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Australian foreign policy under Labor governments from John Curtin's prime ministership to the present

JCPML Anniversary Lecture presented by Stephen Smith on 6 July 2010.

Mr Paul Keating, Patron of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Professor Jeanette Hackett, Vice Chancellor, Curtin University, Members of the Curtin family, Eric Ripper, Leader of the State Parliamentary Labor Party and my State Parliamentary colleagues, the Hon John Coddell, resident Western Australian Labor Party historian, long standing supporter of the Curtin Prime Ministerial Library and successful advocate for the preservation of the Curtin family home in Jarrad Street, Cottesloe, other distinguished guests, I am delighted to deliver the 2010 John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library Anniversary Lecture.

I thank Curtin University and the Library for extending me this great honour.

It is a particular pleasure to be introduced by my old boss, Prime Minister Paul Keating, who made his own singular contribution to substantially advancing Australia's national and foreign policy interests in the Asia Pacific.

I, of course, wear the mantle of the Labor Member for Perth and Foreign Minister with pride, but I also regard as a badge of honour my time spent on Paul's staff both as Treasurer and Prime Minister.

Today I will outline some of the Labor Government's foreign policy achievements in the context of a foreign policy tradition and foreign policy principles for Labor Governments that, in large measure, began with John Curtin and endure today.

On any analysis, John Curtin was a great Australian Prime Minister, indeed, one of the greatest. His influence on successive Labor Governments has been profound.

In his December 1941 Call to America speech, Curtin encouraged our nation to think through problems itself and to apply an independent and creative approach to regional and international problems, an approach that all Labor Governments since have followed.

He articulated a clear-eyed vision of Australia's place in the world, supporting a new global order based on international law and setting the stage for an alliance relationship with the United States. Curtin led Australia through a world war and helped shape Australia's post-war public policy, on both the foreign and domestic fronts. He was emotionally torn by the tragedy of the war, but he was pragmatic, hard-headed and clear-eyed when it came to protecting and defending Australia's national security interests, as we must be today. This required Curtin not just to stare down enemies, but friends as well.

Recognising Australia's changing strategic realities, and despite the pressure of the bonds of Empire, Curtin forged a close and essential relationship with the United States, one that has matured into the friendship and the Alliance that we see today – one that has been adhered to by all successive Australian Governments.

Curtin is a hero in Western Australia, not because he lived in Cottesloe, but because through his forging of the United States Alliance, he saved our nation at its moment of greatest peril.

As well, his Government legislated changes declaring Australia's complete sovereignty, redefining our country and redefining our country's role in international affairs.

Under Curtin, Australia began work with the United States and others aimed at liberalising and expanding world trade, understanding the notion that Australia's prosperity had to be underpinned by Australia itself being a great trading nation. This work ultimately gave rise to the agreements and global institutions that emerged from the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference and the subsequent Havana Conference of 1947, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Curtin sent Australia's delegation to the United Nations Conference on International Organisation in San Francisco in April 1945. Thanks largely to the work of that delegation and its leader, Herbert Vere (Doc) Evatt, the draft United Nations Charter was re-crafted to enhance the General Assembly's authority and take greater account of the interests of smaller and middle powers, moves that helped lay the basis for subsequent United Nations efforts on decolonisation. As Curtin's Foreign Minister, Evatt personally played a key role in shaping Article 55 of the UN Charter. Often referred to as the 'Australia pledge', this Article commits the United Nations to promote 'higher standards of living, full employment and conditions of economic and social progress and development'.

Finally, it was under Curtin that Australia negotiated its first major international agreement independently of the United Kingdom. The Australian-New Zealand (ANZAC) Agreement of 1944 set out a blueprint for regional co-operation in the Pacific and asserted for smaller and middle powers a voice in shaping regional affairs.

Labor Governments since Curtin have continued to shape foreign policy consistent with both the principles and practical Australian pragmatism implicit in his redefinition of Australia's place in the world.

Under Prime Minister Ben Chifley, Australia first sat on the United Nations Security Council, became a foundation member of the Bretton Woods institutions, initiated moves that would lead to the Colombo Plan and its aid to countries in South and Southeast Asia, and helped Indonesia on its path to independence.

Under Chifley, Australian troops were arguably the first personnel to be deployed to keep the peace under United Nations auspices when they were sent to monitor the ceasefire between the Dutch and fledgling Indonesian forces in 1947.

Recognising that Australia's future prosperity and security required that it be more deeply engaged in its own region, the Whitlam Government recognised the People's Republic of China in 1972 with a One China policy when it was not quite so

fashionable to do so. This early recognition has always held us in good stead in our relationship with China.

Whitlam ratified significant human rights conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, removed the White Australia Policy from our statute books, committed Australia to principles of racial non-discrimination and granted independence to Papua New Guinea.

In addition to far reaching domestic economic reforms, the Hawke and Keating Governments led advances towards greater long-term sustainable prosperity through freer regional and global trade arrangements.

The Hawke Government founded the Cairns Group of agricultural free trading nations. The Cairns Group played a major role in negotiations to conclude the Uruguay round, which continues to influence international negotiations on agriculture.

It also initiated the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation process (APEC) to foster greater economic integration within the Asia Pacific. Thanks mainly to Paul Keating, an APEC Leaders meeting was established, consolidating APEC's significance as the pre-eminent regional forum for Australia's economic engagement with Asia and the Pacific.

In this period, Australia also played active roles in international non-proliferation and disarmament efforts, including in the Chemical Weapons Convention negotiations and the Keating Government-initiated Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.

Australia also played a central role in regional and international efforts to bring a lasting peace to Cambodia, helping to bring an end to a bloody civil war and establish democracy. My immediate Labor predecessor, Gareth Evans, deserves great credit for this enduring achievement of Labor foreign policy.

Both the Rudd and Gillard Labor Governments sit firmly within these traditions.

In 2007, the Labor Government came to office with a clear, overarching foreign policy objective. At the heart of the Government's foreign policy approach lies the responsibility to protect and defend Australia's national and national security interests.

Three pillars underpin the Government's approach to foreign policy: our Alliance with the United States, our engagement with the United Nations and other multilateral and regional institutions, and a strong and enhanced engagement in the Asia-Pacific.

These three pillars owe their existence to the finest foreign policy traditions established by successive Australian Labor Governments – Curtin's contribution to the creation of the Alliance, the great tradition of multilateralism which Curtin began and which Chifley consolidated as the United Nations found its feet, and the tradition of regionalism, begun under Chifley, consolidated by Whitlam and which came to fruition in the Hawke and Keating era.

This is the framework through which the Government pursues its foreign policy objectives in Australia's national interest.

Australia brings to the world stage unique attributes, a unique view and a unique contribution from our part of the world. With a gross domestic product of around US\$1 trillion dollars, we are the fourth largest economy in Asia after Japan, China and India.

We are the 13th largest economy in the world, reflected by our membership of the G20. The International Monetary Fund forecasts that we will have the 6th highest Gross Domestic Product per capita in 2010, up from 11th last year. Our economic strength also allows us to be a substantial influence in peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Australia ranks in the top dozen countries in defence expenditure, and is the 12th largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget. Around 3500 Australian uniformed personnel currently serve in United Nations, UN-mandated and other multilateral operations around the world. We are a substantial knowledge power. Seven Australian universities rank among the world's top 100 and others,

including this one, are on the rise. We are one of the world's leading education exporters. Over 600,000 international students undertake courses in Australia.

We are also a major contributor of development assistance. Last year, we contributed \$3.8 billion in foreign aid and there is a bipartisan commitment to increase our level of development assistance to 0.5% of Gross National Income by 2015-16. We are a significant and a considerable nation and as a consequence have a responsibility to conduct ourselves as one. This fundamental starting point, acting as a significant and considerable nation, is reflected in the Government's approach to international affairs.

Let me now deal with aspects of our three pillars.

Australia's Alliance with the United States remains the bedrock of Australia's defence security and strategic arrangements.

Since Curtin's first formative meeting with Roosevelt in South Carolina on Anzac Day in 1944, the Alliance has been supported and developed by both major political parties on both sides of the Pacific: Labor, Liberal, Democrat and Republican. The United States will continue to be the single most powerful and important strategic actor in our region for the foreseeable future, both in its own right and through its network of Alliances and security relationships, of which our Alliance is one. The United States continues to underwrite prosperity and stability in the Asia Pacific as it has for the past fifty years.

The United States' ongoing engagement, indeed, greater engagement, in the Asia Pacific is essential for Australia's and our region's interests.

We judge that the United States will continue to be the single most powerful and important strategic actor in our region for the foreseeable future.

Since the Battle of Hamel in the Great War, Australia has been an ally of the United States in every major war it has fought in the past century, including the Second World War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since 2007, we have enhanced our bilateral relationship with the United States leading to new agreements in defence cooperation, civil-military cooperation, and counter-terrorism. We have strengthened our Alliance through our cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan. We have managed all this while also implementing an election commitment to withdraw combat forces from Iraq.

We understand and accept the responsibilities of being the United States' ally. We will continue to have both an interest in and an obligation to contribute creative thought and practical ideas with respect to our shared concerns. We will do so as a self-reliant partner prepared to carry its weight and its responsibilities, as Curtin saw Australia doing in his day.

An essential foreign policy undertaking by the Government has been to reinvigorate our multilateral engagement.

This engagement can be traced back to Curtin's decision to commit Australia to post-war international economic co-operation in 1942 and to the United Nations system in 1945. Curtin was, of course, still Prime Minister when Foreign Minister Evatt went to San Francisco for the major Conference which considered the United Nations Charter and which began in April 1945.

Our long-term national economic and security interests depend on having strong, effective multilateral institutions, norms and rules. Today, the world faces increasingly complex global challenges, such as international development, climate change, food security, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the aftermath of the global financial crisis. These are global challenges that no one country can address on its own. Indeed, the increasingly complex and transnational nature of these challenges means that the need for an effective multilateral system has grown over time.

Engagement with the United Nations is vital because of its role in setting global standards on a wide range of issues, from human rights to the use of force in settling international disputes. The United Nations has a key role in maintaining peace and security, from the United Nations Security Council, to conflict prevention, to peace-

keeping operations, to arms control negotiations. Strong multilateral engagement is Australia's national interests. A narrow, insular, backward-looking view held by some today is contrary to those interests.

As a measure of our commitment to the United Nations, Australia is standing for election to the United Nations Security Council for the 2013-14 term. As a member of the Security Council, we can help shape global responses in ways that serve our national interests, promote our values and virtues and support peace and security. If we want effective multilateral institutions that deliver for us and our region, then we have a responsibility to contribute from time to time.

Australia is also active in a broad range of multilateral forums beyond the United Nations, both global and regional.

We worked effectively with others for the G20 to be consolidated as the premier forum for international economic cooperation. I pay tribute to former Prime Minister Rudd for this achievement. As the world grappled with the consequences of the global financial crisis in 2008, it was far from certain that the G20 would emerge as the premier forum for economic co-operation. Prime Minister Rudd worked assiduously for months to ensure that Australia would take its seat at the G20 table.

The G20 reflects the realities of the new global economic order. It represents the most important shift in global governance in decades. For Australia, it is the most important new Leader's institution since APEC. The G20 successfully addressed the global financial crisis, acting in a coordinated and immediate way to stabilise the financial sector and build confidence globally. As one of nine countries from the Asia-Pacific region that are G20 members, Australia has high ambitions for the G20 and our region's influence in it. The G20 can become a political driver of stronger global cooperation and governance, responding to the range of global challenges that will confront us in this Asia-Pacific century.

As well as taking our place in the G20, the Government has also worked to increase Australia's engagement with a range of regional institutions including some beyond our immediate region. These include the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the African Union, the Southern African Development

Community, the Caribbean community (CARICOM), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. We have done so because, in their different ways, these bodies address issues whose implications extend beyond their regions and ultimately affect Australia's interests.

We remain an active member of the Commonwealth and look forward to hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in the great Indian Ocean city of Perth next year. We are committed to using the Perth meeting to strengthen the Commonwealth in its core values of democracy, human rights the rule of law and good governance.

The Government is following in the footsteps of Hawke and Keating by enhancing Australia's bilateral relationships with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Before I address issues of regional architecture, I will deal with some of our key relationships in the Asia-Pacific region.

For many years, Japan has been Australia's closest friend and our strongest supporter in Asia. We have developed a comprehensive partnership that encompasses strategic, security and economic cooperation; as well as people-to-people collaboration on a wide range of activities.

Our partnership stands on the twin pillars of long-standing economic links, and growing security and defence cooperation. The complementary nature of our economies has helped the relationship flourish. For more than 40 years, Japan has been Australia's key export market and a reliable and stable customer for Australian goods and services. Japanese investment, which has played such a vital role in the development of many of Australia's export industries, continues to underpin Australia's prosperity. As our economic relationship has evolved, so too have our defence and security ties.

We have a framework for security cooperation second only to that which Japan shares with the United States. Together, our three nations have increased our trilateral security cooperation through the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue and the Security and Defence Cooperation Forum. The Australia-Japan Joint Foreign and

Defence Ministerial Consultations, the so-called 2+2 meeting, is the only formal Foreign and Defence Strategic Dialogue that Australia has in Asia.

We are the first major developed economy to enter into Free Trade Agreement negotiations with Japan. Our recent efforts together on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation have shown that we can achieve a great deal by working together. The challenge now is how Australia and Japan can work more closely, how we can be more imaginative and creative in our diplomacy, in this expanded partnership.

The Australia-China relationship is now one of Australia's most important and high profile bilateral relationships. It is growing in its prominence and its complexity.

Our economic relationship has always been a strong one. Under the Hawke Government we experienced exponential growth in trade and economic ties. The foundation of that expansion was in mineral resources and Liquefied Natural Gas from Western Australia. China is our largest two-way trading partner, and last year became our largest export market. Both countries are committed to a comprehensive, high-quality, balanced and mutually beneficial bilateral free trade agreement, which we are working to conclude as rapidly as possible.

Our dialogue has expanded in priority areas of regional security, trade, climate change, environment and development assistance. We work together in the G20, responding to the global financial crisis.

Indeed it is hard to think of a single issue of importance to Australia where China is not a key player on the world stage. This year we jointly established a one and a half track dialogue – the Australia China Forum – which will consider the entirety of our comprehensive bilateral relationship. We are clear-eyed, not starry-eyed, in our assessment of China and our approach to the bilateral relationship. A productive relationship with China, based on mutual interest and mutual respect, is unambiguously in Australia's national interest. We both recognise that we have different histories, different societies and different systems, as well as some differences of view.

India, the world's largest democracy, has emerged in recent years as a significant global power, both politically and economically. Our friendship with India dates back to its inception as a nation. It is not well known that Chifley argued strongly that India's becoming a Republic should not stop it remaining in the Commonwealth. Australia sees in India a country that combines a remarkable pace of domestic development with an active and constructive role on the regional and world stage.

In my first speech as Foreign Minister in December 2007, I said that Australia needed to look west and do much more with India. I often point out that Chennai is closer to Perth than Shanghai is to Sydney. We have made significant progress in the last two years. The priority Australia now rightly accords India in our foreign and trade policies reflects the fact that India, the world's largest democracy, has now emerged as a significant global power. India has been Australia's fastest-growing trading partner, with two-way trade growing more than 10 percent to over \$20 billion in 2009.

In November last year, Australia and India lifted the status of our bilateral relationship to a Strategic Partnership, reflecting the strong convergence of interests and values that we share. This Strategic Partnership includes co-operation on trade and investment, regional and global security issues, education, science, research and development, climate change, and resources and energy.

The Australia-India Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, importantly, enhances the links between our defence, foreign policy and national security institutions.

In May we completed a joint Free Trade Agreement feasibility study. It makes a strong case for a comprehensive FTA.

Recognising the importance of India's rise for Australia's national interests, Australia has placed India firmly in the front rank of Australia's international partnerships.

Closer to home, the Government has strengthened Australia's relationship with Indonesia.

The Australia-Indonesia relationship was placed on firm foundations by the Chifley Government's robust diplomacy in support of Indonesian independence in the 1940s. His support for Indonesian independence following the war went against the then policies of our allies and friends the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. It demonstrated Australia's instinctive understanding of the forces sweeping away colonialism after World War II and our willingness to be bold in our support of the fledgling Indonesian Republic.

What has really served to bind us together, however, are the profound changes that have transformed Indonesia over the last decade – changes which Prime Minister Keating anticipated in fostering greater co-operation between our two nations. It is hard to overstate those changes. Indonesia has emerged as a new polity after a series of significant shocks: the Asian financial crisis; its transition to democracy; and the tragic human cost of terror attacks and natural disaster.

Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim community among its many faiths, is now also the world's third-largest democracy, after India and the United States. Australia, as a neighbour and friend, has looked on with admiration and respect at the blossoming democracy to our north, now with a twice popularly-elected President.

Strong economic growth in recent years has helped raise living standards and foster the stability needed for democracy.

Indonesia is emerging as a global influence, not just a regional influence. We worked together closely in the G20 on a global response to the financial crisis. We cooperate closely in the WTO and, in our own region, our two countries are pushing for closer economic integration. We have completed a feasibility study for an Australia-Indonesia Free Trade Agreement, paving the way for negotiations on an FTA.

Today, ours is a mature partnership between two robust, open democracies that increasingly see the world in similar ways.

Our political leaders will now meet annually in Australia or Indonesia, and we will institute an annual meeting of Foreign and Defence Ministers as well as a high-level dialogue of business, political and community figures.

This record shows that our bilateral relationship is in excellent shape – but there is no room for complacency. Both our countries need to do more to raise the appreciation of each other among our peoples to the level that exists between our governments.

The Government came to office determined to revitalise Australia's relationship with the Pacific and Pacific Island countries.

To his great credit, Whitlam as Opposition Leader pushed the Gorton Government to accelerate considerably Papua New Guinea's movement towards self-government. As Prime Minister, Whitlam guided it towards independence as a sovereign state.

Regrettably, when we came to office in 2007 we found a relationship with Papua New Guinea that was badly strained. One of our early achievements was to fundamentally change the tenor, not only of our relationship with Papua New Guinea, but with others in the Pacific. We set out a new approach based on mutual respect and responsibility in the Port Moresby Declaration of March 2008, and reflected in the Pacific Partnerships for Development. These agreements commit us to increased development assistance, tailored towards these countries' individual development needs. They embrace commitments from our partners to improve governance, increase investment in infrastructure, alleviate poverty, and achieve better outcomes in health and education.

One of the first Pacific Partnerships for Development we struck was with Papua New Guinea. Australia is assisting PNG to maximise benefits from the PNG Liquefied Natural Gas Project – a project with the potential to transform PNG.

We are working with Papua New Guinea along with our other Pacific neighbours in the Pacific Islands Forum, which we chaired this year.

In some of the relationships that I have described today, from time to time the Government has also inevitably had to manage difficulties or differences with our friends.

For example, as close as we are, Australia and Japan disagree on whaling. The issue of safety of international students has also been felt very deeply in India. Our relationship with China had its tensions last year. Sometimes I see the assertion that because of these difficulties, the status, standing or strength of the relationship has faltered. This could not be further from the truth. It is the strength of our underlying partnerships that allow us to manage these issues in a way that does not detract from our mutual interests, ensuring that our relationships remain strong.

I turn now to a discussion about our region's architecture.

Australia's Asia Pacific community initiative, launched by Prime Minister Rudd in June 2008, has generated discussion in the region about our regional institutions and how they might best be renewed and strengthened to serve the region's interests. None of the groupings in our current architecture is comprehensive in membership, scope or purpose. India is not a part of APEC. The United States is not part of the East Asia Summit. We have advanced the view that all of the region's leaders should be able to discuss both strategic and security, and economic and prosperity issues in a single forum. Following two years of discussion, the region is now at a point where there is a broad recognition that current arrangements can be improved.

We take the view that ASEAN should continue to be at the heart of regional arrangements. For this reason we welcomed the ASEAN leaders' decision in April to encourage the United States and Russia to deepen their engagement with Asian regional institutions, either through an expanded East Asia Summit or a so-called 'ASEAN plus Eight'. This is a critical step towards the architecture the Asia Pacific needs.

I am also pleased that Australia is joining the Asia-Europe Meeting process – or ASEM, as it is known. ASEM brings together 16 Asian nations and the ASEAN

Secretariat along with 27 European Union nations and the European Commission. Australia applied for membership under the Howard Government in 1996 and in 1998 but was unsuccessful on both occasions. Regrettably, no further efforts were made for a decade to get Australia into this important regional organisation, deepening and broadening our engagement with both Asia and Europe. This longstanding historical anomaly has now been corrected. Australia will take up its membership at the ASEM Leaders' Summit in Brussels in October.

As intent as the Government has been on building on its three key foreign policy pillars, it has also revived relationships with regions of the world where our interests are increasingly engaged, but which Australia has for too long neglected.

Let me deal with just one – Africa.

Africa continues to face serious security and development challenges. But it is a more stable, free and prosperous continent than it was a decade ago. It is Australia's national economic, social and strategic interests to deepen its engagement with Africa. This commitment is based neither on sentiment nor short term expediency but on Australia's long-term and enduring economic, social and strategic interests. To prosper into the future, Australia, as a great trading nation, cannot ignore Africa, a continent of more than 50 countries and nearly a billion people. There are more than 150 Australian companies with projects spread across 40 African countries. There is an estimated US\$20 billion in current and prospective Australian investment in the African resources sector. Africa has more overseas mining projects held by Australian companies than any other region in the world – about 40 per cent.

Australia wants to work closely with African nations in multilateral fora, including the World Trade Organization, the United Nations and the Commonwealth, to tackle common challenges. The Government has extended diplomatic relations to 51 of Africa's 53 countries, and will open a new embassy in Addis Ababa to strengthen links with the African Union and Ethiopia.

Last year it was my privilege to be the first Australian Foreign Minister to address a meeting of the AU Foreign Ministers Executive Council Meeting in Addis Ababa.

Australia is in Africa for the long term. We will maintain a high level of engagement with Africa because it is in our long-term interests to do so.

In 2007, we came to office with an intention to continue in the best of the foreign policy traditions laid down by Curtin and those that followed him. This was to see Australia playing a more active and responsible role on the international stage, strengthening the global rules-based order and shaping regional developments.

Our foreign policy is a central element of a comprehensive national security strategy. It reflects the fact that this is the Asia-Pacific century, and that global strategic, economic and political weight is shifting to the region. It represents the fact that Australia has regional priorities but global interests. It reflects our democratic values, our respect for the rule of law both domestic and international, our tolerance and our deep-seated belief in others getting a fair go.

Our diplomacy has been increasingly active, not just in areas on which we've traditionally focused since Curtin, but also in those like India and Africa we can no longer afford to ignore. Just as Curtin re-defined Australia's international identity to meet the great challenges of his time, this Government has significantly and substantially elevated Australia's role on the international stage for a purpose. It is a purpose that meets our modern challenges as a nation, a region and a globe, a purpose that protects and defends our national security interests and maximises our national economic interests.

The Government is committed to seeing Australia play that role to the full.

Australia's diverse and growing interests, our values and virtues as a good international citizen, our responsibility as a significant and considerable nation, demand nothing less.