Interview – Melissa Conley Tyler

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Melissa Conley Tyler brings a track record of decades of experience in Australian foreign policy to her role with the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue as its Executive Director. For 13 years, she served as National Executive Director of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, an independent international policy institute established as a branch of Chatham House in 1924, with close links to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Under her leadership, the AIIA was recognised for three years running as the top think tank in Southeast Asia/Pacific and one of the top 50 think tanks worldwide in the University of Pennsylvania's Global Go To Think Tanks Index, the only comprehensive ranking exercise. In 2017, she co-authored Think Tank Diplomacy, the first book-length discussion of the role of policy institutes in the international sphere.

She joined the University of Melbourne in 2019 as Director of Diplomacy at Asialink and then as a Research Fellow/Associate in the Asia Institute. Most recently she was a visiting fellow in Taiwan at the Ministry of Defense's think tank – the Institute of Defense and National Security Research – funded by a Ministry of Foreign Affairs Taiwan Fellowship. Melissa has extensive experience establishing and sustaining Australia-Asia engagement through Track II dialogues involving government officials, academics, media, and business. She is a lawyer and specialist in conflict resolution, including negotiation, mediation and peace education, who worked as program manager of the University of Melbourne's International Conflict Resolution Centre and Senior Fellow of Melbourne Law School. Melissa is a prolific commentator with expertise in Australian foreign policy, Australia's key relationships across Asia and the practice of diplomacy.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I would define my field broadly as anything that is relevant to Australia's foreign policy. That means there is a lot going on at the moment! My career has coincided with a massive shift in international relations due to the increasing power of countries that would not consider themselves part of "the West". I have watched the international rules-based order, of which Australia was so fond, being challenged by rising powers and now being jettisoned wholesale by the United States.

These changes are seismic for a country like Australia that has always seen its security and prosperity as resting on three pillars: a great and powerful friend, open global trade and multilateral rules and institutions. So, debates about how countries manage this time of transition are topical and relevant.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I can trace two areas where I think my thinking has evolved most. First, I have become sceptical that there are (or should be) common interests and values across large groups of countries, like the West. I am much more convinced that the important divisions are between where countries are placed in the international system, as great powers or smaller powers. I am never surprised when great powers behave like great powers. And I think middle powers — countries with some sway in the international system but without the ability to buy or bully others — are absolutely crucial in creating an international system that works for mid-sized and smaller states.

Second, I have become much more alive to the views of the majority world. When I studied International Relations at the Fletcher School in Boston, I think I mostly imbued a classical Western view of the field. However, working with Southeast Asian, Pacific and Indian Ocean colleagues over the decades has given me a much better sense of how most of the world sees the behaviour of the West in international relations. This makes me suitably humble. A project I would love to work on someday is looking at how Australia's First Nations people peacefully managed relations between different language groups across a continent the size of Western Europe or China without the bloody wars we saw in those regions.

How might Australia's foreign policy evolve in light of growing minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, especially concerning its US alliance and its engagement with other regional powers like China and India?

I see minilateralism as a response to two related trends: great power competition and the decline in multilateralism. If we look at the range of multilateral institutions — whether in security, trade, diplomacy, or other areas — they currently have limited ability to achieve consensus or outcomes. This means that it is attractive to join with smaller groups of states that wish to work together on a problem. This is not new, but the trend has accelerated in contested times.

The question for Australian foreign policy is how to adapt when those three pillars of Australia's security and prosperity are all crumbling before our eyes. The only realistic response is to look for partners that share our interests and work with them to preserve what we can of the international order that was conducive to Australia's success.

How do you think Track 1.5 dialogues help bridge the gap between theoretical discussions and tangible outcomes, and in what ways can non-official dialogues play a role in shaping formal policy decisions?

I have been involved in more than 100 Track 1.5 (officials and non-officials) and Track 2 (non-officials) dialogues. I think they are a valuable platform to build relationships, speak frankly, raise new ideas and identify areas for cooperation. In some situations where official discussions are difficult or impossible, they can provide a lifeline to keep communication open. Where there is official dialogue, they can be a useful adjunct — creating a space for a different kind of conversation.

You suggest framing the potential Australia-Japan-Korea trilateral as "like-positioned" rather than "like-minded." How does this concept affect the potential for cooperation among these countries, and do you think this framing will resonate with policymakers?

I am not convinced that any countries are like-minded. Every country has a unique set of interests and a strategic culture which determines how it sees the world. Generally, the best cooperation comes when countries share common problems or common interests and are friendly enough with each other that they are able to work together on these. I did some research which shows that Australian policymakers do not actually often use the term "like-minded" — it is more of an academic phrase, usually referring to a broad group like "the West" or "aid donors". That makes it imprecise and better avoided.

How do you see the influence of the BRICS in Southeast Asia? Do you think it helps Southeast Asian countries assert greater autonomy, potentially reshaping alliances in the Indo-Pacific?

Now that BRICS has expanded into Southeast Asia — with Indonesia joining and Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam becoming partners — it will become more of a focus in the region. It makes perfect sense that Indonesia would want to join, given its history of multialignment — it is also simultaneously joining the OECD. I had assumed that the BRICS had plateaued, but with the massive expansion, it is entering a new phase, and assumptions from the past do not hold any longer.

How can Australia step up to fill the USAID funding gap left by the US, and what challenges might arise in forming effective development partnerships with other countries to implement collective action?

I see this as the moment when US credibility died in the majority of the world, particularly in developing countries. The US has vacated the field on what matters most to them. This has massive security implications, and — with cuts from other countries like the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Belgium — plays into narratives about the West.

Australia's strategic circumstances mean that this is not a route it can even consider — surrounded as it is by more than 20 low and middle-income countries. Australia's relationships in Southeast Asia and the Pacific are a national asset, and development partnerships are core to these relationships. When there were cuts during Prime Minister Abbott's tenure, Australia saw other actors fill the vacuum, particularly in the Pacific, which showed the country not to go down this path again.

In the immediate aftermath of the US foreign assistance freeze and cuts, Australia held the line on its development budget and has intelligently re-targeted programs to where our partners need to fill gaps. In the longer term, the countries that are not following this self-defeating path like Australia, Japan, South Korea, and others are going to have to see how they can work together in the region.

How can Australia redefine its approach to trade in an era where the benefits of globalisation are increasingly questioned? Should Australia continue to expand bilateral agreements, or would a more regional or multilateral approach be more appropriate given the current global challenges?

Australia's long-term preference is for open trade. But that is not the world we currently live in. With a global retreat from open economies and a reemergence of nationalist approaches to trade, countries like Australia have had to adapt. As Australian Treasurer Jim Chalmers noted, "it would be preposterously self-defeating to leave our policies unchanged in the face of all this industry policy taking shape and taking hold around us".

Australia has embraced more active government involvement in markets through the Future Made in Australia plan, investing AU$ 22.7 billion (US$14.3 billion) into Australia's workforce, renewable energy, supporting investment in Australia, technological and industrial renovation, and utilisation of natural resources and critical minerals. This responds to industry incentives offered by other countries, including the US, Japan, South Korea, Canada, and the European Union, to nurture the development of new industries.

At the same time, Australia continues to promote a transparent, predictable, and rules-based global trading order in line with the role of free and open trade in Australia's prosperity. Around 31 percent of Australian economic output is supported by trade activity, and one in every four jobs is linked to trade. We support organisations like the World Trade Organization as one of the pillars of Australians' prosperity, supporting the stability of the trading environment and providing Australian exporters with access to markets. Particularly during the second Trump Administration, Australia should focus on cooperating with like-minded states to maintain what we can of the global trading system. At this difficult time, Australia is trying to find a balance between the imperatives of intervention and openness.

As global economic shifts occur, where do you see Australia's role in the global economy by the end of 2025? Will it have adapted successfully, or will it need to reassess its strategy?

I am confident in Australia's ability to adapt. As a middle power, that is what we have had to do throughout our history. Most recently, we faced a huge economic challenge with China's imposition of trade restrictions in 2020. Australia was able to withstand the attempted economic coercion by redirecting targeted commodities and waiting until Beijing decided to reverse remaining trade restrictions. We will have to be nimble and adapt.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Be flexible. You do not know enough about what the future holds to be sure you know what your pathway will look like. Do interesting things and see where that takes you. And enjoy the journey.