“Australia’s Election: Foreign Policy and National Security Implications”

DATE
Wednesday, May 4, 2022 at 6:00 p.m. ET

FEATURING
Amelia Adams
Senior U.S Correspondent, Nine Network Australia

Peter Hartcher
Political Editor and International Editor, The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age

Stan Grant
ABC International Affairs Analyst, Host of China Tonight and Q and A

CSIS EXPERTS
Charles Edel
Australia Chair and Senior Advisor, CSIS
Hello. I’m Charles Edel, and welcome to the CSIS event on “Australia’s Election: The Foreign Policy and National Security Implications.” I’m the Australia Chair here and a senior advisor. And I’d like to thank all of you for joining us tonight, or, in Australia, this morning. And I’d also like to thank Pratt Industries for supporting this event and the creation of the Australia Chair here at CSIS.

Australia’s election is scheduled for Saturday, May 21st, two and a half weeks from now. And it’s been a wild ride, during a very short election season. The current government, comprised of a coalition between the Liberal Party and the Nationals, has a razor-thin majority. The opposition, Labor, has been ahead, according to polling, but their lead is tightening. Indications are that the upcoming election will be extremely tight, and all major parties have made the country’s foreign policy and national security central to this year’s campaign.

The election occurs as headlines and political debate are dominated by news of China’s advance into the South Pacific, the unfolding war in Ukraine, heated exchanges over climate policy, and rising expectations over what the Quad, AUKUS, and the American-Australian alliance will deliver, and when. As we say here in Washington, elections may or may not be about foreign policy and national security, but they always carry implications for the country’s general orientation, its relations with the rest of the, and administration’s priorities. And, perhaps most critical of all, how it resources those priorities.

Tonight, we’re going to explore the foreign policy and national security implications of Australia’s upcoming election. And to do that, I’m thrilled to welcome three of Australia’s leading commentators – Amelia Adams, Peter Hartcher, and Stan Grant – to offer their insights on the upcoming election, the differences between the parties on national security policy, and the election’s likely implications on Australia’s foreign policy.

Amelia Adams is Australia’s Channel Nine senior U.S. correspondent. She’s reported on major events throughout the world for over a decade. Her live reporting from the doors of the U.S. Capitol during the January 6th insurrection saw her win two Kennedy Awards and a Walkley nomination. Her reporting has taken Australians inside key multilateral meetings – including the Trump-Putin Helsinki summit, NATO, the G-7, and the Quad. And even more important, she’s just returned from Ukraine, where she was reporting on the ground, covering Russia’s invasion and the response from the front lines.

Stan Grant is a journalist of four decades and has covered events in China for more than 20 years, including a decade as CNN’s senior international correspondent in Beijing. Stan has been awarded some of journalism’s most
prestigious honors – including the Peabody Award, Columbia University’s Alfred duPont Award, and he’s a four-time winner of the Asia TV Awards. Stan has written six – six – bestselling books, including most recently, “With the Falling of the Dusk,” a chronicle of the world in crisis. Currently, he is ABC international affairs analyst, host of China Tonight and Q&A.

And last, but certainly not least, Peter Hartcher is the political editor and international editor of the Sydney Morning Herald and its sister publication in Melbourne The Age. He is the paper’s main commentator on national politics and international affairs, and his column is a must read. He is also a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy. Peter’s 40 years in journalism have included decades in postings as foreign correspondent in Tokyo and Washington. And his most recent book is “Red Zone: China’s Challenge and Australia’s Future,” which Frank Fukuyama described as clear-eyed and utterly frightening.

Now, I'm thrilled to have them all here tonight to discuss Australia’s election and its likely effect on the direction of Australian foreign policy. For everyone watching tonight, if you have questions for the panelists, please go to the event webpage on the CSIS website and fill out the question form. We’ll do our best to get as many of these in as possible. And now, without further to-do, I’m hoping we can jump right into things.

Amelia, question for you right off the bat. How big of a role are national security and foreign policy issues playing in this year’s election? What’s emerged really as the primary foreign policy issue of the campaign?

Amelia Adams: Yeah. Thanks, Charles. And thank you for that introduction.

Look, I think we’re seeing national security and foreign policy issues at the forefront of an Australian federal campaign in a way that they haven’t really been for, what, 30-odd years? National security, obviously, is always a key issue, along with economics. So voters, as we know, want to know, you know, what their life will be like under each government. Who’s going to allow me to look after my family the best? Who’ll keep the country safe? But the safety issue, the national security, often presents in relation to terrorism or migration boat arrivals.

This campaign, as you kind of intimated, is absolutely set to such a unique, and a pretty extraordinary backdrop. We have the largest land war in Europe in decades. And to my mind, there’s absolutely no doubt that Australians and voters are watching the images and hearing the stories out of Ukraine and thinking: Could this happen in our region? And of course, the answer is yes. The Chinese Communist Party is expanding and flexing. And Xi Jinping is watching Russia’s invasion and war in Ukraine certainly with his sights on Taiwan.
So how Russia’s actions may embolden him in China certainly, as we know, is a concern for world leaders, but also for our – whoever our government ends up being in May, and Australian people. And of course, now, as you mentioned as well, we have, you know, a Chinese deal or base popping up in the Solomon Islands, which has really dominated the second week – or, really, the last couple of weeks of the campaign.

But I also think that the stage was set for foreign policy to be a really big-ticket item in this election year back in 2021, before the war in Ukraine, before the Solomons pact, when the Morrison government signed up to AUKUS. And that was a huge couple of weeks, if you remember, for foreign policy, and a big couple of weeks here in the U.S. Scott Morrison flew into New York. He had just announced that nuclear submarine pact – lighting a few diplomatic fires with the French and others. He had his bilat there in New York with Joe Biden, and then he came here to D.C. for the first in-person leaders meeting of the Quad at the White House, where AUKUS was obviously top of the agenda.

But, you know, it was all – it was all about China, really. And that, to my mind, is the primary foreign policy issue of this campaign, to your question, because whether we’re talking about Pacific islands and relationships with those neighbors, defense, procurement, even the U.S.-Australia alliance – which obviously encompasses so much history, and shared intelligence, technology. Right now everything points back to our backyard – although I know the Solomon’s prime minister doesn’t like that term. But I’m sure we’ll get more into that U.S.-Australia alliance later on.

But certainly, from a Washington perspective, you know, Joe Biden has been so integral – or, responsible, really, for the renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific since his inauguration. Reinvigorating the Quad, recognizing how dangerous China’s militarization is, engaging with allies to counter that. And obviously Australia’s at the center of it. You know, we’re the oldest and most stable democracy in our region.

So in terms of the campaign, I think that, you know, the Morrison government’s had a pretty firm narrative about being able to handle the China challenge. And the Solomon’s pact has put a real spanner in that. And in fact, there’s a poll out today – and I’m sure Peter can talk more to this because it was in the Herald – but I think 71-72 percent of Australian voters surveyed said they were concerned or very concerned about that agreement, which is pretty significant. And it’s – you know, it’s obviously given Labor not only an opportunity to point out the coalition’s failings or perceived neglect in that space, but also to kind of muscle up its own Pacific plan and put forward its own policies in the middle of a campaign.
We’ve seen this real push with the Labor Anthony Albanese and Richard Marles as well standing up and saying, this is what we could do better. Trying to convince voters they’ll be reliable and won’t get caught out by China. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, by comparison, was asked, I think it was last week, might have been the week before, what he will do to prevent China getting a stranglehold in the region. And his answer was: I’ll keep doing what we’re doing. So it’ll be up to Australians to decide if that’s enough.

But I do think, in a way, the challenges Australia’s facing now are probably more profound than they were, you know, even during the Cold War. The front line then was Berlin. This one’s off our coast. And I would make the point that when I speak to people back home in Australia, and friends, and, you know, mom and dad, yes, people are concerned, as they always are during an election campaign, about hip-pocket issues, and cost of living, COVID management a few months although – although I do think that’s dropped way down the priorities now, with most of the country open and up and running.

But national security is coming up more so in those sort of pub chats. You know, we talk about the pub test of what’s on people’s minds, but it has, I think, for many, many of our elections – Australians aren’t just sitting back and saying: OK, well, let’s let the nation’s leader do what they – do their thing and keep us safe. They just watched a lunatic dictator in Europe invade his neighbor, not very successfully to date but still with an outrageously horrendous amount of death and destruction, lives and humanity.

So suddenly the possibility of a hot war with an autocracy is not that far-fetched at all. And our government may well change on May 21st, but China is – and China’s leader is not going to change. So they’ll be sort of handling the same beast. And I guess that’s the question for our voters. Who is best placed to do that?

Dr. Edel: Do you mind if I hope in right there?

Ms. Adams: Yeah, please do.

Dr. Edel: Because just off with – thank you. I mean, you’ve kind of opened to suite for basically all the election issues that are in there.

Stan, I actually want to key in on that. You know, one of the things that we have to do here in Washington, that I have to do as Australia Chair, is make sure that we translate Australian into American. And so for the Americans who are watching, when we say election campaign, just know for the parliamentary system that we’re dealing with here we’re talking a six-week
campaign. So we are – we are in the throes of it. We’re more than halfway through. But it’s a short election cycle.

Stan Grant: Not like your two-year campaigns, or never-ending campaigns. (Laughs.)

Dr. Edel: Not like our perpetual campaigns that we never get out of over here. So, look, if you’re kind of scoping this at the outset, because Amelia’s already keyed us off about the two different parties but really about the two different leaders presenting different faces, potentially quite different policies for this. What should Americans know about the two prime ministerial candidates? And, you know, a little bit more broadly than that, do you think that there are actual, on the national security front, meaningful differences between those two parties?

Mr. Grant: Yeah, let me go with the two men in particular, Scott Morrison and Anthony Albanese. And what they do share in common is they are men. They are white men. And all Australian prime ministers but one have been that. If we’re looking at the differences personally, quite stark differences, actually. You know, Scott Morrison is the suburban dad, as he likes to prevent himself. And, you know, Anthony Albanese goes under the moniker DJ Albo when he’s spinning disks in his spare time. Scott Morrison, very, you know, Pentecostal Christianity. Anthony Albanese describes himself as a cultural Catholic, but certainly not devout.

Scott Morrison very much a suburban dad persona he likes to present himself with. And Anthony Albanese comes from a very sort of socialist left background. You know, he was opposed to the economic reforms of the Hawke-Keating era. His favorite catch cry was “I like fighting Tories.” Well, Scott Morrison is the very epitome of the Tory. Pentecostal Christianity, conservatism, suburban values. So they’re very different individuals. Anthony Albanese’s gone a long way to try to shrink that difference. He’s played down a lot of his past political positions, tried to wind back some of the more left-wing leading ideas and persona, and narrowed the difference particularly when it comes to issues of foreign affairs.

They’re very much in lockstep when it comes to thinks like defense spending, the defense outlook, the AUKUS deal, the nuclear-powered submarines acquisition, the Quad, the – you know, all of the – and, broadly, the threat that China represents. But if you get down into the detail, you start to look at the histories of the two parties, you do start to see some differences. And one of the things that the Labor Party has wrestled with throughout its lifetime is this relationship to the United States.

And there have been at time antagonism when it comes to that relationship, or suspicion when it comes to that relationship. You know, going back to the Hawke years, and before that Bill Hayden who was leading the Labor Party.
You go back to the Gough Whitlam era. There has been suspicion and discussion around the – that relationship and how it is framed. Now, of course, Anthony Albanese today talks about the United States as the bedrock on Australian security, and there is alignment on that.

But there is a history there. And the coalition has sought to play to that history and doubt some doubt about whether the Labor Part is reliable when it comes to security. Also, questions about defense spending. Again, broadly, if you take the broad sweep of the two parties, there have been little differences. If you look at the Howard government era defense spending and Rudd-Gillard-era defense spending, they're broadly in alignment. But there are differences within that.

During the Rudd years, when Rudd was prime minister, Kevin Rudd was prime minister, he very much identified back in 2009 – in a defense white paper – identified the looming threat of China. He’s well-versed in China, he served there as a diplomat, he’s a Mandarin speaker. He saw the looming challenge or the looming threat. Increased defense spending. That was wound back in the Gillard era. Both the threat and the spending on defense. So again, there are – there are differences there that the coalition has sought to exploit to cast questions about the consistency and how committed Labor would be.

Amelia is right, when you look broadly at what’s happening in the region and in our world, in many respects there is little Australia can do individually to push back against China’s rise. Solomon Islands are going to make their own strategic decisions, their own sovereign decisions. Other countries in the region are going to do that as well. You look at the Belt and Road Initiative that China is building around the world, its infrastructure and investment initiative, the vast majority of countries around the world are signing up to that to some extent.

China is a big power. It’s our biggest trading partner. It seeks to be the preponderant power of the region. It’s the biggest engine of economic growth in the world, and it’s set to surpass the United States as the single biggest economy in the world by the end of the decade. So to many extent, we’re sort of captive to events. And we’re captive to the big power rivalry between the United States and China. But that’s not to mean – not to say we can’t do anything. And we look at strengthening our sovereign defense capacity. Both sides committed to that. We’re looking at strengthening our alliances in the region. Both sides are committed to that. And to be able to push back where we can against this growing assertiveness or aggressiveness.

So Labor is thought to narrow the difference. There are historical issues that may undercut that. The government came into the election being seen as a
safer bet, a more popular option when it came to handling defense and security. But they've taken some blows as well with the Solomons pact, and accusations that their eye was off the ball, and should have seen this coming, and couldn't do anything about it. So that's where we stand at the moment – both sides with their pluses and their minuses but seeking to narrow the difference. And both sides identifying the American relationship as the bedrock of security. And both sides identifying the China threat. How we respond to that is the question.

Dr. Edel: No, this is great. And thanks for scoping so broadly on these initial questions. Amelia kind of what's on voters, how it's resonating. Stan really kind of laying out some of the differences. But one of those differences, at least from a historical perspective that you laid out there, is traditionally how Australia has dealt with its major ally, the United States.

Peter, I'm interested, kind of projecting forward, given the downward turn in the security environment that we see how that both parties are talking about, both parties trying to convince the electorate that they will handle it more competently, what is this going to mean for the alliance? We know at the top level that it will mean nothing – that everyone will stay tightly latched to the – and committed to the American-Australian alliance. But are we likely to see things speeding up, slowing down? Do we think an election one way or the other would change the trajectory of where we're heading in any meaningful way?

Peter Hartcher: You used the word “competence," Charles. And, you know, I would suggest to you that in this election foreign policy, security policy, won't be determinative. But it does give – because voters primarily have much more kitchen table issues on their minds. But it does get a lot of coverage, more coverage than we've seen since the Iraq War, when Labor took a different view to the then-Prime Minister John Howard. That contributed to Labor losing the 2004 election under its then-leader Mark Latham. And Labor's not going to make that mistake again, of trying to differentiate on the U.S. alliance, essentially.

But foreign policy does give the parties a chance to demonstrate competence. And that's where that issue of the Solomon Islands and the security agreement with China plays directly to the heart of this election. Because Labor is portraying the government as incompetent. And in walks Sogavare, the prime minister of the Solomons, and Xi Jinping, hand-in-hand. Signed an agreement smack in the middle of the campaign. And that is a tremendous blow against the competence of the Morrison government. And that's the key issue, the way it's been playing politically. It's not so much the issue itself, but the competence of government to respond to the issue.
How this, to your question, Charles, affects the alliance post-election? What this election has revealed, I think, is two things. First, as you say, the firmness of the bipartisanship on the U.S. alliance – and as Stan ran through, also the bipartisan agreement on China as the threat. That is an absolute rock-solid bipartisanship. So much so that when Scott Morrison has tried to pick a fight with Labor on these issues – on national security, on China in particular – Labor refuses to give him one.

He's tried to politicize the alliance and the response and national security. He's even called the deputy Labor leader a Manchurian candidate, Richard Marles, which is really, you know, we're getting a bit over the top there. But Labor just refuses to pick a fight. Signs up to every substantive policy, every act of parliament the government has put forward on China. Excuse me. And just will not pick up the glass and hit the government back. Just keeps restating its position on China, on Pacific, on the alliance.

The second thing it has done – excuse me – (coughs) – is, as I said, revealed the inadequacy of Australia's current responses on China and national security. And Australia now is in a sort of a pause. I would suggest to you, a national moment where we are in between cognition, recognition of the scale and urgency of the problem, and response. And competence is the huge gap. And we've just seen it yawning before us. So that's going to energize both sides of politics to accelerate everything.

Now, Morrison's already said – the prime minister has already said that Australia's defense budget at 2 percent of GDP will have to go much higher. Labor's not quibbling with that. Everybody can see that that's necessary. Both parties are going to step up their hopes and activities with the alliance. The risk here, Charles, isn't the – anymore – the complacency from Australia. That's Australia's traditional enemy, is complacency. That's our real enemy. And we are now – this has now snapped us, I would suggest by political parties, out of that.

And just today you'll see the Defense Minister Peter Dutton announcing what are really some pretty minor missile acquisitions, but they're getting big play because it's an election campaign. The bipartisan commitment, the sense of national urgency that has just been awakened, believe it or not, in the last couple of weeks, they're a given, I think, now. And Australia is increasingly looking to the U.S., not only with AUKUS. Last week Labor, for example, announced a policy to start to create an Australia DARPA, which as soon as you say it you can immediately think, what, we don't have one already? Why not? (Laughs.) It's such an obvious thing to do.

So that's one indicator of Labor saying, you know, we really need to do more to stand on our own two feet. It's kind of a flattering – it's a compliment to the U.S. and the success of DARPA over the decades. The real risk, I think,
from Australia’s point of view now is the U.S.– is whether we get Donald Trump again, or a Trump-acyclic type, in the presidency that could, once again, start challenging alliances and the value of them. That’s seen as the biggest risk here I think not only in the sort of strategic foreign policy community, but also by the two main parties. Although you’ll never catch them saying that publicly.

Dr. Edel: Thank you. So now that you’ve scoped us very broadly on kind of changes and kind of hurrying up to set a much higher threshold, if you guys don’t mind, I’d like to dive into a lot of the actual particular issues in front of us, which you’ve already raised. So, Peter, can we actually stay on Solomon Islands for a second? For those of you who have not read Peter’s columns particularly over past three weeks please look them, please read them. There’s urgency in the writing no less than the policy turn right now. And I guess, again, just as I had asked Sam to do, can you just take a step back for Americans who kind of tune in to what’s happening in Australia but might not pay as much attention, just about why the Solomon Islands – I know you talked about competence writ large – but why the Solomon Islands resonates just so closely for Australians, and whether or not we might be beginning to see evidence of new approaches? Some of which you’ve suggested in your own columns.

Mr. Hartcher: Yes. Well, in the last couple of weeks, Charles, the Wikipedia entry on battle of Guadalcanal would have been getting a lot of extra traffic out of Australia, I suggest. (Laughs.) Australians are rediscovering – or, the younger generation’s discovering the importance of Guadalcanal, which of course is the main island of the Solomon’s group, and how the U.S. led the allies in World War II driving the Japanese out of Guadalcanal, driving the Japanese imperial army out of the Solomon Islands, and beginning MacArthur’s roll up of the Japanese invasions right through Southeast Asia and into the Pacific.

That was a place where Americans and Australians fought and died. And, you know, they fought and died to prevent a hostile power lodging a little under 2,000 kilometers off our coastline, and also sitting astride the essential sea lines of communication between Australia and the U.S. MacArthur was determined to protect those sea lines of communication. He was based in Brisbane in northern Australia at the time. And so the country’s now discovering that although lives were lost, battles fought to prevent a hostile power lodging in the Solomons, we now have a hostile power with a political foundation for a military base lodging in exactly the same place.

It’s a single failure of Australian foreign policy and security policy. It means that the nearest Chinese military base, which currently is 6,000 kilometers from Australia, could very well have just made a 4,000-kilometer advance towards Australia’s coastline without a shot being fired.
Dr. Edel: You know, Peter, if you don't mind my jumping in, when we were living in Australia, I used to tell all my American friends that the single busiest 36 hours that I had was in and around the announcement of what may or may not have been happening in Vanuatu, when we went through this before, but it didn't quite land. And I used to say, look, as an American, and as an American who works in security policy, I'm always hyperventilating about the South China Sea, and telling my Australian friends this is really bad. And everyone would agree. And I would say, this is what it looks like in Vanuatu, much closer to you. And now we see it actually going up here.

But that's in the policy realm. You know, Amelia, going back to the conversation, yes, with your parents, but much more broadly, is this an issue in particular, as everyone's kind of Googling and Wikipedia-ing Guadalcanal, that you're hearing in your conversations is particularly resonate? Or is it just a general feeling that we're hearing about this, which might actually cause voters – you know, swing voters – to flip one way or the other?

Ms. Adams: Yeah. Certainly in my conversations with people back home in Australia, Charles, that that's a more general, you know, this is a big issue. And I think, I mean, this idea – and Peter certainly touched on it – but the government was caught off guard, or we didn't know this was going to potentially happen. I mean, you know, we know that China's not the first country to try and get a foothold in the Solomons. The Japanese did it in World War II. And, I mean, we're talking about potential control over, you know, shipping lanes connecting America to its allies. It's pretty extraordinary.

But in answer to your question, I think the Solomons issue is a big deal, obviously, but it more plays into that general national security did the government drop the ball, did the government stuff up? And also, as you mentioned Vanuatu, I mean, what if China makes similar pacts with other island nations, you know? And militarizes the region? I mean, that drastically changes the strategic landscape. I think in terms of – in terms of Beijing trying to kind of, you know, drive the U.S. out of the region, it's a pretty big stuff you, to use an Australian term, isn't it? (Launch.) It's a pretty big get stuffed from Xi Jinping basically to Australia, and to D.C. as well.

Dr. Edel: Yeah, you know, Stan, as someone who obviously spent more time than any of us living in Beijing – I was there for only three years, you were there for a lot longer –

Mr. Grant: At the same time, Charles.

Dr. Edel: We were indeed. And, you know, one of the things I found most fascinating, that I think if you ask anyone here in Washington they will also say is fascinating, is watching the changing Australian debate on China. The changing perceptions of China. The threat perception has kind of moved
through the roof, while the friendly, warm and fuzzy feelings have – the floor has dropped out, particularly in the aftermath of COVID and the economic coercion that we’ve seen in Beijing.

I’m really interested, though, does that translate into a floor or a ceiling for where Australia might go in terms of policy with Beijing? We’ve been hearing about a reset potentially under a Labor government. At some point we’ve heard from the coalition government that they’d be willing to redo. What do public perceptions mean for expectations of both floor and ceiling?

Mr. Grant:

Well, you know, public perceptions of the relationship with China have changed dramatically. You know, it was only a few years ago China was seen as an opportunity and ever closer ties. Now they’re split, and China is being seen as a threat, and a challenge, and a danger. But like the rest of the world, Charles, Australia was asleep at the wheel. We kept believing that the Chinese Communist Party would, A, collapse or, B, reform and become more like us. That was never the intention. Deng Xiaoping when he began the reform process in the 1990s talked about hiding your capabilities and biding your time. Xi Jinping believes his time has arrived.

If we go back to 2014, Xi Jinping, who at the time – I’d been reporting in China at that time – at the same time was locking up Uighurs, locking up Tibetans, cracking down on dissent, locking up his rivals. He comes to Australia, he addresses the joint sitting of federal parliament, and the prime minister at the time, Tony Abbott, describes him as a partner in the future of democracy. I mean, this is how blind we were to what China’s long-term ambitions were. China was always saying that it seeks to become the preponderant power of the region.

You know, we need to flip things as well, Charles, and understand what it looks like through Chinese eyes. Peter made a reference to Guadalcanal and how we need to learn those lessons from World War II. Well, the Chinese have memories of conflict as well. They think of the battle of Ch’ongch’on in Korea, against MacArthur, the same foe that Peter had mentioned, you know, in Guadalcanal. Against MacArthur, where China inflicts an enormous defeat on them, drives the American army back in what is still the single-biggest retreat in American military history. It is celebrated every year in China as a victory over the war of American aggression, which is what they call the Korean War.

China and Xi Jinping are still fighting, in many respects, the Opium Wars. That’s where the narrative of the history of humiliation comes from. The Opium Wars of the mid-19th century saw the Qing empire fall, China go into a period of collapse, a deep period of introspection, a period of revolution and conflict ends with the Chinese Communist Party revolution in 1949. It has been a steady growth since then to reclaim what Xi Jinping sees as the
China dream, to return China to the apex of global power. It looks around the world and it says: Everything you did, we’re going to do. We’re going to use economic might. We’re going to claim territory. It speaks to a narrative of Western colonization. It points out the hypocrisy of Western society.

That resonates with a lot of places. It resonates in the Pacific, where they have a history of colonization. They look at Australia and American now, and they look at Australia not doing enough, for instance, on climate change, and see that as being a snub to what Pacific Island nations are going through. So when it comes to floor and ceiling we have to understand the history. We have to understand how China sees the world. We have to be very clear-eyed about our response to that.

And a floor or ceiling policy response isn’t just what we do with China. It’s how we rebalance our supply lines for our economy. It’s what we do on climate change. It’s what we do with Pacific aid. It’s what we do on strengthening the bonds of our democracy. It’s what America does in strengthening its own democracy after the disruption of the Trump years. And it is military. And I’ll just leave you with this thought.

I was speaking to Jim Molan, liberal party senator, former general, just last night. And these are the worlds – (laughs) – you know, Amelia used an Australian colloquialism “stuff up.” I will use another one. Jim Molan said: Right now if a battle was to be fought in this region – and this is coming from his American contacts in the American military – we will get – quoting – “we will get our asses handed to us,” because China has changed the status quo. It is preparing to fight its sort of war in this region on its terms. And we need to be prepared for that. He said, we are 20 years late waking up to this, and now we need to go into fast forward.

That’s where we stand. China’s seeing a history of humiliation, a return of China to the apex of global power, pointing out what it says is contradictions and hypocrisies in Western liberal democratic narrative, challenging us in our own region. And people are listening and hearing. Hence, you get the Solomon pact.

Dr. Edel: Amelia, I saw that you wanted to jump in here, but let me complicate this for you a little bit because I’m going to throw another question your way too. I just had someone come in actually from here in D.C. This is a senior staffer on the House Foreign Relations Committee. Everyone is asking the same question, and it’s hovering around what all three of you have just talked about – about kind of wither Australian China policy. And are we talking about a general continuity or a general reevaluation? Or are there specific things that you think are more likely to change on red versus blue? Take that question and/or make your previous point, please.
Ms. Adams: The point I was going to get – and I’ll get to that. I don’t think there would be huge specific changes, no, would be the short answer. But it just made me think, when Stan mentioned, you know, the potential resets, through the sort of U.S. lens, 2008. Remember Obama, that the reset with Russia – you know, he wanted to reset relations with Russia, right? Sounded good. Big kind of promises, and sit down, and sort this out. Didn’t really change or achieve much in the end. And I just wonder – and I don’t necessarily have the answer – I don’t have the answer to this.

But I just wonder if our government does change if anything significant is going to change really in Australian China policy. I think Labor’s got a different tone in China, certainly. But, I mean, the first thing Anthony Albanese would do would be get on a plane to Tokyo to the next Quad meeting. That’s in the days after our election, which would be a huge first international trip for him. But is he going to change the messaging or the dialogue or try and put something else forward? Probably not, I would imagine.

Is the Labor government going to go in a different direction with AUKUS? I’m not sure the Labor government would have signed up to AUKUS but, you know, certainly they supported it. And now that it’s in the works, I think they would be very – they would continue that continuity in getting it done under a Labor government, probably under a Richard Marles defense minister. I’m interested in what you think on that as well, Peter. Do you think there would be any – in terms of specific changes?

Dr. Edel: Yeah, Peter, please. We’re all interested in hearing.

Mr. Hartcher: OK, sure. Well, there would be. A general change would be a new level of energy. This is an exhausted government that we have at the moment. And the fact that the foreign affairs minister – I would guess that if you conducted a vox pop on the streets of Sydney today you’d be lucky to have one in 10 people tell you who the foreign affairs minister is. That wasn’t the case when it was Julie Bishop. But with Marise Payne, she’s practically invisible, completely inert, and a complete failure as foreign affairs minister. The problems in her portfolio just keep piling up, and none ever get solved. She’s also the minister for women, believe it or not, and this government’s had a crisis of confidence with Australian women in this – in this government. And if they lose, that will be one of the main contributing reasons.

But on the specifics, yes, there’s a couple of things. So I’ll just mention briefly what Labor put out last week as its Pacific policy responses, as in South Pacific. So Penny Wong, Labor’s shadow foreign affairs spokesperson – shadow minister, produced a series of modest, sensible policy proposals to Australia’s relationship with the South Pacific. The most meaningful, I think, was a liberalization of immigration and labor market access arrangements
for the citizens of the South Pacific, there’s only 10 million of them, and access to Australia. That’s potentially very big, although the numbers initially are quite small.

She has proposed for the first time that Australia create a specified quota for South Pacific islands as part of Australia’s permanent migration settlement. It’s only 3,000 initially, but, you know, Labor’s doing everything very modestly and very cautiously, deliberately to keep the focus on Morrison, because Labor wants this election to be a referendum on Morrison. So these policy proposals from Labor give you an idea of where they would take policy, but I think only at sort of an entrée point. And you can expect to see them ramp up all the ideas that they’re proposing.

Another one, the – well, one that’s actually in a bipartisan parliamentary report that was delivered to the parliament in November, to which the government has not responded – further evidence of an exhausted government. And it was a parliamentary inquiry that was actually chaired by a senator from the ruling party, from the coalition. And yet, the government has to respond to it.

But the most interesting, and I think most transformative, policy idea in that report, which has bipartisan support at the parliamentary level, is for Australia to look at compacts of association with the South Pacific nations, as the U.S. has with some of your Pacific protectorates, where there would be an increase in the – a transformation of the relationships so that, for example, there would be Australian passports issued to any of the South Pacific countries that entered a compact with Australia. And in return for which Australia would give security guarantees and provide some defense, potentially bases, in the region.

So these are the sorts of ideas that we could expect Labor to pick up and to run with. Labor’s also said they’ll had half a billion dollars over four years to Australia’s South Pacific aid budget. They’ve got a suite of sensible, no-regrets measures that they would apply. And they would – I think they would bring those measures to bear. I know in Washington there is a residual suspicion – and Stan touched on this earlier – of, you know, the reds are under the bed in Labor Party suites. That it’s full of – it’s full of closet communist sympathizers.

That’s changed. That has absolutely changed, not only because the leaders of the Labor Party themselves have received the classified briefings and are fully aware of the seriousness of the Chinese intrusions into our systems, and China’s ambitions, but because the politics have taken them there. Amelia mentioned the poll in this morning’s paper about the number of people concerned about the Solomon’s deal. The number of people concerned about
China generally is as close to unanimous as you will ever get in a democratic society.

Dr. Edel: Yeah. One of the things that you – again this is intervention for the American listening audience. Things are sometimes reversed. So the Liberal Party is the party of the center right. The Labor Party is the party of the center left. And, confusingly for Americans, the center-left party wears red, the center-right party wears blue. So it’s a little discombobulating here. But as we’re on China, there is something else that I want to bring in before – I’m getting a ton of questions, I’m trying to summarize them here in some of this.

But Amelia, especially with your experience being on the ground in Ukraine, I can tell you in Washington what has happened in Ukraine, how the U.S. has responded, and what it might portend, as Stan said, for other nations is really reverberating. It is the constant topic of discussion here. And if we talk about things that are indeed headline news every day at this point, do you have any sense of what lessons the government and the opposition are drawing from Ukraine, beyond the fact that, yes, we will get Bushmasters when they are requested?

I mean, what specific lessons – and, again, for an American audience who’s listening to this, I would note that President Zelensky addressed, of course, the U.S. Congress. He also addressed Australian Parliament House, and was very explicit when he was there, saying we appreciate what you’re doing, Australia, because we don’t want to see territorial norms, such as sovereignty, violated, because that could happen in other places of the world, like where you are. Amelia, how is that conversation on Ukraine playing out?

Ms. Adams: Yeah. And I think that’s a key point, you know, Volodymyr Zelensky saying to the Australian parliament, you know, whatever is happening in our country has become a real threat to your country and your people as well. So bad actors, dictators, whoever they are, you know, what will they be allowed to get away with in 2022? And what we’ve seen in Ukraine is that Putin was not stopped at the gate, right? The incursion was building and pending for months and months.

And frankly, the West and the world didn’t do enough to stop him. And he rolled his – he rolled his troops in. And what was supposed to be a, you know, three-day taking of Kyiv has turned into these long, and bloody, and quite unsuccessful invasion, really, for Putin. But, you know, the fact remains that he’s burning Ukraine to the ground and razing cities. He’s not conquering it, but he’s certainly ruining it. And, first of all, there’s the lesson of what is happening – what would this look like in our region, obviously, as we discussed a little earlier. Is Beijing watching? Absolutely. What would an invasion of Taiwan look like? You know, how would Putin go here and could Xi Jinping do something similar? So those sort of comparisons.
You know, Russia has – and he’s continuing to be allowed to – get away with war crimes almost daily. And it was extraordinary to be on the ground there. And I was based in Lviv, which, you know, there were a couple of missiles strikes there, and I did – I did travel out of Lviv a couple of times. But very much a, you know, beautiful, historic, fairly cosmopolitan European city. And coming under attack, was just – it’s just extraordinary. So in terms of how the world responds, the lessons that we – the lessons that our government learned, well, I mean, you mentioned U.S. sending Bushmasters and military aid and anti-tank missiles and bullets. And that’s what we have to do. I mean, we have to continue to arm Ukraine and humanitarian aid as well.

I don’t think – I don’t think Vladimir Putin ever imagined a couple things. I don’t think Vladimir Putin expected, first of all, the Ukraine resistance, which has been extraordinary and so resilient. And the people you meet there on the ground, from the men who have been forced to stay behind in Ukraine and go into fight, but many of them want to, to, you know, Ukrainians raising money and trying to get people out of the cities that are under attack. They’re just extraordinary, the resistance there.

And the second thing is I don’t think Putin envisaged the world would rally around the Ukrainians in the way that they have, and against Russia as well. I mean, we have the NATO alliance more united than it’s been in decades and decades, which is just extraordinary, and the exact opposite, obviously, of what Vladimir Putin would have wanted.

Dr. Edel:

You know, really – sorry to interject – one of the things that’s happening here, as I’m sure you’ve seen, is that what’s happening in Ukraine is not staying in Ukraine. That’s obviously true along the eastern border, where NATO is stationed. But the constant churn of the policy conversation is, is this applicable? Is this a useful analogy for Taiwan or other hot spots in Asia? And so it’s prompting a policy and a political debate here about what more needs to be done yesterday in terms of weapons procurement, in terms of stockpiling? And, Stan, I’m – is that debate playing out? I mean, we’ve seen hints of Taiwan surface during this election campaign. But is it turbo-charging the electoral and the political debate about what else needs to happen in Asia because of what we are seeing, because of what Amelia has just described in Ukraine?

Mr. Grant:

Well, I think most definitely. I mean, first of all, you would say, Charles, that there would not be an invasion of Ukraine had China not upended this global order. Remember, of course, Vladimir Putin goes to Beijing for the Winter Olympics and signs a no-limits pact with Xi Jinping and invades Ukraine the very day after the closing ceremony. So there is a sense Vladimir Putin shared this with Xi Jinping, that the West is weak, indecisive, and this is the
moment to strike. Now, of course, Vladimir Putin’s seen the West can rally and is supporting Ukraine, as Amelia has rightly pointed out. Now he’s bogged down in this conflict.

It’s hard to invade a country. The Soviets learned that lesson in Afghanistan. The Americans learned that lesson in Afghanistan. Look at what happened after the invasion of Iraq and the consequences of that spilling over into other regions. So once these things begin, they don’t end necessarily how you would expect. As that famous philosopher Mike Tyson once pointed out, everyone has a plan until you get hit. And then you have to respond.

Now, in terms of Taiwan, there are several questions to ask. One is, what would the United States do, Charles? The United States is not on the ground inside Ukraine, fighting with Ukrainians against the invasion. Yes, supporting Ukraine. NATO’s not sending troops in there to fight alongside the Ukrainians. Would the U.S. put troops on the ground to defend Taiwan? Yes, it is duty-bound to arm them in the event of an attack. What would they actually do? That’s a question that has to be asked.

Peter pointed out, what will happen after the next election, and what happens if we get a Trump-like or Trump himself? And what does that mean for alliances and America’s stickability in the region. Remember, Donald Trump after he met Kim Jong-un talking about the potential for pulling out American troops in South Korea and Japan. Those sort of things raise alarm bells. And then in terms of Australia, what would we do and what could we do? We clearly don’t have the military might to meet China in a face-to-face battle, but building our alliances and building our strength with the United States, then clearly that changes the equation.

If we saw an invasion of Australia, I would say at that point the war is too late. It’s lost. If they’ve made it all the way here for a Ukraine-style invasion, with all the island-hopping in between, we’re in big trouble. Can we stop China at the gate? Well, I think the gate is open. They’ve already walked through. We’ve seen Solomons. We’ve also seen drawing closer ties with PNG. You mentioned Vanuatu before. China is not Russia. It’s an indispensable nation. Russia is an economy the size of Australia’s. They’re the biggest engine of economic growth in the world, Australia’s biggest trading partner.

Look what’s happening globally economically at the moment. Inflation’s on the rise. Interest rates are rising here in Australia. You know, one if five jobs in Australia are related to exports. What happens if there is a downturn – a significant downturn and a decoupling our China relationship? So all of these things factor in. And then what will China do? I mean, Peter mentioned the Pacific and Labor’s measures to look at counteracting a creeping Chinese influence. We’re playing catch-up.
When I was in China, when you were in China, China was already bringing the best and brightest of the Pacific islands to study in their universities. It built the parliament in Timor. It builds roads. It builds parliament buildings, government buildings. It’s been investing. It’s already doing this. And we’re now trying to play catch up. It is a superpower to rival to the United States. It is an authoritarian regime.

The big question of the 21st century was always going to be what happens when an authoritarian regime becomes the biggest economy in the world? We were asleep at the wheel. We’re trying to play catch-up. And everything we’ve talked about, Charles, China is going to have a say in what happens, what the outcome is.

Dr. Edel: No, thanks. Peter, you know, you did a really nice job laying out, you know, what I think is a fine dissecting of what Labor put out last week, what more they would do. I’m curious with what Stan has just laid out, but keying in on the fact of rising interest rates, dislocation after the pandemic, and yet understanding that Australia, and the U.S., and others have all lost the march on China here in the Pacific. Do you think there is – we know that there is policy oomph, initiative behind doing more. Which means spending more. Is there going to be political support for that?

Mr. Hartcher: You’re talking about specifically defense and security related?

Dr. Edel: Well, I’m talking about a little bit broader than that. Because I would say let’s start with defense, but this also means, of course, tightening investment controls further than they are now. And it also means plussing-up the development and the aid budget as well.

Mr. Hartcher: Yes, OK. Well, the first point I’d make is that the political support for increasing spending on all of those categories is there. And both parties have already committed to spending above and beyond 2 percent of GDP. You know, Australia was just so asleep it beggars belief, right? Two years ago the government delivered its defense strategic update, which – where sort of the lightbulb went on. And they said, oh, we’d always assumed in defense planning that Australia would have 10 years warning window of any hostile approaches by an enemy. And now we’ve realized we don’t have 10 years.

And that was when they started announcing acquisition of missiles. Australia had no long-range missiles – none. The entire defense edifice of this country has been exposed as a façade. It’s not the, you know, big serious military. There was one part of the military that was licensed, if you like, to conduct actual war, and that was the special forces. The rest was sort of – I mean, the whole strategy was just to play a bit part in American operations. 2010 – 2020, rather, was when the lightbulb moment came. And they said, hang on.
The threat from China is real. The U.S. might not be there to do it for us – ala, you know, the Trump factor. Maybe we should think about acquiring strike capability.

So this is astonishing negligence by Australia for decades. It’s now suddenly got to be compensated for. The Defense Department hasn’t discovered any sense of urgency. The biggest challenge for any incoming government, whether it’s a reelected Morrison or an incoming Albanese government, reactivating the Defense Department to stop – to get out of this mandate that there’s not actual – any actual threat and we don’t need to get serious about acquisition. Support for increasing the defense budget will be rock solid across the parliament, except for the Greens. And they have some influence. They will have some influence. They’ll have numbers on the cross bench in the Senate.

The country still has a AAA credit rating. The national debt burden is at its highest since 1956, believe it or not. But there is still scope for increased spending. There is scope for reordering of budget priorities. And anything to do with countering the China threat, Charles, whether it’s spending on aid, spending – because people now get the connection – military, AUKUS, the alliance, will be supported politically, to answer your question.

Dr. Edel: Thank you. Look, I know that you guys have already woken up, and woken up early, except for Amelia and I who are here in Washington. And I’m conscious of everyone's time because I really would like to continue this conversation. But let me just ask a very brief final question of each of you. We’ll keep this brief, but I am curious, because we’re broadcasting to a largely American audience here. What would you say about why Americans should care about this Australian election? Amelia, you’re here in Washington with me, so why don’t you start us off on this one?

Ms. Adams: We’re so aligned at the moment. And I was just thinking, you know, it’s interesting, our federal election syncs up with a really intense month of American engagement with Asia and the Pacific. So we have the ASEAN summit here at the White House next week – I think it’s next week, the week after – which is obviously really important. As I mentioned earlier not long after, and straight after the Australian election, the next Quad meeting in Tokyo, which will also be, incidentally, President Biden’s first trip to Asia since he took – since he took office. And people I’m speaking to here in D.C. have been really firm that, you know, it’s a critical trip for him. His tone is critical. The outcomes, especially with what’s going on in Ukraine. He’s got a bilat with the Indian prime minister on the sidelines, which is critical because India’s been quite reluctant to take a hard line on Russia.

So it’s interesting that all of these things are kind of aligning at the same time as Australians are going to the polls. But I think the bottom line is, which
we've all been pretty clear, that China is right now just undermining the international rules-based order. And the Australian and the American alliance has never been stronger and, I think, more determined to counter that, and to come up with objectives – you know, a set of objectives when it comes to China. And I think that whoever our prime minister is, come May 22nd, that’s not going to change. In fact, it’s likely only going to, as Stan said, you know, intensify.

Dr. Edel: Peter, you agree with the assessment that it’s never been more important? We should expect either result to kind of latch us up more closely? I mean, why should we be focused on this?

Mr. Hartcher: Kurt Campbell told me a while ago, Charles, that he and others had thought that Australia was the U.S. ally most likely to flip, in his term, to dump its alliance with the U.S. and ally itself with China in the recent – what, since 2017 – when the rethinking really began. In the last five years, we've seen Australia become a case study in political resistance to China.

America should care because if Australia were to lose its will to resist China, if Australia were to so fail in its ability to arm itself, and gear up, and meet the challenge, if Australia should Finlandize and decide its worth bargaining with China after all and their fourteen demands – the list presented to the Australian government by the Chinese government – fourteen demands on our sovereignty, then Australia would go from being a part of the U.S. security guarantee network and become a liability.

I mean, America should care about Australia for the same reason China is pursuing it. Australia sits astride the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and the Southern Ocean. China is making inroads everywhere from – as you know, from the South China Sea in the north to Antarctica, building new bases on Australian territory. Australia lays claim to 42 percent of the surface area of Antarctica. China's building scientific or dual use, actually, bases in Antarctica, plus is making inroads into the Pacific.

If Australia were to become neutral or change its alignment, all of that vast landscape – look at where Australia is on the globe – would become open territory to China. The U.S. could forget about trying to contain the Chinese navy at the first island chain or the second island chain. The U.S. would be forced fundamentally to reconsider its own – its own defense against China. The Pacific would be lost.

Dr. Edel: Well, that’s a stark rationale for why we should be paying attention to not only what China’s doing, but how Australia is responding.

Stan, a couple of times – you get the final word here, Stan. You know, a couple of times you talked about Australia being small. I can tell you,
actually, the defense conversations here in Washington really look at what Australia has done as a model of resistance, as Peter had said. So I'm curious where the question of agency plays in here, and what Americans should be paying attention to in terms of what Australia has been doing and will continue to do.

Mr. Grant: Peter’s right. You know, Australia was described as the canary in the coal mine. Many things that we had done here, the rest of the world has looked to. How we responded to China is going to give other democracies around the world a lead. Huawei is an example. We blocked Huawei’s involvement in rolling out our 5G. And other countries have followed suite. Investment laws that we put in ways, foreign interference laws that we put in place. There has been a political – a coherent political response, albeit one that is late and followed decades of delusion to what China actually represents right now.

But why should we be paying attention? Why should Americans be paying attention to this election? Because democracy matters. I mean, that's the question of the 21st century. It's why we should care about Taiwan. It's why we should care about Ukraine. And democracy around the world, Charles, as you well know, has been in a perilous state. Freedom House measures 15 straight years of declining democracy and freedom around the world. We’ve seen the rise of populist autocrats. We’ve seen a hollowing out of institutions, growing inequality – which is a cancer on democracy. It is devolved into tribalism, erosion of freedom of expression and free speech. Of course, I don’t need to tell you about the Capitol Hill insurrection and what that told you about the state of your own democracy.

Democracy matters. And a coherent democratic response to authoritarianism is going to define the 21st century. I don't think China, in and of itself, lays waste to democracy. The U.S. and the EU combined still dwarfs China's economy. The virtues of democracy, for all its failings and its contradictions and its inconsistences, is that we are held to a moral count. And I don't see that, obviously, is an authoritarian-led world, where it's far more transactional, not moral, and not based on alliances.

Democracy matters, and the strength of our democracy matters. How we strengthen those institutions, how we deal with the legacies of our own history, the legacies of racism, the legacies of colonization which certainly resound throughout the Pacific, how we deal with issues like climate change, our ability to work together to strengthen those bonds of our democracy, is going to go a long way to how we deal with this.

And Australia, the canary in the coal mine in this region, staring down the threat with a robust democracy, is one – you know, we should be looking at this election and seeing how do we strengthen those things? And how do we emerge from this with a consensus to move forward? We may be in a
minority government at the end of this, looking ahead with the influence of parties like the Greens who don’t want to increase defense spending, an opposition that becomes obstructionist and wants to wreck everything, as you saw during the Obama years when Mitch McConnell said he just wanted to drive Obama out of office. If we end up in that situation, then we won’t be able to meet this challenge. So strengthening democracies matter. That’s why you should – that’s why you should care about this election.

Dr. Edel: Well, what a fitting way to end this, by talking about the democratic processes that are upon us, that are upon you and Australia, but is one of our sources of strength. I would just thank, as we conclude here, all three of you for being such loud and prominent and really strong voices, and for being so game as we covered the entire waterline here. From Ukraine, to Taiwan, to democratic resilience, to China. This has been a fabulous conversation. Really appreciate all your time.

I would be remiss if I didn’t thank the CSIS wonderful AV team who put this on, and also to both Hannah and Parker, who make sure the trains run on time here in our office. For those of you who are watching, please make sure that you visit our website for the latest on upcoming events, publications, and announcements, especially because we have an election on us – or, on you in two and a half weeks down in Australia.

Thanks, everyone, so much for tuning in. Very much appreciate it. And have a good night or a good morning in Australia.