

The 2013 Australian Election: Political and Policy Implications

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I. Introduction

The 2013 Australian Federal election, held on September 7, has seen a change of government; the conservative Liberal-National Party (LNP) Coalition, led by Tony Abbott, soundly defeated the social democratic Australian Labor Party (ALP), led by Kevin Rudd, who had only recently returned to office as Prime Minister, after overthrowing Julia Gillard as ALP leader. This article will analyse the background to and course of the election campaign, and consider the political implications of the election's results, as the numbers for the new parliament take shape. The challenges for the new Abbott Coalition Government will then be considered, in both domestic and foreign policy.

II. Background—The Rudd/Gillard/Rudd Labor Governments

In the 2007 election, Rudd led Labor to defeat the conservative Coalition Government of John Howard, which had been in power since 1996. In 2008–09, the Labor Government's economic stimulus packages in response to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), totalling around \$50 billion, effectively kept Australia out of recession. This preserved Australia's continuous economic growth since 1991, having one of the best-performing economies in the OECD, with relatively low unemployment, inflation, interest rates, government debt, and AAA credit ratings.¹⁾

Despite this overall positive record, by 2010, Rudd had alienated his Cabinet and wider parliamentary party with his aloof and arrogant leadership style. They were further disillusioned by Rudd's backflip on pursuing a carbon emissions trading scheme, and also after backing down on implementing a super-profits tax on the

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1) George Megalogenis, *The Australian Moment: How We Were Made For These Times*, Viking: Camberwell, 2012, pp.340–342.

mining industry, following a damaging media campaign launched by the major mining corporations; both led to a slump in opinion polls. While he generally enjoyed a relative (if somewhat shallow) popularity among the public, Rudd never had the firm support of the senior factions and union support base of the Labor Party. This culminated in Rudd being challenged and overthrown by his Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard in June 2010, with Rudd becoming Foreign Minister.²⁾

However, the subsequent September 2010 election resulted in a rare ‘hung’ parliament, with neither of the major parties able to secure a majority, which had not occurred since 1940–43; (Labor’s relatively poor performance in the 2010 campaign was widely blamed on Rudd supporters making damaging leaks to the press, undermining Gillard).³⁾ Gillard was forced to form a minority Government with the support of the Greens Party and Independents, who required the introduction of a fixed price on carbon emissions, portrayed by the Opposition LNP as breaking an election promise by Gillard not to introduce a carbon ‘tax’.⁴⁾

The unusual political condition of the hung parliament, plus a constant sense of leadership tensions between Rudd and Gillard, saw Labor remain well behind the Coalition in opinion polls throughout the period of the Gillard Government.⁵⁾ This was despite around 600 bills being passed during Gillard’s term of government, including significant legislation such as: the price on carbon, a National Disability Insurance Scheme, a National Broadband Network, education funding reform, and a super-profits tax on the mining industry. There were also tax cuts for low income earners, pension increases, and increased health funding, particularly for mental health and dental services.⁶⁾ Australia also managed to secure a rotating seat on the UN Security Council, and an annual leadership dialogue with China was also established.⁷⁾

Despite having relatively low public popularity, Tony Abbott (Opposition Leader since 2009) maintained a relentless pressure, aided by commercial media and

2) John Birmingham, ‘The Rudd Experiment’, *Anne Summers Reports*, No.4, September 2013, pp.35–38, at: http://annesummers.com.au/pdf/ASR_issue_4b.pdf, accessed October 12, 2013.

3) Barrie Cassidy, *The Party Thieves: The Real Story of the 2010 Election*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2010, pp.238–239.

4) John Wanna, ‘Political Chronicles: Commonwealth of Australia July to December 2010’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol.57, No.2, June 2011, pp.283–286.

5) William Bowe, ‘The Poll Bludger’, *Crikey*, October 15, 2013, at: <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollbludger/>, accessed October 15, 2013.

6) Carol Johnson, ‘Labor’s legacy: six years of. . . what exactly?’, *The Conversation*, September 8, 2013, at: <http://theconversation.com/labors-legacy-six-years-of-what-exactly-17526>, accessed October 15, 2013.

7) Charles Hawksley and Nichole Georgeou, ‘Issues in Australian Foreign Policy: July to December 2012’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol.59, Issue 2, June 2013, pp.264–269.

the News Corporation press, which were generally hostile to Labor. The Coalition argued the Labor Government was fundamentally divided over its leadership, was incompetent and effectively ‘illegitimate’, particularly on issues such as the increasing numbers of asylum seekers arriving by boat via Indonesia, and the inability of the Gillard Government to deliver on its promise to return the Federal budget to surplus.⁸⁾

Rudd unsuccessfully challenged Gillard in February 2012, after which he stepped down as Foreign Minister onto the backbench. An abortive challenge was again attempted by his supporters in March 2013. The looming prospect of heavy defeat in the next election saw desperate Labor MPs reverse their decision, returning Rudd in a leadership spill in June 2013. Feminists have since claimed that misogyny against Gillard in commercial and social media, encouraged by the Opposition, was a major factor in her downfall.⁹⁾ Reorganising his Cabinet, Rudd’s return saw a brief ‘honeymoon’ improvement in the opinion polls to near equal with the Coalition.¹⁰⁾

III. The 2013 Election Campaign

Attempting to blunt the asylum seeker issue, Rudd announced a deal with Nauru and Papua New Guinea to accept asylum seekers, to the disapproval of human rights advocates. Rudd then called a five-week election campaign on August 4, with the slogan ‘A New Way’, hoping to shift perceptions away from the recent bout of leadership instability. However, this meant that Rudd effectively ignored the positive policy record achieved by Labor under Gillard.¹¹⁾

The election campaign itself was largely lacklustre and uninspiring. Rudd was often unfocused, with a series of populist policy pronouncements, such as plans for special economic development zones in northern Australia. Labor’s campaign was largely negative, attempting to scare voters that the Coalition would implement harsh cuts to public services, or raise consumption taxes once in office. The three

8) Bernard Keane, ‘Swan alters course, delivers early Christmas present for Joe’, *Crikey*, December 21, 2012, at: <http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/12/21/swan-alters-course-delivers-early-christmas-present-for-joe/>, accessed October 15, 2013.

9) Katherine Murphy, ‘Julia Gillard reveals what she thought when she gave the ‘misogyny speech’’, *The Guardian*, July 26, 2013, at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/26/julia-gillard-misogyny-kevin-rudd>, accessed October 15, 2013.

10) Mark Kenny and Heath Aston, ‘Rudd poll bounce boosts Labor’, *The Examiner*, June 28, 2013, at: <http://www.examiner.com.au/story/1605207/rudd-poll-bounce-boosts-labor/>, accessed October 15, 2013.

11) ‘Rudd faces battle as campaign starts’, *The Japan Times*, August 5, 2013, at: <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/08/05/asia-pacific/rudd-faces-battle-as-campaign-starts/#.U1zE3NVm59o>, accessed October 15, 2013.

leadership debates held were largely flat and unengaging. In his campaign launch speech, Abbott stepped back from the Coalition's previous rhetoric of harsh fiscal discipline, instead making vague promises to return the budget to a surplus of 1% of GDP over ten years.¹²⁾

Abbott's main policy promise was to introduce a generous paid parental leave scheme, funded by increased taxation on large corporations, while repealing the carbon and mining taxes. Defence spending would be increased, with border security improved to finally 'stop the boats' bringing asylum seekers. Abbott also sought to blunt Rudd's scare tactics by effectively embracing Labor's health, education and welfare policies, claiming these would be essentially maintained by the Coalition. Despite a few minor media 'gaffes' on both sides, the Coalition ran a disciplined, low-risk, 'small target' campaign overall, refusing to release its full policy costings until the second last day of the campaign.¹³⁾

IV. The 2013 Election Result

The Coalition secured a comfortable majority in the election, winning 90 seats out of 150 in the Lower House of Representatives. The ALP went down from 73 to 55 seats, with minor parties and Independents set to have up to 5 seats. (Rudd's supporters claim that based on internal polling, up to 15 more seats would have been lost by Labor, if Gillard had remained leader. Gillard supporters dispute this, but the point is now moot, of course). Labor's share of the national primary vote fell 4.5% from its 2010 election result to 33.4%; the Coalition's rose by 1.8% to 45.6%; the Greens fell 3.1% to 8.6%; and 'others'—small parties and independents—rose 5.8% to 12.4%. A record number of 54 parties and 1717 candidates stood for the 2013 election.¹⁴⁾

Rudd stepped down as Labor leader following the loss. Gillard did not contest the election, also retiring from politics. Under new rules established by Rudd after his return as PM, a leadership contest has been held, with the weight of voting divided 50:50 between Labor MPs, and for the first time, ordinary rank-and-file

12) The 2012–13 budget deficit was only 1.2% of GDP, at \$18.8 billion. Treasury forecasts that the FY 2013/14 deficit will be \$30.1 bn, due to lower expected tax revenues. 'Hockey believes US saved from the brink', *SBS News*, October 11, 2013, at: <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2013/10/11/hockey-believes-us-saved-brink>, accessed October 11, 2013.

13) Joanna Mather et al, 'Hockey unveils Coalition's final costings', *The Australian Financial Review*, September 6, 2013, at: http://www.afr.com/p/national/politics/hockey_unveils_coalition_final_costings_iICZHtlxrb7KK3jDGzJBoM, accessed October 15, 2013.

14) Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), 'Virtual Tally Room: The official election results', *AEC Election 2013*, October 15, 2013, at: <http://vtr.aec.gov.au/Default.htm>, accessed October 15, 2013.

ALP members. Contested between prominent frontbenchers Bill Shorten and Anthony Albanese, Shorten won in a close result, with 52.02% of the vote; 63.95% from the Caucus of MPs, and 40.08% from the ordinary party membership. Shorten will have the immense challenge of rebuilding a demoralised party through at least two, and possibly three terms in Opposition.¹⁵⁾

The most unexpected result of the election though was for the upper house of parliament, the Senate. The complex preferential voting system for the Senate, where parties can swap voting preferences through an arcane process of negotiations, has seen a group of right-leaning 'micro-parties' potentially take the balance of power in the Senate from July 1, 2014, when their terms are due to commence, despite some receiving less than 1% in their primary vote.¹⁶⁾

The Liberal Democratic Party, the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party and the Family First Party are projected to be elected to the Senate, despite having no real popular base or clear policy platforms. A right-wing Democratic Labor Party Senator, and centrist Independent Nick Xenophon will continue their Senate terms. Possibly the most surprising development of the election was the emergence of the Palmer United Party (PUP), only recently established and personally funded by mining magnate (and former LNP powerbroker) Clive Palmer. Winning 5.5% of the primary vote, the PUP won three Senate seats, with Palmer likely to secure his own seat in the Lower House. The makeup of the new Senate is set to be 33 Coalition Senators, 26 Labor, 9 Greens, and 8 'Others'.¹⁷⁾

With these numbers, the Coalition will therefore require votes of six out of the eight crossbench Senators to pass its legislation. Given the conservative ideological leanings of most of the new Senators, the Abbott Government is likely to get most legislation through, although it could face difficulties on some issues, such as pursuing free trade agreements, allowing foreign investment, and replacing the carbon pricing scheme with its regulatory 'Direct Action' carbon emissions policy. The PUP has already secured a coalition agreement with the Motoring Enthusiast Party Senator, and so will play a lead role in any negotiations; it remains to be seen what concessions and agenda the flamboyant Palmer will require, in order to support

15) 'Bill Shorten elected Labor leader over Anthony Albanese after month-long campaign', *ABC News*, October 13, 2013, at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-13/bill-shorten-elected-labor-leader/5019116>, accessed October 13, 2013.

16) The Senate usually runs in staggered terms separate from the lower house, with half the Senate facing election, and Senators serving six-year terms. Narelle Miragliotta et al, *The Australian Political System in Action*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2010, pp.172-173.

17) Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), 'Virtual Tally Room: Senate Results', *AEC Election 2013*, October 10, 2013, at: <http://vtr.aec.gov.au/SenateResultsMenu-17496.htm>, accessed October 15, 2013.

the Coalition.¹⁸⁾

For their part, the Greens face losing one of their Senators, and losing their balance of power in the Senate, with a sharp decline in their vote, although they managed to retain their lone seat in the Lower House. Other prominent candidates also failed to win a place in the Senate, notably the controversial Julian Assange, leading his Wikileaks Party, despite being ensconced in the Ecuadoran embassy in London; and xenophobic One Nation Party leader Pauline Hanson was unsuccessful yet again.¹⁹⁾

V. The Abbott Coalition Government—Domestic Policy Challenges

Now that the Coalition has taken power, the transition from playing a largely critical role in Opposition, to carrying out the administration of policy, has already presented the Abbott Government with some significant challenges. Always the most prominent and wide-ranging of any policy area for any government is economic management; the Australian economy's main potential problem is the long-running mining investment boom, and the related export demand from China both declining from their peaks. Reflecting this, the 'budget emergency' pronounced by the Coalition while in Opposition has been downplayed, now it is in government, indicated by Abbott's campaign promise to restore the budget to a surplus of 1% of GDP sometime before 2023.²⁰⁾

If aggregate demand in the economy softens, reducing the budget deficit too rapidly would risk slowing the economy too much, particularly as tax revenues are lower than projected. If the Abbott Government manages to carry out its promises to cut the carbon and mining super-profit taxes, while maintaining levels of health and education funding promised under Labor, and increasing infrastructure and defence spending, this would indeed push the target of returning to surplus far into the medium-to-long term future. To this end, the new Treasurer, Joe Hockey, has outlined that reflecting the ongoing budget and debt crisis in the USA, legislation to lift Australia's own debt ceiling beyond \$300 billion will be an early priority for the

18) Senate results are subject to disputed recounts. Emma Griffiths, 'Clive Palmer issues warning to Government as Motoring Enthusiast Ricky Muir joins Senate voting bloc', *ABC News*, October 10, 2013, at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-10/clive-palmer-joins-forces-with-motoring-enthusiast-ricky-muir-i/5013556>, accessed October 15, 2013.

19) Nick Economou, 'The 2013 Senate contest: Australia lurches to the Right', *The Conversation*, October 3, 2013, at: <http://theconversation.com/the-2013-senate-contest-australia-lurches-to-the-right-17535>, accessed October 15, 2013.

20) Phillip Coorey, 'Abbott abandons first-term surplus for 10-year agenda', *The Australian Financial Review*, August 26, 2013, at: http://www.afr.com/p/national/abbott_abandons_first_term_surplus_AnD7dilpQ2W0gAdMNLtFYn, accessed October 15, 2013.

new parliament.²¹⁾

Another likely controversial area of policy will be the Coalitions \$3.2 billion 'Direct Action' plan to reduce carbon emissions, set to replace Labor's carbon pricing scheme, once it is repealed. Direct Action aims to achieve its target of a 5% reduction in emissions by 2020, mainly through subsidies to large polluting companies, and increased regulation to encourage greater energy efficiency. However, while legislation to repeal carbon pricing is likely to pass the Senate, the new minor parties have indicated they are less keen on the Direct Action policy; if it is blocked in the Senate by the minor parties, the Coalition would be in the embarrassing situation of having no policy on climate change in place.²²⁾ The Coalition has already been criticized by environmentalists and economists over Direct Action in any case, doubting that it will be able to reduce emissions effectively, with its stated costs likely to blow out, if its original targets have any hope of being achieved. Abbott is also criticized for scrapping the Climate Commission, an advisory scientific body, and for having no separate Ministry for Science.²³⁾

Other long-term social policy challenges confront the new Abbot government, especially the long-entrenched issue of tackling economic and social disadvantage among indigenous peoples, which Abbott has at least given rhetorical commitment towards addressing.²⁴⁾ The issue of allowing same-sex marriage has already arisen; the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government based in the Australian capital Canberra has pledged to defend the right to same-sex marriage, which runs against the position of the conservative Coalition.²⁵⁾ Regarding gender diversity, there has been criticism of the lack of women in Abbott's Cabinet, with only one woman out of twenty Cabinet ministers (Foreign Minister Julie Bishop), with five women out of

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- 21) 'Debt an early issue for parliament: Joe Hockey', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 13, 2013, at: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/debt-an-early-issue-for-parliament-joe-hockey-20131013-2vfzz.html>, accessed October 13, 2013.
 - 22) Lenore Taylor, 'Australia could be left with no policy on climate change', *The Guardian*, September 25, 2013, at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/25/australia-climate-change-policy-vacuum>, accessed October 15, 2013.
 - 23) Cathy Alexander, 'Green purge: the climate bodies on Abbott's chopping block', *Crikey*, September 20, 2013, at: http://www.crikey.com.au/2013/09/20/green-purge-the-climate-bodies-on-abbotts-chopping-block/?wmp_switcher=mobile, accessed October 15, 2013.
 - 24) Elizabeth Strakosch, 'Will Tony Abbott be a 'prime minister for Aboriginal affairs?', *The Conversation*, September 11, 2013, at: <http://theconversation.com/will-tony-abbott-be-a-prime-minister-for-aboriginal-affairs-17985>, accessed October 15, 2013.
 - 25) Lisa Cox, 'Same-sex marriage law High Court challenge confirmed', *The Canberra Times*, October 10, 2013. at: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/samesex-marriage-law-high-court-challenge-confirmed-20131010-2vqaq.html>, accessed October 15, 2013.

thirty in the wider Ministry as a whole.²⁶⁾

The Abbott Government has also had to endure the end of its post-election ‘honeymoon’, with revelations that up to a quarter of its MPs, including senior Cabinet ministers, and Prime Minister Tony Abbott himself, have abused taxpayer-funded travel entitlements (although Labor MPs are potentially implicated as well). While this is likely to be more embarrassing than fundamentally damaging to the Abbott Government in the long term, given its large parliamentary majority in the lower house, it has certainly quickly taken the gloss off its election victory.²⁷⁾

VI. Foreign Policy Challenges

While foreign policy is generally bipartisan in Australian politics, the issue of asylum seekers was prominent in the election campaign, and has now become the responsibility of the Abbott Government. The Coalition promised throughout the campaign to ‘stop the boats’, in a policy now termed ‘Operation Sovereign Borders’. It has since come under criticism both domestically and internationally for its post-election approach to the issue. The LNP sought to relentlessly highlight the issue while in Opposition, in order to embarrass the Labor Government, which it blamed for effectively allowing people smuggling networks to encourage an increase in asylum seekers, by allowing them to be processed offshore. While Rudd unsuccessfully attempted to reverse this perception by pursuing the deal with PNG to accept asylum seekers arriving by boat, the Abbott Government has encountered controversy with its proposed ‘towback’ policy. The pronounced policy of the Coalition Government regarding asylum seekers is to tow asylum seeker boats back towards Indonesia ‘when safe to do so’; this has been criticised as potentially dangerous, and possibly in breach of international law by human rights NGOs. It has also been rejected as unfeasible by the Indonesian government. In an attempt to pre-empt diplomatic tensions over implementing this policy, Tony Abbott made his first official visit as Prime Minister to Indonesia early in October, soon after taking office, aiming to also improve trade and investment links between Australia and Indonesia. He promised to respect Indonesia’s sovereignty regarding the asylum seeker issue (and over West Papua), and hoped to eventually secure an agreement

26) Kathy Marks, ‘Australian PM Tony Abbott criticised for one-woman Cabinet’, *The Independent*, September 16, 2013, at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/australian-pm-tony-abbott-criticised-for-onewoman-cabinet-8820240.html>, accessed October 15, 2013.

27) Jonathan Swan & Daniel Hurst, ‘Abbott embroiled as scandal widens’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 9, 2013, at: www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/abbott-embroiled-as-scandal-widens-20131008-2v6ev.html, accessed October 15, 2013.

for greater bilateral cooperation to tackle people smuggling overall.²⁸⁾

On the wider diplomatic sphere, Australia will continue to exercise its responsibilities holding a rotating two-year seat on the UN Security Council, secured last October under the Rudd/Gillard Labor Government. Abbott had opposed the bid for the seat, claiming it was a waste of money and diplomatic resources; however, once it was won, the Coalition was happy to embrace it. Australia has already had to address and vote on global security crises such as Syria and chemical weapons. More controversially, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop announced reductions in the growth of Australia's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) program, effectively resulting in cuts of up to \$4.5 billion over the next four years, with the ODA delivery provider AUSAID being subsumed directly within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), reducing its overall autonomy, with the overall direction of aid being shifted toward encouraging trade, rather than direct humanitarian assistance. This aligns with Bishop's campaign statement that 'foreign policy will be trade policy, and trade policy will be foreign policy'.²⁹⁾

To this end, Abbott has continued the approach of the previous Labor Government by strongly committing to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) multilateral regional trade negotiations, hoping to benefit Australia's export-based industries, particularly agriculture.³⁰⁾ At his first APEC leaders' meeting, also recently held in Indonesia, Abbott declared his policy of hoping to conclude Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with China, Japan and South Korea, Australia's three largest export markets, within a year.³¹⁾ This approach is in one sense yet another reversal from the Coalition's election campaign rhetoric, when restrictions on Chinese investment were floated, particularly by politicians in the rural-based National Party, the junior partner of the Coalition. Australia will also continue participation in the other overlapping multilateral trade talks, for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Australia will be the focus of

28) 'Australian PM Wavers on Asylum Seekers During Indonesia Trip', *The Jakarta Globe*, October 1, 2013, at: <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/australian-pm-wavers-on-asylum-seekers-during-indonesia-trip/>, accessed October 15, 2013.

29) Brendan Nicholson, 'Free trade, end to poverty: our vision laid out for the UN', *The Australian*, September 28, 2013, at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/policy/free-trade-end-to-poverty-our-vision-laid-out-for-the-un/story-fn59nm2j-1226729179033>, accessed October 15, 2013.

30) Ann Capling and John Ravenhill, 'Australia, the United States and the Trans-Pacific Partnership: Diverging Interests and Unintended Consequences', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol.48, No.2, June 2013 pp.194-195.

31) Katherine Murphy, 'Tony Abbott expects free trade pact with China in the next 12 months', *The Guardian*, October 7, 2013, at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/07/abbott-free-trade-deal-china>, accessed October 15, 2013.

multilateral diplomacy itself in 2014, when the G20 leaders' meeting will be hosted in Brisbane.

Abbott's attendance at the ASEAN/EAS Summit meeting in Brunei, held immediately after APEC, further emphasised the initial direction of an implied 'Asia First' foreign policy. Among his first official meetings as Prime Minister with other regional leaders, during his meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Abbott declared that Japan was Australia's 'closest friend in Asia'. He invited Abe to visit Australia, including the rare privilege of addressing parliament.³²⁾ Abbott will likely maintain the bipartisan policy of opposition to Japan's whaling program though, a topic he avoided raising with Abe.³³⁾

In the field of security, the US alliance under the ANZUS treaty remains at the core of Australian foreign and defence policy; the Abbott Government has pledged to restore defence spending to at least 2% of GDP by 2023, with much of the spending expected largely to go on US equipment, including the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). Australian combat forces will be withdrawn along with other foreign NATO/ISAF forces from Afghanistan, although military advisors and anti-terrorist Special Forces may remain. The rotating deployments of US Marines, naval and air forces to northern Australia, as part of the US 'pivot' to the Asia-Pacific region, seems set to continue and increase; Australia also remains closely tied into the US global surveillance/intelligence network.³⁴⁾

The central dilemma of Australian foreign policy remains for the Abbott Government though: how to support the interests of its key ally the US, and improve security ties with other regional powers like Japan, while not alienating its largest trading partner China. Security cooperation has already been steadily increasing with Japan, including more joint training exercises and cooperation in UN peacekeeping operations.³⁵⁾ If Shinzo Abe manages to reinterpret the Japanese Constitution to allow greater participation in collective self-defence with allies then even greater security cooperation with Australia could eventually result.³⁶⁾ The

32) Mark Kenny, 'Tony Abbott says Japan is Australia's 'closest friend in Asia'', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 10, 2013, at: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-says-japan-is-australias-closest-friend-in-asia-20131009-2v8ty.html>, accessed October 10, 2013.

33) Charlotte Epstein and Kate Barclay, 'Shaming to 'green': Australia-Japan relations and whales and tuna compared', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol.13, No.1, 2013, pp.110-118.

34) Jae Jeok Park, 'The persistence of the US-led alliances in the Asia-Pacific: an order insurance explanation', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol.13, No.3, 2013, pp.352-357.

35) Rikki Kersten, 'Australia and Japan: Mobilising the Bilateral Relationship', in James Cotton & John Ravenhill (eds), *Middle Power Dreaming: Australia in World Affairs 2006-2010*, Oxford University Press: South Melbourne, 2011, pp.98-100.

36) James Manicom and Andrew O'Neil, 'China's rise and middle power democracies: Canada ↗

regular Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) talks between Australia, the US and Japan, last held alongside the APEC meeting in Bali, indicate the potential direction of a closer defence alliance among the three countries. However, this has already angered China, which has warned Australia and the US not to interfere in its territorial disputes with Japan and other ASEAN nations in the East and South China Seas.³⁷⁾

VII. Conclusions

The hung parliament of 2010–13 was an unusual period in Australian politics. The change to majority government to the Coalition resulting from the 2013 election has the potential to restore a greater level of stability to the political system; however, a level of uncertainty is set to continue, given the balance of power in the Senate will still be determined by minor parties, pursuing their own particular agendas. While a diverse range of domestic and foreign policy challenges confronts the Abbott Government, it at least has the benefits of a relatively prosperous economy, and generally positive relations within the region overall. Whether Tony Abbott will be able to successfully pursue the diplomacy required to promote and protect Australia's national interests, amid an ever more complex Asia-Pacific region, remains to be seen.³⁸⁾

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37) 'China warns US, Japan and Australia: stay out of territorial disputes', *The Guardian*, October 7, 2013, at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/07/china-warns-us-japan-australia-territorial-disputes>, accessed October 15, 2013.

38) Hugh White, 'Abbott walking tricky tightrope on diplomacy', *The Age*, October 15, 2013, at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/abbott-walking-tricky-tightrope-on-diplomacy-20131014-2viqg.html>, accessed October 15, 2013.

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