, Australia, as a 'middle power,' should consider aligning policy with three main pillars, being (1) defending and advocating for Australia's interests in the global rules-based trade system; (2) enforcing trade and investment measures through partnerships and alignment with domestic industrial policy; and (3) regulating policy through retrospective surveillance and monitoring to ensure positive trade and investment outcomes, supported by other diplomatic initiatives.

Importantly, concurrent alignment with each pillar will ensure a coordinated effort in defence of Australia's long-term interests.

Arguably, multilateral trade organisations, and the rules-based order underpinning them, are failing to respond to challenges and keep pace with the evolving nature of global trade, particularly that of digital trade.

This criticism is often directed at the WTO as a consensus-based organisation which relies on the voluntary cooperation of its member countries. For example, the WTO has been criticised for failing to implement a functioning e-commerce regime to facilitate modern business transactions.

However, as a middle power in the region, Australia should remain actively involved in WTO processes. In doing so, Australia can strengthen such processes while defending and advocating for Australia's national interests in the rules-based trading system.

In this way, Australia can nurture an inclusive and development-friendly regime underpinned by the rules-based order, especially given the number of developing nations in the region.

Active involvement in a global trading system is important primarily because an open rules-based order and inclusive multilateral system is valuable in offering much-needed predictability, uniformity and regularity.

It reconciles conflicting rules and facilitates business transactions across multiple and overlapping preferential agreements, particularly beneficial in standardising policy and procedures.

Second, the rules-based order maintains the focus on shared values, as distinct from power and influence. This focus ensures that the order is inclusive of small and medium enterprises and developing nations, irrespective of their perceived influence or type of government.

Third, the rules-based order requires 'give and take.' Participation at the multilateral level requires sufficient mutual benefit to ensure voluntary buy-in and a desire to cooperate.

Significantly, any failings on the part of multilateral organisations or perceived gaps in the rules-based order are an opportunity for Australia to advocate for change in furtherance of her national interests. Indeed, involvement and support from the WTO would only enhance the legitimacy and geographical coverage of this change.

Accordingly, Australia should focus on formulating new aspects to the rules-based order. This is especially pertinent given that many modern challenges are globalised and interdependent, and therefore better solved through collective action and a coordinated effort.

For example, the digital economy in Southeast Asia is estimated to be worth $300 billion by 2025. However, there remains a sharp disparity in the technological capability of countries in the region. Accordingly, formulating digital trade rules at the multilateral level is pertinent in standardising rules regarding, for example, trade facilitation and data sharing.

Further, Australia faces strong economic competition as well as coercive, unilateral trade measures, threatening Australia's competitiveness and influence. Australian foreign policy should, concurrent with the other pillars, implement trade and investment measures domestically through partnerships and alignment with industrial policy. Other successful exporting nations have embraced trade liberalisation while providing support to local firms.

For example, Japan, Korea and Taiwan have historically provided conditional support to local firms, contingent on their meeting specific performance targets often related to technological upgrading and export volumes. Countries such as the UK and South Korea have also used national development banks to support new firms and facilitate their access to export markets.

Indeed, Australia's recent decision to finance Telstra's takeover of Digicel Pacific via a $1.33 billion loan indicates a shift from trade liberalisation. Outwardly, the shift in strategy is driven to counter the growing presence of China. In this regard, Australian foreign policy could be more proactive in countering coercive trade initiatives generally. For example, Australia could engage routinely in partnerships with the private sector (such as domestic banks) and the public sector to direct outbound investment and development financing in furtherance of Australian foreign interests. Greater consultation between policy-setting, transaction and regulation will ensure a greater alignment of common goals and connect foreign policy with domestic industrial policy.

Finally, monitoring and maintaining policy through retrospective surveillance will be beneficial in ensuring positive trade and investment outcomes. Existing government agencies such as the Productivity Commission have the potential to undertake a granular analysis of foreign and industrial policy, including, for example, the likely impact on business innovation. In this way, Australian foreign policy can balance the protection of Australia's national interests with equal scrutiny of the policy.

Ultimately, as a middle power, Australia can play an important and influential role in reducing trade barriers and recalibrating rules in reviving the global trading system. This can be achieved through defending and advocating for national interests while aligning with domestic industrial policy, and monitoring retrospectively.

Philippa Cordi is an Analyst at the Australian Government Department of the Treasury.

Food security an issue in the Indo-Pacific

Food insecurity is one of the most significant challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region. While it does not get the same attention as other regional security issues such as the South China Sea, the current state of food (in)security is grim.

The Asia and the Pacific Overview of Food Security and Nutrition estimate that 945 million people in the region have experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2019, due to limited food availability or insufficient means to access food.

On an individual level, this means more people suffering from hunger and reduced productivity, and in the long term, can result in undernourishment and related ailments. This is projected to increase in the future, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing population in the Indo-Pacific, and the impacts of climate change.

Current food systems are not equipped to tackle the complexities that climate change creates and will struggle to provide for the region's population. This is already being felt and the region must reconsider its current food practices and pivot towards climate resilience.

Simple, yet effective, measures can be implemented to reduce climate change risks to food systems and improve productivity, such as strengthening warning systems to prepare for severe climatic events and possible supply disruptions.

To mitigate current impacts, farmers can increase agroforestry on farmlands to improve soil nutrients, while governments can mandate responsible fishing laws to prevent overexploitation of aquacultures. Ensuring resilience in food systems is a multi-dimensional challenge, as it includes sustainable adaptation of current systems, preventing future damage, and improving the environment for future. The region cannot afford to prioritise one area – all dimensions must be considered in order to support the population.

While neither the COVID-19 pandemic or an increasing regional population are solely responsible for food insecurity, both elements exacerbate the issue and highlight accessibility issues.

According to UN News, the region will be home to nearly 5 billion people by 2050, meaning more people will be at risk of food insecurity and food systems will struggle to effectively support the region. Current food systems are too fragile to handle a larger population or other disruptive events, which emphasises the need for resilience and sustainable practices in the region's food systems.

Food insecurity and its effects can be witnessed across the region, with South Asia countries reporting the highest prevalence of undernourishment and food insecurity in Asia. One of the most affected is Bangladesh, with a quarter of the population experiencing food insecurity.

Population factors, geography of watercourses and low elevation makes addressing Bangladesh's food security problematic, as food cultivation and distribution is impacted by natural disaster disruptions. This has led to various health issues, ranging from malnutrition to stunted child development, which would bring challenges for the next generation. Food insecurity has also perpetuated a gender imbalance, as adult women are expected to forfeit or reduce their consumption to provide for their children.

The implications of food insecurity reach beyond individual and community wellbeing, as it can be the catalyst for migration. On a domestic level, rural producers that experience farming challenges due to unfavourable environmental conditions may be forced to relocate to urban centres for income. In these instances, the influx in rural-to-urban migrants means infrastructure in urban centres become strained, while the remaining farmers are pressured to produce enough for the population. It can lead to international migration and put pressures on the region. Incoming migrants may become food insecure or increase the strain on food systems in the new country, perpetuating the cycle to other countries.

To prevent food insecurity-induced migration, governments should support their producers and work towards instilling resilience in food systems. Short-term assistance may see grants for farmers, while long-term could involve subsidising agroforestry or natural pest management systems. Similarly, governments could support urban agriculture initiatives, such as community gardens, to alleviate pressures on rural producers. Government support is critical to ensure that food insecurity does not escalate to famine or produce a migration crisis.

There is no perfect solution to tackle food insecurity in the region – it is an unprecedented challenge that must be proactively addressed. Every Indo-Pacific nation must recognise the detrimental impacts that food insecurity presents to the people of each nation and to the region.

If left unchecked it creates damaging impacts to human security and has detrimental impacts on individuals and communities. When considering climate change and the region's growing population, food insecurity can prove to be the region's most pressing challenge.

Jazmin Wright is a second-year Bachelor of Security Studies student at Macquarie University.

Myanmar's instability leaves ASEAN with a dilemma

In February 2020, the Myanmar military seized control of the country claiming election fraud after the party they backed experienced a landslide loss in the general election. The detention of elected State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and her party members resulted in mass protests which have been met with violence, civilian deaths and targeted imprisonments.

The continued disruption to Myanmar's democracypresents the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with a dilemma. While keen to practice non-interference with member states, the continued political violence and little progress towards peace has led ASEAN to limit its interactions with Myanmar.

As this situation has persisted, ASEAN members have suggested that there must be action to bring domestic peace to the country, regional stability and eventual reincorporation as a member state. For ASEAN, Myanmar presents a problem of legitimacy, and the coup has left its division on how to proceed with Myanmar's membership.

Without an overall strong consensus of how to handle Myanmar by all members within ASEAN, legitimacy cannot be ensured. Current chair Cambodia, an autocratic nation with closer ties to China than its partners, would likely favour altering ASEAN's approach to Myanmar. Yet this chairmanship looks unlikely to take dramatic action as it goes against ASEAN's non-interference policy concerning unwarranted involvement in other member's domestic affairs. Some members see the non-interference policy as a severe roadblock to maintaining stability in the region, whilst others consider it a protection of their domestic actions and politics from their fellow ASEAN states.

Another consideration for ASEAN is the priorities of great power interests in the region. With ASEAN's own interests located within a region involved in the ongoing powerful rivalry between the United States and China, a careful approach considering external nations must be provided when reincorporating Myanmar into ASEAN that does not incite a situation involving the rivalry of the great powers. This reintegration is important for ASEAN as it would reinforce its significance in the region as a symbol of Southeast Asian unity. However, if the situation with Myanmar were to spill into the region and involve the China/US rivalry it could lead to further tensions between ASEAN members allied to either side.

In October 2021 ASEAN made an attempt to include Myanmar in its proceedings without seeming to legitimise the coup, by inviting a non-political representative to ASEAN's summit. This invitation was a bold step as it excluded Myanmar's new leader Min Aung Hlaing in an effort to uphold ASEAN's credibility.

This was declined by Myanmar's leadership leading to further actions being explored, with Malaysia's foreign minister Saifuddin Abdullah even suggesting that ASEAN should exercise some "soul-searching" surrounding it's non-interference policy.

This is not the first time the policy has been questioned, especially regarding the domestic affairs of Myanmar. Myanmar's repeated persecution of the Rohingya has left ASEAN member states and outside nations wanting further pressure placed on ASEAN and Myanmar to uphold stability.

In contrast, a rethinking of ASEAN's non-interference policy may actually be detrimental to ASEAN's stability. For member nations such as Cambodia, whose autocratic government contrasts many of its fellow member states, non-interference in domestic affairs is a principle that ensures that it experiences no pressure to change from nations politically dissimilar.

Here Cambodia's new chairmanship of ASEAN may become a key obstacle to solving the issue of bringing Myanmar back into ASEAN affairs. Although Myanmar's new leadership is seen as highly concerning and to many ASEAN members, Cambodia's own domestic issues, albeit less concerning to other regional members, have the potential to be interfered with if the non-interference policy were adjusted. Cambodia could develop a reluctance to engage with the ASEAN as a result, instead being more focussed towards China, which also has a policy of non-interference.

For ASEAN, the need for stability may surpass its need to uphold its key principles. Although there is a dislike for interference within the regional grouping, an unstable region could invite more trouble for all members concerned. As we have seen with countless countries in the past, political, ethnic and religious instability can lead to problems for neighbouring countries. As the region is also a contention point for China and the US, this instability is sure to create scenarios for both nations to be involved in ASEAN affairs, whether it is beneficial for ASEAN or not.

Bringing Myanmar back into the fold will be a strenuous task. ASEAN does not hold a single view, and many of the decisions made concerning Myanmar will not please everyone. For ASEAN however, to keep all nations committed to the grouping, a pathway to the reintegration of Myanmar will need to be a balanced decision that keeps nations committed to the institution whilst ensuring its legitimacy and contribution to regional stability.

Lachlan Cropley is an Education Facilitator at Australia-Indonesia Youth Association.


FREE OUR LEADER

Talk is cheap, so let's invest in it

Serious and distinguished individuals have been calling for an increase to Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) budget for over a decade.

Regrettably, these calls have not been heeded. Following further job cuts in 2020, Rory Medcalf described the successive economising of DFAT not as "cutting fat, but rather cutting muscle and bone." In previous years, the consequences of the Department's chronic underfunding remained largely hidden from view, or at least were apparent only to a specialist and interested demographic. This is no longer the case.

Recent episodes, particularly the mismanaged AUKUS announcement and the decision to discontinue domestic manufacture of AstraZeneca vaccines for distribution in Australia's neighbourhood, starkly reveal the marginalisation of diplomacy's influence over Australian foreign policy.

More adequate diplomatic investment over the past decade would have had little influence on shifting regional power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific; though it would have put Australia in a much better position to deal with them. Instead, Canberra finds itself unprepared in a less comfortable, more contested strategic environment. But rather than serving as a reminder of the need for well-funded diplomacy, Canberra has yet to recognise there is a problem. Worse still, Australia has skipped ahead a step – turbocharging its defence capability while leaving diplomacy to languish.

In an anarchic world with no higher authority, military force is a state's insurance policy of last resort, and the current climate of uncertainty does warrant defence investment. In that sense, as well as from a deterrence point of view, defence is an undeniably important tool in the statecraft toolkit. But it is not the only tool, and nor is it a substitute for diplomacy. Clausewitz may consider war to be the continuation of politics by other means, but Sun Tzu reminds us that the acme of skill is to win without fighting.

Whereas defence relies on the perpetual acquisition of eye-wateringly expensive platforms, diplomacy is a relative bargain. The cost of the scrapped French submarine contract – with nothing to show for it – amounts to $2.4 billion. This waste is $400 million more than DFAT's entire departmental funding for 2021, yet has gone relatively unremarked upon. Imagine the uproar if that amount was squandered on an aid program.

It might be true that a dollar spent on diplomacy is worth more than a dollar spent on defence, but not enough to offset a sevenfold funding disparity in Defence's favour. Not every problem is a nail, and a well-funded diplomatic corps is infinitely more agile and deployable in responding to a wider range of challenges than is the hammer of defence, which has one core war-fighting function.

Defence logistics can, for example, help tackle some of the symptoms of climate change – such as the ADF's Operation Bushfire Assist – but the military is not configured to address its root causes in the same way that diplomatic efforts like the COP are.

An overreliance on defence – what Dr Anna Powles terms "khaki-isation" – and the securitisation of Australian foreign policy more broadly, risks regional security dilemmas becoming self-fulfilling. The "drums of war" rhetoric emanating from certain quarters is equally ineffective.

As former DFAT Secretary Michael Costello put it recently: "Diplomacy seems to have been forgotten in the febrile alarmism that has taken hold in Australia's security establishment and now dominates our national discourse on external relations. The relative decline in DFAT's resourcing and influence is a critical related factor."

The benefits of securitisation include a greater resource allocation to the issue being securitised, but those additional resources are themselves securitised, and do not address the underlying problem of an emaciated diplomatic corps.

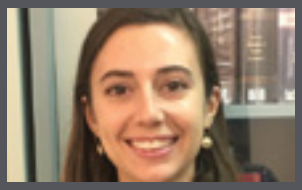
How then to proceed? If the Defence budget is locked in as a percentage of gross domestic product, then DFAT's budget should be too. Better yet, why not abolish arbitrary quotas and institutionalise a whole-of-government approach to foreign policy resource allocation based on what Australia actually needs to achieve – something akin to the UK's integrated review.

The result of a 'radical' assessment of Britain's place in the world, the UK's integrated review is essentially a distillation of its Foreign Policy and Defence White Papers. It notes the overlap and interaction between a broad range of trends, outlines Britain's national security and foreign policy objectives in response, and underscores the benefits of an integrated approach to achieve them. It is less an attempt to prescribe policies on every issue identified; more an outlining of a national narrative that "sets a foreign policy baseline and identifies priority actions."

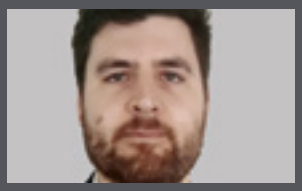
A reactive Australian outlook is inherently predisposed to view Defence as the solution to a myriad of challenges. An integrated review process – one which outlined a future vision of Australia's place in the world and identified pathways to get there – would help reorient Australia's outlook, break Defence's virtual monopoly on the strategic policymaking process, and ideationally and materially reinvigorate Australian diplomacy.

Tom Barber is a Program Officer with the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D).

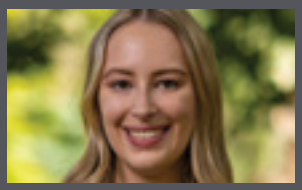
Authors



Isadora Vadasz
Isadora Vadasz holds a Master of Law and Development and works on criminal law policy for the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety. She has studied and worked on the intersection of law, gender and conflict, including time spent contributing to criminal justice projects in Myanmar and Cambodia.

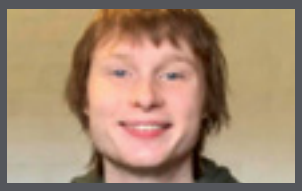


Tom Barber
Tom Barber has a keen interest in Australia's international affairs. He has previously worked as a research assistant at Deakin University and La Trobe Asia, and has been published in the Lowy Interpreter. He is currently a Program Officer with the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D).



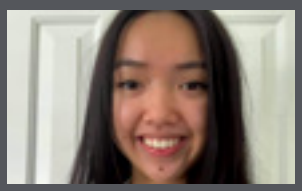
Kate Clayton
Kate Clayton is a Research Officer at La Trobe Asia and a graduate research student. Her research looks at security and climate change in the Indo-Pacific. She is COO at Young Australians in International Affairs. Kate has contributed to media including *ABC News*, *The Conversation* and the *Lowy Institute Interpreter*.

Alexander M. Hynd
Alexander M. Hynd is a PhD candidate in international relations at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and a research associate at UNSW's Korea Research Initiatives. He is also a senior research analyst at one of South Korea's top ten law firms, and book review editor at the Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies.

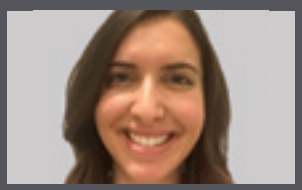


Callum Burkitt
Callum Burkitt is studying a Bachelor of International Relations at La Trobe University. In 2021 he volunteered with the La Trobe International Relations Association as Publications Officer, during which he wrote on the Tigrayan conflict and the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia. Callum has a particular interest in the geoeconomics and security of Asia.

Lachlan Cropley
Lachlan Cropley has completed a Bachelor of Arts majoring in international relations and Indonesian language at Deakin University and is writing a thesis concerning regional perspectives in Australia and the Indo-Pacific. He has studied in Indonesia and is an education facilitator at the Australia-Indonesia Youth Association.



Jazmin Wright
Jazmin Wright is studying a Bachelor of Security Studies student at Macquarie University. In 2021. She is currently a Youth Activist with Plan International Australia, with her key areas of focus being online safety, climate change, and representation. She was a World Literacy Foundation Ambassador, where she advocates for increased literacy.



Philippa Cordi
Philippa Cordi is an Analyst at the Australian Government Department of the Treasury. She holds a combined Bachelor of Laws (Honours) / Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (Japan Major) from the University of Technology Sydney. Philippa now provides timely legislative and policy advice to the Government regarding corporate and market conduct.

Contact:

La Trobe Asia
La Trobe University
Melbourne, Victoria 3086
T +61 3 9479 5414
E asia@latrobe.edu.au

@latrobeasia

latrobe.edu.au/asia

CRICOS Provider 00115M DC38721 03/22