Australia and the Global South under the Abbott Coalition Government
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The Australian federal elections of 7 September 2013 resulted in a victory for the centre-right Coalition led by Tony Abbott from the right of the Liberal Party; the minor party in the new government is the rural-based National Party. For this Coalition the concerns of the Global South were not a major issue; indeed the term ‘Global South’ would not be a common one in the lexicon of Coalition politicians. Nevertheless any Australian government will inevitably be involved in issues that affect the Global South, or at least some of the countries within that broad grouping.¹ For purposes of this paper I am using ‘Global South’ in the sense of ‘developing world’, a loose grouping of countries ranging from poor to middle income, with India, Brazil and South Africa being prominent in its leadership. Australia is a Western country, located in the Southern Hemisphere, but adjacent to both Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands region as part of the Global South.

For Australia interaction with the Global South is partly a matter of the country’s geographical location. However there are also issues affecting the Global South more broadly where Australia can be involved; these issues affect both the Global South (or at least a wide range of countries therein), while also being important to Australia. Such issues include development cooperation, refugees and asylum seekers, and climate change. Here the plan in the first instance is to examine the approach Australia has taken to these broader issues under the Abbott government, referring particularly to the implications for the Global South. Then the focus will be on the key relationships in Australia’s immediate region as a major aspect of Australia’s interaction with the Global South. There will also be some attention given to Australian policy in some extra-regional issues relating to the Global South, including Southwest Asia and the Middle East, and Africa.

While I maintain that the Abbott government has not given much attention to the Global South as such, in terms of substance there has been considerable interaction. The Coalition came to office emphasising its pragmatism in relation to foreign policy and other issues. One slogan was ‘Jakarta not Geneva’, implying that Australia could most usefully focus on issues that were important at a regional level rather than attempting to achieve influence at a global level; the Coalition had been sceptical about the (successful) bid by the previous Labor government to win a position on the United Nations Security Council for 2013-14. Abbott’s own international predilections make him sympathetic to the Anglo-world, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, and the liberal democracies more generally.² There is also a perception that Australian governments should focus on the protection and advancement of Australian interests however defined; common interests can be sought with other countries even though the cultures

¹ I have previously written on this issue in Derek McDougall, ‘Australia and North-South Political Relations’, *Round Table*, vol. 100, issue 415 (2011), pp. 361-74. This is part of a special issue on the theme of ‘Australia and the Developing World’.
and underlying ideologies can be quite different. While Abbott as prime minister has a strong influence over a broad range of issues, other ministers have also had a significant input in relation to their portfolios. These ministers include Julie Bishop (foreign minister), Scott Morrison (immigration and border protection until December 2014), and Greg Hunt (environment), as well as Joe Hockey (treasurer) in relation to economic issues more broadly. Clearly these ministers can have their own particular emphases, but they work within the framework of government policy as a whole in which the prime minister is the main influence.

**General issues**

In the first instance I will examine the Abbott government’s approach to development cooperation, refugees and asylum seekers, and climate change, indicating both the substance of these policies as they relate to the Global South, while also analysing the underlying dynamics.

*Development cooperation*

A major focus for the Coalition government has been reducing federal government spending in line with its argument that such reductions are the best way to stimulate the Australian economy. Among a range of measures put in the budget of May 2014 was a reduction in Australia’s foreign aid. Aid would be maintained at about A$5 billion over the next three years but with no adjustment for inflation (consumer price index) until 2016-17; this amounted to a cut in real terms of about ten per cent by 2015-16. Cuts of A$7.6 billion at this point were augmented in December 2014 with further cuts of A$3.7 billion; Australia’s aid over a four year period would fall by 33 per cent. Australian aid had long had a strong ‘national interest’ focus but this was taken further under the Coalition government. Similarly while the previous Labor government had put a stronger emphasis on using aid to encourage the private sector, this was taken further by the Coalition. An indication of the Coalition’s national interest focus was the decision to put the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) under the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

While Australia is a significant player in international development cooperation the official figures indicate that the cuts are to be achieved mainly through reducing extra-regional and global programmes. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 54 per cent of development assistance in Oceania in 2012 came from Australia. Under ‘Australia’s new development policy and performance framework’, as

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published by the Coalition government in June 2014, at least 90 per cent of Australian aid would go to the ‘Indo-Pacific region’ as from 2014-15⁶; the focus within this region was on Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The single biggest recipients of Australian aid are Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, estimated to receive A$542.5 million and A$502.1 million respectively in 2014-15 under the May 2014 budget.⁷ Total Australian overseas development assistance under that budget was A$5031.9 million (i.e. the roughly A$5 billion indicated above), with A$3226.8 million (A$3.2 billion) going to country and regional programmes.⁸

Clearly the ‘Australia first’ focus in the Coalition’s approach meant that in reducing the federal budget any attempt to protect foreign aid would receive low priority. Cutting aid in this way was seen as the most politically palatable way of proceeding.

Refugees and asylum seekers

Another issue relating to the Abbott government’s approach to the Global South focuses on refugees and asylum seekers. This issue is both global in scope but also has a specific regional dimension as far as Australia is concerned. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that as of January 2014 the total ‘population of concern’ to the agency was 42.8 million, including 11.7 million refugees and 23.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) assisted or protected by UNHCR⁹; these figures do not include the 4.8 million Palestinian refugees (the largest single group of refugees) who come under the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).¹⁰ Australia has been a major resettlement country on a per capita basis for refugees coming from UNHCR camps in different parts of the world. In 2010, for example, Australia ranked third in absolute terms (after the US and Canada) and highest in per capita terms¹¹; however only about 80,000 people worldwide are resettled this way each year, with Australia usually taking about 5000. What has been politically contentious has been the arrival of asylum seekers by boat. These people have come from different countries in Southwest Asia and the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria) as well as Sri Lanka, generally travelling via Indonesia. Both Labor and Coalition governments have attempted to deter such arrivals through the establishment of both offshore and onshore detention centres as part of the process of asylum seekers having their claims heard under the provisions of the Refugee Convention. Under the previous Howard Coalition government (1996-2007) a

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⁸ Ibid.
‘Pacific solution’ was attempted whereby asylum seekers were transferred to Papua New Guinea and Nauru to have their claims heard. A version of this policy was reinstated by the Rudd Labor government in July 2013.

Scott Morrison on behalf of the Coalition continued this policy, making it even more stringent. There was a determined and successful effort to turn back asylum seekers arriving by boat. Successful asylum seekers would not necessarily gain long term residence in Australia but would be granted temporary protection visas enabling them to be returned to their home countries should conditions there improve. An agreement was negotiated with Cambodia (a signatory to the Refugee Convention) whereby some of the offshore asylum seekers who were successful in their claims would be transferred there. A regional solution was touted but this would require cooperation with Indonesia and Malaysia, including probably a commitment by Australia to resettle more refugees; such an agreement was not forthcoming.

The perception in the Coalition, and in much of Labor for that matter, was that asylum seekers arriving by boat were ‘queue jumpers’ upsetting the orderly arrangements negotiated with the UNHCR. The policy of both Labor and Coalition was to reduce the intake through the UNHCR by the number of asylum seekers who were successful in their claims. While the orderly arrangement for accepting refugees appeared to have widespread community support, the arrival of asylum seekers by boat upset the perception that Australia was in a position to control its intake of refugees and other immigrants; hence the focus on ‘border control’ in the context of this issue.

**Climate change**

Another general issue, affecting not just the Global South but the whole world, is climate change. From the perspective of Australian engagement with the issue, one needs to consider the general approach while also giving particular attention to how the issue relates to the Global South, including the region adjacent to Australia.

As far as the general approach is concerned one needs to note that this has been a very contentious issue in Australia. The previous Howard Coalition government refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, preferring to undertake various forms of direct action as a means of reducing carbon emissions. The Rudd Labor government, after being elected in November 2007, did ratify the Kyoto Protocol. This government favoured a carbon emissions scheme as a means of reducing emissions. The Greens in the Australian Senate wanted more drastic cuts than were proposed. Rudd had the support of Malcolm Turnbull, then leader of the opposition Coalition, but this support in turn caused conflict within the parliamentary Liberal Party. It was this conflict that led to Turnbull being replaced by Abbott, who had the reputation of being a climate sceptic. Under the Gillard Labor government from June 2010 the focus shifted to a carbon tax; this tax became effective in July 2012 but Abbott vowed to dismantle it if elected to government.

This is what Abbott proceeded to do after becoming prime minister, the repeal occurring in July 2014; direct action again became the preferred means for dealing with global warming. At a general level there is a question as to whether this approach can achieve the reductions Australia is committed to (five per cent unconditionally by 2020 in relation to 2000 levels, with
higher targets dependent on international agreement). Clearly there are many questions of equity involved in the debate about climate change. As a developed country with high per capita emissions a broad Global South position would be that Australia should do more and that developing countries should be given more leeway in relation to their own emissions. However, as of the Lima conference of the UNFCCC in December 2014, with China and the US leading the way there does seem to be a broad consensus that all countries should make some commitment. It has been left to governments to make voluntary commitments on this matter; it is a question of whether this will be sufficient. The Abbott government has not been prepared to go too far on this issue, generally adhering to the position that it will make a contribution but consistent with not putting Australia at an economic disadvantage.

In relation to the direct action approach the Abbott government has been prepared to work with regional countries such as Indonesia and Papua New Guinea to counter excessive deforestation (through the international scheme known as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation or REDD). Greg Hunt as shadow minister for the environment saw such cooperation as a useful focus. In office cooperation with this framework received some attention, extending to support for schemes to counter illegal logging; in November 2014 Hunt announced a A$6 million contribution (adding to an A$8 million contribution by the previous government in 2012) to combat illegal logging in the region.

The Abbott government has not been very sympathetic to the position of small island countries (as represented in the Alliance of Small Island States). Australia was subject to criticism on this issue at both the meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in Palau in July-August 2014, and then at the meeting of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) under United Nations auspices in Marshall Islands in September 2014. Tensions over issues such as this fuel islander support for the Fiji-led Pacific Islands Development Forum that excludes Australia and New Zealand.

Regional issues

In discussing some of the key general issues relating to Australia and the Global South it is clear that there is often a regional focus as far as Australia is concerned. In this section of the paper I will examine some of the key developments in the Abbott government’s relations with Global South countries in Australia’s immediate neighbourhood, particularly Indonesia and the Pacific island countries. It is not that the government particularly highlights that these countries are part of the Global South but that this is not to avoid the fact that they are. I will also refer briefly to

some other ‘regional’ issues that might also be seen as part of Australia’s developing relationship with the Global South under the Abbott government.

**Indonesia**

Indonesia has been referred to previously in the context of Australia’s approach to development cooperation, refugees and asylum seekers, and climate change. With over 250 million people Indonesia is Australia’s most populous neighbour, as well as being among the leading countries of the Global South, the Muslim world and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Clearly there are many issues where cooperation with Indonesia would be beneficial to Australia, as well as providing a point of entrée into the broader groupings where Indonesia is involved. The problem for the current Australian government (and previous governments for that matter) has been the cultural and political distance between the two countries. During the period of the Howard government these underlying tensions were exacerbated by Australian intervention in support of East Timor following the crisis of 1999. However East Timor appears to be no longer a point of tension between Indonesia and Australia; Indonesia views Australia as a significant source of support for Timor-Leste but without being overly concerned about the geopolitical implications.

The Abbott government would particularly like cooperation with Indonesia over the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. However the Indonesian government has not been willing to give the Coalition what it wants: a complete cessation of the flow of asylum seekers through Indonesia to Australia. One could argue too that Indonesia does not exert sufficient governmental control to be able to restrict people smugglers in the way that would be required. On the first point Indonesia has the expectation that Australia as a wealthy country should do more in assisting with refugees; it believes that comparatively speaking the burden placed on Indonesia is unfair. There have also been tensions relating to Australian naval vessels infringing Indonesian territorial waters in their attempts to turn back asylum seekers travelling by boat. The revelation in November 2013 that Australian intelligence had bugged the telephone conversations of President Yudhoyono (Indonesian president, 2004-14) in August 2009 undermined whatever trust existed between Australia and Indonesia.15 The gap in terms of competing perceptions of Australian and Indonesian interests has not been reduced under the Abbott government, and might even have deepened. At this point the position of President Joko Widowo (elected July 2014; took office October 2014) towards Australian-Indonesian relations seems to be similar to that of his predecessor.

**Pacific islands region**

In relation to the Pacific islands region all three of the general issues previously discussed are significant aspects of Australia’s relationship with this region. The policies of the Abbott government on these issues have had major implications for the island countries, the impact varying depending on the issue (Nauru and Papua New Guinea being most affected by Australian

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policies on refugees and asylum seekers, for example). In terms of the broader geopolitics of the region Australia under the Abbott government has attempted to maintain itself as a leading influence in regional affairs. One of the main challenges in this respect has been the position of Fiji where Australia and New Zealand had instituted a selective sanctions regime and policy of diplomatic isolation following the military coup of December 2006. This policy resulted in Fiji being suspended from both the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum until after the restoration of democracy in September 2014. On the diplomatic front Fiji under Commodore Frank Bainimarama fought back by various means, such as the ‘Look North’ strategy (focusing on the development of relations with China) and the establishment of the Pacific Islands Development Forum in August 2013 as a new form of Pacific islands regionalism that would exclude Australia and New Zealand.

Under the Abbott government an attempt was made to improve relations with Fiji, the argument being that the previous approach had not encouraged a return to democracy and had also undermined Australian influence. This approach was well in train ahead of the elections held in Fiji in September 2014. These elections were won by Fiji First led by Bainimarama in his ex-military and civilian capacity. Of course if Bainimarama’s party had not won the elections there would have been considerable turmoil in Fiji, possibly threatening the return to democracy. As it was the previous regime in effect remained in power but could now claim the mantle of democratic legitimacy. The result reinforced the approach taken by the Coalition government under the leadership of foreign minister Julie Bishop in particular. Australian influence in relation to Fiji might have improved but Fiji is likely to continue the new international direction it developed during the 2006-14 period.

Some other ‘regional’ issues

While Indonesia and the Pacific islands region might be seen as the most significant regional issues for Australia within a Global South context, there are other issues that might be described as ‘regional’ that have also been important to Australia under the Abbott government and before. China is clearly a major issue for Australia but while China is linked with the Global South in many respects it does not normally take a leading role; analyses of the Australia-China relationship focus mainly on the economic and strategic aspects without much reference to the Global South context. In the case of India Australia also has a broad ranging economic and strategic relationship, but India differs from China in putting more emphasis on its role as a Global South leader. On a somewhat lesser level an interesting initiative by the Abbott government has been an attempt to revive Indian Ocean regionalism; this initiative could be seen as having a Global South context.

Although India is a leader in the Global South it could not be said that the Abbott government particularly emphasises that aspect in developing the Australian relationship with India. The focus is more on the economic benefits to Australia from developing closer relations with an important emerging economy. There are also perceived geopolitical benefits in fostering

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16 The argument for a change of direction is well put in Richard Herr, ‘Special Report Issue 27 - Time for a fresh approach: Australia and Fiji relations post-abrogation’, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, January 2010.
closer links given India’s increasing influence in a world that is becoming more pluralistic. There is also a certain element of ‘soft balancing’ vis-à-vis China. Even though the Abbott government proclaims its good relationship with China there also concerns that China’s influence in the Asia-Pacific region might become too strong; a closer relationship with India provides some scope for manoeuvre in this situation of flux. It might also be noted in this context that the Abbott government is a very strong supporter of the Australian alliance with the United States, and has moved to strengthen the security relationship with Japan.

In relation to Indian Ocean regionalism Australia had been involved in 1995 under a previous Labor government in the establishment of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). This grouping linked Australia to Global South leaders such as India and South Africa, as well as various countries from the African seaboard, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean island countries such as Mauritius and the Seychelles. An early initiative by Julie Bishop at a meeting in Perth, Western Australia (Bishop’s home town) in November 2013 was to encourage a more active role by this grouping, known henceforth as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Whether this initiative will bear fruit remains to be seen but it would be an interesting role for Australia that could bring greater coherence to parts of the Global South that are often viewed as segmented along different regional lines (Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia). Australia is chair of the IORA from November 2013 for two years. Such an outcome would also be contrary to the argument I have been putting that the Abbott government does not give a very high priority to the Global South as a category.

Extra-regional issues

Consistent with the argument that the Abbott government has not given high priority to Global South issues as such I will next examine Coalition policy in relation to Southwest Asia and the Middle East, and then Africa. Australia is involved in these broad regions in various ways. This involvement has implications for the Global South as such even though the Abbott government does not particularly emphasise this dimension.

Southwest Asia and the Middle East

In Southwest Asia the Abbott government inherited the Australian commitment to the NATO-led Coalition in Afghanistan (International Security Assistance Force or ISAF); the original Australian commitment had begun under the previous Howard Coalition government in 2001, and was then continued under the Labor governments of 2007-13. Although not usually viewed as a Global South issue, the Abbott government saw the conflict as part of its contribution to fighting global terrorism (the Taliban being a manifestation of this phenomenon from the government’s perspective); strategically the Australian commitment also reflected a perception (Coalition and Labor) that supporting the US in conflicts such as this was an important part of maintaining the Australian alliance with the US.

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In line with the position of the US and NATO as a whole the major Australian commitment in Afghanistan concluded at the end of 2014. Some military advisers remained, and some development aid continued.

The struggle against terrorism assumed a different focus for Australia and various other Western countries, particularly the US, during 2014. This related to the emergence of the extremist group, Islamic State, in Syria and northern Iraq. Again this was not highlighted by the Abbott government as a Global South issue, but insofar as countering terrorism was important to that government and terrorism manifested itself within parts of the Global South, then it could be construed as a Global South issue. In this particular instance the Australian rationale of supporting the US in major conflicts also manifested itself. Australian involvement was in the form of air operations in northern Iraq, those operations being based at the Al Minhad air base in the United Arab Emirates.

In the context of Australian membership of the UN Security Council (see next section), Australia was the only country to support the US in voting against a resolution on 30 December 2014 to support a deadline for negotiations on a Palestinian state to conclude by the end of 2015, with a view to establishing such a state by 2017. While the US would have vetoed the resolution if necessary, only eight affirmative votes were secured rather than the necessary nine; five countries abstained. Apart from the close alignment with the US, the Abbott government has been strongly pro-Israel.

Africa

Turning to Africa this again is a region that one would not expect to have a high profile in Australian foreign policy. However Africa is clearly part of the Global South, and Australia is involved in various ways with this region. Australia has important diplomatic relationships with two leading African countries. South Africa, apart from being a leader in the Global South, is a Commonwealth member alongside Australia; Nigeria is also a key Commonwealth country, as well as having a significant role in the Global South. Under the Abbott government an additional dimension affecting Australian engagement with African issues was Australian membership of the Security Council in 2013-14; almost sixteen months of this two year period were under Coalition auspices. The previous Labor government had wooed many African countries in campaigning for Security Council membership; these countries expected some support from Australia.

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19 In June 2014 Attorney-General George Brandis caused controversy when he referred to ‘disputed’ rather than ‘occupied’ East Jerusalem. In November 2012 during the Gillard Labor government there was a clash between Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Foreign Minister Bob Carr over whether Australia should oppose or abstain in relation to a General Assembly resolution recognizing Palestine as a non-member observer state. Carr won his point in favour of abstention. See Bob Carr, Diary of a Foreign Minister (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2014).

return. Quite apart from this political ‘payback’ was the fact that African issues dominate the agenda of the Security Council. There is usually a high level of consensus among the Permanent Five in relation to these issues. The Abbott government did not adopt a high profile on these issues but was able to work within the consensus. In addition the Coalition maintained Australia’s small commitment to support UN peace operations in South Sudan.

**Conclusion**

I have argued overall that while the Abbott Coalition government in Australia has not given a high priority to Global South issues as such it has inevitably been involved in such issues because of their importance both globally and regionally. These issues include development cooperation, refugees and asylum seekers, and climate change at the global level, with an important regional dimension as far as Australia is concerned. Regionally there has been a strong focus on Indonesia and the Pacific islands region; India and Indian Ocean regionalism have also featured on the Coalition’s agenda. Extra-regionally the Abbott government’s support of operations in Afghanistan and more recently in northern Iraq against the Islamic state are part of a concern with global terrorism, but implicitly this can also be seen as a Global South issue. African issues have also received some attention, Australia’s membership on the UN Security Council in 2013-14 contributing to this increased profile.

The involvement of the Abbott government in relation to this range of issues has been motivated by a perception of Australian interests rather than any sympathy with the Global South. Abbott is the key figure but his assumptions are widely shared within the government, and many of them overlap with the views held within the Labor opposition. Beyond the perception of Australian interests, the underlying identification is with the Anglo-world led by the US, and the liberal democracies; the concept of ‘good international citizenship’ does not feature.