Any analysis of Australia’s foreign relations in the 20th century must include a focus on Australia’s progression from ‘dependence’ to ‘independence’. Under Prime Minister John Curtin’s skilled and pragmatic leadership, Australia’s refusal to see itself as a colonial outpost serving only British interests created the possibility of a new direction in foreign policy. The central problems faced by Curtin during World War Two are essentially the same problems Australia faces today:

- the need to resolve its geographic position in Asia in relation to its European background;
- the need for security by a small to middle power.

**Separate Diplomatic Representation**

In the first four decades after Federation, Australian governments made consistent attempts to pursue their foreign policy objectives within the framework of the British Empire.

In 1935 a Department of External Affairs was established under its own permanent head and in 1937 an Australian Consul General was attached to the staff of the British Ambassador in Washington to provide some direct feedback. However, the main instruments underpinning Australian foreign policy during the 1930s was that Australia’s role was to formulate suggestions and forward these to the British Government.

In 1939, with war looming, Prime Minister Robert Menzies made a reassessment of Australia’s foreign policy. In a broadcast to the Australian people, he said:

> What Great Britain calls the Far East is to us the near north. Little given as I am to encouraging the exaggerated ideas of Dominion independence and separatism which exist in the minds of many of our people, I am convinced that the day will come when our education, our music, our English, our literature and our thought will be a challenge to the community to learn about it past in order to build a better future. It goes to the very heart of the purpose by developing a unique research and a special autonmous program for the educational sector and general community. It has been established at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia. The JCPML has digitised material in its own collection and dispersed John Curtin’s works through the JCPML Electronic Research Archive (ERA).

**Exhibition Team**

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The John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (JCPML) is Australia’s first prime ministerial library. The JCPML honours the contribution of wartime Prime Minister John Curtin, who was a significant figure in both the advancement of knowledge and the enrichment of culture, and provides a gateway for the community to hear about it past in order to build a better future. It goes to the heart of the purpose by developing a unique research and a special autonomous program for the educational sector and general community. It has been established at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia. The JCPML has digitised material in its own collection and dispersed John Curtin’s works through the JCPML Electronic Research Archive (ERA).

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**THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE**

**Creating an Independent Australian Foreign Policy**

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**The Art of the Possible**

The Art of the Possible explores Australia’s growing independence in the realm of foreign policy from 1935 to 1950. The Art of the Possible explores Australia’s growing independence in the realm of foreign policy from 1935 to 1950.
In many respects, Australia’s fear of being sidelined in decision-making during the war was the major factor determining Australian foreign policy until the end of 1945. While Dr H V Evatt, as Minister for External Affairs, was a key figure in Australia’s moves towards an independent foreign policy, it was Curtin himself who set the scene with his famous newspaper article published in the Melbourne Herald on 27 December 1941:

> Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom. We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces... But we know that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on.

Historically, Curtin’s message is seen as one of the most important turning points in Australia’s relations with the world. The idea of the United Nations as an international peace-keeping organisation was first mooted in June 1941 and essentially based on the broad principles established by the Atlantic Charter. Australia had signed up to these principles in early 1942. During the 1945 conference Evatt worked to ensure that Australia’s role in middle powers and generally established Australia’s position in an international context.

The Bretton Woods Agreement developed from the United Nations Monetary and Finance Conference held in July 1944. Securing Australia’s ratification of the Agreement was one of the most politically difficult but important achievements of the Curtin and Chifley Governments in preparing Australia for its role in the post-war world of international trade and economics. After a long and tense set of negotiations within the Australian Labor Party, the parliamentary acceptance of the Bretton Woods Agreement was finally secured in March 1945.

**THE STRUGGLE TO BE HEARD**

**INCREASING AUSTRALIAN INDEPENDENCE**

The ratification of the Statute of Westminster in 1942 was a major step forward in establishing Australia’s legal identity in the international arena. Less than two years later, Australia, for the first time, entered into a new international agreement in which Britain was not a party when it signed the Anzac Agreement with New Zealand. The Anzac Agreement foreshadowed the fact that Australia was prepared to part with its colonial past to form new settlement areas. As Minister for External Affairs, Dr Evatt, said in 1944, it was necessary to get rid of the idea that Australia’s international status is a reality and that we are still, in every technical manner, British, or any other status.

Even played a prominent role at the April 1945 San Francisco meeting for the establishment of the United Nations. The idea of the United Nations as an international peace-keeping organisation was first mooted in June 1941 and essentially based on the broad principles established by the Atlantic Charter. Australia had signed up to these principles in early 1942. During the 1945 conference Evatt worked to ensure that Australia’s role in middle powers and generally established Australia’s position in an international context.

**A NEW WORLD ORDER**

The Curtin Government placed great emphasis on self-determination for nations in the wording of the Atlantic Charter and in the aims and objectives of the United Nations. By 1947 Australia had contributed new powers to the United Nations, based largely on the Bretton Woods Agreements. These continue to be important in the context of a rapidly changing and complex postwar world.

Between 1941 and 1945 Australia took the first decisive steps towards a more independent world role, moving away from total reliance on Britain for its foreign policy and defence. Australia was aware of the extent to which future security would depend on the development of the Pacific region, and of the importance of continuing involvement by Britain and the United States.

In the remaining five decades of the 20th century Australia has endeavoured to enhance and expand the degree of independence achieved during the war years. As a small to middle power Australia is still seeking its own active role in an often unstable regional and international context. The complications of its historical and cultural links to Europe and the western hemisphere have to be set against its geographical location.

While the same problems still exist in one form or another, the events of 1941 to 1945 in many important respects changed forever the way those problems are dealt with today.