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## **THE EQUATOR OF ANTHONY ALBANESE'S PREMIERSHIP: AN ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY'S FOREIGN POLICY (2022–2024)**

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**Abstract:** This study examines the multifaceted foreign policy landscape inherited by the Anthony Albanese government following the tenure of Scott Morrison in Australia, especially strategic shifts and continuities in the Asia-Pacific, assessing the legacy and changes under the new administration. Key areas of focus include the evolution of Sino-Australian relations, which are pivotal amidst growing regional tensions. The analysis also explores the recalibration of defence policies, particularly in the context of AUKUS and its implications for regional security. Further, this paper investigates the dynamics of relations between Australia and the United States, as well as the nuanced engagements with the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). The review provides an understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by the Albanese government in the international arena.

**Keywords:** *Australia, foreign policy, Anthony Albanese, the Australian Labor Party, China, the United States, Pacific Island Countries*

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Научная статья. Исторические науки

## **ЭКВАТОР ПРЕМЬЕРСКОГО СРОКА ЭНТОНИ АЛЬБАНЕЗЕ: АНАЛИЗ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ АВСТРАЛИЙСКИХ ЛЕЙБОРИСТОВ (2022–2024 гг.)**

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**Аннотация:** В статье рассматривается внешнеполитический ландшафт, унаследованный правительством лейбориста Энтони Альбанезе после поражения Скотта Моррисона на всеобщих выборах в Австралии. Исследуются тектонические сдвиги политики в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе (АТР), оценивается стратегический вектор при новой администрации. Особое внимание уделено состоянию австралийско-китайских отношений. Рассматривается вопрос об оборонной политике, особенно в контексте альянса AUKUS и его последствий для региональной безопасности. В статье также исследуется динамика австралийско-американских отношений и нюансы взаимодействия с океанскими государствами. Обзор дает развернутое представление о вызовах и возможностях, с которыми сталкивается правительство Альбанезе на международной арене.

**Ключевые слова:** Австралия, Океания, внешняя политика, Энтони Альбанезе, лейбористы, Китай, США

**Для цитирования:** Гарин А.А. Экватор премьерского срока Энтони Альбанезе: анализ внешней политики австралийских лейбористов (2022–2024 гг.) // Юго-Восточная Азия: актуальные проблемы развития, 2024, Том 2, № 2 (63). С. 229–241. DOI: 10.31696/2072-8271-2024-2-2-63-229-241

### **Australia at the Crossroads: Scott Morrison's Premiership and Seismic Changes in Asia-Pacific Geopolitics**

Australia is a geostrategically exceptional country that borders oceans: the Pacific, Indian and Southern. This traditionally determines the broad scope of its foreign policy<sup>1</sup>. In the context of the transformation of the world order, Australia is trying to keep the Pacific Islands in its own orbit, which it still considers its "shield"<sup>2</sup>, and to become more involved in the affairs of the wider Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, Canberra's foreign policy is increasingly becoming the subject of debate, including due to its increased conflict potential.

Since 2018, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has been in power in Australia. His premiership represents an epoch of sharp Canberra rhetoric. It was under Morrison that Australia began to actively rearm, transfer its policy to external control from the United States and aggravate relations with China. This led to the loss of high-level contacts between Australian and Chinese politicians, and also provoked anxiety from a number of Asia-Pacific countries that are not interested in turning the region into a battlefield. Australia has begun to be perceived as one of the obvious participants in a potential high-intensity conflict.

In the theory of foreign relations, Australia is defined as a middle power. Due to the combination of vast maritime and land area, and significant financial resources, it is trying to "punch above its weight."<sup>3</sup> However, attempts to cover as much space as possible with its foreign policy are fraught with "territorial overstretch"<sup>4</sup> and miscalculations in a number of areas. The transformation of the world order requires countries to take a sovereign approach to foreign policy, since it is necessary for actors with their own independent position to resolve urgent issues of global and regional architecture. Despite this possibility, Australia, under Morrison, chose the role of a country relaying the position of the United States, which negatively affected its credibility. By joining the AUKUS alliance, Canberra actually allowed Washington to continue its efforts to involve it in a possible conflict with China.

Miscalculations were also made in the South Pacific. After the re-orientation of the Solomon Islands from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China (PRC), strong pressure, including in the informational space, began to be exerted on the small developing island state (SIDS). In fact, this showed that the Morrison administration intends to approve only those steps by PICs that are comparable only to Australian national interests. But the foreign policy dynamics have undergone significant changes. Traditionally influenced by historical ties and geographical proximity to major powers such as the United States and Australia, the Pacific Islands nations are actively seeking to diversify their international relations and integrate more comprehensively into the Asia-Pacific. This shift reflects not only a pursuit for greater political autonomy and economic opportunities, but also an intention to gain a more active role in regional affairs.

In summary, the tenure of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison was marked by significant controversies and debates. Central to these discussions was the perception of an unbalanced foreign policy approach and an increase in conflict rhetoric, which not only affected Australia's domestic policies but also its international relationships.

### **Navigating Pitfalls: The Foreign Policy Challenges Facing Anthony Albanese's Government**

Australia has great potential. However, in order to realize the opportunities, a more strategically adjusted foreign policy course is needed, which will consider the realities of the transformation of regional architecture, and not rely on the narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An important step in this direction could be the federal elections that took place in Australia on May 21, 2022<sup>5</sup>. Following the results of the vote, the Labor administration,

headed by Anthony Albanese, came to power. The head of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) became the country's prime minister, and the Liberal Party of Australia (LPA) found itself in opposition after nine years of leading the country.

The ALP faced a number of serious challenges in foreign policy: to correct the deplorable situation in relations with China, reduce excessive dependence on the United States, and improve Australia's image in the eyes of the Asia-Pacific countries. In this context, the Australian Labor Party had to consider a range of factors, including:

**The Dualistic Relationship with China.** The foreign vector in which Australia is trying to declare its intentions to improve contacts with China, but at the same time is preparing for war against its main trading partner, is counterproductive, given the high class of China's diplomacy.

**Rethinking Rapprochement with the United States.** If Australia continues to follow in the wake of the U.S. and "surrender" the Fifth Continent to the American outpost for anti-Chinese actions, prepare it for a big war in Asia-Pacific, then the countries of the region may continue to distance themselves from Canberra. For most of them, China is a leading economic partner. In addition, it is impossible to constructively resolve regional and global security issues without dialogue with Beijing.

**U.S. Responses to Shifting Foreign Policy Trajectories.** Morrison's policy led to a sharp tilt towards Washington, making Canberra part of the United States' military strategy to compete with China. Against this background, Australia faced the risks of interference in internal affairs. Moreover, we are not talking about China's actions, but about the steps the United States can take if Canberra decides to abruptly abandon the course of engaging in confrontation with Beijing.

All this has put the ALP in a rather difficult position. Nevertheless, the Australian Labor Party has positioned itself as an actor that intends to use diplomacy more actively in order to gradually work with the tangle of contradictions in Australia's foreign policy that formed under Morrison.

### **The Sino-Australian Relations: Economic Ties vs. Security Concerns**

Analysis of Australia's foreign policy is very closely related to its relations with China. The PRC is Australia's largest trading partner in its entire history. At the same time, Canberra perceives Beijing as its main threat and intends to protect its trade routes from its main trading partner. Against this background, discussion arose: how can the main trading partner be a threat? Every country has the right to ensure its sovereignty, to have con-

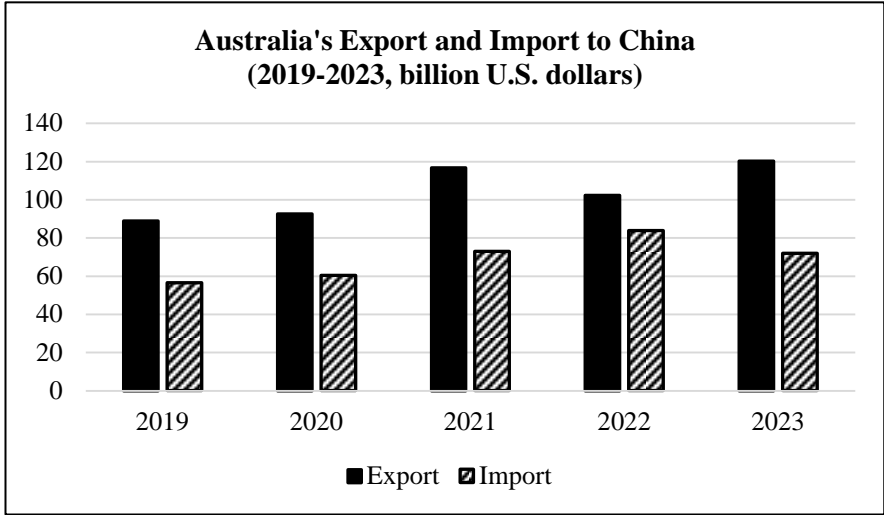
cerns related to trade and political dependence, and military vulnerability. However, in the case of Australia, it was the dualism of the relationship that took over. Canberra turned a blind eye to U.S. attempts to involve it in the anti-Chinese orbit, which caused serious strategic and image damage to it, and made it a potential party to a possible high-intensity conflict in Asia-Pacific. At the same time, Australia has taken a number of tough measures against China, although, due to trade cooperation with the PRC, it has achieved, among other things, its economic well-being.

In Australia's 2023 Defence Strategic Review conducted under the Albanese government, Australia calls China "the largest and most ambitious of any country since the end of the Second World War"<sup>6</sup>. Canberra also points to the lack of "transparency or reassurance"<sup>7</sup> of Beijing's strategic intentions in the region. The Australian military also believes that China's active presence in the South China Sea threatens the rules-based global order in the region and, consequently, negatively affects Australia's national interests<sup>8</sup>. In response, Australia intends to refocus its doctrine to conduct high-intensity military operations away from its territory. Given such rhetoric against itself, the PRC continues to improve its military capabilities, understanding from whom specifically security threats may come. Especially in the context of the risk that the United States plans to turn Australia into a temporary command post under its control in the event of a potential conflict in the Asia-Pacific.

In the context of such tensions, another important factor in the relations between Canberra and Beijing has been adjusted. The total volume of bilateral trade in 2022 amounted to \$186 billion, a decrease of more than \$3 billion year-on-year. Australia's exports to China totaled US\$102.36 billion, down by more than \$14 billion. However, in 2023, the situation began to improve gradually.

The economic cooperation has become the main focus of the Albanese administration. During the first half of his premiership, Australia and China held a number of high-level meetings. The topic of the talks was the partial lifting of restrictions, including on the supply of wine, beef and agricultural products to the PRC. China, in turn, reminded Australia of the need to consider issues of economic cooperation objectively, impartially and appropriately, and take measures to provide Chinese companies with a fair, open and non-discriminatory business environment<sup>9</sup>. In 2022, Albanese held formal talks with Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Indonesia, after which he paid an official visit to China on November 4-7, 2023. He became the first Australian Prime minister to visit China in seven years. On May 2023, Canberra held the 16th China-Australia Joint Ministerial Eco-

conomic Commission, which was the first since 2017. On April 2024, both parties restarted China-Australia Free Trade Agreement Joint Committee meetings, as well as held a number of negotiations at the level of trade ministers.



**Source:** compiled by the author based on United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database<sup>10</sup>

China demonstrates readiness for dialogue with Australia, but at the same time indicates that relations should be built on an equal basis. This is especially relevant in the context of Canberra's tougher approach to investments from China<sup>11</sup>. In recent years, Australia has caused serious damage to bilateral relations with China. Therefore, Canberra needs to show that it is able to take a pragmatic position in bilateral relations. The ALP probably understands this, but it's extremely difficult to achieve this goal in conditions of total orientation towards the United States.

### **Australia's Defence, AUKUS and the U.S. Factor**

Despite the numerous domestic political and economic issues that the Albanese administration has to resolve, including high rental prices and tax reform<sup>12</sup>, special attention is being paid to foreign and military dimensions. The ALP is on its way to reforms in the Australian Defence Force (ADF). As mentioned above, Australia plans to address the challenges of conducting high-intensity operations as far away from its borders as possible. This includes the increasing spending on long-range missiles, hyper-

sonic technologies, combat drones (including undersea ones), the production of guided weapons, optimizing fleet capabilities, cyber operations, as well as amphibious force development efforts and solving the issue of fuel storage and logistics. One of the main authors of the Australia's 2023 Defence Review, Angus Houston, former commander-in-chief of the ADF, declared the current strategic circumstances the worst he has seen in his lifetime<sup>13</sup>.

Australia's military policy involves close integration with the United States. For a long time, it was believed that the country receives security benefits through such cooperation, sacrificing certain foreign policy interests. However, in the context of the intensified Sino-American rivalry and strong tilt towards Washington, Canberra is actually depriving itself of the right to conduct an independent foreign policy and automatically makes itself a potential party to the conflict in the Asia-Pacific. Australia's focus on the US military-industrial complex is also demonstrated by the regular trips of Defense Minister Richard Marles to the United States. He also called China "the biggest security anxiety"<sup>14</sup> and supports the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs).

In this case, it's necessary to consider the AUKUS factor. This alliance has also become the legacy of Scott Morrison. Labor members in the parliament of the continent have criticized AUKUS, but the Albanese administration is still on course to implement it. The analysts highlight the following advantages of AUKUS for Australia: strengthening its naval potential through access to nuclear powered submarines, increasing the operational range of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), creating a "deterrence system" in the region, interaction in the technological field (artificial intelligence, quantum computing and undersea capabilities), the development of the defense manufacturing sector<sup>15</sup>.

However, the alliance itself contains a number of nuances. All these factors are a serious challenge for Australia and carry risks.

**The Diplomatic Effect.** The countries in the broader Asia-Pacific perceive this alliance as a destabilizing factor. AUKUS increases the risks of high-intensity conflict in the region. The stakes are being raised precisely by the United States, which does not want to completely lose influence in Asia.

**The Deterioration of Relations with China.** There is no doubt that the nuclear submarines promised to Australia will be used in the South China Sea and against China, which is certainly considered in Beijing. Moreover, Australia has an extensive coast in the Indian Ocean, so there

are scenarios that RAN submarines will operate off the coasts of India and Africa.

**Loss of Sovereignty.** AUKUS is a wake-up call for Australia on the issue of sovereignty. It is possible that the U.S. military personnel will be involved in the nuclear-powered submarines promised to Australia, especially in the shortage of mariners in the country. In addition, the SSNs will certainly need to be used in coordination with the United States. Australia risks paying a very high price for such technologies – the role of one of the most obvious contenders for participation in the high-intensity conflict with China.

**Incompatibility with the Emerging Regional and Global Architecture.** Australia will have to wait at least until the 2030s–2050s for its expensive nuclear-powered SSNs. But when the country has them, the world may turn out to be completely different and with a different balance of power.

Anyway, this legacy of Scott Morrison will continue to influence Canberra's foreign policy. The above-mentioned consequences of the AUKUS provide an opportunity for Australia to take a fresh and independent look at its own security interests. For example, when analysts will be talking about the reality that Australia wants for itself, and not the one that the United States has prepared for it.

But one cannot discount the scenario that the current Labor government is waiting for a second term to adjust its foreign policy course to a more independent one. The United States, for its part, does not intend to abandon its own military outposts in Asia-Pacific.

### **Australia and the Pacific Island Countries in a Changing World Order**

The Pacific Island Countries have become focal points in the arena of global geopolitics. This increased attention stems from the evolving and complex dynamics within the subregion: China's extensive presence in the Pacific Islands has become a constant on the momentum that Beijing set back in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now there is a phase in which Australia and the United States are trying to counteract the influence of the PRC. Canberra's policy is reactive. Australia and the United States are not keeping up with the changes in the changing world order, as the establishment of relations between small developing countries and China reflects a deeper trend: PICs want not only to develop ties with the PRC, but to become part of Greater Asia, diversify diplomatic, economic and humanitarian ties, and become more resistant to external shocks.



The trend was observed during the years of Morrison's premiership. However, his administration was unable to respond adequately to this and rebuild in time. Moreover, the ALP sharply criticized Morrison after the signing of the security agreement between the PRC and the Solomon Islands. Now the Australia Labor Party itself has turned out to be in power, and it is possible that if their policy towards the PICs does not change, Australia will face new foreign policy fiascos.

The Albanese administration has taken some steps to try to establish ties with the Pacific Islands Countries. The Australian Labor Party committed to boosting development aid to the Pacific by \$525 million from 2022 to 2025<sup>16</sup>. However, Albanese attended the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders' Meeting on November 7-9, 2023. On January 12, 2023, Australia's Prime Minister met with Papua New Guinea's Leader James Marape. In April 23, 2024, Albanese completed the walk on the Kokoda track. Besides that, Foreign Minister of Australia Penny Wong made at least nine visits to the Pacific Islands (including negotiations in Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga).

Australia has also sought to strengthen its ties with Pacific Island nations through reforming migration and visa regimes. A significant aspect of this reinvigorated approach was the introducing the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), commenced on March 29, 2024. This new visa category is designed to provide a pathway to permanent residency for citizens from Pacific Islands nations and Timor-Leste.

Moreover, Australian government signed a treaty with Tuvalu. This agreement aimed to facilitate easier migration for Tuvaluans, particularly in the context of rising sea levels and the increasing unlivability of their island due to climate change<sup>17</sup>. But the treaty also incorporated a significant security component. It has led to a twofold reaction. Concerns stem from fears that these security measures could limit the sovereignty of SIDS or involve them in broader geopolitical conflicts that are largely beyond their control. It also proved that Australia's policy in the Pacific is based almost exclusively on attempts to take "revenge" for the security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands, on competition with Beijing, and not on a long-term strategy.

This case highlights that the PICs face numerous serious challenges related to the rapidly increasing subregional dynamics (especially due to the rivalry between great and middle powers).

**The Risks of Involvement in a Military Conflict.** The Pacific Island Countries certainly do not want to turn into a part of potential conflict.

In the terms of increased rivalry between Australia and the United States against China, there're risks that the former colonial powers will try to use the Pacific Islands' territories for military purposes (the deployment of weapons and the modernization of naval bases left over from World War II).

**Geopolitical Tensions.** The geopolitical landscape in the South Pacific has become more dynamic and complex. This diverts the resources of Pacific Island Countries from economic development towards foreign policy, and Australia only exacerbates this process. For example, the issue of using nuclear-powered submarines and the risks that they will be in the waters of the PICs without their knowledge, and with extremely dangerous lethal weapons, remains open.

**Internal Interference.** The tensions in the subregion are rising from year to year. As a result, the Pacific Island Countries face a lot of risks of being pressured by larger actors, which could decide that PIC's policies are not connected in their interests. An example of this was attempts to interfere in the affairs of the Solomon Islands and criticism for their co-operation with China.

Australia does not want to lose its "shield" in the form of the Pacific Islands. But this Canberra's vision is hugely outdated and does not meet the demands of the emerging world order. Sovereign Pacific Island Countries are interested in economic development nowadays. This makes it necessary for PICs to diversify foreign policy ties, expand their ties in Asia-Pacific and the world (it's not only about cooperation with China, but also with India, ASEAN countries and Russia). Australia will have to understand that it will not be able to independently ensure these processes, and the U.S. shows only a situational character towards the subregion.

### **Theoretical Implications on Australian Foreign Policy**

A change of leadership in any country is an important event, which often affects foreign policy. For example, new leaders can give new meanings to the strategic landscape: it is about strengthening or changing alliances, reassessing military commitments and setting new policy priorities.

Australia is an important Asia-Pacific actor, which faces the imbalance of foreign policy in the context of a change of leadership. It makes the Fifth continent especially interesting for analysis from the theory of international relations point of view. As the author of this article sees it, the postulates of realism are a suitable theoretical basis for this analysis, since it is focused on power and country interests.

According to the postulates of political realism, countries primarily take care of their own security and interests<sup>18</sup>. From this paradigm, the new prime minister of Australia had to understand the role and place of the country in the region and the world; how to manage the complex dynamics in the Asia-Pacific; respond to challenges in the South Pacific and reduce the influence of the United States; as well as manage relations with China. Political realism assumes that the main goal of the policy will be precisely to maintain and strengthen the country's security and its position in the global power structure. However, Canberra's current vector demonstrates disregard for these aspects. In fact, Australian foreign policy does not correspond to its real interests, which indicates the need for a more thorough and detailed review.

In the classical sense, the Australian Labor Party is an actor that, even in the conditions of the Cold War, managed to build relations with communist China. In 1972, under ALP's leader Gough Whitlam, Australia established diplomatic relations with China, and the politician himself sought to demonstrate to Washington that Canberra could make independent decisions. Later, another Labor Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, became the first to publicly broach the idea of APEC. However, under Albanese premiership, Australia remains a country that has not yet decided on its interests or on the position of whose common vision is closer to it: East or West.

Albanese adheres to the orientation towards the U.S., especially in the military and foreign policy areas. In fact, this creates risks for Australia's involvement in a high-intensity conflict in the Asia-Pacific, which is fraught with extremely negative consequences. If previously close defense ties with the United States were considered a kind of "payment" for security, now it is a risk factor for Canberra. It has become especially clear that Australia is trying to prioritize a short-term rather than a long-term vision. Instead of developing an approach that would consider the realities of the changing world order, Australia once again perceives everything as a bipolar rivalry, rather than the formation of a multipolar world.

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It was stated above that Australia is considered a state that "punches above its weight." It was believed that Washington would help Canberra in these efforts. However, the tectonic shifts in the regional and global architecture are proof that only a more flexible and sovereign approach to foreign policy will help achieve this. Australia's strategic landscape faces

numerous and complex challenges that extend across defense, economic, and South Pacific dimensions.

Defense strategies, overly reliant on the United States, have constrained Australia's autonomy. Economically, Australia's approach towards foreign investment, particularly from China, has soured its business reputation, indicating a need for a balanced strategy, connected with economic pragmatism. In the Pacific, Australia faces mistrust from its neighbors due to its perceived preparations for conflict with China, which could lead to increased military activities that may infringe upon the sovereignty and security of the Pacific Islands.

Australia faces difficult times ahead and Albanese's government faces the mission of keeping his motherland in the game. But this can only be achieved based on pragmatism and the real interests of the country.

## ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

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