

Strategic Priority 5: Better communication of Australian foreign policy

Recommendation 5.1: The White Paper process should be used to develop a values-based narrative for Australian foreign policy as a key communications tool.

Recommendation 5.2: An over-arching, plain-English purpose statement for Australia’s foreign policy should be developed that has bipartisan support and agreement.

Limitations of the key elements of the current narrative

1. Australian foreign policy currently lacks an effective articulation of the values that underpin our foreign policy. Because of this, it also lacks a coherent narrative about what Australia intends to achieve in the world.
2. The White Paper is an opportunity to think laterally, strategically, and innovatively about how we conceive of, and communicate what we seek to do in, foreign affairs.
3. Currently, explanations of Australian foreign policy rely heavily on a set of descriptors or concepts that are outdated and fail to effectively convey to the Australian public and neighbouring nations what Australia stands for and how we will engage in the world.
4. Below, ACFID has outlined what we see as key the key concepts and narrative elements of the current foreign policy descriptions and raised some of the critical challenges posed by those terms.

Concept	Critical challenges
Middle power	<p>In a multipolar world, where Australia’s influence is declining relative to the rise of countries such as the BRICs, this concept may have outlived its usefulness as it fails to capture and convey the changing dynamics of the global system.</p> <p>The terminology also seems to limit the scope of ambition towards shaping and leading on the world stage. Middle power conveys a sense of being squeezed by larger powers rather than a proactive approach to shaping the system in line with Australia’s own values.</p>
Punching above our weight	<p>In direct contrast to the phrase ‘middle power’, this term seems to indicate that Australia achieves more than expected. However, in the absence of visible leadership in pursuit of values that resonate with most Australians, the dominant questions remains: Achieving what? And why?</p> <p>It also uses an expression linked to violence and discord, projecting a sense that fighting is the only way to achieve our goals.</p>
Committed to a rules-based normative order	<p>To the general public, this phrase is jargon. Its use by political and policy professionals is obfuscating rather than enlightening and when it is understood, it appears to be honoured more in the breach than in the observance.</p> <p>For those groups of Australians who share a focus on global engagement and global governance, the phrase invites either scepticism or outright critique as Australian practice in our treatment and approach to refugees and asylum seekers appears to directly contradict this statement.</p>
Committed to free trade and globalisation	<p>At the electoral level there has been significant backlash to free trade and globalisation. This can be seen with the</p>

	<p>resurgence of anti-free trade, anti-globalisation political parties who diagnose that free trade and globalisation have failed to deliver for the populace.</p> <p>For those who have benefited least from globalisation, populism, nationalism, and isolationism have been on the rise as the apparent antidote.</p>
Special relationship with the US	Under President Trump, such a claimed special relationship may be of less reassurance to the public and more of a concern, given potential future vagaries in US policy.
National interest	The term itself is amorphous and ill-defined. Without explaining what Australia stands for, the invocation of something being <i>in the national interest</i> is too broad and can be viewed as just a term of convenience rather than of any meaningful definition. It has been overused and has lost any sense of meaning.

5. The terms above are used in political circles by policy and political professionals, and are not invalid for those who believe they understand what is meant when they use them. However, the key to good communication is to have consistent messages that are understood by many.
6. While there is no narrative that will appeal to everyone, Australia has mainstream values that can resonate with a wide cross-section of the population.

A values-based narrative for Australian foreign policy

7. The values below are illustrative, demonstrating what can be done when attention is paid to the issue of communicating Australia's foreign policy in deliberately simple but resonating language.

Value	Explanation	Communication benefit
Cooperative	Australia is one amongst many in the family of nations, and a preferred way of working is to cooperate with others to achieve outcomes.	The public has an intrinsic understanding of what cooperation means, and what uncooperative behaviour looks like, with a preference for the former. Invoking the value of cooperation communicates that Australia will work with all equally.
Good neighbours	Australia's geographic location positions us for interaction with people from all different cultures and backgrounds. As in a neighbourhood, we want our region to be peaceful and prosperous, for us to be able to go about our business, and contribute to making it a better place.	The neighbourhood is an easily-understood idea that helps invoke identity and belonging. Drawing on the value of being a good neighbour helps to situate Australians in a positive place in the world, and describes how we will treat others and how we expect to be treated.
Play by the rules	We all understand that rules make society a better, more organised and fairer place to live and work. So too with the international order. Australia contributes to creating the rules and processes by which nations coexist, and we also follow the rules.	This simple statement of value helps avoid obscure descriptors such as 'rules-based order', 'normative standards' and the confusion and varying application between domestic and international law. This value plays into the strong sense of propriety that Australians have about following clearly articulated rules, and projects it onto the world and our role in upholding rules.

Democratic	Australians understand that we are a liberal democracy with social and political freedoms, and a parliamentary democracy, and that other countries don't all share these attributes. Most Australians would agree that this a very positive aspect of living in Australia.	Using the democratic value, we can proudly present the benefit of living in a democratic society to the world, and proclaim that our liberal democratic values will inform our foreign policy, even though we are not always dealing with liberal democratic countries. As a key value on which our foreign policy is premised, it also provides a rationale for why we will stand up for a democratic way of life and speak out where we see freedoms being abused or authoritarianism repressing people.
A fair go	A trait of Australians is that we help others less fortunate and work to ensure that they have opportunities to prosper. We don't kick someone when they are down or take advantage of them. We don't pick on a particular group of people.	This is one of the most enduring national values. Using it to communicate our foreign policy goals speaks to our commitment to help others less fortunate and to give a hand when we see people struggling. This value also helps to place our development assistance efforts, which are aimed at helping others, as an integral part of our value system. It conveys simply that we are non-discriminatory in regard to all peoples and groups regardless of gender, ethnicity, and beliefs.
Open economy and society	As with a business, an economy can be open or closed. An open economy is one that embraces business and migration, and will find constructive ways to bolster these. Open societies are ones where people's freedoms are emphasised and rights protected. Australia wants to work with other open economies and open societies to create a more open world.	As a value statement, it avoids the politically loaded terms 'free trade' and 'globalisation'. It is also clearly expressing how we want to trade and engage with the world, and what we would like to see from other countries, i.e. more open economies and societies.

8. The values above are intentionally simple to capture and communicate concepts that are commonly understood by the public, and project them onto foreign policy as an explanatory tool. The advantage of using such values is that the broadest cross-section of Australians implicitly understands their meaning.

9. More sophisticated descriptors applied to trade, multilateral cooperation, and security can be used behind these high-level values.

A plain-English narrative for foreign policy

10. While different governments will have foreign policy priorities that give emphasis to their policy objectives, it is important to develop an overarching narrative that can have longevity across election cycles.

11. Without such an overarching statement, foreign policy is too often communicated piecemeal and in terms of stand-alone issues or processes, rather than holistically.

12. We believe that a high-level narrative must explain to the public, clearly and simply, what our foreign policy intends to achieve for Australia and the world.

13. Such a narrative might be:

Our foreign policy aims to increase Australia's human security, sustainable and inclusive prosperity, and the positive influence of Australia in the world. We believe that in working towards these goals for Australia, we will actively contribute to increased human security, prosperity of other nations, and through cooperation, make a better world.

Recommendation 5.3: DFAT should prioritise communicating with the Australian public about why, how, and to what end we engage internationally by:

5.3.1 Creating and resourcing a senior role for a Strategic Communications advisor for Australia's Foreign Policy;

5.3.2 Embedding communication's specialists across the Department to increase the ability of all areas to communicate with the Australian public;

5.3.3 Investing in high quality data and monitoring to learn lessons on how communications are being received by the Australian public.

