Strategic Priority 4: Predictable, principled action promoting multilateralism and human rights

Recommendation 4.1: The White Paper recognises the benefit of Australia's leadership in championing the multilateral system, including supporting reforms for improvement to the various instruments of the United Nations.

Recommendation 4.2. The White Paper makes the case for Australia's continued focus on defending universal human rights and protesting violations as a means of curbing instability and increasing human security/

Recommendation 4.3 The White Paper articulates the value in having a predictable and principled approach to human rights, inclusive and sustainable growth and human security, upheld through relevant domestic policies as well as in foreign policy.

Why should Australia's foreign policy champion multilateralism and human rights?

1. As noted in the Strategic Priority 1 section of this submission, the emergent multipolarity of geopolitics sets the stage for the next decade of Australia's foreign policy engagements to require that delicate balances between competing interests be struck. States will pursue their interests and test the old balances of power to determine how, and in what ways, the system will permit them to exercise their power.

2. The multilateral system and key normative frameworks, such as universal human rights, have been established and upheld as a direct response to the lessons learned in the early 20th century about rising powers and the unchecked pursuit of State interests. These tools are necessary to constrain the legitimate choices available to powerful actors. However, to continue to hold sway over actors, there must remain a widespread consensus about their applicability; they must function in practice; and there must be consequences for their breach.

3. To maintain and strengthen the consensus that exists will require predictable and principled adherence to these norms by those actors seeking to champion them. It is in Australia's interests that this consensus remains and the system and normative frameworks are meaningful for as many actors as possible amongst the family of nations. They underpin peace and prosperity and Australia's own security and economic interests are best served in a peaceful, stable and prosperous global order. Australia must be prepared to align its domestic policy with the same principles to be a credible and strong leader on these issues.

4. In addition to the role that multilateral and human rights defence and promotion play in achieving optimal conditions for Australia to pursue its foreign policy, these tools are also effective in disrupting the rising protectionist, isolationist and nationalist sentiments that are in part motivated by the deeply entrenched poverty, economic and social inequality experienced by so many individuals.

5. The growth of populism and nationalism is evident through resurgent parochial political parties in Australia and momentum for far-right parties and populist political actors across Europe, the USA, and in the Philippines.

6. These politicians, their parties and their supporters have grievances, many legitimate; however, their narratives are ones of blame and anger which threaten to undermine domestic social, economic and foreign policy, approaches that have been very good for Australians over many decades.

7. Complex social, economic and political problems are blamed simply on globalisation, the United Nations, trade relations, refugees, migrants, Islam, and mainstream political parties. Government programs to redistribute economic benefits in society are attacked with derision, and international development assistance is given short shrift, with funding deeply cut on the false premise of its zero-sum benefits.

8. Those advancing and accepting isolationist and populist approaches are inclined to turn inwards, shut the gate, and take unilateral action in response to complex, deeply integrated, problems. There is a similar script amongst the demagogues: one of fear, chaos and hopeless leaders, and it is designed to tap into an anxiety felt by people that they have been, or will be, left behind.

9. These populist and far-right actors position themselves as the only ones capable of fixing problems and use popular acquiescence to their narrative as justification for rolling back fundamental freedoms and universal human rights. This, in turn, sets the stage for political and social unrest, as people won't stand for such concentrations of power and curtailed individual freedoms for long, particularly in countries with a long-standing practice of democracy.

10. Civil society, and the legitimate space for civil society to operate in all countries, is a key way of protecting against this decline of stability around the world. People's right to organise, to hold their governments accountable, and to participate in social, cultural and political processes of their country is a critical component of free and open societies. Civil society also holds to account the private sector and works with, and alongside, private enterprise to incentivise action for the common or public good.

11. Civil society plays numerous roles from acting as watchdogs in States where impunity and corruption are endemic, to service providers in places where public services are under-funded or are contracted out to be delivered on behalf of the government. Civil society also acts in solidarity with the vulnerable, serving as a bulwark against a complete disregard for universal rights. Amongst its achievements, civil society also plays a critical role in articulating standards which can define and shape the course of action of States and non-State entities.[1]

12. Each of these has a valuable contribution to make in extending the number of State actors that feel, and are responsive to, pressure from their citizens, that act as a constraint on their exercise of power, both domestically and internationally. As a right of individuals to gather, think, discuss and participate in like-minded groupings, civil society spaces are also an important human rights outcome.

13. By acting on all the strategic priorities outlined in this submission, and doing so with a primary emphasis on Australian values, predictable, principled action and promotion of multilateral approaches and universal human rights, a clear signal is sent to those most worried: 'you will not be left behind'. Using the multilateral system and the framework of universal human rights to identify and prioritise collaboration with likeminded actors builds the constituency for those ideas, and in turn, builds their legitimacy.

14. A highly subscribed-to multilateral system that is seen to have high degrees of legitimacy will also contribute to better adherence to agreements and decisions taken through, or in support of, multilateral approaches and human rights. Better adherence to commitments – and consequences for breaches – will contribute to better outcomes which in turn will influence individual belief that the current system can meet their needs and interests.

Foreign Policy Imperative 3: Support, and protect space for, civil society

As a liberal democratic nation with a long and established tradition of civil society's contribution, Australia is well placed to champion the role of civil society, and to engage diplomatically to protect the space that civil society requires to operate in with legitimacy. This will make a vital contribution to keeping open societies and representative governments flourishing around the world in the decade to come.

In recent years, increasing pressure has been placed on institutions, processes and systems which have been the mainstay of open societies for a century or more. In fact, in some of the most stable democracies around the world, troubling assaults on the bedrocks of the democratic tradition have been increasing for some time. Several of these pressures are being driven by changes to social organisation prompted by distribution and accessibility of mobile technology, social media, labour mobility and movements of people, and the judicial and political interpretation of these phenomena communicated to the public.

Amongst these worrying trends, none is more so than the shrinking space for civil society around the world. Civil society is an intersecting feature of both human rights and democratic principles. Civil society is the space for individuals within their communities to participate in, shape the direction of, and hold accountable elected representatives of, their societies.

Narrowing the legitimate space for civil society consequently limits people's rights to participate in the processes of social, cultural, economic and political life within their countries. Doing so also signals an unwillingness by governments to be responsive to their constituents.

As a proud and stable democracy, Australia is well placed to champion the important role of civil society and seek to protect and extend the spaces for civil societies to engage in their own countries and in global policy and governance. It is in Australia's interests that there be a growing number of free, equal, inclusive and open societies in the decades ahead.

Recommendation 4.4: The White Paper should clearly identify the role of civil society in protecting and advancing human rights and fundamental freedoms and position Australia as a champion of civil society space around the world by:

4.4.1 Supporting reforms to global governance that make it more representative and inclusive, including specific space for civil society engagement;

4.4.2 Protesting violations of human rights and attacks on civil society;

4.4.3 Working closely with all sectors to achieve adherence to business and human rights standards in all industries;

4.4.4 Engaging partners around the world in developing and upholding enabling environments, legal, regulatory, policy and normative, for civil society.

What does success look like?

15. If Australia's foreign affairs were to prioritise predictable, principled action and promotion of multilateralism and human rights, the characteristics, policies or commitments would be:

   a. **Predictable:** Global engagements where Australia leads by example in support of multilateral and human rights causes, as well as through action aligned with our values, and problem solving that prioritises positive-sum solutions;

   b. **Principled:** Australia's reputation as a principled actor and neutral broker would be supported by a consistent approach to domestic and foreign policy solutions, including domestic human rights adherence, and international commitments would be pursued domestically as relevant.

   c. **Values-based:** The achievement of short- and long-term geopolitical, trade and development aims would be sought based on a triple bottom line approach and our values would act as the ultimate bottom-line, stopping us from following partners down paths that cannot serve our full set of interests.

   d. **Multilateral**: Australia's global engagements would be consistent with cultivating a normative rather than a coercive influence. Building on the high levels of normative influence over the past half-century, Australia can continue to enjoy this status by refraining from adopting unilateralist approaches and vigorously seeking and applying collaborative solutions to common problems.

   e. **Defending human rights:** Australia should be an unequivocal champion of human rights and social, cultural, economic and political enfranchisement for all.

   f. **Protecting civil society space:** Australia can support accountable governments and human rights by championing and protecting civil society space. Civil society sits at the nexus of human rights and democratic principles and its ability to operate without undue regulation or interference is a strong predicator of governments' responsiveness to its citizens.

   g. **Investing in the UN**: Australia should seek to reform the United Nations and its instruments to be more representative, including the Security Council.

   h. **Working with new partners on new issues:** Australia should be seen to be leading in consolidating and widening adherence to existing and new normative frameworks for action on human rights, climate change, migration and refugees, nuclear non-proliferation, and international humanitarian law. Australia can lead nations by better ensuring that non-State actors, particularly multinationals, act as good global citizens, pay their full share of domestic tax where they operate, and are held accountable across jurisdictions for violations of rights in any single jurisdiction.

   i. **Development assistance**: Assigning equal value to our development assistance efforts, consistent with the importance placed on diplomacy and trade, as discussed throughout this Submission.

j. **Improving public communication**: As discussed in Section 5, a values-based Australian foreign policy and aid and development program could be more effectively communicated to the Australian public to engender support.

[1] World Economic Forum. *The Future Role of Civil Society.* January 2013, p. 9.
http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FutureRoleCivilSociety_Report_2013.pdf, accessed 20/2/17.