

Reassessing Malcolm Fraser

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Introduction

Malcolm Fraser, Australia's 22nd Prime Minister, died on 20 March 2015 aged 84. He was Prime Minister from November 1975 to March 1983. This *Strategic Insights*, drawn from posts on ASPI's blog *The Strategist*, examines Fraser's foreign policy record from his hard-line view of the Soviet Union to his more constructive approach to dealing with Beijing as well as his approach to defence policy making and his evolving attitude to the US alliance. Fraser reorganised Australia's defence establishment and the 1976 defence white paper foreshadowed the move towards the defence of Australia strategy adopted by the Labor government in the 1980's. Fraser's strong commitment to human rights and his support for the Commonwealth as a useful multilateral forum were enduring features of his prime ministership. As Peter Edwards and Graeme Dobell observe, in many areas of national security policy Fraser as Prime Minister consolidated reforms and policy directions begun by Gough Whitlam.



Malcolm Fraser when Minister for the Army, 1 February 1966. Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial.

Malcolm Fraser and the American Alliance

Peter Edwards, 26 March 2015

Much of the commentary on Malcolm Fraser portrays him as the politician who moved most dramatically from the right to the left of the political spectrum. The man denounced by the left for his role in the dismissal of the Whitlam Government by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, in November 1975 became in his later years the left's hero, as he denounced Liberal and even Labor governments, not least on the American alliance. His last book, *Dangerous Allies*, urged Australia to end the alliance and our 'strategic dependence' on powerful allies. How does this square with Fraser's role as Minister for the Army and then Minister for Defence during the Vietnam War, a commitment of which he was one of the coalition government's most articulate defenders?

A close look at his actions in the 1960s and 1970s reveals some early signs of his later attitude to the American alliance. After ten years on the backbench, his first ministerial appointment, as Minister for the Army, came when Harold Holt formed his first government in early 1966. As Minister for the Army, Fraser made several visits to Vietnam and engaged with the issues the Australian Army faced there, including the pronounced difference in the tactics employed by the Australian and American armies. Fraser—like many of the Army's leaders—wanted the Australians to focus their operations on one province, where they could utilise the counter-insurgency tactics that they had used skilfully, successfully and with minimal casualties in conflicts in Malaya and Borneo. He was concerned by the American reliance on advanced technology and heavy firepower, their willingness to accept high casualty rates, and their desire to use the Australians in combined operations over a wide area. But like the other service ministers, Fraser had little influence on policy.

After the 1969 election, Prime Minister John Gorton appointed Fraser as Minister for Defence. The service ministers, the armed services and his own department now found themselves driven by an extremely active and assertive Minister with the power of a senior Cabinet portfolio. But his energy and vigour were not directed only towards Australians. Fraser long remained proud of his handling of the contractual arrangements with the Americans for the acquisition of the F-111 aircraft. Cost blow-outs and delays in production were embarrassing the Government. Fraser's vigorous and confrontational tactics on a visit to Washington were based on technical advice that established weaknesses in the information provided by the Americans. While his critics continued to portray him as a pro-American hawk, Fraser was actually playing hardball politics in Washington. There was no suggestion at this time of a complete break from the alliance in pursuit of 'strategic independence'. In the circumstances of the day, that would have been inconceivable: but Fraser was already indicating that he would not genuflect obsequiously before great and powerful friends.

Fraser appointed the formidable Arthur Tange as departmental secretary, saying that he needed someone in that position who could stand up to him. The two men predictably clashed, before reconciling to form a powerful partnership. Fraser often described Tange as the public servant he most admired, and many of principles underlying the so-called 'Tange reforms' originated in Fraser's term as Minister for Defence. They included not only the combining of three services into one Australian Defence Force and the uniting of five departments into a single Department of Defence, but also a new strategic approach that placed less emphasis on the American alliance and more on the defence of the Australian continent and its environs.

Although the 'defence of Australia' strategic approach is generally linked to the 1986 Dibb Report and the 1987 White Paper, many of the principal elements were outlined in a White Paper in 1976, Fraser's first year as Prime Minister. Given the importance of the White Paper process in defence policy-making, it is worth noting that this was Australia's first Defence White Paper. It would not have been surprising if Fraser had urged Australians to place less reliance on the American alliance last year. His call to end the alliance altogether was a step too far for many Australians, but it at least prompted some debate about the fundamental elements of Australian strategy.

The reshaping of strategic policy is only one example of the ways in which Fraser, as Prime Minister, quietly consolidated and institutionalised many of the changes in national security policy and structures that were initiated, often with considerable flourish and fanfare, by the Whitlam Government. The reorganisation of the Australian Defence Force and the Defence Department was another.

In foreign policy, Fraser continued more of Gough Whitlam's policies than he reversed. He ensured that the development of positive relationships with China, Japan and Indonesia, and with as many of our other Asian countries as possible, became a bi-partisan policy. His sympathy for non-white peoples, sparked by his personal experience as an undergraduate at Oxford, was a consistent and prominent element in his foreign policies as Prime Minister, not only in Asia but also in his opposition to South African apartheid and his support for the independence of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.

The greatest change in foreign affairs was probably in relation with the Soviet Union. Fraser rescinded Whitlam's unwise *de jure* recognition of the incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union. Fraser reacted vehemently to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and he encouraged Australian athletes to boycott the Moscow Olympics in 1980.

Three successive Prime Ministers – Whitlam, Fraser and Bob Hawke – shared responsibility for a comprehensive reform of Australia's intelligence and security agencies. All three commissioned the same man, Justice Robert Hope, to conduct a series of inquiries, which established structures and roles for the agencies that retained bi-partisan support for decades.

In many aspects of national security, Fraser's term as Prime Minister did more to consolidate than to reverse the reforms often associated with Gough Whitlam. It was not altogether surprising that, in their later years, the two men became close, notwithstanding the bitter tensions associated with the Dismissal.

Malcolm Fraser: realist to radical

Graeme Dobell, 30 March 2015

The most remarkable feature of Malcolm Fraser's lifetime pursuit of Australia's international interests was his journey from rock-ribbed, alliance-loving realist to green-tinged alliance decrier.

Fraser's eventual rejection of the US alliance as deeply dangerous to Australia put him well outside the Liberal-Labor strategic consensus. Not for Malcolm the alliance addiction that has been the drug-of-choice for Australian defence from day one, 1901.

In office, Fraser was a deeply committed alliance addict in the great Oz tradition; in retirement he renounced the habit with all the fervour of those who reform and recover.

In the previous paper, Peter Edwards offers an excellent account of Fraser's alliance evolution and transformation. And Peter points to the Soviet Union as the bogey man that animated much of Fraser's leadership. On the alliance and on the communist threat, Fraser was being true to his teacher and political inheritance.

One way to read Fraser-as-PM is to see him as a loyal Menzies disciple, acting out in office many of the aims and attitudes he'd learnt from the master. Fraser entered Parliament at the age of 25 in 1955, the youngest MP at the time, so his education can be attributed as much to a decade of tutelage by Menzies as the third-class degree from Oxford.

Fraser's exit from Parliament in 1983 and the end of the Cold War six years later were important points of departure beyond the Menzies mantle. Such pop psychology must immediately acknowledge important areas where Fraser was completely at odds with Menzies in government, especially on race, immigration and multiculturalism. In office from 1975 to 1983, though, Fraser's instincts and understandings of politics and geopolitics were marked by Menzian habits of mind. That is why Fraser always maintained that the Liberal Party had shifted away from him—he stood with Menzies, the Party drifted off. The contest for the Menzies' mantle is part of the tug-of-war between Howard and Fraser, forming an undercurrent of [Howard's book on Menzies](#).

Peter Edwards provides the historical context for looking at the shift from realist to radical expressed in Fraser's jeremiad against the alliance in his last big message to Australia: the book *Dangerous Allies*. The deep flaws in the book do not detract from the distinct position it marks out in the great national endeavour to navigate the Asian century. As this column (Dobell 8 May) commented on the book's publication, for the first time in its history, Australia had a Prime Minister who didn't believe in the need for a great and powerful friend.

For a detailed demolition of Fraser's call to end the alliance, see Rory Medcalf's essay '[Malcolm Fraser's Asian Delusion](#)'. Rory says Fraser offers an absurd caricature of US policy and what this means for Australia: 'Beneath a veneer of reasonableness, it is characterised by omissions, distortions, half-truths and plain errors of fact. The account is frequently naive, automatically assuming the best of Chinese motives and actions.' And after that, Rory really starts to get stuck in.

The funny thing is I am sure that Malcolm Fraser would have absolutely loved it as the basis for a wonderful verbal wrestle. Fraser was a political bully who always wanted a good argument. Like Margaret Thatcher, he was often more interested in those who argued with him. Supporters were part of the base, while those who argued might have interesting perspectives to be tested or even incorporated. And those who argued could even be debated into becoming converts. What else is politics for?

Fraser's shift beyond the alliance was an increasingly apparent part of his political persona through the 1990s. The moment when I shifted Malcolm fully into the alliance nay-sayer camp was his the speech he gave in the Old Parliament House 70th Anniversary Lecture Series in October, 1997.

He posed the problem this way:

Our security arrangements had been based on the reality of the Cold War and on the possibility of a real Communist threat. Our relationships with the US were dominated by the necessity for that security alliance. It gave us comfort. But what implications does the end of the Cold War have for security in East Asia and the Western Pacific? American power was based in the Western Pacific, largely because of the Cold War. Is the deployment still relevant?

Fraser said in that 1997 lecture he couldn't now give a clear answer to a question about the circumstances in which the US would come to Australia's military aid:

Is there a perceivable threat that could involve the US, because they will only be involved if their interests are threatened? They will not be involved if Australia's interests alone are threatened. Over the next hundred years, more and more we are going to have to achieve Australia's future through our own efforts and through our relationships with countries in East and Southeast Asia. We need the courage and capacity to realise that relationships with Asian countries can give us a more secure future than relationships with Britain or the United States.

Fraser wrestled with a lot of history to produce *Dangerous Allies*. It must have torn at his Menzian training. And Fraser certainly offered an incomplete picture of what strategic independence would mean and cost. He didn't even grapple with concepts such as 'armed neutrality', while his embrace of Asia meant he was no isolationist. This is an argument that will not die with Australia's 22nd Prime Minister.

Malcolm Fraser's foreign policy pillars

Graeme Dobell, 13 April 2015

On 11 September 1980, Malcolm Fraser stood in the House of Representatives to describe the four pillars of Australian foreign policy. The Prime Minister's statement listed the 'four essential components of our foreign policy' in this order:

1. The Western alliance
2. Regionalism
3. The Commonwealth
4. Strengthening relations with middle-sized powers

In the statement, the four components were not numbered as they are here; yet adding the numbers merely highlights the hierarchy Fraser used in his list and followed in his speech.

Sitting in the press gallery at the time, I remember thinking that if these were the four pillars supporting Oz policy, then it was a rickety, lopsided building with a ramshackle roof. The pillars differed vastly in their height and strength and the weight they could support.

For Fraser in 1980, the Western alliance was the central pillar—the defining interest. The Cold War framed Fraser’s understanding of the world and power among nations. Equally, he was conscious of the rigidities and restrictions imposed by the Cold War and alliance demands. Australia didn’t have much room to move.

Points two, three and four were expressions of Fraser’s efforts to find other ways and alternate avenues for Australia’s international interests. He hankered to reinforce those lesser pillars to reach for other modes of play, beyond alliance, where Australia had more options and could play a bigger role.

Notice that point one is the ‘Western alliance’ not the ‘US alliance. This choice is a flicker of what would be Fraser’s eventual journey away from ANZUS (see Dobell 30 March).

In 1980, to talk of the West and alliance was really to talk of the US. Fraser nods to this directly in the first of the two key reasons he offered for why the alliance was vital to Australia:

1. The alliance offered ‘the ultimate guarantee of our security should a direct threat to Australia ever eventuate.’
2. The alliance was the necessary instrument for maintaining a global strategic balance ‘to ensure a measure of stability in international affairs in our region as in others.’

That word ‘instrument’ matters. Times change and instruments can become outmoded, and this is where Fraser’s flicker became a flag:

Let this be clearly understood: Australia’s commitment to the Western alliance is ultimately not based on historical ties or ideology or cultural compatibility, important as those things are. It is based four-square on an appreciation of Australia’s interests and what Australia’s interests require.

In 1980, points two and four—regionalism and middle power activism—were expressions of ambition, flavoured by ad hoc opportunism and driven by hope. These pillars were still in design-and-build stages.

Read this way, the four pillars and the strange building they support are an expression of Fraser’s dissatisfaction. These were the best levers he had to pull. This was all he had to work with!

The essential components were a formalised statement of Fraser’s comment to Parliament on 1 June 1976, that a successful Australian foreign policy must be ‘flexible, alert, undogmatic. We must recognise that Australia, a middle power, lives in a world where power in a broad sense remains a major factor in international politics.’

In his 1980 statement, Fraser reached towards that goal by kicking against the failure of previous efforts: ‘On occasions in the past Australian foreign policy has been too modest and too passive. On other occasions it has suffered from delusions of grandeur and the absence of a sense of limitations.’

At the time, the ‘delusions of grandeur’ stuff was primarily about his vanquished opponent, Gough Whitlam. In Fraser’s post-politics evolution, his critique centred on a passive and fearful Australia, and the targets became more numerous.

A following column will talk about the continuities at the heart of Fraser’s foreign policy—what he carried on from his predecessors (notably Whitlam) and the elements that were, in turn, carried on by Hawke, Keating, Howard and Rudd. A big part of that continuity from Whitlam to Fraser can be found in points two and four. Whitlam’s efforts on regionalism and middle-power nimbleness were excellent expressions of what Fraser meant by an Australia that was smart and flexible.

The leaders who followed Fraser helped create more useful instruments that gave Australia a guaranteed role on important stages based on its regional role and middle power status—APEC, the East Asia Summit, the G20.

In his time, Fraser put lots of work into a vain effort to get a seat at the G7. The G7 ambition had a hint of grand delusion about it, showing Fraser's supreme confidence that he was a leader who could play at any level. And his wish to give Australia more instruments and more room to play internationally.

Viewed today, point three is the anachronism. Expect a further column on why Malcolm Fraser was Australia's last Commonwealth man.

Abbott and Fraser: 'for the good of the wider world'

Peter Jennings, 17 April 2015

There was a change of tone in Prime Minister Tony Abbott's [media conference this week](#), where he announced the deployment of the Australian and New Zealand training contingent to Taji, Iraq. Gone was the more strident rhetoric about the ADF being the 'long, strong arm of Australia', leaping at 'an opportunity to do something which is unambiguously good'—language the PM [used](#) at Al Minhad airbase in the UAE last August. The latest announcement was more cautious about the risks faced—'it is a dangerous place and I can't tell you that this is risk-free'—and the prospects for success in the context of 'a pretty dispiriting situation in the Middle East in recent months.'

For all the caution, though, the PM's instincts about Australia's role in the world were on full display:

The fundamental point I want to make is that we are a good international citizen. We have a long history of shouldering our responsibilities to the wider world. This is about international security and national security. We will do what we can to keep our country safe, to play our part in the wider world....

This comparison may not often have been made, but Mr Abbott is probably the most liberal internationalist Prime Minister Australia has seen since Malcolm Fraser.

In January 2013 Julia Gillard offered a form of naive regionalism when she declared the end of the 9/11 era and described the strategic outlook as '[positive and 'benign'](#)'. It helped Australia get voted onto the UN Security Council.

Kevin Rudd's approach was a frenzied hard-power gamesmanship schooled in observing Chinese statecraft. That delivered the promise of twelve submarines. John Howard practiced a pragmatism that produced surprising results for East Timor and got us closer to the US and to China simultaneously. Hawke and Keating made big strides to shape regional architecture, but all to the aim of realist balancing in Asia by locking in the US to the alliance and to APEC.

One has to go back to Malcolm Fraser to find a Prime Minister as committed as Abbott to the idea of Australia simply being a force for good in the international community. Fraser's liberal internationalism famously saw him take a stand against Apartheid South Africa, welcome Vietnamese refugees after the fall of the South in 1975 and oppose Australian participation in the Moscow Olympics after Russia's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.

Mr Abbott surprised some observers in his Parliament House eulogy for Mr Fraser when he sought to claim back to the Liberal Party the views of a man whom some judged to have moved significantly to the left after leaving politics. Abbott [said](#):

John Howard has famously observed that the Australian Liberal Party, unlike its namesakes elsewhere, is the custodian in this country of both the liberal political tradition and the conservative one. But there is in fact a third tradition our party represents that is as vital as our liberal and conservative philosophies—a dedication to service and to repaying good fortune, the working out in this world of the gospel notion 'To whom much is given, much is expected'.

That ‘third tradition’ explains a lot about the personal emphasis Mr Abbott brings to international affairs. Abbott demanded a very high profile Australian response to the Russian shoot-down of flight MH17 over Ukraine and seemed as affronted by Moscow’s refusal to accept responsibility for supplying the weapon as much as the reality of Australian deaths. In the new deployment of forces to Iraq the PM has provided additional forces without there being undue international pressure to offer them. Why? Because ‘the important thing is to make an effective and meaningful contribution to the security of the wider world.’ Doing good internationally promotes Australia’s security because it secures the spread of values like our own and ultimately defeats the ‘Islamist death cult’.

You could object that Mr Abbott’s liberal internationalism doesn’t derive from a commitment to international institution building, such as that of Woodrow Wilson. Our PM’s approach seems to draw more from a sense of moral obligation informed by faith. In this respect Abbott’s closest counterpart is former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

Others may claim that the PM’s approach is invalidated by the impact of policies such as ‘stopping the boats’ and aid cuts. But both Abbott and Gillard claimed that a driving priority on boats was to stop drownings at sea. On aid, one defence is that poorly directed development assistance achieves neither institution building nor good moral purpose.

A third objection might be that by deploying troops to Iraq Mr Abbott is just paying ‘alliance dues.’ Not so. Australia did its best to influence a reluctant US to intervene.

A final pointer to this emerging world view can be seen in the priority Abbott has given to strengthening relations with Canada. The two countries are like-minded and share many common values, but what makes Canada important to Tony Abbott is a shared tradition of doing good internationally. In a carefully crafted speech to the Australia–Canada Economic Leadership Forum last year the PM made some [revealing remarks](#):

On a wall in my offices, hangs a painting of a World War One battlefield near Vimy Ridge where Canadian and Australian soldiers had been comrades-in-arms. In those days, it would have been taken for granted that Canadians and Australians should have gone into action together....

The relationship is strong but under-developed even though we are as like-minded as any two countries can be. So, I want to make more of this friendship: for our own good *and for the good of the wider world*.

Instinctive and based on judgements about an obligation to do good, Mr Abbott’s approach to strategy is significantly different to an Australian norm of realist pragmatism.

Malcolm Fraser: last of the Commonwealth men

Graeme Dobell, 21 April 2015

Malcolm Fraser was the last Australian Prime Minister who thought the Commonwealth could be a major instrument of Australian foreign policy.

Some of Fraser’s successors—Hawke, Howard and even Gillard—believed the Commonwealth could do useful work and gave it appropriate attention as a second- or third-tier multilateral priority.

Fraser, by contrast, was the last Oz leader to put the Commonwealth in the top rank of Australian foreign policy concerns. He pushed hard to shift and reshape the Commonwealth to relate it directly to Australia’s regional interests and middle power role.

The previous column (Dobell 13 April) discussed the four pillars of Fraser foreign policy:

1. The Western alliance
2. Regionalism

3. The Commonwealth

4. Strengthening relations with middle-sized powers

As one of Fraser's 'four essential components of our foreign policy', the Commonwealth is the anachronism in the list. The significant point is that this third pillar reflected the limited foreign policy options available then, not the power of the Commonwealth.

Fraser as the last Oz PM who was a convinced Commonwealth man differs markedly from earlier versions of the breed. He wasn't an Australian Briton in the manner that was natural to Deakin or Bruce or Menzies. Going to Oxford taught Fraser to think and brought him to intellectual adulthood; one of the lessons was the difference between Britain and Australia and where he could be at home.

Fraser didn't embrace the Commonwealth for heritage or history. He wanted to put it to work to serve Australian interests. The Commonwealth would be the bridge or the device to meld points two and four of his essentials: regionalism and Australian middle power aspirations.

In 1980 Fraser said he was 'extremely active' in the Commonwealth because he 'rejected absolutely the views that it could only be a talking shop or that it was merely an interesting anachronism on the world stage... we have proceeded on the assumption that it is an instrument which can be used to solve problems and that it can be particularly useful in situations where great powers are reluctant or unable to act.

The Cold War warrior longed to be unshackled. His vision was of a non-aligned Commonwealth that was brave, vocal and effective on the world stage; and—not incidentally—had Malcolm Fraser in the lead.

Fraser's ambition saw two regional meetings of the Commonwealth convened: in Sydney in 1978 (remembered for the Hilton hotel bombing) and New Delhi in 1980. As Fraser said, the purpose was to have regional summits to bring together Australia's 'large scale region', extending from 'the sub-continent to our north west to the islands of the South Pacific.'

If Fraser's pattern had endured, there'd be a full Commonwealth summit every year where Africa and African leaders dominated the agenda, and in the alternate year a Commonwealth regional or Asia-Pacific summit, absent the Africans.

After that second regional meeting in India, Fraser told Parliament on 11 September 1980:

These meetings came about as the result of an Australian initiative. After the success of the New Delhi meeting I think it is clear that this has been one of the most useful foreign policy initiatives ever undertaken by Australia. It links together and integrates two of our most important concerns: the region and the Commonwealth.

At the moment Fraser was talking up this 'most useful' foreign policy idea, he was actually marking its last specific expression. After New Delhi, the Commonwealth regional summit didn't reconvene. When Fraser left, so did the champion for a special Asia-Pacific role for the Commonwealth. In Fraser's memoirs, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Sonny Ramphal, is described as unenthusiastic, fearing 'regional meetings would result in power blocs, detracting from Commonwealth unity.'

In retirement, Fraser reached one last time to see what sort of instrument he could make the Commonwealth, campaigning for 18 months to be elected to become Commonwealth secretary-general to follow Ramphal.

Backed by his successor as PM, Bob Hawke, Fraser toured the Commonwealth pledging that he'd put new force and energy into running the organisation. That campaign promise was honed by Margaret Thatcher as the perfect weapon to prevent Fraser's election, when Commonwealth leaders voted on the job in Kuala Lumpur in 1989. The British Prime Minister's killer line was an accurate rendering of Fraser's character versus the comfort levels of the club that is the Commonwealth. 'You realise,' Thatcher warned, 'if Malcolm gets in, he'll want to do things!' Exit Malcolm.

Tamie Fraser was an unlikely Thatcher ally in opposing what she saw as her husband's 'bizarre' quest for a post where he'd perform as a bureaucrat taking direction from leaders. Tamie knew her man—he gave orders, he didn't take them. 'Mind you,' Mrs Fraser laughed, 'if he'd got it he would have tried to make the Commonwealth a rival to the United Nations. He wouldn't have been happy to moulder along with everyone having happy little meetings every couple of years.'

Come the 21st century, the Commonwealth as a pillar of Oz foreign policy crumbled to nothing, even for Fraser.

In his final big meditation on Australia's place in the world, 2014's *Dangerous Allies*, Fraser spent a lot of wordage on the development of the old British empire and what it meant for Oz. Writing about Australia after World War II, Fraser presented as an Evatt, not a Menzies, man: 'Evatt believed in Australia as an independent nation acting entirely in our own interests. Menzies still tended to the view that we could exert the greatest influence when working through the Commonwealth and the Empire connection.' And that's where the book's consideration of the 'new' Commonwealth ends.

What of the Malcolm Fraser who in 1980 saw the Commonwealth as one of the four essential components of Oz foreign policy? Nary a word.

Malcolm Fraser and Australia's Asia consensus

Graeme Dobell, 27 April 2015

Malcolm Fraser's greatest contribution to foreign policy was the new consensus on Asia that he embraced, fostered and cemented.

Fraser's Asia policy drew large elements of continuity from the Whitlam government that Fraser blasted from office. Here's one of the many Fraser contradictions: he sought to scourge Whitlam's politics, but in foreign and defence policies Fraser built on and secured his predecessor's achievements.

Previous columns have looked at Fraser's remarkable journey from realist to radical (Dobell 30 March), becoming the first non-aligned Oz PM (granted, in retirement), arguing that we no longer need great and powerful friends (Dobell 8 May). And Fraser is awarded the quixotic title of being the last PM to see the Commonwealth as a core instrument (Dobell 21 April) for Oz foreign policy.

Here I turn from those distinctive and spiky bits of the Fraser legacy to focus on the part he played in the Canberra consensus on the Great Asia Project.

The title 'Great Asia Project' is [mine](#), but the timeline and importance of what Fraser achieved is a John Howard judgement. This makes it a useful assessment because Howard is a discerning analyst of his opponents. Fraser and Howard stand together in the list of Liberal PMs, yet they warred over policy and the heart of the Liberal Party.

Howard's view is that the Great Asia Project began with Whitlam in 1972 and has been pursued by all leaders since. In [Howard's memoirs](#), *Lazarus Rising*, the first sentence of the Asia chapter begins: 'For more than 40 years, every serious political leader in Australia has been committed to the belief that close engagement and collaboration with our Asian neighbours was critical to Australia's future.'

Could the formulation of that sentence stretch to cover the Liberal PMs Holt, Gorton and McMahon? Nope. Trust Howard to refine the text to make his meaning explicit. On the following page, he returns to the issue of which leaders make the cut, drawing the line at 1972: 'I came to office sharing the views of my four predecessors that close links, at every realistic level, with the nations of Asia were fundamental to Australia's future.'

The Project lineage thus runs from those four—Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke, Keating—to Howard and every following leader. This is a powerful consensus heading towards its 50th birthday in 2022.

To start the consensus with Whitlam and Fraser is to mark a big before-and-after divide. Before 1972, Australia's leaders were Asia Excluders; after '72, the leaders became Asia Engagers. Using Howard's phrase, the Engagers seek 'engagement and collaboration'. The Bob Hawke catch-all was 'enmeshment'.

The Excluders were equally interested in Asia—but chiefly to keep 'em out through strategies on migration (White Australia as barrier to Asia and invitation to Europe), trade (tariff protection and Imperial preference) and military policy (Empire and forward defence).

As the first Engagers of the Great Asia Project, Whitlam and Fraser stood together in proud rejection of White Australia and embrace of non-discriminatory immigration. Fraser was even louder than Whitlam in his promotion of multiculturalism as a core value of the Project (one of the many areas of difference between Fraser and Howard).

Fraser entrenched the Whitlam reforms of the Defence Department and issued Australia's first Defence White Paper in 1976, expressing the new defence-of-the-continent orthodoxy to replace Forward Defence. The Paper stated: 'We no longer base our policy on the expectation that Australia's Navy or Army or Air Force will be sent abroad as part of some other nation's force, supported by it.' Now there's a sentence to launch a thousand expeditionary-versus-continental arguments—and it has!

On intelligence, Fraser created the Office of National Assessments in carrying through the [Hope revolution](#) initiated by [Whitlam](#). As Peter Edwards observes in his earlier piece:

The reshaping of strategic policy is only one example of the ways in which Fraser, as Prime Minister, quietly consolidated and institutionalised many of the changes in national security policy and structures that were initiated, often with considerable flourish and fanfare, by the Whitlam Government.

Using defence policy changes as part of an Engager philosophy has problems—after all, the basic military purpose is keeping 'em out. Yet the bipartisan remaking of defence by Whitlam and Fraser is important to the Asia Project narrative. The key is that Fraser's White Paper codified the optimistic view that Australia could defend itself—the nation could build the capability to secure its continent.

On the other side of the divide stood the Excluders who, whatever their political divisions, were united on a dark point: the pessimistic belief that Australia couldn't defend itself alone.

The optimism of an Australia that can secure its borders by its own military effort is a vital starting point for then going out into Asia on all the fronts that make the Great Asia Project such an engrossing and complex endeavour. As Howard acknowledges, Fraser picked up from Whitlam to launch the Project as the bipartisan position of the Oz polity. Fraser's effort in creating and embedding the new consensus stands as his overarching contribution to Australia's international role.

Malcolm Fraser as pragmatic panda hugger

Graeme Dobell, 30 April 2015

International policy is deeply serious work—vital to nation and people, and deadly in effects. Yet oft times it lurches from furore to fiasco, via farce to straight-out funny.

The utter pragmatism of Malcolm Fraser's embrace of China meets the measure of serious work of lasting import, relevant to today's arguments. First, though, the fun in Fraser's initial visit to China as PM in June, 1976—a tour that entered Press Gallery lore on all sorts of 'f' measures from fantastic to farce.

Fraser's party, plus journos, attended a sumptuous Chinese dinner to be entertained by rousing renditions of traditional Chinese songs. The PM decided there should be an Oz response and commanded the gallery hacks to sing. Fraser expected Waltzing

Matilda. Instead, Ken Begg, of the *ABC*, and Peter Bowers, of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, led the hack howlers in a rendition of an [advertising ditty for Aeroplane jelly](#).

The Adelaide Advertiser's Brett Bayly [recalls](#) a gusto performance (although the hacks couldn't remember all the words) to Fraser's growing displeasure:

When the Chinese asked for an interpretation, Fraser looked at us with a very threatening look. But up jumped Begg to explain to our Communist hosts that the song was about the evil capitalists who were taking over the economy in Australia. Fraser fumed, Tamie giggled, the Chinese applauded and we all felt just great.

[Alan Ramsey wrote](#) that the howler's performance horrified press secretary, David Barnett, who accused the hacks of embarrassing Fraser and 'betraying the national interest'.

The trip had already served up multiple helpings of furore, farce and fiasco. A junior Australian diplomat mixed up copies of a press release with copies of the full transcript of the first day of talks between Fraser and China's Premier. The mix-up meant Fraser's party got the envelopes with the press release and the hacks got the envelopes with the confidential transcript. Crash, bang, boom, with lots of details about Fraser's indiscreet remarks about India, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Premier Hua Kuo-feng, in turn, was recorded offering an enthusiastic view of the new British Tory leader, Margaret Thatcher, which was an interesting signal of where Maoist China was heading.

The geopolitical furore was Fraser's floating of the idea of a four-power Pacific agreement reaching towards alliance, bringing together China, the US, Australia and Japan to face-off against the Soviet Union. Travelling with Fraser, the *Melbourne Herald's* Peter Costigan broke the scoop this way on 26 June: 'The Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, wants China to join with Australia, the US and Japan in a four-power Pacific agreement. He has raised the subject in talks with the Chinese Premier, Hua Kuo-fang.'

There's some debate about whether Fraser raised the idea so explicitly with Hua, while sketching it in more lurid detail during a drink with Peter Costigan. Senior Fraser aides muttered darkly that fiasco and furore were fermented by unreconstructed Whitlamites in Foreign Affairs, seeking to damage the new PM.

Beijing didn't mind. The Chinese quickly decided that here was another conservative leader from the West who had come to do business. (For a fine discussion of Fraser and China in 1976, see Professor John Fitzgerald's [masterful account](#).)

Whitlam got the kudos for diplomatic recognition of China. Yet the embrace of China was one area where Fraser matched Whitlam exactly in policy intent and personal commitment. Fraser's achievement was to establish that a conservative government in Canberra could be as fervent for the China relationship as Labor.

Deeply different national histories, interests and ideologies didn't prevent a firm friendship that could surprise on the upside. There was nary a hint that Fraser had been a minister in previous Liberal governments that refused to recognise the devil regime in Beijing (Menzies) and gave formal recognition to Taiwan (Holt).

Fraser's persona as an ideological warrior could play to his advantage; his visceral distrust of the Soviet Union was shared by China's leadership. Forget ideology to do a deal to mutual benefit. A China that had fought border wars with Russia was well able to find some geopolitical common ground with Malcolm Fraser. Beijing was not going to sign up to Fraser's vision of a grand anti-Soviet coalition, but it liked where he was coming from.

Fraser's label for his approach was 'enlightened realism'. It was the mantra of a Cold War warrior who'd cooled and become more selective about his enemies. The warrior would be as zealous as ever about resisting the Soviet Union, but anti-communism would not get in the way of new possibilities with China.

The pragmatism of ‘enlightened realism’ created plenty of room for a new China passion. That was signalled in Fraser’s first major statement on foreign policy as Prime Minister, delivered to the House of Representatives on 1 June 1976, just before his first overseas trip as leader, visiting Japan and China.

The ‘enlightened’ bit of the speech was its tribute to deeply held Australian values of democracy, freedom and respect for the individual. Then, the ‘realism’ came crashing in. The ideology of regimes couldn’t be the guiding principle of Australian policy. Interests, not ideology, would drive cooperation:

Whatever the basis of a regime, whatever the organisation of its domestic government, the chief determinant of our relations will be that country’s approach to foreign relations, how it meshes with ours, and of necessity the extent of the interests we share. We should strive to deal with other countries, and look to the development of cooperative relations with those countries with whom we have some common interests, regardless of ideology. A relationship founded on common interests is ultimately the only relationship that can be depended upon.

This China script was endlessly reworked in these exact terms by John Howard. Tony Abbott’s indiscreet line that Australia’s China policy is driven by ‘fear and greed’ merely shows he still retains his journalistic ability to simplify and heighten. The hack howlers would applaud. There’s plenty of room for fear and greed as part of the mix in enlightened realism, as Malcolm Fraser well knew. And Fraser also understood the pain caused when private remarks to another leader are made public. *Plus ça change...*

An anti-alliance Prime Minister

Graeme Dobell, 8 May 2014

After more than a century of federation, we have a PM pointing us towards armed neutrality, and who doesn’t want to be closely aligned to a great and powerful friend. Granted, it’s a PM who lost the job 30 years ago. But Malcolm Fraser’s re-imagining of himself and his country is fascinating. His book *Dangerous Allies* takes Australia to a parallel universe where Oz no longer believes in, or needs, the US alliance.

Fraser writes that ‘almost a century of strategic dependence has left an indelible mark on the Australian psyche’. (Hmm...true.) One solution—close Pine Gap. (Hmm...yikes.) He judges that Australia’s habits of dependence and acquiescence mean it’s ‘now more heavily aligned with the US than at any time in our history’. (Hmm...what about MacArthur and the Pacific war?) Fraser says Australia has become a ‘strategic captive’ of the US (Hmm...?) And the former PM thinks we have more to fear from provocative action by the US or Japan than from China. (Hmm...!!!)

For a generation of Australians who remember the Fraser government—and especially for my generation of press gallery hacks—the post-PM evolution of Fraser’s thinking puts the maze into amazing. Channel [Lloyd Bentsen](#) (‘I knew JFK...you’re no JFK’) for this book: I knew Malcolm Fraser. I covered Malcolm Fraser’s government. This isn’t Malcolm Fraser.

Sure, we all grow and evolve and sometimes change our minds. But in the case of Malcolm Fraser, the facts haven’t changed as much as he has. The one constant is that Fraser has full confidence in his own judgement. As a tough, realist political leader, Fraser smashed the Whitlam government, scorned the soft internationalism of Jimmy Carter and ordered a panicky rearmament surge for Oz after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Today, Fraser is equally as decisive. It’s just that his deductions take him to a Green-tinged edge of the Oz polity, far from the Liberals or Labor. [Here’s](#) Fraser’s summary of his argument while this is my staccato version of his book:

- Australia’s dependence on the US should’ve ended with the Cold War: ‘There was no longer any fear of attack or any reason for Australia to make its own best interests, and the interests of the region in which we live, subservient to earning the goodwill of the US.’

- Australia is so heavily enmeshed in ‘American military and strategic affairs, in interoperability and in the use of military hardware that it is difficult to distinguish a separate military or strategic destiny’.
- Close Pine Gap, one of the largest US satellite intelligence bases outside America. The Alice Springs facility is now a critical part of America’s offensive capability.
- Australia should weigh-up leaving the Anglo intelligence club of the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand, if one cost is ‘the idea that we are spying for, and on behalf of, the US’.
- Japan started the latest round of escalation in the East China Sea and Japan’s growing militarism ‘might represent a dangerous factor in future years’.
- China isn’t an imperial power in the sense that European states, the US and the Soviet Union have been imperial powers. ‘China does not represent a threat to the integrity of an independent Australia.’
- With current policies, Australia would have to join the US in a war with China. If the US lost a war with China, America could withdraw to the western hemisphere, leaving Australia, ‘geographically part of the Asia Pacific, but also a defeated ally of a defeated superpower’.

Hacking at the shackles of the alliance leaves little space to discuss what the alternative looks like. The former PM repeatedly talks of the need for Australia to achieve strategic independence, but there’s little discussion of the landscape of this armed-neutrality nirvana.

Fraser discounts the possibility of any threat emerging if Oz opted for strategic independence; the alliance, he says, ‘provides the greatest problem to our future in the region’. He concludes that ‘there are clear costs to strategic independence’ but thinks ‘these costs are insignificant compared to the potential costs involved in continuing our policy of strategic dependence’.

The man who ranks behind only Menzies and Howard in his tenure as a Liberal PM has produced an iconoclast’s lament, a provoking and passionate attack on the orthodoxies of Australian strategy.

Reassessing Malcolm Fraser

Graeme Dobell, 12 May 2015

Malcolm Fraser, Australia’s 22nd Prime Minister, died in March 2015 at the age of 84. Fraser was Prime Minister from November 1975 to March 1983.

Malcolm Fraser helped cement the Australian political consensus on engagement with Asia—the Great Asia Project—that has directed Australian foreign policy for 40 years. Fraser’s term bedded down the establishment of the modern Department of Defence and the Australian Defence Force in structures that endure. In 1976 his government issued Australia’s first Defence White Paper, marking the shift from forward defence to defence of the continent and its approaches.

Fraser waged one of the greatest battles of Australian politics—the constitutional crisis of 1975—to destroy Gough Whitlam’s Labor government. However, Fraser embraced and enhanced much that Whitlam started in foreign and defence policy. Whitlam and Fraser stood together in proud rejection of White Australia and embrace of non-discriminatory immigration. Fraser was even louder than Whitlam in his promotion of multiculturalism as a core value.

The crash and crunch of the confrontation between Whitlam and Fraser is a major moment of Australian history. Yet the Whitlam policies on which Fraser built point to a simple Canberra truism: the consensus and continuities of policy are the broad current beneath the turmoil of political argument. What marks Whitlam and Fraser is how they turned that broad current. They stand together as important leaders who shifted the direction of policy and made firm a new consensus.

To start that consensus with Whitlam and Fraser is to mark a big before-and-after divide. Before 1972, Australia's leaders were Asia Excluders; after '72, the leaders became Asia Engagers.

Much of the commentary on Fraser's death concentrated on how he had left the Liberal Party or, as Fraser put it, how the Liberal Party had left him. The central discussion of how Fraser's international thinking changed must be his rejection of Australia's alliance with the United States. His 2014 book *Dangerous Allies* is deeply flawed, and yet is a deeply important contribution to Australian debate precisely because of those flaws. Aged in his 80s, more than 30 years after losing office, Fraser had lost none of his ability to strike controversy and state his case in the sharpest terms.

The title *Dangerous Allies* is classic Fraser. Most modern books on foreign policy suffer from colon-itis. The title of the book is given and then the visible or invisible colon throws to a further phrase or phrases that define, refine and mediate the terms of the headline. No refining or definitional hesitation for Malcolm Fraser. He was writing about the danger of alliance with the US and quasi-alliance with Japan leading Australia to line up for a war against China.

It was tempting to write that Fraser had become Australia's first isolationist leader. But that would have been to misunderstand and misrepresent his argument. He wanted strategic independence for Australia—to cease being what he called 'a lackey of America's'—so Australia could take its full place in Asia. The commitment to an independent Australia, able to think and act for itself, is central to the Fraser approach. The journalist Paul Kelly [judged](#):

The unifying theme behind all Fraser's foreign policy was a pragmatic and independent search for the Australian national interest. When speaking for Australia abroad he was consistently informed, formidable and constructive.

That word 'independent' recurs when talking of Fraser's foreign policy compass. The aim is easily embraced by the Australian polity; steering the course to the aim is contested and controversial.

Such battles energised Fraser. All leaders must have the will to power. Fraser was defined by the steel of his will and his steely faith in his own judgement. The Prime Minister could be stiff and abrupt, even when trying to persuade. He was shy and solitary as a country child; a life in politics meant it wasn't shyness but that glint of steel which could be glimpsed beneath the surface. His tall physique and—yes, steely gaze—meant that an argument with Fraser was a physical confrontation. And confrontation was what he did well. This man brought down a Liberal Prime Minister, John Gorton, stalked and bested a Liberal leader, Billy Snedden, and calmly saw off Andrew Peacock's party room challenge to his Prime Ministership. In 1975, Fraser held his nerve and held his party steady in the great confrontation that killed a government with a clear majority in the House of Representatives. Self-belief was one of Fraser's core strengths. Even as those beliefs might change, the strength of his conviction never wavered.

On Fraser's death, his biographer Philip Ayres [judged](#):

The most impressive thing about him, to my way of thinking, was his strong interiority and self-sufficiency, though there was an emotional vulnerability, as with anyone. He didn't need other people much, except politically, and within the family. This offended the press, who had no possibility of plucking out the heart of the mystery – they just couldn't get in there.

The Canberra journalist Jack Waterford [wrote](#) how Fraser rained telephone calls on all levels of the Australian public service, delivering sharp demands for instant information and explanation. In person he was daunting:

Fraser liked an argument, and, if a natural bully, usually warmed to people who stood up to him. He had about him a somewhat aggressive style of wanting to test every part of an argument before he adopted it, leading some to think that he was flatly opposed to a proposition he was in fact leaning to. Instead he was rehearsing the arguments, and learning, or absorbing, the counter-arguments. In this sense he did not mind being contradicted, even if he often disconcerted by the aggressive manner of his questioning, and a tendency not only to want to know what an official thought, but the complete provenance of an idea. One felt that one was being pinned, pushed, tested, and to the limit—and, because of Fraser's impatience, never given much of a chance to explain.

What Fraser did to public servants he was equally willing to do to political colleagues and ministers. The evidence that today's politicians might be a bit weaker than previous generations—or, at least, have a lower pain threshold—is the way the Labor Party caucus and ministry rebelled at the brutal treatment meted out by Kevin Rudd after little more than two years in government. The Liberal Party endured seven years of tough love (very tough, little love) from Fraser and the single leadership challenge was crushed.

One of Rudd's many mistakes was to treat cabinet as something of a formality, with key decisions taken by a small 'kitchen cabinet'. Fraser, by contrast, pushed and cajoled and kept cabinet sitting or reconvening until he got what he wanted, producing nearly 19,000 cabinet decisions. Rudd avoided cabinet while Fraser exhausted it.

Aged 45 when he entered the Lodge and only 52 when he left, Fraser was a workaholic, described by Paul Kelly as 'an awe-inspiring political executive with a near-unrivalled capacity.' That cabinet dominance also figures in Michelle Grattan's [summation](#):

Cabinet sat endlessly; his colleagues were exhausted. Fraser had his hands on everything – his department was omnipresent, ministers were often second-guessed.

Steel will and iron self-belief don't guarantee the correct course, as Fraser's former chief of staff and federal director of the Liberal Party, Tony Eggleton, recalled with [one anecdote](#):

His determination sometimes translated into bloody-mindedness. I still smile when I remember Big Mal striding across the ballroom at the Savoy Hotel in London, convinced that he was taking a short cut to his suite. Despite the protestations of personal and hotel staff, he headed for a door and disappeared into the broom cupboard, to a clatter of mops and buckets. Despite some loss of dignity, he managed to crack a smile.

My best Malcolm Fraser story has me arriving at the Lodge with Owen Lloyd, one of the PM's press secretaries, at 7pm one cool evening in 1980 to do a radio interview about an overseas trip Fraser would commence the next morning. Fraser emerged, glass in hand, to say there'd been a mis-communication; he was hosting a dinner and intended to do the interview at 7am, before departing for the plane at 7:30.

As we left, I told Owen that I'd be back at 7am with a companion, my two-year-old daughter Kate, as my wife would be on shift at the Royal Canberra Hospital. Sure, said the phlegmatic Lloyd, the staff will be glad to meet her. So it was that the next morning I handed a young lady in a dressing gown to the butler at the Lodge and went to record an interview with the Prime Minister. Heading to the kitchen 20 minutes later, I discovered Kate had enjoyed her first close encounter with chocolate biscuits, with nearly as much chocolate on her hands as her face.

With tape recorder on one shoulder and Kate on the other hip, I was turning towards the hall when up loomed an impressive figure in a magnificent pinstripe suit. 'Ah, hello!' said the Prime Minister. The 'wow' reaction from my chocolate-covered munchkin was to lunge at this immaculate apparition with both hands. I swerved even harder, nearly lost the recorder but held the girl, and the chocolate-smear-disaster was averted by inches.

It was the most human moment I ever shared with the big man. Typically, though, Malcolm Fraser had neither changed course nor altered speed.

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