

Towards making strategy, not structure, the story: the case for a Foreign Affairs White Paper

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Recently on [The Strategist](#) -- the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's blog -- Peter Jennings [made the case](#) for why a new Foreign Affairs White Paper is needed. A number of the Coalition government's policy predispositions have emerged, Jennings notes, but the need to integrate these into a 'coherent strategic plan' would be best served by commissioning a new White Paper. Jennings promised to provide four reasons for why his case is compelling. But after scrolling expectantly down his list, it became apparent that Jennings hadn't identified, what I think is, one of the most compelling reasons for why a Foreign Affairs White Paper is required: [AusAID's integration into DFAT](#).

As in the broader realm of Australia's foreign relations, the Coalition's aid-specific predispositions are slowly emerging. Foreign Minister (and Minister for International Development) Julie Bishop has [repeatedly signalled](#) that aid will be employed as a tool of statecraft designed to achieve [Australia's long-term economic interests](#). Late last month, in her highly anticipated first major [address](#) on aid since the Coalition was elected, Bishop [sketched out in more detail](#) her approach to aid. But, as Stephen Howes and Ashlee Betteridge [have identified](#), serious strategic questions remain unanswered.

On the other hand, important decisions about the structure of the aid program, as regular readers of this blog [will be aware](#), have already been made. What's more, the implementation of AusAID's integration into DFAT is moving very swiftly. The @AusAID twitter handle [is no more](#), Ausaid.gov.au is now aid.dfat.gov.au, and the AusAID graduate program [has been scrapped](#). Partly because of the lack of detail on offer to date, communication of the Government's *strategy* for the aid program has not kept pace with announcements about how it will be *structured*.

With the Coalition's approach appearing not to align with the maxim '[structure follows strategy](#)', structure has inevitably become [the story](#). By announcing the commissioning of a Foreign Affairs White Paper, the Coalition would refocus the energy of the development community in Australia towards influencing strategy. Of course, just because the Coalition has not published a comprehensive blueprint -- unless you count [this email](#) -- it does not mean they don't have a well-formed vision about how they see aid fitting into

Australia's foreign policy. In fact, Bishop has been [exceedingly consistent](#) in her messaging about the aid program (even [before becoming](#) Foreign Minister), [as has](#) Peter Varghese, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Clearly AusAID's integration with DFAT is much more than a substantial bureaucratic realignment and cost-saving exercise, as [difficult](#) as those challenges [will prove](#). It represents a fundamental reorientation of how Australia's aid program functions as a component of our engagement with the world. Bishop herself heralded the integration as a '[new era in diplomacy](#)' -- a move that would "facilitate the alignment of Australia's foreign, trade and development policies and programs in a coherent, effective and efficient way." A Foreign Affairs White paper, and the opportunity for considered reflection and buy-in that such a process offers, would serve as a suitable road-map to guide this 'new era'.

The scale of the reorientation of Australia's aid program also calls into question the ongoing relevance of the existing policies that guide it. If the Asian Century White Paper [has been discarded](#), apparently [because](#) Gillard's imprimatur featured too heavily, then we must ask what fate awaits the Kevin Rudd-inspired [Making a real difference—Delivering real results](#) -- ostensibly the cornerstone guiding aid policy. Presumably new policies are in the pipeline. It would be beneficial if they aligned with a clearly articulated strategic vision set out in a Foreign Affairs White Paper.

The structural changes to the aid program that the Coalition has already implemented obliges them to set out in more detail its strategic shape. Stephen Howes has already [made the case](#) for accurately formulating the overall aid objective. And [Dinuk Jayasuriya](#) has [set out](#) why it matters for assessing aid effectiveness. The onus is on the development community to continue to agitate for an extended explanation of how the Coalition government sees aid fitting into Australia's foreign policy toolkit going forward. Only then will it be possible for the Australian development community to bring its collective experience to bear on the recalibrated aid program, and ensure it provides the best outcomes for recipients.

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