



EXPLAINER SERIES

What does First Nations Foreign Policy mean?

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First Nations Foreign Policy

First Nations foreign policy seeks to embed the unique experiences and perspectives of indigenous people into a country's international policy priorities and programs.

When a country adopts a First Nations foreign policy approach to their interactions with the world, it is often based on the principles of mutual respect, collaboration, co-design and reciprocity. This relational approach to diplomacy aligns closely with indigenous ways of knowing and being.

First Nations foreign policy can also be framed as a means of leveraging the diplomatic skills, knowledge and capacities of indigenous peoples, cultivated over thousands of years prior to colonisation. In this framing, indigenous peoples are considered a strengths-based resource that can strengthen the quality and authenticity of a country's engagement with other nations, communities and peoples in an interconnected world.

A number of countries weave indigenous perspectives into the fabric of their international engagement, including New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Mexico, Chile and the US.

Foreign ministries engage regularly on indigenous issues as part of their work – from shaping international norms and standards to benefit indigenous peoples, to seeking ways to maximise economic opportunities for indigenous peoples in trade and investment, or promoting sustainable development for indigenous peoples globally.

Sitting above these national efforts is the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**, which establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, wellbeing and rights of the world's indigenous peoples.

BOX 1: **The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – Key Provisions**

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007. It establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, wellbeing and rights of the world's indigenous peoples.

The Declaration addresses both individual and collective rights; cultural rights and identity; rights to education, health, employment, language, and others. It prohibits discrimination against indigenous peoples and promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them. It also ensures their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own priorities in economic, social and cultural development. The Declaration encourages harmonious and cooperative relations between states and indigenous peoples.

Countries that incorporate First Nations perspectives in their international relations work:



Canada

Global Affairs Canada has an Action Plan on Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples which provides a framework to guide the department's efforts to advance the rights, perspectives and prosperity of indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world, from 2021 to 2025.



Australia

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) established the Office for First Nations International Engagement in December 2023 to implement the Australian Government's commitment to embed First Nations perspectives into Australia's foreign policy and enhance collaboration between First Nations communities and partners across the Indo-Pacific.



New Zealand

New Zealand has a long history of Māori leadership and work on international indigenous issues. In 2021, New Zealand outlined an Indigenous foreign policy to embrace a values-based approach to foreign policy making that emphasised kindness and reciprocity (manaaki), connectedness (whanaunga), collective benefits and shared aspiration (mahi tahi and kotahitanga) and stewardship of intergenerational wellbeing (kaitiaki).



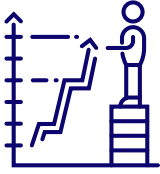
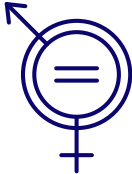
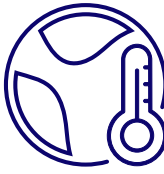




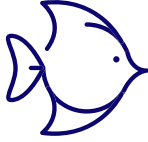




United States, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean

In 2016, the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The OAS is a regional intergovernmental organization of 35 member countries of the Americas, including the United States. The American Declaration offers specific protection for indigenous peoples in:

- North America
- Mexico
- Central and South America; and
- the Caribbean

It affirms the right of self-determination, rights to education, health, self-government, culture, lands, territories and natural resources.

Global issues where First Nations perspectives play a prominent role

 <p>Economic and social development</p>	 <p>Gender equality</p>	 <p>Climate action</p>	 <p>Clean energy transition</p>
 <p>Intellectual property issues</p>	 <p>Biodiversity & environmental science</p>	 <p>Cultural heritage protection</p>	 <p>Fisheries management</p>
 <p>Justice, education and health system strengthening</p>	 <p>Localisation</p>	 <p>Human rights</p>	 <p>Repatriation of cultural heritage</p>

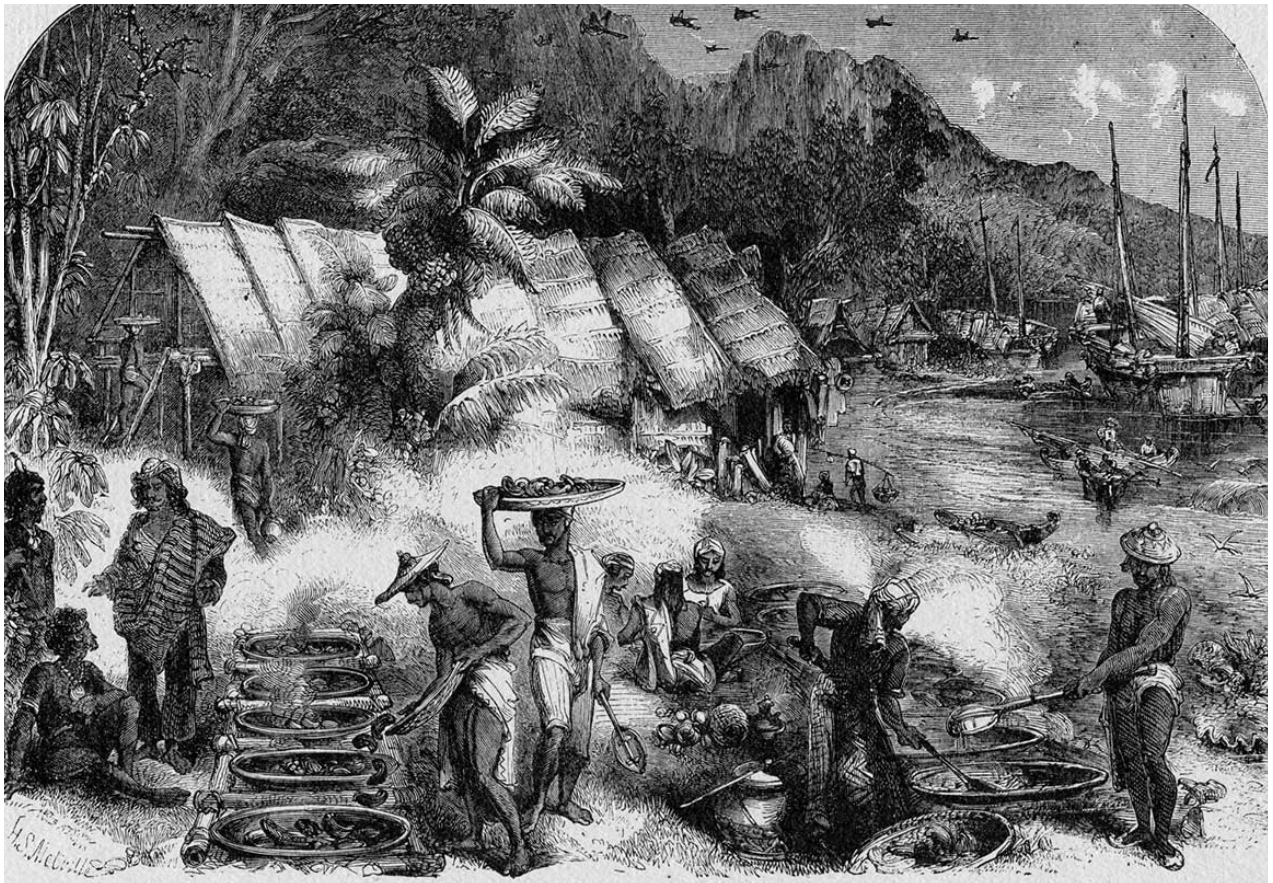
Indigenous peoples in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is home to more than 270 million indigenous peoples who have a long history of participating in diplomatic relations, trade and commerce. It is an old story and one that goes back centuries. The colonialisation process loosened some of these threads of connection, but they were never lost.

Australia's Aboriginal peoples have been interacting with neighbouring peoples in Southeast Asia for a very long time – in trade, commerce, kinship and more.

A **well documented case** is the fishing and trade of trepang (sea cucumber) between Makassan communities in South Sulawesi (Indonesia) and indigenous communities in northern Australia, from at least 1750 to 1907.

There are also **strong connections** between Australia, the islands of the Torres Strait and Papua New Guinea, where previously low sea levels meant indigenous people could easily walk between Cape York and Papua New Guinea.



Macassans at Victoria, Port Essington, HS Melville, 1845, published in The Queen, 8 February 1862 via National Museum of Australia

Indigenous peoples in Australian foreign policy

First Nations peoples were Australia's first diplomats and traders and have long engaged in international efforts in the pursuit of rights now enshrined in international law.

In 2009, two years after its adoption by the United Nations, Australia formally endorsed the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** (UNDRIP). Australia continues to participate in the **United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues** (UNPFII), and the **Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous peoples** (EMRIP).

While there is a long history of First Nations diplomats working within Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) since the 1970s, the contributions of First Nations peoples were not brought into the fabric Australian foreign policy making until the development of **DFAT's Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda** in 2021, and later, the establishment of the Office for First Nations International Engagement in 2023.

Led by the Ambassador for First Nations People, the Office **for First Nations International Engagement** is working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identify new areas of cooperation between Australia's First Nations communities and international partners – including in areas such as intellectual property and exports, climate change, tourism and development. A **First Nations Trade Unit** has also been established in DFAT, Austrade and other government agencies to embed First Nations perspectives and interests across Australia's trade and investment activities.

Australia works with the United Nations Human Rights Council to address human rights violations, including those affecting indigenous peoples, and to work closely with the **Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** to advance the rights and concerns of indigenous peoples, including Indigenous Australians.

Australia is also a founding participant of the **Indigenous Peoples Economic and Trade Cooperation Arrangement** (IPETCA), a regional initiative to strengthen the economic empowerment of indigenous peoples in our region and beyond. IPETCA is a non-binding cooperation-based arrangement initiated by New Zealand during its 2021 APEC host year. While not an APEC initiative, it was discussed with interested economies such as Australia in the margins of APEC meetings.

Indigenous peoples continue to play an integral role in the societies and economies of our region, and this Arrangement will focus on further unlocking their economic potential and increasing trade and investment opportunities.

Further reading

- **Australian Office for First Nations International Engagement:**
<https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/indigenous-peoples/ambassador-first-nations-people>
- **New Zealand Foreign Affairs - Māori Engagement and Interests in Trade:**
<https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/trade-engagement-with-maori>
- **Global Affairs Canada's Action Plan on Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples - 2021-2025:**
<https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/indigenous-reconciliation-autochtones/index.aspx?lang=eng>

About the author



Sarah Leary is a former diplomat and First Nations Foreign Policy Fellow at the Perth USAsia Centre. As a diplomat she served on postings to Solomon Islands, Vietnam, Cambodia and the US and also as an advisor to Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls. At the Centre, she writes about trade, climate, development, and gender issues in the Indo-Pacific from an Indigenous diplomacy perspective. She is a proud Palawa/

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