



***AUSTRALIA'S ELECTION: QUAD
CONTINUITY AND CLIMATE
ALIGNMENT, WITH NUCLEAR
DISAGREEMENTS***

BY GRAEME DOBELL

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Sworn-in as Australia's new prime minister, within hours Anthony Albanese was flying to Japan for the summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad").

An accident of timing—the May 24 summit following Australia's May 21 election—offered the leader of the Australian Labor Party plenty of flying-start symbolism.

Departing Canberra for Tokyo, Albanese said the "[message to the world](#)" was that Australia had a new government that would lift policy on climate change, while emphasizing foreign policy continuity and the value of "friendships and long-time alliances."

The Quad

Labor's attitude to the Quad today (version 2.0) differs markedly from its rejection of the first version of the Quad.

Back in 2008, the Rudd Labor government walked away from [Quad 1.0](#) because ties with Japan or India could endanger its relationship with China, as Kevin Rudd [argued](#): "Australia would run the risk of being left high and dry as a result of future foreign policy departures in Tokyo or Delhi."

Labor has gone from negative to positive about the Quad, reflecting the shift from positive to negative in Australia's view of China. When Quad 2.0 was created in 2017, Labor matched the Liberal-National Coalition government's enthusiasm for the reborn grouping.

Albanese, a minister in the government that sank Quad 1.0, told the Tokyo summit that his government's [priorities aligned](#) with the Quad agenda: "I acknowledge all that the Quad has achieved. Standing together for a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific region. And working together to tackle the biggest challenges of our time, including climate change and the security of our region. My government is committed to working with your countries and we are committed to the Quad."

AUKUS

Labor's policy [states](#) that it will aim at "maximi[zing] the potential of the important, bipartisan AUKUS agreement." The language is a nod to the greatest defence achievement of the outgoing prime minister, Scott Morrison—the deal with the US and UK to build an Australian nuclear-powered submarine.

A Canberra jest is that while China was stunned by AUKUS, the most amazed people were in the US Navy. The US Navy line had always been that Australia should not bother asking for a nuclear sub, because the answer would be an emphatic refusal. As China sparked the rebirth of the Quad, so Beijing helped Washington change its mind about sharing submarine technology.

The Biden administration insisted it would go ahead with AUKUS only if Labor gave it solid backing. But Morrison [waited four-and-a-half months](#) before informing Labor. During the campaign, Albanese condemned Morrison for seeking political advantage by telling Labor about AUKUS [the day before it was announced](#).

"It is extraordinary that the prime minister broke that faith and trust with our most important ally by not briefing Australian Labor on these issues," Albanese said.

Morrison replied that he'd maintained full secrecy and did not want to give Labor the chance to [leak details](#) of the negotiations.

Now, Labor's job is to make AUKUS work.

Changed China

Changes in China, and in Australian views toward China, have done their part to ensure bipartisan continuity on the Quad and AUKUS. A shared Labor-Liberal line throughout the campaign, with a three-word expression, was to blame Beijing for the problems in the bilateral relationship: "China has changed."

The [diplomatic icy age](#) is five years old. China has been doing the [trade squeeze](#) on Australia for two years. China's ministers will not take phone calls from Australian ministers, nor respond to ministerial letters.

As he headed for Tokyo, Albanese commented: "The relationship with China will remain a difficult one. ... It is China that has changed, not Australia. And Australia should always stand up for our values. And we will in a government that I lead."

Beijing could use the new government in Canberra as the opportunity for a reset, linking it to the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations in December. First, though, China must reverse the billions of dollars of [thinly disguised political trade bans](#) imposed on Australian exports, or as Labor's Foreign Minister Penny Wong puts it: "Desist from its coercive economic positions."

The first step from Beijing was a [message of congratulations](#) to Albanese from Premier Li Keqiang saying, "The Chinese side is ready to work with the Australian side to review the past, look into the future and uphold the principle of mutual respect and mutual benefit, so as to promote the sound and steady growth of their comprehensive strategic partnership."

Australia chooses the United States

A Canberra refrain of earlier decades was that Australia didn't have to choose between China and the US.

No longer. Australia *has* chosen because of what China has become.

In the election [foreign policy debate](#) at the National Press Club, Wong said the no-choice duality was the way John Howard's government (1996-2007) could balance the principal strategic relationship with the US and the principal economic relationship with China. That no-choice balance was gone, Wong stated: "Clearly, the way in which economic power is being utilized for strategic purposes means that duality, as a model of engagement, is no longer the case. I would make this point, though—we have actually already chosen. We have an alliance that's over 70 years old, between us and the US, an alliance with deep bipartisan support. So we have already chosen."

Wong used Madeleine Albright's phrase, saying the US remained the "indispensable partner" in the reshaping of the region, while Australia must do much more with partners in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

The "we've chosen" message from Wong is an echo and an answer to a set of question that nagged at Washington in the first decade of this century: How far would Australia lean towards China?

The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific coordinator, Kurt Campbell, says Australia's response to China's coercion had [resolved US doubts](#) about Canberra: "Frankly, if you'd asked me 10 years ago what country was most likely to start thinking about 'we have to have a different kind of relationship with China and maybe think differently about the United States,' it might have been Australia. I think that is completely gone now."

Banning nuclear weapons

Labor has promised to sign and ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. For Albanese, this is both policy commitment and personal belief. At Labor's national conference in 2018, Albanese [moved the motion](#) to make the treaty party policy.

He recounted how one of his mentors on Labor's left wing, Tom Uren, had been a prisoner of war on an island close to Nagasaki, and "saw there the second

atomic bomb with his own eyes. He came back, having fought for Australia, a fighter for peace and disarmament.”

Albanese said the nuclear ban should be core business for Labor, and is following Labor tradition, campaigning against nuclear weapons while holding tight to the extended deterrence offered by the US alliance, as outlined by the Keating Labor government’s 1994 Defence White Paper:

“The Government does not accept nuclear deterrence as a permanent condition. It is an interim measure until a total ban on nuclear weapons, accompanied by substantial verification provisions, can be achieved. In this interim period, although it is hard to envisage the circumstances in which Australia could be threatened by nuclear weapons, we cannot rule out that possibility. We will continue to rely on the extended deterrence of the US nuclear capability to deter any nuclear threat or attack on Australia. Consequently, we will continue to support the maintenance by the United States of a nuclear capability adequate to ensure that it can deter nuclear threats against allies like Australia.”

In his talks with US President Joe Biden, Albanese can promise that a Labor government will be much closer to the US position on climate change than the [previous Liberal-National coalition](#) government.

Instead, the new difference between the two allies will be over nuclear weapons.

Bridging this difference looks an impossible quest. Managing it will involve Australia talking more openly about the extended deterrence bargain. Such a debate will build on what has been a long discussion of Australia’s calculations and commitments in hosting the key US signals intelligence base at Pine Gap.

In adopting the UN treaty, the Albanese government will draw on the alliance approaches used in earlier eras to deal with the United States’ neither-conform-nor-deny nuclear policy; the creation of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone treaty; and the lessons Canberra took when New Zealand crashed out of

ANZUS alliance 36 years ago because of its anti-nuclear policy.

The 70-year history of the alliance gives plenty of guidance on using broad agreement to balance individual policy differences.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.