7

Conclusion

The notion that genuine and substantive Australian engagement with Asia began only with Whitlam's 1972 recognition of communist China and came to full expression with the Hawke and Keating governments from 1983 into the 1990s is not borne out by the postwar historical record. Indeed, close attention to that record supports the proposition that decolonisation in Southeast Asia, and Cold War strategic imperatives across the region more broadly, drew Australia into deep and genuine political relationships with many Asian states, based on shared normative as well as security concerns.

An analysis of the motive of Commonwealth responsibility in Australian postwar approaches to decolonisation in Southeast Asia reveals that the foreign policy traditions typically used as interpretative frames for this period are flawed. This study has shown that the 'internationalist' Chifley Government sought to protect Australia's security interests in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, through claiming a British Commonwealth responsibility for the region. On the other hand, for the Menzies Government, its Commonwealth responsibilities structured its conception of regional interests, which were sometimes in tension with United States (US) Cold War strategic priorities. For both governments, the norm of Commonwealth responsibility was an important motivating factor.

From the immediate postwar years of the late 1940s until the mid-1960s, Australia's engagement with the decolonisation process in Southeast Asia was driven not only by Cold War security interests, but also by strong normative sentiments of Commonwealth responsibility. This is evident in the Colombo Plan, the Australia–New Zealand–Malaya (ANZAM) Agreement defence planning arrangement, and Australia's participation

in the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve (CSR) in Malaya and Borneo. The origins of the ANZAM Agreement, Australia's deep engagement with Southeast Asian decolonisation during the Cold War, and the conditions for Australia's early forward defence deployments are located in the Chifley Government's view, derived from its wartime experience, of insular Southeast Asia as Australia's region and a British Commonwealth responsibility.

It was Evatt, associated with the internationalist tradition of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), who asserted Australia's responsibilities for the region on behalf of the British Empire and Commonwealth in the immediate aftermath of the war. This was continued by the Menzies Coalition Government, which, along with its familiar Cold War rhetoric, consistently emphasised in the 1950s and 1960s Australia's Commonwealth responsibilities in Southeast Asia. This demonstrates that there is much more continuity between the foreign and defence policies of the two governments than is typically portrayed in the literature on Australia's foreign policy traditions. Under Menzies, Australia's commitment to ANZAM and Malaya in the face of Washington's scepticism and military deployment to Borneo in tension with US Cold War strategy, and at the risk of open conflict with Indonesia, are not consistent with instrumental calculations of strategic interest or subservience to US priorities.

Australia's sense of Commonwealth responsibility, which had become increasingly reluctant by the mid-1960s, faded away relatively quickly with the end of Indonesia's Confrontation of Malaysia in 1966 and Britain's subsequent commitment to withdraw from east of Suez. Australia's policy discourse features a more instrumental focus on its independent national interests after this time, along with explicit denials of any residual Commonwealth responsibilities in Southeast Asia. This is especially evident from 1968 in the rhetoric of the Gorton Coalition Government in negotiations with Malaysia and Singapore leading up to the signing of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in 1971, which superseded the previous Anglo–Malaysian defence agreements (1957–71).

With East Asia more broadly, the non-communist solidarity of the Cold War provided the conditions for Australia's political and security engagement from 1950 to 1971, which was perhaps at its deepest from 1966 to 1968. In the aftermath of the war in the late 1940s, the Chifley ALP Government had viewed insular Southeast Asia as Australia's

region for security purposes. By 1950, however, the Menzies Coalition Government was more attuned to the solidifying Cold War dynamics in the region. For Spender and Casey, the Cold War drew a peripheral Australia deeply into East Asian affairs. However, this basis for Canberra's political and security engagement was eroded from 1966 to 1972 by a series of compounding external factors that were mostly beyond Australia's capacity to influence, but which served to distance Australia politically from region: the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 and the development by the early 1970s of a cultural understanding of regional consciousness that excluded Australia; an easing of Cold War pressures from March 1968 with US de-escalation and withdrawal from Vietnam; the 1969 Nixon Doctrine; and Washington's rapprochement with China in 1972. These changes removed the material conditions, and, importantly, also the normative and institutional underpinnings, for Australia's deep political and security engagement with East Asia.

By the time the Whitlam Government took office in December 1972, the trajectory toward transactional engagement was established. This was intensified by the Whitlam Government's recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its policies in Southeast Asia, which may have been consistent with Japanese policy and trends at the global level but created dissonance among Australia's immediate regional neighbours. By 1974, Australia looked in at East Asia from the South Pacific with its engagement premised on a broadening but shallower transactional basis.

When viewed through the lenses of International Relations theory, Coalition governments are typically described as holding a realist orientation, while ALP governments are usually labelled as liberal internationalist (although tempered by realist assumptions regarding the Australia–New Zealand–United States Security Treaty, or ANZUS, alliance). However, the analysis of the 1944 to 1974 period undertaken in this book reveals major inconsistencies with these theoretical labels. As this study has shown, Coalition governments during this time consistently demonstrated normative motivations such as responsibility, solidarity and building a shared regional 'consciousness' in their foreign policy approaches. They also placed great emphasis on the regime type and identity of states as communist, non-communist or non-aligned. In this, a constructivist interpretation that emphasises norms and identity is more appropriate as an explanatory device than realism, while a concern for

regime type is resonant of liberal internationalism. It could be argued that neo-classical realism allows for a focus on domestic politics and intangible motives in foreign policymaking; however, these are supplementary to its primary structuring principle of the distribution of capabilities. Australia's reliance on its 'great and powerful friends' is the reason for the application of the realist label. However, it is extremely important to note that Britain and the US are culturally, politically and institutionally similar great powers. Australia has never identified itself, or aligned itself in peacetime, with a culturally dissimilar authoritarian great power, such as China, nor is it likely to do so in the foreseeable future.

By contrast, the Chifley and Whitlam ALP governments pursued highly instrumental policies toward Asia, often more consistent with structural realism than liberal internationalism. For example, the Chifley Government sought to use residual British Commonwealth power to exert an Australian sphere of influence over insular Southeast Asia and the South Pacific in the immediate postwar years. It sought to dominate what it regarded as its region of the world. The Chifley Government also regarded international organisation as functional, technical and therefore instrumental, rather than for the less tangible purposes of encouraging cooperation, exchanging information and building shared understandings, all of which are regarded by liberal internationalism as important for fostering international peace, prosperity and security.

Similarly, the Whitlam Government's priority of redirecting Australia's relationships away from smaller regional players toward the large countries of China and Indonesia, while continuing the emphasis on Japan, is also reflective of a realist approach. Whitlam's realism is further evidenced by his non-interventionist attitude toward conflict in neighbouring countries, his consequent reorientation of Canberra's strategic policy from forward defence to defence of the Australian continent, and his economic focus on resource nationalism. It is worth remembering here that in the lead-up to the US ground combat intervention in South Vietnam from July 1965, the main internal critic within the Johnson administration (1963–69) was Undersecretary of State, George Ball, who criticised the deployment of US ground troops on the realist ground of prudence. Ball argued at the time that most available evidence suggested the Republic of Vietnam was a lost cause. The outcome of the proposals for intervention would be 'a protracted war involving an open-ended commitment of US

forces, mounting US casualties, no assurance of a satisfactory solution, and a serious danger of escalation'. Ball stressed the urgency of coming to a compromise solution in mid-1965 without a US ground intervention.[1]

On the other hand, Evatt's role in the formation of the United Nations (UN) and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Chifley Government's adherence to UN Security Council principles of dispute resolution, Whitlam's advocacy for the Asia Pacific Forum, and his strong identification with human rights, anti-racism and non-discrimination are consistent with a progressive liberal internationalism. In addition to emphasising the importance of normative motivations in foreign policy analysis, my point here is that the theoretical labels typically assigned in discussions of Australia's foreign policy traditions do not adequately explain, or do justice, to the complexity of the international environment that the country faced, or to the foreign policy approaches and positions taken by Australian governments of both political persuasions during this period.

A concluding observation from this study is that policy approaches from Australia can only be successful in Asian engagement if aligned with larger regional trends or forces. Australia does not carry enough strategic weight to independently shape the regional environment. The Pacific War and its aftermath, the circumstances of British decolonisation and the onset of the Cold War drew Australian governments deeply into the Asian region politically and militarily. The later Gorton and McMahon Coalition governments from 1968 to 1972 were subject to a series of profoundly destabilising changes to the regional environment, which undermined the existing bases of engagement premised on Commonwealth responsibility and Cold War solidarity.

Whitlam overestimated Australia's influence, misinterpreting the significance of these changes for regional diplomacy, especially in Southeast Asia, and by 1974 was reduced to signalling a transactional basis for Australia's future engagement. Rather than the start of genuine engagement, Australia's political exclusion from Asia during the 1970s is evident in the Hawke–Keating (1983–96) era policies of 'enmeshment' and 'comprehensive engagement', and in the intense activism of Foreign Minister Gareth Evans in trying to re-establish Australia's place in the

---

1   See 'Paper by Ball', undated, sent to McGeorge Bundy, 1 July 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (*FRUS*), 1964–68, Vol. III, Vietnam: June–December 1965, doc. 40.

region. The end of the Cold War and globalisation process from the late 1980s ensured that the transactional basis for Asian engagement in trade, tourism and international education would remain entrenched. Efforts in the early 2000s to again deepen Australia's engagement beyond the transactional have largely failed, with Kevin Rudd's 2008 Asia Pacific Community proposal exemplifying this.

However, recent trends indicating a more assertive and nationalistic China, the US 'pivot' back to Asia under the Obama administration (2009–17), India's Act East policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014–present), overt Sino–Japanese strategic rivalry and competing maritime claims among a number of states in the East and South China Seas suggest the conditions may again be developing to support deeper Australian political and security engagement in Asia. Over the last decade, a number of governments—notably Japan, Australia, India and the US— have adopted the term 'Indo-Pacific' for their conceptualisation of Asian regionalism and security arrangements. For Canberra, this shift marks a return to the regional outlook of the late 1940s and early 1950s, where the concept of Asia was located north and westward of the Australian continent, rather than the dominant 'East Asian' and 'Asia-Pacific' focus of more recent decades. This modified strategic outlook—from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific—recognises that an increasing number of political, strategic and economic 'interactions and interdependencies between governments now either link or span across these two formerly separate regions'.[2] Jeffrey D Wilson argues that one of the most important developments related to the Indo-Pacific concept is a return to the traditional separation between economics and security in foreign policymaking.[3]

This evolving Indo-Pacific strategic framework has given rise to a number of 'minilateral' security initiatives between Japan, India, Australia and the US. These include various trilateral configurations among the four, and an informal and undeveloped 'quadrilateral' grouping introduced in 2007 and revived from 2017. Japan has been the leader in promoting the quadrilateral initiative under the prime ministerships of Shinzo Abe (2006–07, 2012–present) in the face of Beijing's opposition. The Indo-Pacific concept explicitly dilutes an 'East Asia' regional construct centred

---

2   Jeffrey D Wilson, 'Rescaling to the Indo-Pacific: From Economic to Security-Driven Regionalism in Asia', *East Asia* 35, no. 2 (2018): 177–78.

3   Ibid., 182.

on China, while elevating India's status to that of a key strategic partner. These developments have been met with a highly negative response from Beijing, which argues that they display a Cold War mentality and NATO-like (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) alliance framework designed to contain or encircle China.[4]

There are a number of similarities in these emerging strategic dynamics compared with those of the early Cold War period. The first is the centrality of an assertive and ideologically driven PRC. Whereas in the early Cold War, this was characterised by Maoist communism, Beijing is now driven by a self-conscious nationalism that seeks to reverse China's 'century of humiliation'. The second are strategic rivalries and disputes that again impinge on fundamental issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity— whether in the South and East China Seas, or in Kashmir (where China's Belt and Road Initiative is encroaching)—and with a range of Asian states involved. The third pattern is that of some regional states more firmly aligning with China or, alternatively, with the democratic world and 'rules-based international order', which, since the Second World War, has been underwritten by US strategic preponderance. Finally, much like the early years of the Cold War in Asia, there is some doubt over Washington's ongoing commitment to regional security and stability in the Indo-Pacific under the Trump administration (2016–present), although this may be a relatively transient phenomenon.

Considering the historical trajectory advanced in this book, these contemporary dynamics suggest that the structural conditions may again be developing in the 21st century to support a deeper Australian engagement with Asia. For a country on the geographical margins of Asia with a liberal political culture and governing institutions, the perceived risk of an authoritarian great power—like China—seeking to dominate the broader region may be the shared common denominator required between Australia and its Asian neighbours for 'deeper' engagement.

---

4   David Brewster, 'The Australia–India Security Declaration: The Quadrilateral Redux?' *Security Challenges* 6, no. 1 (2010): 3; Emma Chanlett-Avery and Bruce Vaughn, *Emerging Trends in the Security Architecture in Asia: Bilateral and Multilateral Ties among the United States, Japan, Australia and India*, CRS Report for Congress, 7 January (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), 4, 14; Lavina Lee, 'Abe's Democratic Security Diamond and New Quadrilateral Initiative: An Australian Perspective', *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2016): 4.