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Solomons deal brings China too close for comfort

THE AFR VIEW

China's security deal with Solomon Islands is a serious worry. Beijing already claims the South China Sea, the main trade artery of the Indo-Pacific, as its territorial lake and has dotted it with fortified islands to make the point. Now, for the first time, China has also reached into Australia's immediate neighbourhood in its search for bases, in uncomfortable proximity to the east coast ports that our future nuclear submarine fleet will use.

Labor's foreign affairs spokeswoman, Penny Wong, claims that this is our worst foreign policy failure in the South Pacific since 1945, accusing the Morrison government of going missing when warnings on the deal were given last year. Prime Minister Scott Morrison argues that low-key diplomacy was simply viewed as more effective. In reality, Australia's election politics have collided with the politics of Solomon Islands. The government of Manasseh Sogavare and the country's opposition are deeply divided in their support for China and Taiwan respectively, and a prickly Mr Sogavare has snubbed both Australia and the Biden administration in return for Beijing's patronage.

Labor and the Coalition are commendably close on foreign policy.

unmissable chance to embarrass the government in the national security area it considers a strength, and retaliation for the Coalition's groundless claims that Labor is Beijing's preferred government. In reality, Labor has supported the government on the South China Sea, the diplomacy of the Quad, and the advanced technology sharing of AUKUS. These are all important counterweights to Beijing, precisely the kind of multi-partner alliance-building where democracies have a co-operative advantage over autocrats.

The real rifts in the Solomons are domestic inter-island economic inequalities, which no outside players, even the successful Australian-led intervention between 1998 and 2003, can fully fix. But a more substantial economic integration between Pacific Island nations and Australia would help offset these widespread inequalities. China's trade with the Pacific Islands has grown tenfold since 2005. It is the third biggest aid donor, at around \$1 billion a year. But this is dwarfed by China's \$18 billion in debt-driven construction work in the region, controversial because of lack of transparency and local jobs, and heavy debt. Australia's Pacific Step-up since 2018 has added more aid. But what China cannot match is employment opportunities in Australian agriculture for Pacific Islanders, whose remittances might make a huge difference in island economies, now that fruit-picking backpackers from wealthy Britain are set to be fewer. Australia should be taking many more than the 40,000 Pacific Island workers who arrived over the past decade.

Whoever wins Australia's federal election next month may find divides between China and the West widening further, with Beijing apparently prepared to put its ties with Moscow ahead of its main technology suppliers and consumer markets in the West.

Yet Australia has a different relationship with China from most of its Western peers, which run trade deficits with China, not surpluses. China's mercantilist export policies are a source of grievance in the US and Europe. But this week the International Monetary Fund said that commodity-rich Australia is one of the few countries set to grow even as the Ukraine war stifles recovery elsewhere. That is partly because of China. For all its attempts at economic coercion against Australia, China cannot do without Australian iron ore and gas, or even the coal imports that it tried to ban. In an odd parallel, Germany's long efforts to engage the now-toxic Moscow are rightly seen as a political and diplomatic debacle. But Berlin is also finding that the Russian energy imports that underpinned it are also very hard to do without. And if Europe does diversify, it will be by expanding the global seaborne LNG supply, which also would benefit Australia. But there are few alternatives to the scale and efficiency of the Pilbara. It's a reassuring underlying truth that economic interdependence is at least as powerful a force as economic competition, and it is an advantage that Australian governments of either party share.

From the Gallery

David Rowe



Albo's not kicking with the wind

Polling trends
Despite the self-inflicted wounds, Labor remains in front in a majority of seats. But the margins are getting tighter.



John Black

In week two of the 2022 election campaign, Labor is still assessing the damage from campaign wounds inflicted on all of its MPs and candidates by Anthony Albanese in week one.

It wasn't so much that Albanese didn't know the current unemployment rate or the cash rate. It was the impression he gave voters that he didn't think it was important enough for an aspiring Labor prime minister to understand what these basic economic indicators mean for working families.

Despite this self-sabotage, Labor is still in front on the national seat count, as the benchmark for us here is the vote in 151 individual seats in 2019, not the latest media gaffes from politicians or wannabe politicians.

The short version of the number crunching is that Labor is still well in front in terms of a majority of seats in the House of Representatives, but the margins in many seats are getting tighter.

My reading of the demographic vote summaries, along with national, state and seat-based polls and trends had Labor moving yesterday from 69 seats to 81, gaining 12 seats: Bennelong, Lindsay*, Reid*.

Scott Morrison's relentlessly positive junkyard dog attitude has been working pretty well for him.

Boothby, Bass, Braddon, Chisholm, Casey, Higgins* Swan, Pearce* and Hasluck*.

However, the five seats marked with an asterisk were on margins of less than 1 per cent and could go in the coming weeks if Labor's leader doesn't start performing. This could leave Labor with a bare majority of 76 seats.

I have the Coalition losing these 12 seats, taking it from 76 to 64, and currently under serious challenge from six "teal" candidates for North Sydney, Wentworth, Goldstein, Flinders, Kooyong and Curtin.

As for Scott Morrison, he's not too worried about the polls, and you'd have to say his relentlessly positive junkyard dog attitude has been working pretty well for him so far this campaign, albeit against a labradoodle opponent.

I have also conducted a few face-to-face interviews. The thing you notice on the doorstep is that, before the election campaign was announced, all but the most hard-bitten

supporters of established parties were looking backward. They weighed their responses according to how the government has performed during the current parliamentary term. The opposition gets a bit of a look in, but not much.

You normally get relatively few undecided voters, typically in single figures. And if you allocate them according to how they voted last time and what they think of the major party leaders, you get the undecideds down to a handful of first-timers, who invariably vote the same way as mum and dad.

However, once the election date is announced you can turn up on the same doorsteps and find the undecideds have jumped to 20 per cent-plus. The respondents are then looking forward to the policies of both the government and the opposition, to see how they and their families are affected personally.

At this time, the quality of opposition leaders gets considered as well, along with the policies they've established during their period in opposition. Typically, it's too late once the campaign is announced for the voters to take it all in.

The ALP has some strong, potentially vote-winning policies on childcare, aged care, an integrity commission, global warming and free TAFE courses.

But last weekend's Resolve Political Monitor had the Liberals and Morrison a country mile ahead of Labor and Albanese on economic management and national security. However, on education and health issues, where Labor is normally well in front, Labor and Albanese have gone backwards to almost level pegging.

So, we all know who's kicking with the wind here, with four weeks to go – and it certainly isn't Albo. You'd think a Souths supporter would know that rugby league is a much better metaphor for Australian politics than Aussie rules.

In league, the big forwards don't kick the ball, they ruck it up through the middle for the whole game, and they take risks and get hurt. Then they shake themselves off and do it again. After that, the yappy little half back gets to look good and the wingers get to score.

And it's never pretty, watching a yappy little half back who thinks he can play like a forward and win the game all by himself. Especially in the last quarter.

John Black has pioneered demographic and political profiling in Australia since the early 1970s and is a former Labor senator for Queensland. He is executive chairman of profiling company Australian Development Strategies.