



Dr Shumi Akhtar
Associate Professor
The University of Sydney

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T: Senator Kimberley Kitching

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Phone: +61 2 6277 3535
Fax: +61 2 6277 5818
fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

Re: Funding for public research into foreign policy issues

Dear Committee Chair,

I, Dr Shumi Akhtar, (Associate Professor at the University of Sydney Business School) would like to express my gratitude to you and your colleagues for opening such an important line of inquiry into funding for public research into foreign policy. As I have spent more than a decade on various aspects of research related activities including development of research funding applications, for which I was successful on numerous external large research grants from the Australian Research Council (ARC) and also industry research grants as the lead researcher, I feel I am well placed to make this submission in addressing the terms of references:

a. current funding by Australian Government departments and agencies in this area



The current government has a good set of initiatives for Indo-Pacific regions and also for other foreign countries (but there is always room for improvements which I discuss at the end of this document):

- The New Colombo Plan (NCP) initiative by the Australian Government which offers Australian undergraduates students prestigious scholarships and grants for the opportunity to live, study and undertake internships/mentorships in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Indo-Pacific Design Funding Window grant funding by DFAT. This aims to design and launch catalytic blended finance solutions in some specific countries in the Indo-Pacific region primarily focusing on sustainability, resiliency of infrastructure and gender equality.
- DFAT's International Indo-Pacific Partnerships Program (2020-23), which is designed to support Australian citizens, businesses and governments to minimize corruption in the job creation and human development process in the Indo-Pacific countries.
- Health Security Initiatives was taken by the Australian Government for the Indo-Pacific regions to assist with medical and health related emergencies and outbreaks and also to upscale capacity in their health security.



b. the quality and diversity of publicly funded think tanks focused on foreign policy

Whether it is government funded or publicly and privately funded think tanks, institutes and research centers - all may claim to be independent and unbiased in expressing their views on certain foreign policy but there always going to be some level of unconscious bias on certain foreign policy debates. Quality of research on foreign policy is dependent on many factors – some examples are, the depth and breadth of real data and information the researcher/analyst has access to and equally important is the skills set required to apply appropriate scientific analytical approach, method and models to obtain defensible, accurate and unbiased estimates of the analysis and accurate/sensible interpretation of all results (as opposed to selective results). Also, how closely national research code of conduct is followed that closely aligns with our national interest, protecting our sovereignty, the rule of laws and mutual respect should be considered in assessing the quality of reports. The diversity of opinions and rich/accurate/legit sources of information on foreign policy should be reflected in the report for it to be credible.

c. ways of enhancing greater public understanding of foreign policy issues

The best way to enhance greater public awareness and understanding of foreign policies would be to share information through social media platforms in non-technical manner. Also advocating its importance through newspapers, tv, radio news and using government app (ie, COVI-19 app type) to inform public about the foreign policy issues and encouraging Australian citizens to engage in the debate via phone or in-person or email or social media by providing an appropriate platforms.



d. how the Australian Government involves states, business, civil society, unions, universities, think tanks, diasporas and the wider community in developing and implementing foreign policy

There is no clear set of mechanisms in place on how Australian government involves universities in developing or implementing foreign policies. I list below some of the ways University researchers get involved in contributing to foreign policy debates or reform discussions which may or may not directly involve Australian government:

- University researchers working on certain indo-pacific foreign policy areas are sometimes invited by the Senate or the Parliament to serve as an expert witness in public hearings especially when Australian government initiate an inquiry.
- University researchers themselves take the initiative to inform the government via senate submissions/senate correspondence.
- University researchers team up with the industry partners and non-government organisations to address some issues revolving indo-pacific foreign policy issues that affect our business growth and economic productivity.
- Some universities have programs set up to involve industry employee(s) who wishes to undertake higher degree research studies by partnering with the universities working on certain policy matters that directly impact our businesses and wider community.
- Our collaborations should be focused on trusted, legit and mutually respectful partnership that enhances diversified research collaboration across the globe.



e. Strategies the Australian Government should adopt to build the knowledge needed to support more effective future foreign policy

The existing funding process and structure that Australian Government and its agencies have in place, do not appear to have sufficient mandatory instructions/requirements that may help to detect possible conflict of interest and harmful consequences that Australia could potentially face as a result of research collaboration with foreign countries researchers, including indo-pacific regions. Therefore, Australian Government and its funding agencies could do well with some careful revision of its funding schemes rules/instructions to ensure those grant funding results and drives positive outcome for Australia, protects its national interest and not allow other countries taking unfair advantage of Australia's relaxed collaborative research funding approach. This is especially important when it comes to foreign policy issues that is central in affecting Australia's economic wellbeing and its safety. Research partnership with foreign countries researchers should require better and more specific guidelines so that Australian researchers are protected from being scooped away with their research ideas, intellectual capital and innovation. Policy related research project must demonstrate a practical benefits to Australia for current and perceived future.

Universities to take 'best practice' should be made mandatory (as opposed to optional) to mitigate any potential risk. Australian Government should make grant funding guidelines and instructions clearer and transparent. Grant funding should not be transferable to international partner investigators country as it will increase the chance of interference and misuse of Australia;s fund to benefit outsiders than Australians.



The study of foreign policy issues is a dynamic area and hence we need proactivity and regular revisions of our foreign policy to keep up with the fluidity of the foreign policies in foreign countries as well as Indo-Pacific regions. Some of the Australian government funding (e.g., DFAT grants) has started to steer in this direction but more is needed. Also, for example, ARC encourages to have international collaborators and this creates a double edge sword problem: the incentive to attract international collaborator will come with risk as it would be impossible for university researchers to assess the potential risk (e.g., which international university or industry partners and collaborators that have strong ties with military or governments). As a research collaborator we exchange ideas freely and how it will be used against Australia in terms of biological or defense weapon or espionage or intellectual-property theft or cyber spying purposes or technological innovation for military or health purpose is not so easily detected by the Australian academics to be aware of. And when we do not have international collaborators then less weighting is given to the grant proposal. Perhaps Australian Government can provide information to the Australian universities the list of potential risky collaborators and partners to have collaborations with.

We need more transparency with our university collaborators with foreign institutions and researchers and any financial links. Australian Government should make it mandatory requirements for universities and industry partners to fully reveal the collaborators on researcher's public profile.

For example, it beats the whole purpose if Australian Government pours funding into addressing an important economic or investment or trade or innovation or technological



advancement research matter but only to be later transferred to be foreign countries that are not part of Indo-Pacific regions for implementation to see if the research finding outcome is beneficial or applicable or not. Therefore, it is paramount that the Australian Government funding is well aligned with having special interest for Australia and Indo-Pacific regions to be justified well before awarding funding to the possible applicants.

To excel in innovation and to be able to promote sustainable trade practices that are highly important for our economy and future growth, Indo-Pacific will play vital role for Australia. Under the current climate of geological tension, Indo-Pacific are our most important trade partners especially for our economic growth, increasing employment and improving our standard of living. We need diversity in our trading partners and Indo-pacific remains one of our major source of immigrants which is important to our nation moving forward. Protecting our national interest is a priority and we should endeavor to prosecute our interest without fear, without duress and without any coercive interference. Indo-Pacific region will help us to diversify our trading partners. I provide following possible strategies for the Australian Government for adoption/implementation to build the knowledge needed to support more effective future foreign policy:

- Targeted foreign policy relevant grant funding opportunities to reshape and revise each piece of Australia's outdated foreign policies rules/regulations/laws that is no longer serving the purpose that it was originally intended to;
- More funding allocation is required for foreign policy related Australian Research grants especially in Social Science areas where major economic and business related policy matters are studied;



- Provide universities with more resources, scholarships and fellowships for prospective students and staff to undertake foreign policy related education, research, trainings.
- Make our educational curricula design on more fact based in high schools, colleges and universities that has more thought provoking learning contents and fresh knowledge on foreign policy issues, economic and business policies and other pressing matters such as understanding the importance of acknowledgement of indigenous heritage, multiculturalism, environmental and climate issues, inequality, gender diversity, pros & cons of technological advancement and innovation, healthy living etc.
- Introduce, encourage and promote more data-driven, research-based and research-led education system towards possible new policy development and revision to make Australia safe and secure.
- Promotion of inclusive, open and productive dialogue needs to be established for foreign policy matters among academics, businesses, government and citizens with appropriate platform that is user friendly and less cumbersome;
- We need to develop a well-functional and sustainable framework to enable us creating endless possibilities and opportunities for our businesses to compete globally and in the Indo-pacific regions while ensuring Australian citizens feel safe and secure to operate in global landscape. We also need to protect and safeguard our natural resources, land, water, air, endangered animals, precious metals and our citizens from foreign threats and avoid over reliance on foreign nations or foreign investors or foreign talents/skills;
- Making grant funding applications process less administratively burdensome for the institutions and the researchers to promote more academic, industry and government engagement in a triangulation settings.



To conclude, proper precaution, proactive well-thought-out plan and agility is needed to flourish in the midst of current cultural dynamism of globalisation, health crisis, inequality, climate risk and environmental degradation caused by human and by the earth itself, cyber-attacks, terrorism and innovation/technological challenges. We need a genuine shared agenda to strengthen our interactions with the Indo-Pacific regions to make us stronger, united and better off in secured and prosperous way. I will happily welcome the opportunity to address more issues if required.

Sincerely,

Shumi

Dr M. SHUMI AKHTAR | Associate Professor
Discipline of Finance | The University of Sydney Business School

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
Rm 423, The University of Sydney Business Building (H69) |
Cnr of Codrington Street & Darlington Lane | Camperdown Campus
The University of Sydney | AUSTRALIA | NSW | 2006

W <http://sydney.edu.au/business/staff/shumia>