

# Tanya Plibersek: Australia must restore 'poisoned relations' with Timor-Leste

Deputy leader outlines Labor's foreign affairs ambitions, including that Australia be a better international citizen and more confident global presence

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Australia must “redouble efforts” to resolve a boundary dispute that has “poisoned relations” with Timor-Leste, Tanya Plibersek has said.

The deputy opposition leader and foreign affairs spokeswoman called for good faith negotiations during a speech to the National Press Club in Canberra on Wednesday.

Plibersek also laid down some markers about a broader approach to foreign policy, suggesting Australia could be “a better international citizen, a more active player in our region and a more creative, more confident presence on the world stage”.

The Labor MP said while Australia regularly called on other countries to abide by international norms and to settle disputes in line with the rules-based system, its own record was “not a flawless one”.

Timor-Leste last year announced it would resume a formal challenge against a 2006 oil and gas treaty that became mired in controversy following claims Australia bugged the cabinet room in Dili to gain the upper hand in negotiations.

But the government of Timor-Leste withdrew an international court of justice case against Australia relating to evidence it said was wrongly seized by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation in raids in Canberra in December 2013.

Plibersek called for a resolution, noting Timor-Leste had suffered decades of war and starvation and Australia's role in securing the country's independence was “a proud moment for many Australians”.

“The maritime boundary dispute has poisoned relations with our newest neighbour,” she said on Wednesday.

“This must change, for their sake, and for ours. A Shorten Labor government will redouble efforts to conclude good faith negotiations with Timor-Leste to settle the maritime boundaries between our two countries.

“If we are not successful in negotiating a settlement with our neighbour, we are prepared to submit ourselves to international adjudication or arbitration.”

Plibersek said the former president and prime minister Xanana Gusmão came to Australia in March last year and told her and Bill Shorten: “We don't want charity, we want justice.”

She said in meetings in Dili the following month she formed the view that it remained “a top-of-mind issue for the Timorese”, who were “so very disappointed that a country that supported them so greatly in their struggle for independence has, in their view, delayed coming to a negotiation on sea boundaries”.

Timor-Leste has said it remains willing to resolve the dispute directly with Australia even as it launched new arbitration proceedings in September last year.

Australia's foreign affairs minister, Julie Bishop, and the attorney general, George Brandis, have previously said they were disappointed with the decision and they would prefer to resolve the issue "through dialogue rather than legal action".

Plibersek raised the issue as part of her observations about Australia's need to be a good international citizen. She said the government could ensure safety at home by helping secure peace abroad, and enhance prosperity in Australia by extending opportunity in the wider world.

The senior Labor left figure said she had encountered "a few foreign policy purists". While idealism would always inform the party's foreign policy, pragmatism was sometimes needed to achieve incremental advances, she said.

It was "wishful thinking" to suggest Australia was a small country, far away, removed from the problems of the world and that it did not need to engage.

"Be it terrorism, war, poverty or climate change, Australia cannot afford to imagine ourselves immune from global threats to security and prosperity," Plibersek said.

"Climate change, pandemics and terrorism won't be combated by digging trenches or by throwing up nationalist barricades."

She reaffirmed the importance of the alliance with the United States, while noting the partnership was more valuable if Australia had the maturity and confidence to speak frankly and not seek the badge of "deputy sheriff".

Plibersek said the Labor party was right in 2003 to have disagreed with the Howard government's decision to join the US-led invasion of Iraq, insisting the action proved to be "a terrible mistake".

She explained her support for Australia's current role in training Iraqi troops and conducting airstrikes against Islamic State, saying in this case the democratically elected Iraqi government had called for help to protect its citizens from mass atrocity crimes.

Plibersek also affirmed the need to "enmesh ourselves" and build institutions in the Indo-Pacific, noting the world's "economic centre of gravity is moving to our region".

Australia's close economic and diplomatic relationship with China "binds us, but it does not blind us" on issues such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Plibersek said.

It was in Australia's interest to defend freedom of navigation and to urge all parties to "abide by both the terms and the spirit of the United Nations convention on the law of the sea" and respect the outcome of a case before the permanent court of arbitration.

Plibersek stopped short of calling for Australia to announce regular freedom-of-navigation exercises close to the disputed territories and reefs, saying public statements "can be perceived as deliberately provocative so you'd have to take a case-by-case approach".

However, Labor's defence spokesman, Stephen Conroy, has previously criticised the government for "hiding what activities our planes and our ships are engaged in" in the South China Sea.

Plibersek called for reforms to the UN security council to address the veto power of permanent members to increase its effectiveness in responding to future conflicts.