

Analysis of Australia's Foreign Policy towards Southeast Asia during the Tenure of Prime Minister Scott Morrison from Personal Perspective in International Relations

Nguyen Minh Giang¹, Nguyen Thuy Van², Nguyen Ngoc Dung³

¹Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, 72100, Vietnam. Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, 72100, Vietnam Email: 21822904008@hcmussh.edu.vn

²Phu Yen University, Vietnam Email: nguyenthuyvan@pyu.edu.vn

³Faculty of History, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, 72100, Vietnam. Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, 72100, Vietnam Email: nndung@vnuhcm.edu.vn

Abstract

The foreign policy of Australia towards Southeast Asia during the administration of Prime Minister Scott Morrison has been notably influenced by the prevailing wave of populism and the dynamics of international relations within Southeast Asia. The individual level constitutes one of the fundamental tiers in the analysis of foreign policy within the field of international relations. Through the synthesis and analytical examination of qualitative data, this article elucidates the profound impact of Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Australian foreign policy concerning Southeast Asia, thereby elucidating a series of significant milestones that have transpired within Southeast Asia-Australia relations throughout this epoch. Concurrently, this article demonstrates the influence of personal factors, including cultural identity origins, individual cultural characteristics, behavioral norms, competencies, and experiences, on the political engagement of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Keywords: *Australia; Australian Foreign Policy; Individual-Level in International Relations*

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Australia elevated its relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to the status of a comprehensive strategic partnership, positioning itself as one of the inaugural two comprehensive strategic partners of ASEAN, preceding the accession of the remaining three comprehensive strategic partners to date: the United States, Japan, and India. Japan attained the status of a comprehensive strategic partner with ASEAN in 2023. China initially established a strategic partnership with ASEAN in 2003, subsequently achieving comprehensive strategic partner status in 2021. India entered into a strategic partnership with ASEAN in 2018, culminating in its designation as a comprehensive strategic partner in 2022. The United States achieved comprehensive strategic partner status with ASEAN in 2022. More than half of Australia's Southeast Asian partners have also enhanced their relations to the status of strategic and comprehensive strategic partners with Australia throughout the four-year tenure of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, encompassing Malaysia (2021), Thailand (2022), the Philippines (designated as Australia's strategic partner), Indonesia (2018), Malaysia (2021), Singapore (recognized as Australia's comprehensive strategic partner), Brunei (2023), Thailand (2022), and Vietnam (designated as Australia's comprehensive strategic partner). This can be regarded as the most significant achievement in foreign policy that Australia has realized under the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who represents the first Prime Minister of a new era, effectively concluding the political crisis that persisted throughout the second decade of the 21st century in Australia. Moreover, the most consequential global political events that exerted substantial influence on Australia and Southeast Asia emerged during Prime Minister Scott Morrison's administration, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the US-China trade conflict, and the Russia-Ukraine war. The personal imprint of a Prime Minister's influence on Australia's foreign policy has never been as distinctly manifested as in the tenure of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, navigating through such globally significant crises, conflicts, and pandemics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the era of ancient Greece, Aristotle conceptualized the state as being governed by the elite middle class, comprised of individuals who were both intellectually astute and affluent in material and spiritual resources. He posited that such individuals were uniquely resistant to the allure of wealth and the burdens of poverty, thereby qualifying them as the sole citizens capable of effectively managing civic affairs. In the perspective of Xenophanes, a leader ought to possess the ability to command, exhibit superior capabilities, demonstrate advanced technological proficiency, and possess persuasive skills. Furthermore, it is imperative for such leaders to prioritize the collective welfare over personal interests, eschewing selfishness and individualistic pursuits. Conversely, Augustine extolled the virtues of a political leader who is resolute in advancing the common good, disdaining arrogance and avarice for power. This leader must possess foresight to recognize and mitigate detrimental habits, advocate for moderation, and actively discourage indulgence that could lead to societal decay and the eventual disintegration of the state. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an effective leader must embody virtues, possess talent, be adequately educated regarding the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of citizens, and demonstrate an understanding of societal dynamics. Moreover, such a leader must exhibit a comprehensive knowledge framework, master legal principles, and prioritize communal interests over personal aspirations, ensuring that individual desires are subordinate to collective needs. Notwithstanding the variations in cultural, historical, spatial, and temporal contexts, Western political theorists demonstrate a remarkable consensus regarding the foundational criteria for rulers, emphasizing the essential qualities of moral integrity, intellectual acumen, and physical vitality, which are necessary for political leaders to harness collective and communal strengths in order to successfully fulfill designated responsibilities (Ho Chi Minh Academy Institute of Political Science, 2009, tr. 355-357).

In a broad sense, within any societal framework, an effective leader is required to possess extensive knowledge, a comprehensive cultural foundation, profound insight, an understanding of the principles governing historical progression, a thorough grasp of the contemporary socio-political challenges faced by the class, a steadfast political position, a complete comprehension of the class's interests, unwavering loyalty to the ideals, directives, policies, and standards of the party, a working style that aligns with the responsibilities undertaken, an ethical, appropriate, and simplistic lifestyle, an inherent trust and respect for individuals, a continuous endeavor for societal advancement, the application of highly artistic political techniques in managing intricate scenarios, and the ability to innovate by applying political theories to resolve practical issues, as well as the capacity to deeply synthesize practical experiences to enhance the political ideology of the party (Nguyen Quoc Tuan, 2008, tr. 264-265).

METHODOLOGY

Throughout the last two centuries, the liberal bourgeois political paradigm has elevated the significance of leaders, individuals, intellectuals, spiritual figures, and transcendentalists to an absolute level. They perceive political figures as politicians occupying significant roles within the party, state, and social organizations, asserting that politicians are those who execute political decisions, necessitating an analytical examination of the essence of the law as it pertains to the decisions made by politicians. They employ the advancements in behavioral science to refute the class characteristics of politicians (Ho Chi Minh Academy Institute of Political Science, 2004, tr. 318-320). For instance, in the tripartite framework of analysis concerning international occurrences as well as national behaviors, the actions of individuals are pivotal in influencing internal political dynamics, while the national political framework also exerts considerable influence on events and the behavior of nations (David Singer, 1960, tr. 453-461). The influence of individuals who lead a nation is significantly contingent upon the behaviors and personal attributes of the individual in leadership (David Singer, 1961, tr. 77-92). Constructivist theory evaluates foreign policy through the lens of human psychology, cognitive processes, and perceptions, focusing on the contributions of individuals or collectives in the formulation of foreign policy, which encompasses subjective elements within individuals that affect decision-making processes and foreign policy (such as personality traits, leadership styles, or cognitive and decision-making methodologies, as well as the personal egos of leaders within socio-political frameworks) (Sharifullah Dorani, 2019). This methodology

serves as a principal analytical approach in international relations when scrutinizing foreign policy from the individual perspective within the domain of international relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The roles of Prime Minister in Australia's foreign-policy making

In the context of Australia, the individual occupying the office of Prime Minister is regarded as the leader of the political party that secures the plurality of seats within the House of Representatives. The Prime Minister assumes a pivotal role within the Cabinet, wielding the authority to appoint and remove ministers, allocate fiscal resources to various ministries, determine the organizational framework of the government, preside over Cabinet sessions, and establish the policy agenda. Consequently, the Prime Minister serves as the focal point of governance, possessing considerable prestige and holding a position of significant importance within the political party. The Australian Prime Minister not only possesses the prerogative to appoint and dismiss ministers based on their qualifications and standing but also bears the responsibility of reporting to Parliament regarding the administration of social expenditure budgets and socio-economic initiatives. Historically, the Australian Prime Minister has consistently exercised the authority to dissolve the House of Representatives and convene early electoral processes, with the most recent occurrence noted in 1975. To effectively fulfill a central role in governmental oversight, the Australian Prime Minister may concurrently assume various critical positions of authority, contingent upon the prevailing national circumstances. For instance, Prime Minister Whitlam concurrently held the position of Minister for Foreign Affairs, while Prime Minister John Gorton also served as Minister for Immigration. As the fourth consecutive administration of the Labor Party, the Hawke government rapidly established notable personal engagements in the office of Prime Minister, exerting a significant influence on numerous foreign policy matters, including vocal support for an alliance with the United States, initiatives for disarmament in the Asia-Pacific region, endeavors to restore peace in Indochina, and robust backing for the role of the United Nations. In general, critical societal issues such as women's rights, the welfare of indigenous populations, immigration policies, and foreign relations are frequently addressed by the Australian Prime Minister. During the nascent period of the Australian government, the role of foreign ministers was predominantly fulfilled by prime ministers who lacked substantial political clout. The Foreign Office, which primarily managed immigration and land-related matters, was dissolved in 1916. In 1932, the Prime Minister assumed the responsibility of appointing the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. It was not until 1935 that an autonomous Foreign Office was instituted, no longer operating as a subdivision of the Prime Minister's Office. The establishment of the first diplomatic missions beyond Britain occurred in 1940, with Australian embassies being inaugurated in Washington, Tokyo, and Ottawa. The gradual evolution of a specialized diplomatic service within Australia can be attributed to the close ties between the British Empire and familial-national relationships, the absence of widespread alienation from the British Empire among the populace, the historical context of power struggles throughout the nineteenth century, and the prevailing understanding that, without fostering animosity or aggression towards the British populace, the principal focus was on self-preservation and defense. The geographical remoteness of Australia from the broader Western capitalist sphere—characterized by the highest concentration of military forces, significant conflict, and the looming threat of nuclear warfare—would inherently constrain Australia's capacity to ensure its own security and defense (Gareth Evans & Bruce Grant, 1999, tr. 34-36).

The Prime Minister constitutes the most pivotal figure in the formulation of Australia's foreign policy. This influence is inherently associated with the role. It is applicable regardless of whether the Prime Minister is actively and extensively engaged in policy formulation, as exemplified by Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, or to a lesser extent, as was the case with Ben Chifley. In either scenario, the orientation and trajectory of Australia's foreign policy is established from the highest echelons of government. Russell Trood has characterized the capacity of Australian Prime Ministers to obtain and sustain a level of authority over foreign policy as "unique in government" (Russell Trood, 1992, tr. 156). The significance of the Prime Minister in matters of foreign affairs has been apparent since the inception of the office. Excluding the ephemeral Labor Government of John Watson in 1904, all Prime Ministers until 1908 concurrently held the position of Foreign Minister. During the late 1940s, the opposition criticized Evatt

for both his and his department's disregard for the established conventions of Australian Prime Ministership. In a modified iteration of Australia's Westminster system, the Prime Minister possesses the prerogative of relative autonomy in the majority of both domestic and foreign policy domains (David Lowe, 1997, tr. 70). The Prime Minister's authority over foreign policy is derived from his or her overarching responsibility for delineating the government's strategic agenda and articulating the government's vision; thus, elucidating the nation's identity to both its citizens and to the international community. An integral aspect of this vision encompasses the perspective on how Australia ought to engage with the global milieu. The Prime Minister singularly wields the ultimate authority of the government on two distinct planes: for the Australian Government in relation to other governments and for the Australian nation in relation to foreign states. In the first context, the Prime Minister's function is rooted in the tradition of hierarchical diplomacy and its historical evolution as a conduit for sovereign entities to negotiate with one another. In the second context, the Prime Minister's role is more expansive and symbolic. It entails the articulation of Australia's values and principles to audiences that extend beyond governmental confines; initially to international elites such as business leaders and investors, the media, and opinion shapers, and subsequently to the broader global citizenry. The Prime Minister effectively and comprehensively represents Australia to this extensive constituency in a manner that surpasses the capabilities of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Trade, or Defence. The Prime Minister's international visits serve as a critical nexus between foreign policy and domestic political considerations. While Australia's foreign and trade ministers may traverse the globe independently and with minimal staff, Prime Ministers invariably accompany an entourage of senior journalists. These visits stand as one of the most overt manifestations of the government's foreign policy. The selection of destinations serves both symbolic and practical purposes.

Foreign policy is more readily executed by the Commonwealth than by sectors such as health, transportation, or education. The Australian Constitution's Section 51 explicitly designates the responsibility for foreign relations to the Commonwealth. Policymaking, irrespective of the critiques directed at state governments, necessitates the balancing of challenging domestic trade-offs, much of which transpires without the financial implications associated with programs related to social policy or national defense. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the Prime Minister possesses significant authority over Commonwealth policy. Foreign ministers have historically wielded substantial power and influence, as exemplified by figures such as Evatt, Casey, Hayden, and Evans. However, in instances where the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister are at odds, such as Menzies' disagreement with Casey regarding support for Anthony Eden during the Suez crisis, or Fraser's divergence with Peacock concerning Cambodia policy in 1980-81, the will of the Prime Minister generally prevails. This predominance is attributable in part to the Prime Minister's superior political authority within the Cabinet, but it also reflects the severe political ramifications that may ensue from any dissent directed at the Prime Minister by his Cabinet colleagues (Patrick Weller, 1989, tr. 313). Traditionally, the governing body is constituted by the majority party in the House of Representatives. The Prime Minister simultaneously serves as a member of the House of Representatives. Conversely, the Senate exhibits a broader diversity of Members of Parliament representing various political factions. A Prime Minister is subject to replacement should he lose the confidence of the majority party in the House of Representatives. Securing a leadership position within the ruling party equates to obtaining the Prime Ministership. Consequently, the collegiality inherent in the political decision-making process in Australia is frequently pronounced. During the question periods in the House of Representatives, where the Prime Minister and members of the Government are present, opposition or coalition parties retain the prerogative to interrogate all pertinent issues. To leverage this authority, the opposition party within the Australian parliamentary system is entitled to scrutinize and access information regarding governmental administration to critique policies effectively. Conversely, the Australian Prime Minister also possesses the authority to dissolve parliament and initiate a new parliamentary election, enabling the electorate to resolve disputes between Parliament and the government concerning the exercise of state power. While the dissolution of parliament and the scheduling of a new election are complicated in scenarios involving disagreements between the two dominant parties, each party may address the issue by electing a new party leader, which may include both the ruling and opposition parties, potentially resulting in a change of Prime Minister.

Consequently, the incomplete separation of the three powers persists, with a singular group of party leaders maintaining control over both the House of Representatives and the government. This phenomenon elucidates why political discourse often transpires solely within the ruling party, thereby precluding public participation and oversight. In summary, such a two-party system is imperative within a parliamentary framework to mitigate the propensity for power abuse, corruption, and to enable the opposition party to exert control in an organized and effective manner. It becomes evident that the separation of powers within the Australian federal state apparatus is largely superficial; fundamentally, it represents a division of power among political parties, as no parliamentarian may cast a vote contrary to the collective decisions of the political party they represent.

The roles of Scott Morrison in Australia's Southeast-Asia-policy making

Morrison was born and raised in Bronte, a suburb located in Sydney. His father served as a police officer and subsequently held the position of mayor of Waverley, a town situated within Sydney's eastern suburbs. In his youth, Morrison featured in television advertisements promoting Vicks cough syrup. He first encountered his spouse during church-related events when she was merely 12 years old. They entered into matrimony when Morrison reached the age of 21 and are parents to two children. Following the completion of a Bachelor of Science degree, Morrison pursued a career in real estate and tourism. He subsequently assumed roles within the Australian Property Council, the Australian Tourism Authority, and the Department of Tourism and Sport in New Zealand, ultimately leading the Australian Tourism Authority in 2004. Mr. Morrison formally entered the realm of politics in 2007 and was re-elected as a member of parliament representing the Sutherland Shire area in southern Sydney. His diligence and leadership abilities have long been acknowledged by numerous colleagues. One of Australia's most prominent Members of Parliament articulated to the country's *Women's Weekly* in 2015 (prior to Turnbull's contest against Tony Abbott for the premiership) that "If we (the Liberal Party) lose the next election, Scott Morrison will be the leader." Morrison has firmly established his political identity through a stringent approach to immigration. Following the tragic sinking of a boat carrying numerous refugees off the Australian coast in 2011, he incited a "public opinion storm" by claiming that the government was squandering taxpayer funds by facilitating the attendance of victims' relatives at their funerals. When confronted with a budgetary shortfall, Morrison exhibits a preference for expenditure reductions rather than tax augmentations (Tuan Anh, 2018). He is recognized for his stringent positions on immigration and same-sex marriage. Specifically, in 2013, upon assuming the role of Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, Mr. Morrison actively enforced a zero-tolerance immigration policy. One of Australia's strategies to deter illegal immigration involved the confinement of such individuals in offshore centers located on Manus and Nauru Islands. This policy faced condemnation from the United Nations and various human rights organizations. In addition to his uncompromising immigration stance, last year, Mr. Morrison also cast his vote in favor of opposing same-sex marriage legislation in the Australian Parliament, notwithstanding the outcomes of a nationwide public opinion poll indicating robust support among the populace for legal reform. Furthermore, Morrison has exhibited an unwavering dedication to the enhancement of multilateralism, engaging with allied nations, and transforming initiatives, plans, and agendas into tangible resources that foster a peaceful, secure, and prosperous security environment in the Indo-Pacific, thereby safeguarding national interests; security and defense constitute a pivotal domain of cooperation that substantially advances the effective execution of Australia's proactive hedging strategy with Southeast Asian nations, designed to manage China's increasingly assertive ascent while ensuring a sustainable United States presence in the region and protecting national interests. Scott Morrison (born 1968) represents the inaugural post-Baby Boomer generation to ascend to the office of Australian Prime Minister. In contrast to the Baby Boomers, who emerged during the post-war demographic surge, or the frequently discussed Millennials, Generation X was born amidst a decline in birth rates in Australia. The advent of the contraceptive pill, the liberalization of divorce statutes in the early 1970s, and low immigration levels during their formative years yielded a relatively smaller generational cohort. Nevertheless, despite their diminished size, Generation X has occupied influential roles within both governmental and corporate spheres. Indeed, every Australian state premier belongs to Generation X, and they have assumed significant positions as prime ministers and chief executive officers across numerous sectors. This underscores their profound impact on the formulation of national policy. This

generation was raised during the tenures of Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke, with Ronald Reagan occupying the White House and Margaret Thatcher serving as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The scarcity of childcare resources during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in Generation Xers spending a considerable portion of their childhoods without supervision. This environment cultivated a pragmatic and resourceful disposition, which they carried into their adult lives. Their formative experiences were characterized by the 1987 stock market crash, the ensuing "recession we had to go through," and the fall of the Berlin Wall, which signified the collapse of communism in Europe. For numerous Gen Xers, the "recession we had to go through" coincided with the commencement of their professional careers, contributing to their somewhat cynical and cautious perspective on employment. In 2020, Morrison articulated that tensions in Asia evoked memories of Europe in the 1930s. More recently, he cautioned against an "arc of authoritarianism" that poses a threat to global stability. While loose rhetoric may be easily dismissed, the more consequential matter lies in the decision to position Australia on an offensive military stance. In the measured language of Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update, the government seeks to "maintain adversary forces and infrastructure at a greater distance from Australia." Despite the adversities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, both parties have persistently engaged in the Australia-Vietnam and Australia-Indonesia Defence Policy Dialogues, alongside the Australia-Vietnam and Australia-Indonesia Diplomatic and Defence Strategic Dialogues at the ministerial level, reflecting the established defence strategic dialogue frameworks between Australia and its traditional allies, specifically the United States and Japan. Prime Minister Scott Morrison commenced his victory address on Saturday with the assertion, "always believe in miracles." This statement is devoid of hyperbole. Morrison seemingly articulated his conviction that divine intervention plays a role in the political arena to influence electoral results. At the core of Morrison's comprehension of political life lies his Pentecostal Christian faith. In his inaugural address to Congress in 2008, he characterized the leader of Hillsong Pentecostal Church, Brian Houston, as his mentor and positioned himself as a proponent of unchangeable truths and principles inherent to the Christian faith. Morrison's Horizon Church is an integral component of the larger Pentecostal movement that originated in the United States. Miracles constitute fundamental tenets of Pentecostalism. Miracles, in conjunction with the gospel, remain defining characteristics of contemporary Pentecostal Christianity. From a Pentecostal perspective, Jesus represents the sole pathway to salvation, while all of history—and the future—exists under divine sovereignty. Consequently, the imperative for further measures aimed at decreasing carbon emissions to mitigate environmental degradation linked to climate change may hold minimal significance for Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Should apocalyptic scenarios arising from climate change be perceived as part of God's divine plan, there exists little that humanity can or should undertake in response (David Hardaker, 2021). Only those who attain salvation through Jesus (who undergo a spiritual rebirth via intrinsic faith within the Pentecostal church) possess any prospect of attaining eternal life in heaven. Theoretically, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's faith is characterized by a pessimistic outlook concerning the individual's rapport with the divine. Thus, faith is oriented towards the divine in both the present and the eternal. Consequently, the doctrines of Pentecostalism carry limited social implications. It would therefore be unreasonable to anticipate progressive perspectives from a Pentecostal individual such as Morrison.

The alliance between Australia and the United States has persistently been regarded as a robust and enduring partnership. For Australia, the affiliation with the United States is perceived as pivotal, not only for economic advancement but also for safeguarding the national security interests of Canberra. Prime Minister Scott Morrison is situated among the most conservative figures within the moderate faction of the Liberal Party, a conservative centre-right political entity that was formally established in 1945 through the amalgamation of three non-Labor factions: the Australian Alliance Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and the United Australia Party (Jeff Wallenfeldt, 2024), which reflects the interests of the bourgeoisie and upper echelons of Australian society, endorsing free trade while advocating for elevated tariff barriers to promote the accumulation of capital for domestic enterprises. Trade and economic considerations occupy a central position in the ideological framework of the Liberal Party, which aspires to: enhance the capabilities of an internationally competitive Australian economy to capitalize on the globalization of trade and investment flows; uphold a robust national defense, comprising an appropriate amalgamation of bilateral, regional, and multilateral security alliances; fortify international connections

and partnerships, particularly with the United States; and optimize economic and strategic prospects presented by closer engagement with Asia-Pacific nations. Consequently, the Liberal Party's administration in governance will endeavor to realize the objectives delineated in its manifesto. Since the 1970s, Asian immigrants have constituted a substantial segment of the working-class electorate, with Northeast and Southeast Asian regions increasingly augmenting their trade with Australia, thereby reinforcing the notion that Australia is intrinsically linked to, and a component of, Asia. Australia embarked on a phase of significant integration with Asia, committing to align its developmental trajectory with the Asia-Pacific region. Scott Morrison has unfailingly manifested a commitment to prioritizing the alliance with Washington, accentuating that the United States constitutes Australia's foremost partner and closest ally since his assumption of office. He has asserted that a vigorous and engaged America in the Asia-Pacific region is critically important to Australia's national interests at a juncture characterized by intense competition for influence between the United States and China. Even in Australia's 2023 Strategic Defence Review, one of the government's immediate initiatives is articulated as "strengthening diplomatic and defence partnerships with key partners in the Indo-Pacific, adopting a more focused and strategic approach, and enhancing coordination across key government agencies." In contrast to the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, the cultivation of partnerships is now perceived as a collective mission. This endeavor will necessitate personnel across national security and international policy agencies to cultivate "intercultural competence" to comprehend the priorities, strengths, and operational methodologies of disparate bureaucratic entities. Nonetheless, while policies aimed at economic integration with Asia are highly regarded for their pragmatism, the proposition of recalibrating Australia's identity has encountered mixed receptions and is fundamentally deemed ineffective due to the disparity in regional perceptions of Australia and vice versa, Australia's British heritage and lack of struggle for national independence, Western lifestyle and cultural traditions that diverge from the regional perspective, Australia's significant emotional security ties with the UK and the US, and the religious dichotomy between Australia and the region.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison seeks to enhance the process of Australia's integration by underscoring a "rules-based global order" and accentuating Australia's export activities through the South China Sea, predominantly directed towards China and Thailand, as well as Vietnam, which collectively represent two-thirds of Australia's export turnover. In addition to sustaining economic relations with China and preserving traditional security alliances with the United States, Australia has broadened its collaborative engagements with Southeast Asian nations to safeguard national interests amidst uncertainties surrounding the US's commitment to the region. Australia is a signatory to the Five Powers Defense Agreement (FPDA), the sole military alliance involving Malaysia, and plays a pivotal role in facilitating Malaysia's progress within the maritime sector. In 2019, Malaysia emerged as Australia's second-largest trading partner within the ASEAN framework and was designated as Australia's ninth-largest trading partner overall. Furthermore, Australia was identified as Malaysia's 11th largest global trading partner in the year 2020. Both nations acknowledge the significance of fostering a peaceful, prosperous, and rules-based Asia-Pacific region, and they aspire to actively engage in regional mechanisms that ensure the resilience of the region against the adverse impacts of the United States and China. The year 2021 also witnessed Malaysia assuming the role of national coordinator for Australia within ASEAN, thereby providing enhanced opportunities to influence the regional agenda (Daniel Thomas, 2021). Concurrently, the ascendance and increasing influence of China in Southeast Asia compels the government of Canberra to actively participate in regional dynamics, particularly as superpowers intensify their competitive engagements. The Southeast Asia package encompasses infrastructure initiatives that Australia perceives as essential for bolstering the resilience of nations in the face of external pressures. Australia is contemplating the integration of development assistance into its overarching strategy. Although the supplementary funding allocated in the October 2020 budget was not classified as development financing—thus avoiding an elevation of development expenditures beyond the \$4 billion limit—the cooperation package unveiled in November 2020 did augment the development budget. This indicates that the Australian government has recognized that the prevailing levels of investment are insufficient in relation to Australia's strategic objectives. Consequently, if Australia aspires to cultivate profound relationships in Southeast Asia, it must augment its investment in the region. Canberra is

positioned to support pragmatic programs tailored for the region within its operational capacity. As articulated by Bridi Rice of the Australian Council for International Development, development cooperation would enhance Australia's reputation as a "practical, problem-solving" nation. The Southeast Asia package has been conceptualized as a comprehensive governmental initiative, with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade undertaking a coordinating role. The heightened interest in the region is evident in the enthusiasm exhibited by former officials regarding the Asia-Pacific Diplomatic, Defence and Development Dialogue (AP4D). It is encouraging to observe Australia employing the full spectrum of defence, diplomatic, and development instruments to cultivate profound partnerships with Southeast Asian nations—a region that remains critically significant to the health, security, and economic vitality of the country (Melissa Conley Tyler, 2021).

However, Australia's hedging strategy continues to exhibit a 'low-active' orientation, insufficiently addressing measures aimed at mitigating prospective uncertainties. In spite of its robust commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific", Australia encounters significant obstacles in institutionalizing the Quad framework and fortifying collaborative partnerships within the region. In the context of enhancing diplomatic relations with Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia, Australia has accentuated the pivotal significance of the South China Sea as a vital conduit linking the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. Overall, Australia prioritizes the maintenance of stability within the Indo-Pacific region through the sustained presence of the United States and the adherence of Southeast Asian nations to a rules-based international order. Nevertheless, the Morrison government's AUKUS announcement in September 2021 has engendered a profound schism in Australia's relations with Southeast Asia, posing a threat to the credibility of Australia within this region. Although Canberra aspires to garner support from Southeast Asian nations for this agreement, the relationship between Australia and ASEAN more broadly, and specifically with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, has been elevated to a "strategic partnership" and a "comprehensive strategic partnership", thereby expanding collaborative efforts between the two entities, particularly in defense and security in response to China's maritime coercion. Singapore, an essential security ally of the United States in the region, saw its Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, on September 17, refrain from criticizing the agreement while expressing hope that AUKUS would "contribute positively to peace and stability in the region" (Jaipragas Bhavan & Bhavan Jaipragas, 2021). Bilahari Kausikan perceives a beneficial aspect in this development: "That's not necessarily a bad thing. That means our problems are not as bad as in other regions" (Hoang Thi Ha, 2021). However, in practical terms, AUKUS continues to provoke "deep concerns" within Southeast Asia as it contravenes longstanding ASEAN principles regarding the presence of nuclear armaments.

CONCLUSION

In general, the pivotal influence of leaders in the formulation of foreign policy is indisputable, as evidenced by the life histories, personal characteristics, religious convictions, perspectives, attitudes, interests, strengths, and political experiences of prime ministers in their endeavors to navigate the ramifications and recuperate from the complex developments of instability and conflict within the sphere of national interests. Concurrently, factors such as the overall national strength, cultural identity, the structure of the internal political system, and overarching national interests are also manifested through the perception and political decision-making processes of the leader, which in turn govern the foreign policy formulation process and play a critical role in facilitating the evolution of the nation's foreign policy. Consequently, an analysis of foreign policy at the individual level will yield a more holistic understanding of the country's foreign policy, which inherently reflects the personal imprint of the governing authority.

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