AFFPC AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

Challenges for Feminist-Informed Foreign Policy: Militarisation and Australia's engagements via AUKUS and NATO

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AFFPC ISSUE PAPER SERIES. ISSUE NUMBER 15. DECEMBER 2023

Introduction

In recent years, Australia has assessed the global and regional security environment as increasingly unstable.[i] The rising economic and military power of China and broader challenges to the 'rules based international order' seemingly signal a period of instability, prompting a reconsideration of Australia's defence capacity and role in the region. Meanwhile, new forms of cooperation with like-minded states have emerged, most notably the AUKUS agreement, announced in 2021 by then Prime Minister Scott Morison with bipartisan support, which binds Australia more closely with the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) militarily. Australia has also strengthened its relations with NATO, aspiring to play a central role in the Indo-Pacific region as a NATO partner, alongside Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand.

In this AFFPC Issues Paper, we explore the contradictions and tensions that emerge in the framing of national security threats and whether there are opportunities for more inclusive peace and security as promoted by the principles of feminist-informed foreign policy. For example, amidst this focus on militarisation, when the Australian Labor Party (led by Prime Minister Albanese) assumed power in 2022, Foreign Minister Penny Wong articulated a new foreign policy direction, which seemed to leverage broader attention towards feminist-informed acts and commitments. Wong promised that Australia would focus more attention on listening to its regional Pacific partners and committed to enacting a First Nations foreign policy.[ii]

This redirection is a recognition that questions of justice, human dignity, wellbeing, and representation matter in global politics. For instance, a First Nations foreign policy should be grounded in giving voice to 'unseen' communities, 'deep listening' and intergenerational justice.[iii] Regionally, Wong's redirection emphasised respectful and nurturing relationships that reflected a desire to be "[p]artners, not patriarchs."[iv] In brief, Foreign Minister Wong proposed a vision of "a different Australian government and a different Australia."[v]

However, the Albanese government has maintained a commitment to the AUKUS partnership, at an estimated cost of $368 billion between 2023-2053. Under AUKUS, Australia will deepen its cooperation with partners in developing new technologies, and improving interoperability in electronic warfare, command and control.[vi] The nuclear submarine programme will cost $58 billion over ten years[vii] and planned spending on naval bases to accommodate nuclear power submarines is expected to cost around $8 billion in the next decade.[viii] Notably, AUKUS is a Western-aligned shift towards militarism, increasing militarisation and securitisation, that focuses on upgrading Australia's defence forces but also impacts regional partners. Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, raised concerns that AUKUS may provoke an arms race and nuclear proliferation.[ix]

Meanwhile, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept for the first time mentions the Indo-Pacific region as important for Euro-Atlantic security. Australia's inclusion as a NATO partner was evident in Prime Minister Albanese's invitation to the 2022 Madrid Summit. Aside from the growing diplomatic and political dialogue, Australia is set to contribute to NATO's security through cooperation on emerging and disruptive technologies, energy security, and enhanced interoperability.[x]

In the domestic space, the Albanese government has committed to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart, a call from First Nations peoples for Voice, Treaty and Truth. However, the failure of the October

2023 referendum to enshrine the Voice to Parliament in Australia's constitution raises a policy coherence question between Australia's domestic and international commitments on First Nations justice.

This heightened focus on regional defence and security has significance for the possibility of Australia adopting a feminist platform for its foreign policy, given that increased militarisation runs contrary to such feminist aspirations. Below we focus specifically on the implications of the militarisation and militarism that accompany AUKUS and Australia's deeper engagement with NATO in the Indo-Pacific. We argue that these engagements hamper the possibility of adopting a transformative foreign policy that is feminist, ambitious, accountable and authentic.[xi] In concluding this brief analysis, we set out the conditions we see as necessary to integrate feminist perspectives in its foreign policy practices drawing on the experiences of other feminist foreign policy states.

AUKUS and increasing militarism in Australian foreign policy

In September 2021, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison made a sudden announcement that Australia was to enter a trilateral security partnership with the USA and UK in the Indo-Pacific region. Driven by concerns over China's increased power and presence in the region, the initiative promotes "a free and open Indo-Pacific that is secure and stable."[xii] The decision was controversial, as it effectively ended a deal with France to supply Australia with conventionally powered submarines.[xiii] Now, the US and UK would supply nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarines that would be delivered after 2030. AUKUS has been contentious because it introduces the possibility of nuclear technology and proliferation further down the track.[xiv] It commits a large amount of spending to upgrade military capabilities in cyber technology, naval and air forces.

AUKUS is a response to a growing fear of insecurity in the region. China has forged economic and security relations with regional partners and its position on Taiwan has drawn the US more firmly into the Pacific. Australia's relations with China under the Morrison government had been particularly fraught, with trade and security tensions exacerbated.[xv] Prior to the AUKUS announcement, in early 2021, alarm over China had been increasing, with key figures deploying more bellicose language to describe the threat; hawkish members of the Morrison administration spoke of the 'drums of war'[xvi] and the need to prepare for a confrontation with China. This fear is also reflected in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, which was prefaced with statements from Morrison and the then Defence Minister Linda Reynolds that a seismic shift was occurring, the most significant since the post-war period, in reference to China's influence.[xvii]

Much of the media and public debate have supported the AUKUS initiative. Notably, in March 2023, a series of 'Red Alert' articles were published in *The Age* newspaper by a panel of 'independent' experts, all of which took the threat of China seriously and advocated for increased military capacity, using urgent language such as 'our missile cupboard is bare' and that 'the clock is ticking.'[xviii] During this period, calls for increased militarisation and military preparedness became a regular feature of public debate.

Militarisation is not simply an escalation in armaments, military power and spending. Australia's perceived need to 'prepare' for a confrontation in the region can also be understood in terms of Stern and Stavrianakis's definition as 'the preparation for and normalization and legitimation of war'.[xix] Militarism signals a preference for the use of force, but it also prioritises specific hierarchical social relations. As Cynthia Enloe has shown, militarism is not confined to military structures and practices, but prevails in other aspects of society including within popular culture and capitalist-informed consumer society.[xx] It is enabled by ideas of protection and masculinity that privilege military solutions to complex security problems over other peaceful approaches.[xxi]

The rationality guiding AUKUS is informed by the idea that safeguarding peace requires militarisation and masculinist protection. In April 2022, Peter Dutton, then Defence Minister, stated: "The only way you can preserve peace is to prepare for war and be strong as a country, not to cower, not to be on bended knee and be weak."[xxii] Feminist critiques of militarism and militarisation argue that military solutions rarely, if ever, produce durable, inclusive and gender-just peace and security. AUKUS illustrates militarism not simply through its claim to protect Australian security, but arguably through investment in (male-dominated) industries like arms manufacturing at the expense of peace diplomacy and public services such as education, health, and Indigenous wellbeing and rights. Analyses by UN Women demonstrate the gendered impact of militarization, arguing that it creates poorer economic outcomes for women in terms of employment and the reduction of social investment and resources.[xxiii] Australia's prioritization of AUKUS, then, is very likely to negatively impact long-term investment in diplomacy and human security.

Closer relations with NATO

In tandem with the development of AUKUS, Australia has strengthened its partnership with NATO. The Partnership was first established in 2005, and now focuses on cyber defence, hybrid threats, resilience and upholding the 'rules based international order'.[xxiv] Australia was also the largest non-NATO contributor to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan from 2006-2014, and contributed to NATO Resolute Support in Afghanistan from 2015-21.[xxv] Prime Minister Albanese has attended the two most recent NATO Summits and Australia has supported the NATO-led Western response to Ukraine by providing training and armoured vehicles.[xxvi] NATO

increasingly sees the Indo-Pacific region as having a direct bearing on Euro-Atlantic security, as noted in the 2022 Strategic Concept, thus incentivising a deeper partnership with Australia.[xxvii] So while Australia's support for NATO is not new, there is an increased diplomatic closeness shaped around the defence of the so-called 'rules based international order' and shared norms.

Australia has in part also built its cooperation with NATO on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which has focused on the instrumental value of a gender perspective to increase operational effectiveness, and as a public diplomacy tool. WPS has often been viewed as a 'non-contentious' agenda through which NATO can build partnerships with states with considerably different security concerns.[xxviii] This was exemplified in Australia's contribution of Gender Advisors to ISAF.[xxix] More recently, Australia has sought to strengthen its alignment with NATO on WPS and defence, formalising a partnership with the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations (NCGM) based in Sweden, which is the location for NATO gender training.[xxx] WPS has also been a component of military exercises with regional partners. Exercise Talisman Sabre (ETS), in which Australia participates with the US, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand, aims to improve combat readiness and interoperability. This activity seems to nod to questions of gender and respect for Indigenous traditions; the WPS component of the ETS is inclusive of eight military gender advisors,[xxxi] training on WPS,[xxxii] and Indigenous engagement is limited to consultation with traditional owners (the Indigenous people on whose lands the exercise takes place).

However, such engagements are limited to specific forms of militarised security, with the Indo-Pacific region being set for 'gradual militarisation'[xxxiii] expressed in increased defence budgets, amongst other things. Moreover, while emphasising respectful relations with regional partners, Penny Wong also recognises that the US 'is our closest ally and principal strategic partner.'[xxxiv]

While both AUKUS and Australia's role as a NATO partner in the Indo-Pacific signal some attention to gender issues and aspects of the WPS agenda, they are largely subsumed by the prioritisation of a militarised and highly masculinised understanding of security. As such they do little to challenge the increasing militarism that currently underpins Australia's foreign policy outlook. Furthermore, the country's support for the WPS agenda should not be equated with Australia's readiness to engage in feminist transformations of the global security structure and politics. Rather a substantively feminist approach to foreign policy would need to be brave and address a wide range of intersecting and oppressive power structures, including militarism, but also the inequalities that have emerged from colonialism and empire.

Implications: Challenges and opportunities for a feminist-informed approach to Australian foreign policy

Our account of Australia's increasingly militarised security initiatives demonstrates the challenges to feminist-informed approaches to foreign policy. There is a *coherence gap* between Australia's security commitments and its stated ambition to realise a foreign policy that seeks to be attentive to gender equality, First Nations perspectives and dialogue with regional partners. While Australia has not stated that it will formally pursue a Feminist Foreign Policy, Wong's leadership indicates that there is scope to develop a feminist-informed foreign policy that aligns with feminist scholarship and civil society-driven understandings of Feminist Foreign Policy.[xxxv] We offer some considerations for the Australian government and civil society groups committed to advancing feminist foreign policy, specifically in terms of strengthening the foundations that would allow a feminist-informed foreign policy to be realised, and the practical challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Normalising a feminist approach to security

Wong's goals of listening to partners and her commitment to a First Nations foreign policy are undeniably feminist in principle and cohere with feminist peace and care ethics. As Stephenson and Blackwell suggest, there is 'significant overlap between these two [First Nations and feminist] policy imperatives'[xxxvi] that lend themselves to a feminist foreign policy orientation that acknowledges and challenges patriarchy and colonial power relations. Challenges to such a progressive foreign policy, however, remain unresolved, not least because recent security developments appear to reinforce militarism and, by extension, an idea of security leadership that is not conducive to listening to the concerns of regional partners, particularly concerns related to the potential of nuclear proliferation and increased tensions in the region.

Security for regional partners means not only economic and territorial security, but environmental security, the absence of which leads to greater inequality. A more holistic approach to understanding security for the region goes beyond militarised solutions. Instead, the most realistic way of fulfilling Wong's foreign policy vision is to make a feminist approach *normal* and the smart thing to do. Thus, the longevity and institutionalisation of new feminist-inspired policy approaches rely on a degree of normalisation, amongst policymakers and within the wider social fabric of society. This is only possible when foreign policy is rooted in dialogue and bottom-up advocacy. This involves opting for an ethical approach to foreign policy that is intersectional, and attentive in particular to colonial power relations that undergird national and global politics.[xxxvii]

An opportunity to lead?

Australia is often seen as a country that 'punches above its weight' in global politics, at times self-defining as a good international citizen within global institutions. Yet, its new engagements via AUKUS and deepened cooperation with NATO are indicative of Australia following a general turn that emphasises geopolitical competition through alliances that preference militarism as a basis of foreign policy. Sweden is a case in point here, exemplified by the Conservative-led government's abandonment of the country's Feminist Foreign Policy in 2022, framed as part of its response to the war in Ukraine and preparedness to join NATO.[xxxviii] By adopting a feminist-inspired platform for its foreign policy, Australia could join a growing number of states moving towards a less hierarchical and more just system of global politics. In fact, Australia could be an influential middle power by leaning into such a policy position and stepping in where Sweden has now departed. Taking up such a leadership role could enable Australia to acquire more normative clout in global politics and it might also strengthen its dialogical and listening-focused approach to foreign policy.

What would a feminist-informed foreign policy look like?

A reflexive and genuine attempt at a feminist-informed foreign policy would mean addressing the country's racialised and colonial past (and present), measured against its military ambitions in the region. Such an approach, as we have noted above, should be rooted in the social fabric of society rather than simply being a top-down driven initiative alone. There are lessons to be learned from Sweden, France, and Canada in this regard. While Sweden was a world leader in FFP, it emerged from a largely top-down approach, led by Former Foreign Ministers Margot Wallstrom, and more recently, Ann Linde. Insufficient engagement with civil society preceding its adoption in 2014 undermined its institutionalisation and valuing by society, which arguably contributed to the ease with which it was discarded by the right-wing coalition. Importantly, a convincing feminist-informed foreign policy, which is typically outward looking, is impossible without similar domestic reflection and buy-in from citizens. Australian can learn from the missteps of other Feminist Foreign Policy states; Sweden and Canada have failed to address the historical and ongoing racialised injustices suffered by First Nations and indigenous people, while France's ethnic minority populations, and especially Muslim women, are continuously marginalised. Inattention to domestic colonial and racialised hierarchies risks limiting the impact of feminist informed foreign policies within the country and at the international stage.[xxxix] As the Albanese government considers ways forward for domestic First Nations policy in the wake of the failed Voice referendum, while simultaneously developing its First Nations foreign policy strategy, it should heed this lesson and strive for greater coherence across domestic and international policy. A more centred feminist focus in foreign policy provides one pathway towards this.

THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across a range of sectors including foreign policy, defence, security, women's rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is an approach which places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, in recognition that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues, and provide practical ways forward.

Endnotes

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