

The Multipolar winter is coming, but Australia needs to stick by Afghanistan

8 March 2017 – Aidan Parkes

The similarities between Kabul and Canberra are few. On one side of the world, dust settles from a devastating suicide attack on a police station which kills 16. Meanwhile in Canberra, the only dust that settles is that which falls off the vintage Bordeaux at the National Press Club

On the first of March 2017, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop announced that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is drastically redefining its budget and scope. The shift is called '*The New Aid Paradigm*', and it will focus 90% of Australia's aid on the Asia-Pacific region.

Over the course Australia's complex foreign policy history, we've looked to alliances for prosperity and security, at other times we've looked to engagement through multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. Historically we've balanced the two quite well, but the balancing act is becoming more onerous. None more so than on the Afghan people.



Afghan children line up for food distributed by UNICEF

Australia's institutional resolve is dwindling. Countries across the Asian continent including Afghanistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh have all seen bilateral cuts of 35% and above. Australia has nearly halved its aid commitment to Afghanistan in five

years. Largely because the countries have fallen into geographic irrelevance, a symptom of the multipolar shift and regional refocus.

But the '*new aid paradigm*' is two-pronged as Bishop all but alludes. Not only will it refocus geographically to the Asia-Pacific region, it will also reformulate Australia's position on three specific issues: *The South China Sea*, *Global Terror* and *Anti-Trade* sentiment. Three strikingly familiar presidential campaign wiles.



All Australian ambassadors and high commissioners are being recalled to discuss the most disquieting event in recent months, and it's not Beyoncé's omission from Album of the Year. It's about the Trump Presidency and how Australia should respond to it.

A strategy to accommodate unprecedented economic growth in Asia is prudent. However, adjustments regarding Global Terror, the South China Sea and Anti-Trade Sentiment are nothing more than appeasements to suit Trump and his populist allure. And thus, AusAID becomes WasAID. Australia finds itself acquiescing to both Trump's allure and the Asian Century. Whilst leaving the Afghan people no less free of poverty, and its women no more empowered than whence we arrived.



All throughout his campaign, Trump was highly critical of the United States' aid program and the need to review these policies bilaterally. Perhaps not so coincidentally, Australia's peak aid agency, AusAID has merged with DFAT.

Bishop says that in the past our aid has "been spread far too thinly across the globe for reasons often not related to poverty alleviation. What Bishop crucially omits from her assessment is Australia's hand in the extensive loss of civilian life and streamlining of poverty in Afghanistan; putting the nation in strong contention for most poverty afflicted country in the world, 15 years running.

From Menzies & Spender, to Evans & Keating, the debate over foreign engagement and regional integration has been ever present. But the Afghanistan invasion and rebuilding process was an institutional, multilateral operation with bipartisan support from the beginning.

Australian finger prints are specifically scattered over the state of Uruzgan. Australian Battalions and Regiments were stationed there between 2006 and 2015 to assist with the reconstruction efforts. But now the Governor of Uruzgan is pleading for Australian forces to return, and send 150 helicopters in response to recent advances by Taliban forces.

The lack of coherency in Australian foreign policy is perplexing. Julie Bishop cited the need for aid to promote prosperity, reduce poverty and empower women. Yet under this criterion there is no more a deserving candidate than Afghanistan.

The Department of Immigration and Border Protection has declared certain areas of Afghanistan now safe for asylum seekers to return home. Paradoxically, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has labelled the entire nation as unsafe to travel. Categorising it as 'do no travel', the same recommendation made for Iraq and Syria.

failed states undermine the legitimacy of multilateral institutions like the United Nations, and the world order more broadly. Historically, Australia has utilised its Middle Power status to promote multilateral peace and prosperity, specifically under Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke. Foreign Minister Bill Hayden was instrumental in

conceiving nuclear disarmament talks between the United States and the USSR. Whilst Foreign Minister Gareth Evans played a fundamental role in the Cambodian Peace Plan.

There is a fracture in the world order. With Trump's commitment to the rules-based international order dubious at best, and China's rise inevitable, one unequivocal truth remains. Afghanistan is a failed state, with Australian finger-prints all over it.

Australia can either acquiesce to Trump's populist allure and abandon altruistic norms, or make Afghanistan an example of how Australia can be a middle power norm entrepreneur, and champion the Millennium Development Goals Julie Bishop alluded to in her speech.

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