

Indigenous diplomacy: A framework for rethinking Australia's engagement with Asia

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of an Indigenous-led approach to Australia's foreign policy and diplomacy, specifically in the context of the country's engagement with Asia. Acknowledging the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism, the article advocates for a paradigm shift that incorporates Indigenous perspectives at every level of policymaking. Drawing from Indigenous precepts, the concept of 'First Nations Diplomacy' is introduced, emphasising relational governance, reciprocity, and cultural preservation. The article delves into historical Indigenous inter-polity relations, highlighting nuanced, non-hierarchical approaches, contrasting with Western paradigms. It argues that embracing Indigenous concepts could reshape Australia's security outlook, emphasising human security and sustainability. The article further suggests leveraging shared colonial histories and cultural linkages for more respectful and equal international relations, promoting mutual benefit and respect. An Indigenous-led approach can redefine Australia's engagement with Asia, showcasing the nation's maturity, openness, and willingness to address historical complexities. By prioritising respect, reciprocity, and mutual benefit, Australia can forge deeper, more meaningful relationships in the region, fostering a future built on understanding, equity, and shared prosperity.

Introduction

As a descendant of white Australian settler-colonisers, I begin this article with an acknowledgement. I am not an Indigenous person. I do not experience—or pretend to be able to experience—the continuing impacts of European invasion on Indigenous peoples across this land. In recognising this, I look to interact with the knowledge of Indigenous researchers, seeking to listen respectfully and engage reflexively. Through acknowledging positionality, the oppressive structures of Western academia, and the continuing impacts of colonialism, this article aims to contribute respectfully and constructively to the ongoing discourse on Australia's foreign policy orientation.

For decades, Australian foreign policy makers have grappled with defining Australia's position in the rapidly changing 'Asian Century'. Asia is firmly Australia's key trading partner.¹ The region is also increasingly viewed in Canberra as 'central to Australia's national interests' with growing diaspora, education, and tourism links.² With the nation's prosperity and identity so tightly intertwined with Asian economies, it is hardly surprising that the region should feature high on the diplomatic priority list. However, Australia—faced with dramatic upheaval in the 'regional balance of power'—has looked to old northern allies rather than the opportunity to reorientate itself in the vibrant political structures of its closest neighbours. The need for stronger regional engagement in a period of unparalleled upheaval can be understood in the realist traditions of Australia's foreign policy approach.³ However, this is an approach developed and perpetuated under the colonialist settler-state. It is a system that fundamentally

1 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Monthly Trade Data March 2023' (Canberra: Trade & Investment Economics Branch, March 2023), 4, <http://web.archive.org/web/20231008080732/www.dfat.gov.au/trade/trade-and-investment-data-information-and-publications/trade-statistics/monthly-trade-data>.

2 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Australia and Southeast Asia', 1 June 2023, www.dfat.gov.au/geo/southeast-asia.

3 Derek McDougall, 'Foreign Policy Studies in Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 55, no. 3 (2009): 375–93, doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2009.1523a.x.

neglects the distinct perspectives, laws, cultural connections, and priorities of Australia's original foreign policy actors: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is an opportunity missed.

Although recent policy measures have ostensibly incorporated Indigenous viewpoints,⁴ Australia is yet to fully recognise the advantages that First Nations approaches can bring to its foreign policy approach, particularly in Asia. This article contends that an Indigenous-led approach to engagement with Asia would likely draw on shared histories, intercultural linkages, and Indigenous approaches to inter-polity relations to promote sustainable ecological practices, challenge traditional security paradigms, and foster reciprocal regional relationships. Importantly, Indigenous peoples are not a homogenous group. It is vital when discussing an Indigenous approach to foreign policy that we acknowledge the variety of viewpoints and lived experiences, as ultimately, it is this respect for heterogeneity that strengthens basic precepts of relationality. Firstly, the idea of a distinctive Indigenous Australian diplomacy will be surveyed in reference to historical and continuing practices. Secondly, the likely approach of an Indigenous-led engagement with Asia will be explored. Finally, ongoing efforts to promote Indigenous approaches will be discussed, highlighting the need for structural policy change.

A First Nations diplomacy

Perhaps contrary to popular imaginations of Indigenous interactions prior to European invasion, Australia's First People have been practicing complex, nuanced, and regionally impactful inter-polity relations for over 65,000 years. The over 250 distinct Indigenous 'language or tribal or nation groups' present on the Australian continent⁵ have been actively engaged in inter-group and inter-polity systems of trade, dispute resolution, and diplomacy for millennia.⁶ For instance, the Ngarra law of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land, which predates colonial invasion by thousands of years, emphasises the importance of inter-group trade systems as a form of relational diplomacy.⁷ Furthermore, Wheeler describes the 'very widespread intertribal bartering' routes that crisscrossed the continent and the accompanying inter-group diplomacy efforts.⁸ Importantly, these trade and diplomatic relationships were not restricted to the continent, but also extended north into Asia. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, Indonesian sea traders known as Makassans visited north-east Arnhem Land from Sulawesi, engaging in trade with local Indigenous groups including the Yolngu people.⁹ The Makassans, primarily occupied with the gathering of *trepang* (sea cucumber), established temporary camps and traded goods such as tobacco, rice, and knives with Indigenous groups. Moreover, there is evidence of cultural interactions between Indigenous Australians and the Makassans, with 'feasts, ceremonies and liaisons, and a mixed language [evolving] in some places'.¹⁰ Largely free from conflict, these inter-polity trade and diplomatic relationships were mutually rewarding and facilitated by relational, rather than hierarchical, social structures and interactions.¹¹ Therefore, Australia's relations with Asia far predate dominant contemporary conceptualisations. Indigenous groups from North Australia hold a long history of engagement, shared knowledge and culture, and hold a distinctive approach towards interaction with Asia.

4 Giovanni Torre, 'Australian Government Appoints the First Official Ambassador for First Nations People', *National Indigenous Times*, 7 March 2023, nit.com.au/07-03-2023/5200/australian-government-appoints-the-first-official-ambassador-for-first-nations-people.

5 David Horton, 'Aboriginal Australia', cartographic material (Acton, ACT: AIATSIS, distributed by the Australian Surveying and Land Information Group, Dept. of Industry, Science and Resources, 1999).

6 Morgan Brigg, Mary Graham, and Martin Weber, 'Relational Indigenous Systems: Aboriginal Australian Political Ordering and Reconfiguring IR', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 5 (December 2022): 901, doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000425.

7 George Pascoe Gaymarani, 'An Introduction to the Ngarra Law of Arnhem Land', *Northern Territory Law Journal* 1, no. 6 (2011): 296.

8 Gerald C Wheeler, *The Tribe, and Intertribal Relations in Australia* (London: J. Murray, 1910), 94, 101–102, catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007704542.

9 'Northern Contacts', in *Where the Ancestors Walked: Australia as an Aboriginal Landscape*, by Philip A Clarke (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), sec. 'The Macassans'.

10 Denise Russell, 'Aboriginal–Makassan Interactions in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Northern Australia and Contemporary Sea Rights Claims', *Australian Aboriginal Studies* (Canberra), no. 1 (n.d.): 5.

11 Morgan Brigg, 'Old Cultures and New Possibilities: Marege'–Makassar Diplomacy in Southeast Asia', *The Pacific Review* 24, no. 5 (1 December 2011): 615, doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2011.634075.

Unlike contemporary Western conceptualisations of inter-polity relations, Indigenous systems of trade, conflict resolution, and diplomacy prioritise relationism. This distinctively Indigenous approach to governance, society, and the environment recognises the importance of collective decision-making, sharing of knowledge and resources, and maintaining reciprocal relationships based on trust and mutual respect.¹² Relational perspectives challenge the Western notion of individualism and the prioritisation of individual rights and freedoms over collective responsibilities. For instance, while the international climate change agenda may today be viewed as a 'collective action problem', an Indigenous relational approach may emphasise interconnectedness, reciprocity, and responsibility to overcome the lack of accountability that dominates current debates.¹³ As Blackwell and Ballangarry contend, relationism provides a 'unique but interactable approach for foreign policy discussion[s]'.¹⁴ Indigenous political thought and diplomacy presents a real opportunity to enrich existing Western approaches, prioritising ideas of kinship, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility in Australia's interactions with Asia. This article interacts with such a relational approach to inter-polity relationships as a distinct 'First Nations diplomacy'.

Indigenous leadership in Asia

Under a First Nations diplomacy approach to relations in Asia, Australia's traditional security paradigms would likely be reorientated to prioritise broader concepts of security that align better with Indigenous perspectives. As noted by Brigg et al., the inter-polity relations of Indigenous Australians are not characterised by the same Western international relations precepts of 'security dilemmas, wars of conquest, or the play of power or utility maximisation'.¹⁵ Rather, Indigenous world views are more closely aligned with broader notions of human security, including cultural preservation, environmental protection, migration, and social justice.¹⁶ This approach aligns with the increasingly dominant treatment of security as a multidimensional concept within Asia,¹⁷ extending far beyond traditional conceptualisations of hard military power. However, influenced by colonial ties and Western bloc alliances, Australia's engagement with Asia continues to largely revolve around traditional 'hard' security paradigms and Western-allied priorities.¹⁸ This is not to say that Asian states do not share in the same security concerns and strategic anxieties of Australia, particularly in East Asia, but rather to highlight the need for a more nuanced and proactive response to the human security concerns of the region. Consequently, a First Nations diplomacy approach to relations in Asia may be better placed to build relationships based upon a shared understanding of security.

Through embracing Indigenous concepts of kinship, caring for Country, and knowledge-sharing, Australia could assert itself as a regional advocate and leader on sustainability and climate action. There is a rapidly growing body of literature that articulates the importance of First Nations perspectives and approaches to diplomacy in mitigating the impacts of climate change and ecosystem decline. For instance, Kapetas and Curtis highlight the role of 'transnational, collaborative, [and the] non-state-bound nature of Indigenous diplomatic networks' in promoting the sustainable ecological practices of Indigenous groups across both land and sea.¹⁹ First Nations stewardship on climate change may provide

12 James Blackwell and Julie Ballangarry, 'Indigenous Foreign Policy: A New Way Forward?', Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition, AFFPC Issues Paper Series, no. 1 (1 April 2022): 2, iwda.org.au/assets/files/AFFPC-issues-paper-Indigenous-Foreign-Policy-Blackwell-Ballangarry-FINAL.pdf.

13 Kimberly R Marion Suseeya, Diana K Elhard, and Christopher John Paul, 'Toward a Relational Approach in Global Climate Governance: Exploring the Role of Trust', *WIREs Climate Change* 12, no. 4 (2021): e712, doi.org/10.1002/wcc.712.

14 Blackwell and Ballangarry, 'Indigenous Foreign Policy', 3.

15 Brigg, Graham, and Weber, 'Relational Indigenous Systems', 901.

16 Marshall Beier, 'Indigenous Diplomacy', in *The Sage Handbook of Diplomacy*, ed. Costas M Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (London, UK: SAGE Publications, 2016), 642–53, doi.org/10.4135/9781473957930.n53.

17 Carolina G Hernandez et al., 'Human Security in East Asia: Beyond Crises', in *Human Security and Cross-Border Cooperation in East Asia*, ed. Carolina G Hernandez et al., Security, Development and Human Rights in East Asia (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 1–19, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95240-6_1; Swarna Rajagopalan, 'Human Security in South Asia', in *Routledge Handbook of the International Relations of South Asia*, ed. Sumit Ganguly and Frank O'Donnell (Routledge, 2022), doi.org/10.4324/9781003246626-18.

18 Rory Medcalf, 'Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance', *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (2019): 79–96, doi.org/10.1353/asp.2019.0043.

19 Anastasia Kapetas and Huon Curtis, 'The Power of Indigenous Diplomacy as a Strategic Asset for Australia', *The Strategist*, 22 November 2021, www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-power-of-indigenous-diplomacy-as-a-strategic-asset-for-australia/.

an attractive alternative to Australia's longstanding reputation as a 'climate laggard' in the international sphere.²⁰ This would be of particular importance in Asia due to the region's susceptibility to the impacts of climate change. Through prioritising Indigenous precepts and First Nations diplomacy on environmental issues, an Indigenous-led Australian foreign policy has the potential to enhance Australia's diplomatic standing and contribute to global efforts to address shared issues in Asia.

A First Nations diplomacy approach may also seek to leverage shared colonial experiences, cultural linkages, and historical interactions with Asia to establish flexible and reciprocal relationships in the region. In addition to the earlier discussion of the diplomacy and trade relations between the Makassans and Indigenous groups in northern Australia, evidence of shared language devices between the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land and South-East Asian Indigenous groups underscore the deep linkages between First Nations groups and Asia.²¹ Such examples of shared history, language, and culture provide a foundation for the development of diplomatic relationships that are not solely based on the interests of the Australian state, but also the interests of Indigenous communities and their Asian counterparts. For example, Australia's shared colonial history with Indonesia could be leveraged to establish a more nuanced and respectful relationship between the two countries, one that acknowledges the impacts of colonialism to emphasise Australia as an *equal* partner. A First Nations diplomacy approach may seek to build relationships that are based on mutual benefit and respect, rather than simply the pursuit of economic or military strategic interests.

Consultation and change

Australia's approach to engagement with Asia is slowly evolving, including a new focus on Indigenous consultation; however, these gradual shifts are not sufficient in achieving a discernibly Indigenous-led approach. In May 2021, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade unveiled its *three-page* 'Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda' which set out the government's vision to 'elevate Indigenous issues' across three pillars of foreign policy: trade and economic policy, development policy, and corporate policy.²² This was closely followed by the establishment of an Office of First Nations Engagement and, in March 2023, the appointment of Justin Mohamed as Australia's first Ambassador for First Nations People.²³ While this agenda 'represents a strong move in the right direction', as Blackwell contends, the policy will provide little substantive change in how Australia interacts with Asia and the broader international system.²⁴ Rather than adopt a First Nations diplomacy approach, the agenda seeks only to place Indigenous people within the existing structures of Australia's Asian engagement.

For Australia to realise the benefits of an Indigenous-led foreign policy and diplomacy, recognition and consultation, while important initial steps, must be accompanied by substantive policy reforms that genuinely respect and incorporate Indigenous perspectives. A key aspect of this would be ensuring that Indigenous voices are central to policy ideation, development, and implementation, rather than simply consultation at end stages of the policy cycle. Crucially, the shift towards an inclusive foreign policy must commence with systemic changes from the top echelons of government. Indigenous leadership should not just be siloed to 'identified' positions but actively incorporated across the very core of the foreign policy monolith. This means more than a three-page strategy; it would involve establishing genuine decision-making power for Indigenous leaders in critical areas such as trade, economics, diplomacy, aid, investment, travel, and intergovernmental coordination. Indigenous peoples should not

20 Nick Bisley et al., 'For a Progressive Realism: Australian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 2 (4 March 2022): 149, doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2051428.

21 Alan Walker and R David Zorc, 'Austronesian Loanwords in Yolngu-Matha of Northeast Arnhem Land', *Aboriginal History* 5, no. 1/2 (1981): 109–34, doi.org/10.22459/AH.05.2011.07.

22 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda', May 2021, www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/indigenous-diplomacy-agenda.pdf.

23 Torre, 'Australian Government Appoints'.

24 James Blackwell, 'Australia is Pursuing a More Indigenous-Focused Foreign Policy. But Does it Miss the Bigger Picture?', *The Conversation*, 25 May 2021, theconversation.com/australia-is-pursuing-a-more-indigenous-focused-foreign-policy-but-does-it-miss-the-bigger-picture-161189.

be limited solely to advising on Indigenous-specific issues, but be integral to shaping policies and practice across the entire spectrum of foreign policy.

Elevating the role of Indigenous peoples is a crucial step, yet achieving a genuine paradigm shift demands a more comprehensive approach. It goes beyond empowering a select few; instead, it necessitates a holistic transformation that redistributes responsibility from just Indigenous peoples to those that create and enact Australia's foreign policy. Cultural competency training for diplomats, policymakers, and foreign affairs personnel is crucial.²⁵ Societally, however, the shift towards genuine reconciliation requires acknowledgement and healing. Truth-telling processes can provide a platform for acknowledging historical wrongs and fostering national healing. Ultimately, an Indigenous-led approach would require a fundamental shift in Australia's approach to foreign policy and diplomacy with Asia, but also one that is reflected more broadly in Australian society, with Indigenous perspectives embedded throughout the entire process.

It is difficult in this discussion, however, to ignore the outcome of the 2023 referendum which asked the Australian public to constitutionally recognise Indigenous peoples through establishing an Indigenous 'Voice' to Parliament. Much was made by those opposed to the Voice of the potential for it to provide advice on matters 'beyond its scope', including international relations.²⁶ Although responses to this sort of criticism by the 'Yes' camp often seeped into discourses of deficit, which emphasise the 'Gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (for more on deficit discourses, see Fforde et al.²⁷), it is difficult to imagine that such a Voice would be preoccupied by issues of foreign policy when Indigenous peoples continue to suffer under discriminatory domestic policy.²⁸ The Voice represented a distinctive opportunity to demonstrate to the region that Australia is moving forward. Placing Indigenous peoples at the heart of Australian democracy would have elevated the nation's profound intercultural connections and shared historical roots with Asia. More importantly, it would have showcased Australia's willingness to shift its domestic political structures, providing hope for a more inclusive approach to international relations. The referendum's decisive failure was an opportunity missed. Nonetheless, it has put the concept of Indigenous political leadership firmly into the public consciousness. It is vital that Australia does not allow itself to be limited by the ghosts of the referendum. An Indigenous-led foreign policy represents a significant step in the right direction, working to make Australia a more respectful and introspective country, not just for its neighbours, but also for its citizens.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an Indigenous-led approach to Australia's engagement with Asia has the potential to transform the nation's relationship with the region. The distinct perspectives, cultural connections, and priorities of Australia's original foreign policy actors, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, can bring valuable insights to Australia's foreign policy approach, particularly in Asia. This article has argued that a First Nations diplomacy, based on collective decision-making, sharing of knowledge and resources, and maintaining reciprocal relationships would enhance existing Western approaches to prioritise respect and reciprocity in Australia's interactions with Asia. As Australia seeks to deepen its engagement with Asia, First Nations diplomacy offers a unique opportunity to showcase the country as an open, mature nation with deep intercultural and shared historical links to Asia; but moreover, one that is willing to explore and address both the light and the shade of its history.

25 Shamsiyya Mustafayeva and Astrid Schnitzer-Skjønsberg, 'Ambivalence in International Dialogue: Implications for Diplomatic Training', *FLEKS—Scandinavian Journal of Intercultural Theory and Practice* 3, no. 1 (26 April 2016): 17, doi.org/10.7577/fleks.1686.

26 Australian Electoral Commission, 'Yes/No Referendum Pamphlet', 14 July 2023, 11, <https://www.aec.gov.au/referendums/files/pamphlet/referendum-booklet.pdf>.

27 Cressida Fforde et al., 'Discourse, Deficit and Identity: Aboriginality, the Race Paradigm and the Language of Representation in Contemporary Australia', *Media International Australia* 149, no. 1 (1 November 2013): 162–73, doi.org/10.1177/1329878X1314900117.

28 The Uluru Dialogue, 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' (National Constitutional Convention, 2017), ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/.

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