White paper tiger

A week has gone by, and it’s as if the Turnbull government’s foreign affairs white paper hasn’t happened. Some mild praise in Washington, some tut-tuts and a routine Global Times blast in Beijing, but nothing much has changed in Canberra, with not even a parliamentary debate scheduled.

That’s partly because, in the way of white papers, this one pulled its punches, but also because it’s deficient in suggesting specific follow-up to the priorities it outlines. Deepening ties and understanding with China? Implementing the Indo-Pacific concept to replace the Asia-Pacific? Nurturing the Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste and keeping out malign powers?

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is wallowing in the wash of the Defence Department, which put out its own more robust white paper first, and will soon be trailing the new Home Affairs super-department as well. Most analysts see DFAT’s white paper putting a Pollyanna view on China’s rise and America’s disarray.

James Curran, a Sydney University specialist on the US relationship, finds Foreign Minister Julie Bishop’s constant use of “uncertainty” as a theme sitting oddly with her faith in enduring US regional leadership. Trump is the prime cause of this uncertainty, though not the only one, “yet Bishop believes it will pass and that the status quo ante will somehow be re-established,” Curran wrote in the Lowy Institute’s The Interpreter blog. “It is difficult to know why the minister has allowed hope to dictate to judgement.” He likens it to Harold Holt pleading with the British in 1967 to keep forces “east of Suez”.

But it doesn’t convey the urgency of the problem. As it points out, Papua New Guinea’s population will grow from the present eight million to 18 million by 2050. It doesn’t mention the shambles of PNG’s recent elections and its deteriorating public finances, or cities such as Port Moresby and Honiara becoming urban nightmares with million-plus populations. It doesn’t discuss what to do if China’s regional approach changes, now that Xi Jinping is pushing the Chinese model for emulation. What happens if New Caledonia’s Kanaks vote to separate from France in next year’s referendum, or Bougainvilleans from PNG in 2019?

“We are left with a question,” wrote James Batley, formerly one of Australia’s top diplomatic troubleshooters in the Pacific and Timor-Leste, also in The Interpreter. “Do we have the wherewithal – the resources, the attention span, and the diplomatic and political capital – to fulfil the promise of bringing ‘greater intensity and ambition’ to our approach in the Pacific?”