

Australia's Role in the Asian Century

JULIA GILLARD

Former Prime Minister of Australia
(June 2010–June 2013)

An Interview with Luke O'Connell and Penelope Kyritsis

Providence, RI, 4 March 2015

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Julia Gillard was sworn in as the 27th prime minister of Australia on 24 June 2010 and served in that office until June 2013. As prime minister and in her previous role as deputy prime minister, Ms. Gillard was central to the successful management of Australia's economy, the 12th biggest in the world, during the 2007–08 global financial crisis and as Australia positioned to seize the benefits of Asia's rise. She developed Australia's guiding policy paper, "Australia in the Asian Century." Under Ms. Gillard's leadership Australia was elected to serve on the United Nations Security Council.

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Ms. Gillard is a Distinguished Fellow with the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. She serves as an Honorary Professor at the University of Adelaide and is Patron of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library in Perth, Western Australia. She is also a member of the board of directors of Beyond Blue, a nonprofit organization committed to helping Australians understand and manage anxiety and depression.

Brown Journal of World Affairs: During your premiership, you focused heavily on fighting climate change. How does the repeal of Australia's carbon tax in summer 2014 affect Australia's legacy of mitigating climate change?

Julia Gillard: From my perspective—having fought so hard for an emissions trading scheme for a price on carbon—it was disheartening to see them all repealed by the current government. It wasn't a surprise that it was going to

happen. They [the current government] ran very strongly against carbon pricing, despite the fact that their political party had in the past endorsed a price on carbon. But I'm philosophical enough to believe that part of Australian politics

Our third biggest export is international education, with students from overseas coming to and studying in Australia. is that truly big reforms often take more than one attempt before they settle into the nation's way of doing things. For example, we now have universal health care.

We've had it since the 1980s, but it was first enacted in the 1970s, then taken away, then reenacted, and now it's just a part of Australian society. I actually think carbon pricing will be like that, so it'll be back.

Journal: Now, on a different topic—with China being Australia's biggest trade partner, how does Chinese influence figure into Australian foreign policy?

Gillard: Well, we are a nation in Asia—our region of the world—so that means we need to have good relationships across our region. That means that the peaceful rise of China is pivotal to us as a nation. We're a U.S. ally, so we're strongly engaged with the United States and very much welcoming of Obama's pivot to our region of the world. We think it's possible for everyone in our region to work through hard issues at places like the East Asia Summit and for the region to continue to grow and prosper—and do so peacefully. Now, that doesn't mean that there isn't strategic competition, but we think that such strategic competition can be peacefully managed.

Journal: On a similar note, how has Australia played an economic role in the development of Asian economies, especially China?

Gillard: In many ways, the most visible thing can be seen in the supply status of our resources. Our two biggest exports are coal and iron ore, and that has literally gone into China's growth as China has urbanized. It's built apartments, it's been made into fuel. Much of that [China's growth] has been done using Australian commodities. But our economic strengths are not limited to resources. Our third-biggest export is international education, with students from overseas coming to and studying in Australia. We have a very vibrant tourism sector. We have a very vibrant and well-respected agricultural sector, which means producing clean, green food and premium wine. We also have a very important and big financial services sector, and one of the things I did as prime minister was

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negotiate for the direct exchange of our currency with the Chinese currency.

So, I think with all of that, what you're seeing is a number of installments on the kind of economic demand that will come from middle-class Asian consumers. As their middle class becomes the biggest middle class on Earth, I think there will be many more things that Australia can do to provide the goods and services that the middle class will want.

Journal: You have supported the possibility of trilateral U.S.–Australia–China military exercises, among other joint security initiatives. How has the position of the Abbott government, especially in the direction of India and China, changed the previously positive momentum of security and cooperation throughout Asia?

Gillard: One thing about Australia's foreign policy setting is that it is overwhelmingly bipartisan. You don't get big swings in foreign policy as governments change, so there will be a lot of continuity. There already has been a lot of such continuity in outlook between the government I led and the government that is in office now. So that philosophy of constructive engagement in our region, of looking beyond the zero-sum calculus, that will continue under the current government.

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Journal: As the chairwoman of the Global Partnership for Education and a major proponent for educational reform in Australia, how do you view your role in bringing universal access to education?

Gillard: One of the delights in this period of post-politics is getting to chair the Global Partnership for Education. It was a passion for education, and a philosophy about the quality of education for all, that motivated me to get involved in politics. Back when I was a student at university and there were some big government cutbacks, I got involved in a campaign against them. That was the first time I got politically active and the rest is kind of history. In this period, I now chair the only multilateral body that is solely dedicated to education and, specifically, to realizing the Millennium Development Goal of universal access for every child. I get to work with the CEO, Ellis Albright, and with 60 developing country partners. The immediate challenge is to get the 58 million

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children around the world who still aren't in school—who don't even get to go to primary school, don't ever see the inside of a classroom—access to school.

A lot of progress has been made since the Millennium Development Goals were struck in terms of getting children to school. But it is kind of inevitable that the ones who remain are the ones in the hardest-to-reach places; around 30 million of those children are in conflict-affected and fragile states. So that is a very big portion of what we do. But when you can point to progress in difficult environments like Yemen and Afghanistan—and we can—then it gives you the heart that we can get the rest of it done. 



Photo of Julia Gillard with a copy of the Brown Journal of World Affairs Vol. 21, Issue 1, 4 March 2015 by Scott Usatorres

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