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Outside the margins

The orthodox narrative of Australia's engagement with Asia identifies the post-Menzies period from 1967 up until the watershed election of the Whitlam Australian Labor Party (ALP) Government in December 1972 as a crucial turning point, where Australia's external circumstances and internal socio-political dynamics changed markedly, thus allowing for greater opening to Asia.¹ According to this interpretation, these changing circumstances had been presciently analysed by Whitlam as Opposition leader, who then capitalised on them to forge a more independent and dynamic Australian foreign policy. As James Curran has recounted, this resulted in a sharp deterioration in relations with Washington lasting until the mid-1970s after senior ALP ministers publicly and bitterly denounced the Nixon administration's 1972 'Christmas bombing' campaign against population centres in North Vietnam.² Other scholars, such as Roderic Pitty, place the transformation of Australia's engagement with the region a little later with the 'early end' of the Cold War in Asia, around the time of the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.³ All claim, however, that these changes in the late 1960s and 1970s allowed for Australia to embark on

1 See, for example, JLS Girling, 'Australia and Southeast Asia in the Global Balance: A Critique of the "Fraser Doctrine"', *Australian Outlook* 31, no. 1 (1977): 5–8; Ian McAllister and John Ravenhill, 'Australian Attitudes Towards Closer Engagement with Asia', *The Pacific Review* 11, no. 1 (1998): 121; and David Reynolds, 'Empire, Region, World: The International Context of Australian Foreign Policy since 1939', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 51, no. 3 (2005): 354–57.

2 See James Curran, 'The Dilemmas of Divergence: The Crisis in American–Australian Relations, 1972–1975', *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (2014): 377–408; James Curran, *Unholy Fury: Whitlam and Nixon at War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015).

3 Roderic Pitty, 'Strategic Engagement', in *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia, Volume 2: 1970s to 2000*, ed. Peter Edwards and David Goldsworthy (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 61–63.

closer relations with the region, which were realised in the 1980s and 1990s under the Hawke–Keating ALP governments. Michael Connors explicitly makes the claim that a major ‘factor pushing Australia closer to the region was the gradual withdrawal of United States (US) troops from Vietnam in the light of the Nixon Doctrine of 1969’.⁴

This chapter shows, however, that despite the new Whitlam Government’s intention to bring Australia closer to the region, the consequences of the external factors analysed in the previous chapter—British withdrawal from east of Suez, the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), de-escalation of the Vietnam War, the Nixon Doctrine and Washington’s rapprochement with Beijing—instead pushed Australia outside the margins of Asia. This trend was exacerbated by Whitlam’s activist foreign policy approach, which was unwelcome in Southeast Asian capitals. In addition to his immediate diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) upon taking office, Whitlam further antagonised Australia’s Southeast Asian neighbours with his advocacy for a new, broad-based regional organisation that was to include Beijing and Hanoi.

Canberra’s political distancing from Asia in the 1970s is especially ironic for the Whitlam ALP in the sense that it had considered the above changes highly positive and beneficial for Australia in forging closer regional relations. With the benefit of hindsight, however, the regional consequences of these factors, which were obscured in Australian public discourse at the time by the euphoria over Whitlam’s victory and progressive agenda, put the new Australian Government’s regional priorities out of step with ASEAN states. Along with Japan, this was where most of Australia’s deepest regional relationships had evolved over the postwar decades underpinned by the norms of Commonwealth responsibility and non-communist solidarity.

This chapter first examines how Canberra’s relationship in the early 1970s with Beijing could only be superficial in a political sense and focused primarily on commercial issues. It then shows how Whitlam’s diplomatic recognition of the PRC damaged Australia’s relationships with its nearest neighbours in Southeast Asia. The Whitlam Government’s focus on China at the expense of Australia’s other Asian relationships accelerated the shift

4 Michael K Connors, ‘Australia in the Asia Pacific’, in *The New Global Politics of the Asia Pacific*, ed. Michael Connors, Rémy Davison and Jörn Dosch (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 91.

to a shallower, transactional form of engagement. The second section shows how Whitlam's advocacy for a new regional organisation that he hoped would include China and North Vietnam antagonised ASEAN states, thus contributing further to Canberra's political distancing from the region. The third section analyses the Whitlam Government's active disengagement from Southeast Asia in its rapid drawing-down of Australian forces in Malaysia and Singapore deployed in support of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). The final section demonstrates that by 1974, Australia's position had been transformed from one of centrality in East Asian affairs to one of exile on the South Pacific periphery. The only Asian regional organisations in which Canberra retained membership were economic in nature, with Australia's engagement with Asia conducted on a broadening but shallower transactional basis.

Recognition of the PRC and the ASEAN response

Australia's diplomatic recognition of the PRC took place at 9.00 pm on 21 December 1972 in Paris (22 December Canberra time).⁵ Whitlam's press release stated:

It has long been the objective of the Australian Labour Party to establish diplomatic relations between Australia and the People's Republic of China. It accordingly gives me great satisfaction to announce that this important step has now been taken. While it has long been recognised that Australia's geographical position gives it special interests in the Asian region, up until now we have not come to terms with one of the central facts of that region, the People's Republic of China. This serious distortion in our foreign policy has now been corrected. Our diplomatic relations with Taiwan came to an end with the signing of the Communiqué in Paris. It is consequently necessary that Australian official representation in Taipei, and Taiwan's official representation in Australia, be withdrawn.⁶

5 'Press Statement, Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with China', 21 December 1972, in The National Archives UK (TNA) Foreign and Commonwealth Office Records (FCO) 24/1337.

6 Ibid.

Very similar to Japan, however, Australia's relationship with the party-state in Beijing could only be superficial in a political sense and necessarily focused on transactional issues. A United Kingdom (UK) assessment in April 1973 of Australia's diplomatic recognition of the PRC supports this:

Contacts between the two countries have hitherto been almost exclusively commercial. Trade is largely made up of sales of Australian wheat to China, which is of considerable importance to the Australian farming community. There is relatively little scope for the development of political relations in any depth.⁷

By September 1974, this sentiment was reflected in Australia's own policy discourse. In a meeting at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Alan Renouf, then Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), said:

Australia was trying to build up her relations with China but found it hard to conduct a meaningful political dialogue with her. Australia's importance for China had been the lead which she had given to other countries in the region in establishing diplomatic relations with China. Now that China's purpose was served the Chinese were happy for trade and cultural relations to develop but were not interested in political discussions. They were content for Australian Ministers to visit China but Chinese Ministers seldom visited Australia. Dr Fitzgerald, the Australian Ambassador to Peking, was perhaps better qualified than anyone else to open a dialogue with the Chinese but found it almost impossible.⁸

The Whitlam Government's focus on China, at the expense of Southeast Asian political sensitivities, meant that the trajectory of Australia's engagement with Asia became shallower and increasingly transactional.

In the wake of Labor's victory in the 1972 election, press comment by supporters of Whitlam, such as Ross Terrill, erroneously argued that with Australian recognition of PRC imminent, Indonesia would be encouraged to move in the same direction.⁹ Whitlam had indeed advised

7 'Mr Whitlam's Visit to London, April 1973', Omnibus Brief for Secretary of State, 16 April 1973, TNA Prime Minister's Office Records (PREM) 15/1299.

8 'Record of Conversation between the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Secretary of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, Held at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on Tuesday 17 September 1974 at 11am', 17 September 1974, TNA FCO 15/1859.

9 Australian Embassy Washington to Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Canberra (reporting on article in *The Christian Science Monitor*), 4 December 1972, NAA A1838/3006/9/1, Part 7.

President Suharto in advance of Australia's diplomatic recognition of the PRC.¹⁰ But Terrill's comments here betray the Whitlam Government's overestimation of Australia's importance in Southeast Asian eyes by December 1972, along with the false projection of its own activist disposition and outlook onto regional capitals. Contrary to Whitlam's advocacy for change, ASEAN states were not anticipating further major developments in the region and were dedicated to inward-focused consolidation and evolutionary growth in the organisation's membership. Australia's recognition of communist China, following the US rapprochement with the PRC and Japan's normalisation of relations, was unwelcome in Southeast Asia. However, the international trend toward diplomatic recognition of Beijing had been established for some time, so developments under the Whitlam Government were not of a similar ground-breaking importance in Southeast Asian capitals as they were in Australia. Indeed, reviewing the archival documents on the early period of the Whitlam Government's foreign policy reveals a similarly Australia-centric view of the world as that held by Evatt in the late 1940s, and a concomitant insensitivity to the concerns and outlook of Canberra's neighbours.

Press opinion from Southeast Asia was resolutely negative about the Whitlam Government's initial forays in the region. From Singapore, it was reported:

in Jakarta ... there is concern that its close neighbour Australia may under Mr Whitlam adopt an over-friendly attitude to Peking. Indonesia has been suspicious of China since the abortive communist coup in 1965, which led ultimately to the fall of President Sukarno.¹¹

Whitlam's first soundings in January 1973 about an Asia Pacific 'Community' or 'Forum' that might include the PRC and North Vietnam were met with derision. An editorial in Bangkok's *The Nation*, entitled 'Playing the Big Brother', observed:

Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam ... must be a tyro in Asian affairs because he goes and proposed to Indonesia the creation of new regional grouping which would include China, Japan and Australia. Maybe he thought Indonesia is another of

10 DFA Canberra to Australian Embassy Jakarta, 6 December 1972, NAA A1838/3006/9/1, Part 7.

11 'AAP Reports', 5 December 1972, in NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 20.

those countries like his which are now caught up with the craze of climbing on the Peking-bound bandwagon. Possibly he was even surprised that Indonesia gave his suggestion a cool reception.¹²

The Big Brother theme is an important one in Southeast Asian attitudes toward the Whitlam Government. Despite its mythologisation in Australian political history, the new ALP Government's independent and activist foreign policy agenda, and Whitlam's imperious style, were not welcome in ASEAN capitals. Max Walsh commented in the *Australian Financial Review* in this respect, that 'we have now ... a Prime Minister who wants to be a Willy Brandt but looks uncomfortably like a Charles de Gaulle'.¹³

The ALP Government's attitudes and direction were also inconsistent with the assessments made by the professional foreign policy bureaucracy in Australia and Britain. For example, a DFA brief for the minister in early March 1973 wrote that ASEAN 'has at present a certain anti-Chinese flavour, because all its member countries are apprehensive about China and value the United States military presence in the region'.¹⁴ A British assessment made in April stated similarly:

Many of the Governments in the area remain suspicious and even hostile to China because of her support for insurgent movements in their countries and her open aid to the North Vietnamese, Vietcong, Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution China has tried to allay suspicions by publicly disassociating herself from the Overseas Chinese communities; she does not however refrain from giving support—even if only moral—to revolutionary movements. Thailand, the Khmer Republic, South Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines do not at present have diplomatic relations with China. Some of these countries have recently begun to show signs of a willingness

12 'Thailand: Press Comment on Australia', Australian Embassy Bangkok to DFA Canberra, 23 February 1973, NAA A1838/686/1, Part 9.

13 Cited in 'Statement on International Affairs by Australian Prime Minister', UK High Commission Canberra (W Peters) to JK Hickman, South West Pacific Dept, FCO London, 25 May 1973, TNA FCO 24/1596.

14 'Indonesia and ASEAN', General Review of International Relations (DFA Ministerial Talking Points), March 1973, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 23; British assessments were also similar; see, for example, 'Mr Whitlam's Visit to London, April 1973', Omnibus Brief for Secretary of State, 16 April 1973, TNA PREM 15/1299.

to develop formal relations with Peking. But until the situation in South Vietnam and the Khmer Republic is more settled it seems unlikely that they will be in a hurry to finalise arrangements.¹⁵

In January 1974, Prime Minister Whitlam was again advised by the DFA:

Of the ASEAN nations, Malaysia and Thailand have moved towards détente with China but residual suspicions of China's general intentions towards the area and its attitude towards national liberation movements and Overseas Chinese communities continue to inhibit progress towards the establishment of diplomatic relations. For these reasons, and for fear of involvement in the Sino-Soviet dispute, regional members would be wary of China's inclusion in a new regional political arrangement.¹⁶

Despite the plethora of indications such as these that any proposal for a new broad-based regional organisation would not be well received in Southeast Asia, Whitlam nonetheless assertively pursued his Asia Pacific Forum idea throughout 1973.

Failed regionalism: The Asia Pacific Forum proposal

Upon taking office, Whitlam instructed the DFA to canvass options for a comprehensive regional organisation premised on the 'new situation in the Asian and Pacific region, in which the war in Indo-China has been ended and in which an outward-looking China is playing an increasingly important role'. Australia's policy should be one of 'continuing and constructive involvement in the region'.¹⁷ Several options were presented in a memorandum on 8 January 1973, which noted that Japan and New Zealand were also interested in such initiatives.¹⁸ The document suggested that the 'ideal solution would be to create a new [and] genuinely representative regional political organisation' for East Asia, which would

15 'Indonesia and ASEAN', General Review of International Relations (DFA Ministerial Talking Points), March 1973, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 23.

16 'The Outlook in South-East Asia', Official Brief for Prime Minister's Visit to Southeast Asia, 10 January 1974, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 11.

17 'Australia: Regional Political Organisations', DFA Brief for Foreign Minister (Whitlam), 8 January 1973, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 15.

18 Japan had made several proposals during the 1960s to create Asia-Pacific or 'Pacific Rim' international organisations. See Takashi Terada, 'The Origins of Japan's APEC Policy: Foreign Minister Takeo Miki's Asia-Pacific Policy and Current Implications', *The Pacific Review* 11, no. 3 (1998): 337–63.

be 'more likely to promote a spirit of regional cooperation between communist and non-communist countries than an already existing one which would have cold war connotations'.¹⁹ There was never a detailed blueprint for the proposed organisation, but the assumption was that it would be a relatively unstructured forum to discuss issues of mutual interest without binding commitments, similar to the Organization of American States.²⁰ If this was not feasible, a smaller variant of such an organisation might be the ASEAN membership expanded to include the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Australia and New Zealand.

However, the memorandum also set out the 'formidable difficulties' involved in any such proposal. It would be difficult diplomatically for Australia to propose the smaller variant of the organisation that would exclude its other important relationships in Asia, such as with Japan. If Japan were included, Australia would then have to 'work actively to include Chinese participation'.²¹ Additionally, the Indochina conflict had yet to be ended, so the status of the two Vietnams remained unclear; neither could a larger organisation be established until ASEAN states had normalised their relations with China. The ASEAN members were also likely to have significant reservations about Japan, and certainly India, being involved. Erroneously, the document suggested that, even

if in the worst eventuality our efforts are not successful no harm will have been done to our regional relations provided we avoid associating ourselves with a restrictive group, and bring other regional countries into our thinking as soon as practicable.²²

The relative optimism of the brief seems pitched to appeal to the sensibilities of the new ALP Government. Diplomatic reporting from the region and statements by ASEAN leaders since 1967 had repeatedly made clear that any organisation such as Whitlam's proposed Asia Pacific Forum was a non-starter.

19 'Australia: Regional Political Organisations', DFA Brief for Foreign Minister (Whitlam), 8 January 1973, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 15.

20 Henry S Albinski, *Australian External Policy under Labor: Content, Process and the National Debate* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1977), 92; see also Curran, *Unholy Fury*, 240.

21 'Australia: Regional Political Organisations', DFA Brief for Foreign Minister (Whitlam), 8 January 1973, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 15.

22 Ibid.

Despite being aware of the challenges of creating a new organisation, Whitlam wrote to New Zealand Prime Minister Norman Kirk (1972–74) that he was ‘not deterred by these difficulties’, although ‘patient and careful groundwork’ and ‘lengthy consultations’ would be necessary.²³ Whitlam’s approach would be to first discuss the proposal with President Suharto, as Indonesian membership of any configuration was considered essential by Canberra, while at the same time taking care not to give the impression that the proposed organisation would be a competitor to ASEAN.²⁴ However, as will be shown, the Whitlam Government’s advocacy of this proposal was an irritation to Suharto and other Southeast Asian leaders because Whitlam either failed to understand, or insensitively disregarded, the delicate business of building regional consciousness and solidarity through ASEAN.²⁵ The new Australian Government also vastly underestimated the deep residual antipathy in Southeast Asia toward China.

Rather than handling the issue slowly and delicately, Whitlam publicly announced on 22 February 1973 in a speech to the *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* (Indonesian Parliament) that Australia and New Zealand would seek a new broad-based regional organisation.²⁶ Whitlam prefaced his comments (on his first overseas visit as prime minister) by noting that his visit came ‘at a time of great change in my own nation and of great change in our region’.²⁷ Changes were therefore needed in existing regional arrangements. Whitlam said that he and New Zealand Prime Minister Kirk saw:

great merit in an organisation genuinely representative of the region without ideological overtones, conceived as an initiative to help free the region of the great power rivalries which have bedevilled

23 ‘Asian Regional Organisation’, DFA Canberra to Australian High Commission Wellington, 7 December 1973, NAA A1838/696/1/5/4, Part 1.

24 Ibid.

25 See, for example, ‘ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting’, Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur to DFA Canberra, 16 February 1973, NAA A1838/696/1/5/4, Part 1, where Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore Thailand emphasised the ‘sense of identity and regional cohesion engendered through ASEAN co-operation ...’.

26 DJ Murphy, ‘Problems in Australian Foreign Policy, January to June, 1973’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 19, no. 3 (1973): 339.

27 ‘Speech by the Prime Minister of Australia, The Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P., to the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia (Indonesian Parliament) in Jakarta, Thursday 22 February 1973’, in TNA FCO 24/1600. In 1975, Owen Harries wrote of Whitlam’s foreign policy approach that the ‘patience, tact and diplomacy’ required in dealings with Australia’s regional neighbours had been ‘conspicuous by their absence’; ‘Australia’s Foreign Policy under Whitlam’, *Orbis: Journal of World Affairs* 19, no. 3 (1975): 1093.

its progress for so long, and which would be designed to insulate the region against ideological interference from the great powers. I must emphasise that such an objective is one which would take time and careful consultation with all of our neighbours.²⁸

Whitlam elaborated that the rationale for the organisation was that, with the Vietnam War moving towards a settlement, Canberra's involvement in the region on a security basis and its military deployments were 'no longer relevant to the contemporary needs of Australia or the region in which we live'. Australia's new attitude would be 'based less on irrational fears for our security' and 'directed more to peaceful political initiatives for the welfare and progress of our neighbours'.²⁹ While Whitlam was correct to point out that the threat of Chinese communism to Australia during the early decades of the Cold War was exaggerated by Menzies, this was not the case for Canberra's Southeast Asian neighbours, all of which had experienced some level of communist political agitation or armed insurgency.³⁰

In response to a journalist's question after the speech, Whitlam said he expected the formation of a comprehensive new international organisation 'before a couple of years', because 'there is a general realisation that the existing regional associations to which Australia belongs are inappropriate because they are transitory or because they're anachronistic or because they are losing members'.³¹ In a report to the UK Government about Whitlam's first overseas visit as prime minister, the FCO wrote that the agenda brought by Whitlam was far from what the Indonesians wanted, which was a 'certain staunchness, more aid, and more alertness to the dangers they see of communist subversion'.³² The British Ambassador to Jakarta doubted 'whether the Indonesians will attach much importance to Australia's new readiness to follow the Afro-Asian line at the United Nations'.³³ On this point, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew

28 'Speech by the Prime Minister of Australia, The Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P., to the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia (Indonesian Parliament) in Jakarta, Thursday 22 February 1973', in TNA FCO 24/1600.

29 Ibid.

30 On this point, see Denis Warner, 'The Whitlam Approach to Asia', *Asian Affairs* 1, no. 2 (1973): 60.

31 'Speech by the Prime Minister of Australia, The Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P., to the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia (Indonesian Parliament) in Jakarta, Thursday 22 February 1973', in TNA FCO 24/1600.

32 'Mr Whitlam's Visit to Indonesia—20–23 February', FCO Report for Mr Wilford and Sir E Norris by JK Hickman, South West Pacific Department, 20 March 1973, TNA FCO 24/1600.

33 Ibid.

labelled Whitlam a ‘sham Afro-Asian’ over his unwillingness to accept Vietnamese refugees.³⁴ With regional organisation, the Indonesians regarded ‘themselves as better judges of what is needed, and when, than the Australians’.³⁵ The FCO report concluded:

we have probably not heard the last of Mr Whitlam’s ideas about a new regional organisation. They are shared to some extent by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr Kirk, and there is an evident need to develop new methods and habits of consultation to meet the new situation in East Asia. But it is by no means clear that Australia (or New Zealand) can play a forward role in promoting this. Mr Whitlam’s visit to Indonesia may have taught him that his proposals are not practical politics for Australia at present.³⁶

By driving such an unwanted proposal in the region without adequate consultation—and by placing Australia’s concerns transparently at the centre of it—the Whitlam Government came across as arrogant and insensitive in its disregard for Southeast Asian sensibilities. By contrast, under previous Coalition governments, Australia had regular, institutionalised consultations with its regional neighbours in the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC), with Thailand and the Philippines in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and with Singapore and Malaysia under Commonwealth arrangements.

According to some accounts, Suharto rejected Whitlam’s proposal out of hand,³⁷ while others suggested that the Indonesian president recognised the potential value of such an organisation, but only as a longer-term proposition.³⁸ An FCO brief for British Prime Minister Ted Heath (1970–74) in preparation for Whitlam’s April 1973 visit to the UK noted that Asian countries were markedly unenthusiastic about the Australian proposal for a regional community. This document alludes to Whitlam’s intractability and insensitivity to Asian concerns by stating:

³⁴ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 395.

³⁵ ‘Mr Whitlam’s Visit to Indonesia—20–23 February’, FCO Report for Mr Wilford and Sir E Norris by JK Hickman, South West Pacific Department, 20 March 1973, TNA FCO 24/1600.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ ‘Record of Conversation between H.E. Mr A.P. Rajah, High Commissioner for Singapore and Mr H.D. Anderson, Regional Organisation’, DFA Canberra, 22 February 1973, NAA A1838/696/1/5/4, Part 1.

³⁸ ‘Australian Prime Minister’s Visit’, UK Embassy Jakarta to FCO London, 24 February 1973, TNA FCO 24/1600.

Mr Whitlam probably thinks that this initial [negative] reaction is due simply to the slowness of Australia's Asian neighbours to understand the new situation created by the end of the Vietnam war, the disengagement of the United States from the Asian mainland and the emergence of China from isolation.³⁹

The brief went on to suggest that, with regard to regional community-building, it might be useful for the prime minister to point out to Mr Whitlam 'the differences between our situation in Europe and Australia's situation in Asia'. Britain shared with its 'European partners a cultural and political past which Australia does not share with her Asian neighbours. Without this historical affinity the foundation for the Europe we are now trying to build would not exist'. There were no such cultural and institutional foundations for Mr Whitlam's 'ideas about new forms of regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific'.⁴⁰ The prime minister might also question:

Mr Whitlam about the likely reaction of other countries to these regional ideas. The ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines), for example, do not want Australia as a member and are worried that Mr Whitlam's ideas might undermine their own more limited endeavours. Mr Whitlam would like to bring in China and Japan but both, for different reasons, are viewed with suspicion by the ASEAN countries.⁴¹

This was indeed the case. Singapore's High Commissioner to Canberra, AP Rajah, explained in February 1973:

Australia was placing too much importance on the position and role of China, and paying too little regard to the fears and apprehensions of South-East Asian countries with regard to China. He implied that Singapore would like at least five years before it had to accept a Chinese embassy.⁴²

39 'Mr Whitlam's Visit to London, April 1973', UK FCO Steering Brief, 16 April 1973, TNA FCO 24/1613.

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*

42 'Record of Conversation between H.E. Mr A.P. Rajah, High Commissioner for Singapore and Mr H.D. Anderson, Regional Organisation', DFA Canberra, 22 February 1973, NAA A1838/696/1/5/4, Part 1.

He further mentioned that Southeast Asians were:

not yet ready to sit down with China. They were also suspicious of Japan and wary of anything that smacked of the war-time Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. Nor did they want to get entangled with India and bogged down with the problems of the Sub-continent.⁴³

Rajah did, however, share Australia's concern that any prospective regional organisation that included Japan but not China would be regarded by Beijing as hostile.⁴⁴

Malaysia's Prime Minister Razak said it was better for Southeast Asian countries 'to concentrate on ASEAN rather than an enlarged regional organisation to include China, Japan and Australia. He said he shared President Soeharto's views on this'. Australia and New Zealand had the backing of the US and therefore 'could look after themselves'.⁴⁵ A spokesperson for the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs added that a wider grouping was not acceptable because Malaysia did not want ASEAN members to have a subordinate role in an organisation that dealt with Southeast Asian affairs. He also pointed out that Whitlam's inclusion of China in his Asia Pacific Forum proposal 'was a tactical mistake since it would make him appear as an intermediary for China and his suggestion was therefore bound to be greeted with suspicion'.⁴⁶

In a meeting with Whitlam's Minister of State, Senator Don Willesee, the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ismail said:

the success of ASEAN was based on the fact that it was an association of like-minded states. Most of them were ex-colonies and all had a prime interest in economic development. All of them were 'scared' of China.

The Sino-Soviet dispute was also a problem for Whitlam's Asia Pacific Forum. Ismail continued by pointing out that any wider grouping in which the PRC was a member would prompt the Soviet Union to insist on membership, because Moscow 'would not agree to any course of

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 'Australian Suggestion for Wider Regional Groupings', UK High Commission Kuala Lumpur to FCO London, Jakarta, 26 February 1973, TNA FCO 24/1596.

46 Ibid.

action which might encourage Chinese domination of the area'.⁴⁷ While the PRC may have come to terms with the US, the Sino–Soviet split was still playing out in the 1970s. It was heavily implicated in the Third Indochina War (c. 1975–91) where Beijing supported the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and Moscow backed the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1975) in its intervention against Democratic Kampuchea (DK) (1975–89), in turn prompting the punitive Chinese invasion of northern Vietnam in 1979. While the Cold War in East Asia may have concluded for Whitlam, it was still a long way from over for Southeast Asian countries. Ismail added that since Australia had not discussed the issue seriously with the Chinese Government yet, the proposal was premature in any case.⁴⁸

Press opinion from Southeast Asia was less diplomatic. For example, from Bangkok, an editorial in *The Nation* wrote:

What Mr Whitlam is up to is beyond our ken. He was personally responsible for killing ASPAC and there he is in Jakarta proposing a new one ... The liberal-country coalition Government, after decades and decades of being tied to the apron strings of Britain, saw that her interests lay in Asia and not in Britain. So it opened up greater contacts with Asian countries much to Australia's advantage and the present Labour Government is trying to improve on it ... Unfortunately in trying to accomplish this Mr Whitlam starts to play big brother in Southeast Asia. He does not realise that we are at this time suffering from a plethora of big brothers and one more will be anathema to us.⁴⁹

The Thai Government also 'reacted angrily when Mr. Whitlam suggested that he saw his idea for a regional grouping as one means of preventing Thailand becoming "a second Viet-Nam"'.⁵⁰ Given the Australian Government's stated priorities, Whitlam's insensitivity to Indonesian, Thai, Singaporean and Malaysian concerns about China, and the implications of the Sino–Soviet dispute for Southeast Asia and regional organisation, appears quite inept.

47 'DFA Record of Conversation between Tun Dr Ismail, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and Minister of State, Senator D. Willesee', 12 March 1973, NAA A1838/696/1/5/4, Part 1.

48 Ibid.

49 'Thailand: Press Comment on Australia', Australian Embassy Bangkok to DFA Canberra, 23 February 1973, NAA A1838/686/1, Part 9.

50 'The Australian Labour [sic] Party Government (2)', FCO Diplomatic Report No. 269/73 by Morrice James, UK High Commissioner Canberra for the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 5 April 1973, TNA FCO 24/1596.

The British assessment of the early months of the ALP Government was that, while Whitlam was undoubtedly genuine in his rejection of intolerance and discrimination, and in his ‘real sympathy for the people of the developing countries’, he ‘adopts an unduly simplistic view of his task’.⁵¹ Whitlam came to government having

thought a great deal about foreign affairs (though in a distinctly theoretical way). He is fascinated by this whole subject. Because of this personal predilection (and the resulting belief that he himself already knows most of the answers) he is not particularly responsive to the advice he gets from his senior officials ... he seems to feel that world affairs are a stage on which all he has to do is to write a fat part for himself.⁵²

In this, Whitlam’s approach to foreign policy very much reflected that of Evatt, and set the tone for later ALP Foreign Ministers Gareth Evans (1988–96) and Kevin Rudd (2010–12), the latter of who proposed a similarly unsuccessful Asia-Pacific Community as Prime Minister in 2008.⁵³ Whitlam failed to perceive that ‘gestures in areas where Australia is not involved can be irrelevant and ... make the achievement of Australia’s aspirations more difficult’.⁵⁴ According to the British High Commissioner in Canberra, Whitlam had yet to

acquire the discernment needed to distinguish between Australia’s essential requirements, among which a close relationship with its neighbours must clearly be included, and the areas in which gratuitous activity may in the end prove to be counter-productive ... All in all, an uncomfortably large number of the foreign policy attitudes so far struck by the new Government lack realism and could lead Australia into unforeseen and unintended trouble.⁵⁵

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Avery Poole, ‘The East Asia Summit: Navigating ASEAN Multilateralism’, in *The Australia–ASEAN Dialogue: Tracing 40 Years of Partnership*, ed. Sally Percival Wood, Baogang He and Michael Leifer (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 54–55.

54 ‘The Australian Labour [sic] Party Government (2)’, FCO Diplomatic Report No. 269/73 by Morrice James, UK High Commissioner Canberra for the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 5 April 1973, TNA FCO 24/1596.

55 Ibid.

A DFA survey in July 1973 of regional attitudes concluded that the general picture in the region was one of caution. Any change would be slow and consensus-based.⁵⁶ Southeast Asian sensibilities were not aligned with Whitlam's attitude to government, activist foreign policy style and pace of reform initiatives.⁵⁷

The DFA made a comprehensive assessment of the prospects for the Asia Pacific Forum a few months later in September 1973 now that most of the proposed members had been consulted. The outcome of this survey was 'a widespread feeling' among Asian countries that, 'although new regional arrangements may well develop in time, the region is still too potentially unstable and vulnerable to Great Power interference for new regional ventures to be other than longer term'.⁵⁸ Specifically, among the ASEAN nations, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand emphasised 'the need for security and continuing United States involvement in the region'. Singapore was the most 'unsympathetic' to the proposal and 'variously suggested that Australia should build on its relations with existing organisations or develop its bilateral economic relations with ASEAN countries'.⁵⁹ Malaysia was 'moving towards opening diplomatic relations with China', having 'already recognised North Viet-Nam and North Korea'. Kuala Lumpur continued to advocate for the neutralisation of the area. Indonesia's attitude had become more positive since the start of the year toward the concept of a larger regional organisation but viewed it as a longer-term aspiration. Messages from Manila were contradictory. President Marcos reportedly favoured some form of broader organisation for the purpose of the 'peaceful settlement of disputes among Asian countries'.⁶⁰ However, the Philippines' Foreign Secretary emphasised 'that the Philippines was opposed to the development of any new association and wanted to use ASEAN as the basis of regional cooperation'. Burma was 'still only tentatively emerging from its isolationist attitudes'.⁶¹

56 'Regionalism', Background Brief for Prime Minister's Visit to US, July 1973, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 10.

57 'Whitlam's Mission', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, editorial, 26 January 1974, in NAA A1209/1974/6181.

58 'Australian Foreign Policy: New Regional Political Arrangements', DFA Canberra to Tokyo, Bangkok, Manila, Singapore, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Peking, Seoul, Saigon, Vientiane, Phnom Penh, Rangoon, New Delhi, Wellington, London, Washington, Moscow, Paris, Bonn, Ottawa, Port Moresby, Suva, Secret: For Heads of Mission, 10 September 1973, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 11.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

Of the large Asian powers, Tokyo remained ‘very cautious and considered initiatives for a regional forum must come from other states’ because of residual suspicion of Japanese intentions.⁶² Based on conversations with the Chinese Deputy Director of the Americas and Oceania Department in the Foreign Ministry, and with Beijing’s Ambassador to Australia, the DFA assessed that the PRC Government

could support a general approach to the establishment of a new framework for regional cooperation which regarded it as something for the future and probably possible only after an effective settlement had been achieved in Indo-China when rights of representation regarding Korea, Cambodia and Viet-Nam had been resolved, when most of the countries of the region had composed their differences with China and after the emergence of a fairly wide consensus. China would oppose Soviet participation in any new regional organisation.⁶³

The position of India was also a complicating factor in the Australian proposals for a broader regional community. The DFA noted that ‘India no doubt feels that it has at least as great a claim to be a party to arrangements covering South East and East Asia as does Australia’.⁶⁴ New Delhi had been ‘re-assessing its role in South East Asia as a large Asian power in its own right’. The DFA assessed that ‘India would probably wish to participate in any new regional arrangement of the type we have in mind; and it could be expected to urge USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] membership as well’. However, Soviet membership was unacceptable to China and India’s inclusion was opposed by most ASEAN countries. For example, both Suharto and Tun Razak had indicated ‘that they do not want India in any new Asian regional organisations’.⁶⁵ The assessment concluded that the inclusion of India would ‘needlessly introduce into the region the problems and conflicts of the sub-continent’; it would increase pressure for the inclusion of the Soviet Union, and hence constitute a focus for Sino–Soviet rivalry; and therefore would be unacceptable to nearly all the countries the Australian Government would like to see included.⁶⁶

It may be observed from this DFA analysis that in his strategic outlook toward the region, Whitlam placed far too much emphasis on the US withdrawal from East Asia with the Nixon Doctrine and Vietnam

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

settlement. Unlike the ASEAN members, Whitlam did not seem to recognise the extent to which other Cold War dynamics, particularly the Sino–Soviet dispute, had yet to play out. Additionally, the newly independent states of Southeast Asia were extremely wary of any possible new form of domination or excessive influence from any of the large Asian powers—Japan, China and India. By December 1973, the message was beginning to be recognised within the Whitlam Government ‘that the time is not yet ripe for the establishment of such a forum’. And in ‘any discussion’ of ‘alternative proposals it might be desirable for Australia to avoid taking the lead’.⁶⁷ Newspaper opinion in early 1974 noted that the prime minister had a great ‘deal of fence-mending ahead of him’,⁶⁸ while academic assessments of the first year of the Whitlam Government’s foreign policy suggested it had ‘yielded more publicity than concrete results’.⁶⁹ The dissonance created by Whitlam’s ‘grandiose plan for a large Asian and Pacific grouping’ further distanced Australia from its now marginal position in regional political organisation.⁷⁰

Of Australia’s closest relationships, the Thai Government, in particular, appeared quite perplexed by Australia’s behaviour under Whitlam. Canberra was pushing to create a new, larger organisation when ASEAN states were still weighing up whether further expansion to the other Indochinese countries would be at the expense of the organisation’s current solidarity. Thailand’s Deputy Foreign Minister (and later prime minister from 1988 to 1991), Chatchai Choonhavan, said that he and his ASEAN colleagues were disappointed that at the same time Australia desired closer relations, it was actually ‘withdrawing from the area’.⁷¹ He said in a meeting with the New Zealand Ambassador in Bangkok that Australia and New Zealand should hold on to their ‘memberships of SEATO and ASPAC’. He concluded: ‘I cannot understand you. You are both members of the region and you have a beachhead on the mainland. Why do you

67 ‘Australia and Regional Co-operation Submission to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dated 10 December, 1973’, For Prime Minister’s Southeast Asia Visit, Official Brief, Annex A, 10 December 1973, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 11.

68 ‘Whitlam’s Mission’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, editorial, 26 January 1974, in NAA A1209/1974/6181.

69 Alexander Macleod, ‘The New Foreign Policy in Australia and New Zealand’, *The Round Table* 64, no. 255 (1974): 294.

70 ‘Whitlam’s Mission’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, editorial, 26 January 1974, in NAA A1209/1974/6181.

71 New Zealand Embassy Bangkok to DFA Wellington, 5 March 1973, in NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 23.

want to withdraw? You have been very good friends'.⁷² Likewise, there was concern in Washington 'that Australia is isolating itself or losing influence' with countries in the region.⁷³ These sentiments point to one of the paradoxes of the orthodox narrative of Australia's engagement with Asia, that 'disengagement' from Asia under the Whitlam Government somehow indicates genuine 'engagement' with the region.⁷⁴

The Whitlam Government's disengagement from Southeast Asia

This theme is most evident in the Whitlam Government's withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore by 1975 of most Australian forces stationed there under the FPDA. This rapid drawing-down of the Australian military contingent and infrastructure was a disengagement from Canberra's previously deep involvement in postcolonial nation-building in Southeast Asia. In one of his pre-election pledges, Whitlam had promised to bring home all Australian troops from Asia during 1973.⁷⁵ The British High Commission in Canberra reported to the FCO:

on the Five Power Arrangement and ANZUK [the Australia–New Zealand–United Kingdom Agreement], Mr Whitlam said that as a long-term scheme the stationing of military forces from one country in the territory of another struck him as anachronistic and outmoded. He conceded that as of now a continuing ANZUK presence was of value as a means of maintaining confidence in the Five Power Arrangement and (he added) of keeping Malaysia and Singapore in a state of reasonable equilibrium with each other. But he saw no point in keeping Australian troops permanently in Singapore where they had little to do, and considered that the need to underpin the Five Power Arrangement could be adequately met by sending Australian soldiers there in rotation for training.⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ 'US and South-East Asian Reactions to Australian Policies', DFA Canberra to Australian Embassy Washington, 16 April 1973, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 10.

⁷⁴ On this theme, see also Andrea Benvenuti and David Martin Jones, 'Engaging Southeast Asia? Labor's Regional Mythology and Australia's Military Withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia, 1972–1973', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 4 (2010): 32–62.

⁷⁵ 'Australian Election: Five Power Defence', UK High Commission Canberra to FCO London, 4 December 1972, TNA FCO 68/391; 'AAP Reports', 5 December 1972, in NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 20.

⁷⁶ 'Australian Election: Five Power Defence', UK High Commission Canberra to FCO London, 4 December 1972, TNA FCO 68/391.

In February 1973, after initial talks with the new Australian Government, UK Defence Secretary Lord Carrington wrote to Prime Minister Heath confirming that, while Australia would withdraw its ground forces from the area, it would retain ships, Mirage fighter jets and a training company and logistics personnel sufficient to maintain the FPDA.⁷⁷ Carrington elaborated:

Mr Whitlam's thinking is overlaid with his personal political philosophy which favours the support of neutralist objectives and an alignment of Australian external policies, wherever possible, with those of third world countries. This came through loud and clear when I spoke to him at length privately ... I fear that we are going to be in for at least a good deal of irritation at the hands of the Australian Government in the months ahead ...⁷⁸

Reflecting these fears, by April—during the frenetic early months of the Whitlam Government—a new policy line had developed in Canberra. The UK assessment of this was that due to 'pressure from the left-wing of the Australian Labor Party', the Whitlam Government now intended to complete the withdrawal of Australian personnel in support of the ANZUK force by April 1975, leaving only a very small number to service aid and technical assistance programs and the requirements of Australian forces visiting the area. By the end of 1976, Australia's squadron of Mirage fighter jets, based at the former British base of Butterworth, adjacent to Penang in the northwest of the Malayan Peninsula, and at Tengah in Singapore, would also be withdrawn.⁷⁹

Australia's Minister for Defence, Lance Barnard (1972–75), explained to Carrington in June 1973 that the ALP Government had been committed to maintaining the Mirage fighter deployment until Malaysia and Singapore established their own air defence capability; however, Tun Ismail had predicted there would be overcrowding at the base by 1976. Canberra was thus planning to withdraw its permanent presence from around this date. Carrington said the British Government 'did not like or welcome' this withdrawal 'or even think it a good idea, but it accepted it'.

77 UK High Commission Canberra to FCO London (Personal for Prime Minister Heath from Defence Secretary Carrington), 21 February 1973, TNA FCO 24/1596.

78 Ibid.

79 'Mr Whitlam's Visit to London, April 1973', Brief for the Prime Minister, 16 April 1973, TNA FCO 24/1555; see also 'Record of Meeting between the Australian Minister for Defence, The Hon. Mr Lance Barnard, MP, and the British Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt. Hon. Lord Carrington', 18 June 1973, TNA FCO 24/1559; Australian High Commission London (J Armstrong) to Carrington, 3 July 1973, TNA FCO 24/1558.

Carrington elaborated that ‘the Mirages were the only evidence of Five Power in Malaysia. If they did disappear in the short term this would have a big effect on Malaysian thinking’.⁸⁰ Barnard refused to be drawn on the matter that Whitlam had originally pledged to maintain Australia’s 600 military personnel in Singapore, but that this would now to be run down to 150 by April 1975. Carrington commented that the troop withdrawal ‘was very unwelcome indeed’ and ‘even worse than expected’.⁸¹ Barnard concluded ‘that the Australian Government saw it as important to be seen to be supporting the Five Power Arrangements and wanted the defence relationships with Britain to continue’. However, it ‘did not regard the stationing of forces in the area as essential’, although ‘would continue to accept some responsibility’.⁸²

This disengagement from the region was not well received by Singapore, where most of Australia’s ground and naval forces were based. Press reports suggested that there were ‘fears in some Southeast Asian capitals that Australia will abandon the region’. This fear was most keenly felt in Singapore where Lee Kuan Yew and Foreign Minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam had often said that ‘a break-up of the Five-Power Defence Arrangement could lead to a big-power struggle to fill the resultant security vacuum in the region’.⁸³

The withdrawal of Australian forces from Malaysia and Singapore was also seen at the time as ‘disengagement’ in some quarters of the Australian press. An editorial in Melbourne’s *The Herald* labelled it a ‘cut and run’ and noted that the ‘Indonesians do not want us to leave. The troops themselves do not want to surrender the posting. Australian public opinion has not demanded their return’.⁸⁴ The Whitlam Government had thrown ‘away the substance of a modest, working, *wanted* agreement made with South-East Asian nations, where our good influence has been welcomed for decades’ in order to reach ‘for a grandiose “regional association” which Asians have rejected’.⁸⁵ *The Sydney Morning Herald* described the withdrawal as ‘shabby’ and ‘discreditable’:

80 ‘Record of Meeting between the Australian Minister for Defence, The Hon. Mr Lance Barnard, MP, and the British Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt. Hon. Lord Carrington’, 18 June 1973, TNA FCO 24/1559.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 ‘AAP Reports’, 5 December 1972, in NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 20.

84 ‘We Wreck, then Cut and Run’, *The Herald*, Melbourne, editorial, 5 July 1973, in TNA FCO 24/1559.

85 Ibid., emphasis in original.

The Five-Power Arrangement was contingent on Australia's pledged active participation; without such participation it is emasculated. Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand and Britain all regard the decision as effectively a breach of the agreement. Indonesia wishes Australian troops to remain in Singapore. The erosion of Australia's credit and credibility as an ally and regional partner is a high price to pay for not rocking the boat at the ALP conference.⁸⁶

When questioned on the motivations for this change in policy, Whitlam said to the British Commonwealth Secretary Sir Douglas-Home on 24 April 1973, 'that Australia now attached high priority to Indonesia, which was much more important in terms of resources and population than Singapore and Malaysia'.⁸⁷ At a press conference the following month, Barnard gave a different rationale for the Whitlam Government's position on the FPDA:

I think the Five Power arrangement, if it is continues, ought to be continued on the basis of providing co-operation between the countries in this area in a way that would permit and indeed encourage the long-term view of neutralisation of the area, that is to provide for a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality, and as that becomes effective well then the Five-Power arrangement would be phased out.⁸⁸

Whatever the reasoning behind Canberra's withdrawal from the FPDA, the Whitlam Government's focus on Indonesia at the expense of Australia's other regional relationships was strongly resented, according to Singapore's High Commissioner in Canberra.⁸⁹ Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines felt that they had been ignored or downgraded by the Whitlam Government. Richard Woolcott, then Head of the DFA Policy Research Branch in Canberra, said in February 1974 that:

86 'A Shameful Affair', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1973, in TNA FCO 24/1559.

87 'Record of a Meeting between the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary [Douglas-Home] and the Australian Prime Minister held at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on Tuesday 24 April at 10.30 am', 30 April 1973, NAA A1838/686/1, Part 9.

88 'Replies Given to Press Questions by Mr. L. H. Barnard, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Following Return from Visit to Singapore/Kuala Lumpur, May 10, 1973', in TNA FCO 24/1557.

89 'DFA Record of Conversation, His Excellency Mr A.P. Rajah, High Commissioner for Singapore and Senator D. Willesee, Minister for State', 26 February 1973, NAA A1838/696/1/5/4, Part 1.

if one looked at the pattern of the Prime Minister's previous visits—to Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, China, Japan, Ottawa, USA and the United Kingdom, there is an obvious gap, which was in effect the area of our traditional interest (South East Asia). The Prime Minister has been conscious of this and of the feeling in some countries that Australia was downgrading or losing interest in the area. There had been a number of factors that could be used to show we had begun to adopt a negative attitude—the decisions in respect of the ending of war in Vietnam, the cessation of military arms to Cambodia, the ending of our support for the Cambodian Support Fund, [and] the removal of our combat forces from Singapore ...⁹⁰

According to Woolcott, regional audiences

knew in a negative way what Australia's foreign policy goals were, but were uncertain as to what more positive values and objectives Australia sought. The Prime Minister had therefore decided to make a visit to Singapore, Malaysia, Laos, Philippines, Thailand and Burma to re-assure them that we maintained and would increase our interest in South East Asia.⁹¹

The emphasis on Indonesia by the Whitlam Government at the expense of Australia's close relationships with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines is another example of how the previously strong normative ties of Commonwealth responsibility and Cold War solidarity, forged through the Australia–New Zealand–Malaya Agreement (ANZAM), SEATO and ASPAC, and shared commitment and sacrifice in the Malayan Emergency, Indonesian Confrontation and Vietnam War, had given way to a more transactional, interest-based outlook toward the region. The UK High Commission in Canberra confirmed to the British Government on 2 December 1974 that Australia had withdrawn its ground forces from ANZUK while reaffirming only 'its commitment to the consultative provisions of the FPDA'.⁹²

90 'Note of Meeting, First Meeting of the Heads of Mission of Member States of the European Community in Canberra in the Department of Foreign Affairs, Canberra', 27 February 1974, in TNA FCO 24/1897.

91 *Ibid.*

92 'Mr Whitlam's Discussions in London: 19–20 December 1974. Part I: Political', UK High Commission Canberra (M James) to Callaghan (Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary), 2 December 1974, TNA FCO 24/1911.

Transactional engagement from the periphery

By 1974, Southeast Asian leaders no longer considered Australia part of the region as they had done from the 1940s through to the late 1960s. For example, in meetings with the Australian Minister of State, Don Willesee (1973–75), Singapore's High Commissioner at Canberra said that ASEAN governments now considered Australia a South Pacific country, like Fiji, not a part of Southeast Asia. He noted that Australia's claims to be part of Asia were now as similarly peripheral as Russia's. In his view, the most fruitful form of cooperation in the foreseeable future for Australia would be a formal association between the South Pacific Forum and ASEAN. This would give Australia the Asian relationship that it sought.⁹³

Even though it is often now presented as evidence of the success of Asian engagement, Australia's formal association with ASEAN (later renamed dialogue partner) negotiated between January and April 1974 was very much a consolation prize for the Whitlam Government.⁹⁴ It established the current pattern of Australia's engagement as a second-tier player in Asia-Pacific international relations, with the national perspective of looking in at East Asia from the South Pacific periphery, and included in 'Asia-Pacific' organisations only with other extra-regional powers. Australia's peripheral situation in 1974 was thus a long way from its central position in Asian political and security affairs from 1944 to the late 1960s. Australia's regional security integration, maintained since 1944, was finished, with the press now touting Whitlam's isolationist 'fortress defence' policy.⁹⁵ The only functioning regional organisations in which Australia remained a member were transactional: the Ministerial Conference for the Economic Development of South-East Asia; the Colombo Plan, which was still in

93 'Record of Conversation between H.E. Mr A.P. Rajah, High Commissioner for Singapore and Mr H.D. Anderson, Regional Organisation', DFA Canberra, 22 February 1973, NAA A1838/696/1/5/4, Part 1; 'Record of Conversation, His Excellency Mr A.P. Rajah, High Commissioner for Singapore and Senator D. Willesee, Minister for State', DFA Canberra, 26 February 1973, NAA A1838/696/1/5/4, Part 1.

94 'ASEAN/Australian Co-operation', Australian Embassy Bangkok to DFA Canberra, 12 January 1974, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 11; 'Talks with the FCO, ASEAN', DFA Brief, 1974, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 28.

95 'Bringing the Troops Home', *Financial Times*, London, 22 May 1973, in TNA FCO 24/1557; see also 'Statement on International Affairs by Australian Prime Minister', UK High Commission Canberra (W Peters) to JK Hickman, South West Pacific Dept., FCO London, 25 May 1973, TNA FCO 24/1596; 'Prime Minister's Visit', Australian Embassy Washington to DFA Canberra, 30 July 1973, NAA A1838/686/1, Part 9.

operation; the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East; and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).⁹⁶ The UK FCO assessment of Whitlam's foreign policy supports this: the Whitlam ALP Government 'wishes to establish more enduring and broad-based relations with regional countries on the foundation of long-term common interest such as trade, development co-operation and cultural links'.⁹⁷

In an editorial in January 1974 assessing the first year of Whitlam's foreign policy, *The Sydney Morning Herald* opined:

It is not secret that in South-East Asia there are considerable reservations, if not always about the substance and intentions of initiatives identified closely with Mr Whitlam's personal philosophy, then certainly about Labor's style. It has been unsettling to nations accustomed to take for granted Australia's commitment to stability to note Canberra's new habit of criticising its old friends while refusing to criticise very new ones. It has been particularly unsettling when one of these new friends is China ... and when each of our South-East Asian friends has what seem to them all very good and obvious reason to be exceedingly suspicious of China. South-East Asian reservations have already found one uninhibited spokesman in Mr Lee Kuan Yew who, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting at Ottawa, publicly rejected Mr Whitlam's thesis that détente among the great powers will contribute to regional stability.⁹⁸

In this Lee was chillingly accurate, with Indochina plunged into genocidal bloodshed with the Khmer Rouge seizing power in Cambodia in 1975, followed by internecine conflict among the communist states from December 1978. Rather than the US withdrawal from Vietnam and subsequent communist victories in Indochina stabilising the region as Whitlam predicted, quite the opposite occurred, with new power struggles and historical grievances being unleashed. It seems clear that Whitlam failed to understand the stabilising effects of the Western military presence in Southeast Asia during the postwar decades, which, as the previous chapters have shown, had been valued by many regional states.

96 'Regional Co-operation', For Prime Minister's Southeast Asia Visit, Official Brief, 7 January 1974, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 11; 'Australia's Outlook on South East Asia', DFA Report, 21 March 1975, NAA A1838/3004/11, Part 12.

97 'Australia's Relations with Indonesia', UK FCO Report, 3 September 1973, TNA FCO 15/1867.

98 'Whitlam's Mission', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, editorial, 26 January 1974, in NAA A1209/1974/6181.

In refuting the charges of isolationism in early 1974, Whitlam did, however, confirm that Australia's pattern of Asian engagement was by then primarily transactional. He argued that Australia's emphasis had shifted from involvement with Asia on an ideological or defence basis to:

one based increasingly on developing trade with the countries of the region, on promoting progress through constructive aid programs, on encouraging security through regional co-operation, on a positive response to the recent proposals that we should consider financial assistance to agreed ASEAN projects, and on the development of cultural contacts through the negotiations of cultural agreements with the countries of South East Asia.⁹⁹

This evolution to a broader-based but shallower transactional pattern of engagement was primarily a result of the momentous changes in the regional strategic environment occurring in the late 1960s that eroded the conditions for Australia's deep political and security integration with Asia. However, it was accelerated by Whitlam's foreign policy approach and activist style, which, as this chapter has shown, was unwelcome in Southeast Asia, where most of Australia's closest regional relationships had developed in the postwar decades.

Conclusion

By 1974, Australia looked in at East Asia from Oceania with its engagement premised on a broadening but shallower transactional basis, rather than on the deeper political and normative ties of Commonwealth responsibility and Cold War solidarity evident through to 1968. British decolonisation within the ANZAM defence area and direct US military involvement in the region were the background conditions for Australia's deep engagement with Asia in the postwar decades. The erosion of these factors did not inaugurate closer regional relations as Whitlam intended—rather, their dissolution in the early 1970s distanced Australia politically from East Asia. As this chapter has shown, this trend was accelerated by the Whitlam Government's focus on China and advocacy for

⁹⁹ 'Speech by the Prime Minister of Australia the Honourable E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P., at a Banquet in his Honour Given by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, 29 January, 1974', in TNA FCO 15/1867; see also Michelle Grattan, 'No Turning Back Now in Asia: PM', *The Age*, Melbourne, 15 February 1974, in NAA A1209/1974/6181; 'Note of Meeting, First Meeting of the Heads of Mission of Member States of the European Community in Canberra in the Department of Foreign Affairs, Canberra, 27 February 1974', in TNA FCO 24/1897.

a comprehensive Asia-Pacific organisation crossing Cold War ideological lines, which alienated Australia's Southeast Asian neighbours. Within the ASEAN grouping, Whitlam's emphasis on Indonesia and disengagement from the FPDA led to perceptions in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines that they had been downgraded or ignored. These were the countries most well-disposed toward Canberra in the postwar decades and where its deepest relationships had been fostered by previous Australian governments.

Whitlam vastly overestimated Australia's importance in the region in the early 1970s. He held the view that Australia's association with its 'great and powerful friends' in the postwar decades had diminished rather than enhanced its status in Asia. For example, in December 1974, Whitlam said that by the time of his election in 1972, 'the external environment and Australia's Government had changed. Our perceptions of Australia's place and role in international affairs had changed. We never were small and insignificant'.¹⁰⁰ However, as Chapters 3 and 4 of this book have demonstrated, postwar Australian governments never considered the country small and insignificant. Both the Chifley and Menzies governments saw Australia playing an important, even leading role in regional affairs. The momentous changes in regional dynamics from the late 1960s made Australia less, not more, significant than it had been from the 1940s up until then. Australia's strategic weight relative to the developing states of Asia had diminished over this time. This loss of influence and relative importance is implicated in the enduring calls by the foreign policy community that Australia must deepen its engagement with Asia. The concluding chapter assesses the implications of the historical trajectory advanced in the book for Australia's foreign policy 'traditions' and makes some concluding observations and analysis about the prospects for deeper Australian engagement with Asia in the 21st century.

100 'Speech by the Prime Minister of Australia, The Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P., at the Mansion House, London, Thursday 19 December 1974', Australian Information Service, Canberra House, London, Media Release, 19 December 1974, in TNA FCO 24/1912.

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