History versus geography?
How things might change under the new Australian government.

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On Saturday, 21 May, 2022, Australians voted for a change of government, replacing the Liberal-National coalition with a new Labor government, led by Anthony Albanese. Early signs are that Australia's neighbours will notice the difference.

Like next-door New Zealand, Australia is at once European and Asian, with European history and Pacific-Asian geography. Its history as a British colony bequeathed it its legal system, language, culture and cuisine. Until not long ago, it also determined much of its engagement with the rest of the world, which tended to be with other members of the British Commonwealth, some of which also happened to be neighbours. It earned most of its foreign income from feeding Britain's textile mills and shipyards with its abundant raw materials, trading little with Asian and Pacific countries, even though geographically that is where it sits.

Australia is a long way from anywhere: its nearest neighbours, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand are four hours' flying time from Sydney. Jakarta is seven hours, while Europe and the US are even further away: 23 and 13 hours flying time respectively. Separated from Europe geographically and from Asia linguistically and culturally, it is unsurprising that Australians sometimes feel isolated and insulated from world affairs.

In the years following federation, Australia reinforced its Europeanness with the White Australia Policy, an overtly racist immigration policy that made it all but impossible for anyone other than northern Europeans to settle in Australia. Its Asian and Pacific neighbours remained "foreign" to most Australians.

The comprehensive shake-up of the world order precipitated by WWII saw Britain's traditional industrial heartlands decline in the face of stiff, mainly Asian, competition. Those competitors, notably Japan, became markets for Australia's seemingly unlimited raw materials, such as coal and iron ore. This shift got another nudge when Britain joined what was then the European Economic Community in 1973. Immigration patterns soon began to reflect this new, more Asian positioning: the White Australia policy was abandoned.

Since then, geography and history have taken turns in directing Australia's relations with the rest of the world. We may now be seeing geography assuming the lead in response to what Australians see as two of the biggest threats they face: China and climate change. Both may have important implications for other Asian, but especially, Pacific Island states.

In an indication that geography is now the driver, Mr Albanese travelled to Tokyo the day after being sworn in for a scheduled meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), with President Biden and Prime Minister Modi of India. In his first seven weeks of office, the Prime Minister spent four of his first seven weeks on the road, in bilateral talks with Jokowi, President of Indonesia, attending the NATO

summit in Madrid, then in more bilateral talks with Presidents Macron of France and Zelensky of Ukraine. We can reasonably suppose that China was never far from the agenda.

It is easy to forget that Australia's relationship with China goes back a long time. A sizeable minority of Australians are ethnic Chinese, their ancestors having come to Australia during the Gold Rushes of the 1850s.

Australia may also have been the first "western" country to seek engagement with China, when Gough Whitlam, then Leader of the Opposition, later Labor Prime Minister, on 3 July, 1971 visited Beijing for talks with Zhou Enlai. He could not have known then that Henry Kissinger was literally on his way, arriving in China six days later for his first secret visit, in preparation for President Nixon early the following year. Indeed, Kissinger's and Whitlam's reasons for making contact with the People's Republic were very similar. Australian historian, William Griffiths, writes in his 2012 book, The China Breakthrough: Whitlam in the Middle Kingdom, 1971, that Whitlam held that it defied reason to ignore the political leaders of a quarter of the world's population. Kissinger, in the volume of his memoirs titled, the White House Years, p 823: "… We were aware too that the alternative was unacceptable - continued isolation from one-quarter of the world's most talented people …".

But the nature of Chinese engagement is dramatically different now: far from initiating the engagement, Australia feels vulnerable to China's whims.

Partly this is because the Australian economy is heavily dependent on China, which absorbs 33.5% of its exports, way ahead of the 8.6% it sends to Japan, its next biggest export market. Until recently, China's consumers supported Australia's tourism industry and, by sending fee-paying students to Australian Universities. its education system. Wealthy Chinese invested in prime property as a means of securing residency rights in Australia, contributing to a record-breaking property boom. But it is immense quantities of coal and iron ore that make up most of that 33.5%.

There had long been grumbles about China's activity in what Australians regard as their fisheries, and there were already doubts about its perceived human rights abuses in Tibet and Xinjiang and its security crack-down in Hong Kong. But Australia's relationship with China changed dramatically with the Pandemic. China took umbrage at Australia's demand for an international inquiry into the origins of the Covid-19 virus. Violations of territorial rights in the South China Sea and growing concerns that Confucius Institutes established in many universities served as a sort of fifth column for Chinese spying, including on Australian citizens, also contributed to the current mood defiance in the face of what is seen as Chinese bullying.

History-defying droughts followed by graphic images of terrified kangaroos, some with joeys in their pouches, desperately seeking to escape bush-fires that devastated much of Australia's cherished forests, decimated populations of its photo-genic animals and destroyed tens of thousands of homes were accompanied by news that Scott Morrison, Prime Minister at the time, was not to cut short his

holiday in Hawaii, as most leaders would have. Mr Morrison famously boasted a lump of coal on his desk, an emblem of his support for the coal industry, in defiance of international opprobrium. Climate change joined the Chinese threat as one of the dominant issues of the day.

Early signs are that the new government has got the message.

No longer the climate recalcitrant, the government announcement in mid-June 2022 it announced its aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 43% below 2005 levels by 2030, with net zero emissions by 2050, in support of its commitments under the 2015 UNFCCC Paris Agreement and promises to enshrine these obligations in law. With plenty of sun and wind, Australia wants, and has what it takes to be seen as a "clean energy super-power". To this end the incoming government promises plenty of new investment in the electricity grid, battery storage, electric vehicles and renewables manufacturing, among other things, and has assigned some of its most talented senior ministers to oversee that transition.

Climate change, as much as anything, has brought Australia closer to its Pacific neighbours, nearly all of whom regard it as their main concern, not least because changing weather patterns and already-rising sea levels threaten their very existence. By contrast, a certain ambivalence to China is evident in some Pacific states: on the one hand, it promises much-needed infrastructure investment, but on the other is distrusted for its illegal fishing operations in their water, which costs them an estimated US$150 million a year in lost revenue. Australia can be a big help, but needs their cooperation to counter Chinese advances, including infrastructure investment, which it worries could be a first move in establishing a military presence that would complicate sea and flight lanes between Australia and the US, among other things.

Being small and remote, it has been easy to overlook the needs of Pacific Island states, so they have suffered from under-investment and lack of opportunities for their young people. As protectorates of Australia, New Zealand or the US, or former British colonies, the relationship has been unequal, even paternalistic, with Australia seeing its obligations as primarily moral. That has changed: the relationship is now driven by cold-headed self-interest on all issues.

In her first five weeks in office, Penny Wong, the highly regarded new Minister for Foreign Affairs paid official visits to Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, Vietnam and Malaysia, all but one of which was for bilateral talks. Ms Wong's task is to establish Australia, with New Zealand, as the "reliable partner of choice" for these vulnerable states, to present a realistic alternative to the often-loaded Chinese advances, most notably in the Solomon Islands.

Material assistance announced by the new government includes help to establish and maintain formal security in the region, such as through the Pacific Maritime Security Programme and a new Australia-Pacific Defence School. Related to this – and to help them to keep their heads above water - are initiatives to develop energy security and independence through the Climate Infrastructure Financing Partnership. Australia will also invest in their economies, for example, by helping develop Islanders' international export markets, updating laws governing things

like e-commerce and, importantly, schemes for enhanced labour mobility, affording Pacific Islanders rights to live and work in Australia. Australia's soft power has long been projected in the region, not least by thousands of Australian tourists each year; but the islanders are now set to benefit from more Australian television and radio. They will also see regular bi-partisan parliamentary visits, aimed at maintaining the momentum of these initiatives.

None of which is to say that Australia is turning away from Europe. Mr Albanese did, after all, hasten to Kyiv and Paris in his first weeks, partly to patch up relations after the submarine *contre-temps*, but also no doubt to try to nudge forward the Australia-European Union Free Trade Agreement. AUKUS, the defence partnership with the UK and the US, meanwhile, is alive and well – submarines ad all. The big change in its external relations is that, rather than engaging in Asia-Pacific as partner to the US or a European power, Australia now is acting of its own volition, much as it did in 1971. History fades with time. Geography is eternal.

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