

2. THE ROAD TO COLOMBO

The decaying gun emplacements dotted around Australia's coast stand as an epitaph to an idea once central to Australian civilisation: that freedom and security were best preserved by building physical barriers and deterrents against a hostile world. 'We live in an unstable era', warned founding father and future Prime Minister Alfred Deakin in 1888, 'from the far east and the far west alike we behold menaces and contagion'.¹ Safe behind their defences, Australians populated and cultivated their continent largely unfettered by outsiders who, many believed, looked rapaciously at an empty, undeveloped country. Indeed, hard work and the fruitful exploitation of the land was the linchpin of a vigorous and effective national defence. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed in 1907, threats would be prevented 'by populating our

country, by filling up the waste places, by settling on the land sturdy men of our own race and our own colour, who will hold Australia for themselves and for the Commonwealth'.² Australians would find, however, that preserving their security meant stepping beyond the barricades.

The issue of security in a hostile — or potentially hostile — region has been a recurrent theme in Australian foreign policy. Dreams of an Australian sub-empire in the Pacific were not articulated with any real conviction until Billy Hughes became Prime Minister in 1915. Australian interest in the Pacific, hitherto shaped by economic and evangelical motives rather than a belief that their destiny would impinge on Australian sovereignty, was now animated by fears of European and Japanese expansionism. Never prone to self-doubt, Hughes was a curious mix of the sentimental imperialist and aggressive nationalist, dismissive of any challenge to Australian interests, British or otherwise. At the conclusion of the First World War, Hughes, like most Australians, expected to enjoy a portion of the spoils, namely the annexation of German possessions south of the equator. En route to the Paris Peace Conference in 1918, Hughes stopped in New York and called for the creation of an Australasian Monroe Doctrine for the Pacific, based on the American principle enacted in 1823 to keep European powers out of the Western Hemisphere. The idea did not belong to Hughes and had first been expressed in Australia during the 1883 inter-colonial convention, when European colonial acquisitions south of the equator were seen to jeopardise the security and prosperity of the Empire. But Hughes' appeal to American tradition paid off and the local press lapped up his feisty aphorisms. The *New York Times* reported his claim that securing New Guinea was not an act of imperialist expansion, merely an attempt to ensure

Australian sovereignty and security, for 'the possession of islands within striking distance of us in unfriendly hands means that our country must always sleep with the sword half drawn'.³

In Paris, Hughes continued in a similar vein. Opening the case for annexation, he unrolled a large map of the region and pointed out to his audience that the islands to the north 'encompassed Australia like a fortress'. Hughes' colourful performance proved something of a spectacle during the sombre conference proceedings. But it was not enough to win the day. With memories of war still fresh, the idea of forceful acquisition of territory had begun to lose its moral and legal legitimacy. Instead, the concept of a territorial 'mandate' administered by a single power on principles laid down by the League of Nations, as opposed to outright sovereign control, was becoming fashionable. The concept of self-determination, typically used in relation to European and Middle-Eastern nationalist movements, was also beginning to be applied to the undeveloped regions of the world. Against this trend the Australian delegation publicly scoffed at the idea of ascertaining the wishes of a people that 'had advanced little beyond the Stone Age'.⁴ The permissive mandate Hughes eventually secured required Australia to prohibit slavery, not to supply liquor to local people, not to raise local armies or fortify the territory. But, while Hughes undertook to provide a humane administration, the security benefits were seen in terms of merely denying territory to potentially hostile powers, rather than as an opportunity to garner support from the local inhabitants or bolster their resolve against subversion. Benevolent treatment of the indigenous population was merely an unavoidable price of winning the mandate. Although Hughes failed to annex New Guinea, he had projected Australia's authority beyond its continental

borders. And, for the moment, Japan and the rest of Asia were kept safely at bay.

Hughes' suspicion of a future attack emanating from Asia turned out to be disturbingly prophetic. The first serious threat to Australian territory came from the Japanese at the beginning of the Second World War — and it came more quickly and with more violence than anyone had predicted. Asia now loomed larger than ever before in the imagination of all Australians. Japan's seemingly unstoppable conquest of South–East Asia shattered the illusion of Australian inviolability, and confirmed deeply held fears that South–East Asia would be the route to an invasion of the mainland. Geographic isolation — for so long assumed to be a powerful deterrent to invaders — now exacerbated Australian anxiety. Over the course of the war, Australians became more intimately and painfully acquainted with South–East Asia. Australia's first mass engagement with the region, when about 22,000 Australians became prisoners of the Japanese, was as a brutalised and subject people. For the post-war generation of Australians either holding, or destined to hold positions of authority and influence, the mention of Asia evoked a wide range of emotions, from anger to memories of horrific suffering and loss. Even before the end of hostilities, Australian politicians and policy-makers began responding to a new concept of Asia, shaped largely by decolonisation, the emergence of nationalist movements and the rising threat of communism. The responsibility for New Guinea — so hard-won by Hughes — and a shared land border with Dutch New Guinea, now perhaps to become part of Indonesia, further projected Australia's gaze northwards. Interest in Asian opinion about Australia, particularly over the consequences of immigration policies, also began to increase. In general, the cultural, economic and political gulf between Asia and Australia, once seen as a protection from

invasion and decay, now needed to be managed, studied — even narrowed. This readjustment, of course, did not come easily or without deep apprehension.

Coming to terms with Australia's isolation from its strong cultural and military allies was the cause for much anxiety during the late 1940s when the spectre of communist expansionism emerged as one of Australia's fundamental security concerns. The domestic achievements of Ben Chifley's Labor Government (1945–49) were considerable. But among the conservatives, the perceived neglect of defence planning and the weakening British connection aggravated the concern that Australia was militarily adrift. Specifically, they saw Labor's foreign policy, with its faith in the new United Nations (UN) and support for Asian self-determination, as an attempt to dismantle the bonds of Empire. Speaking at the First Annual General Convention of the New South Wales division of the Liberal Party in 1945, Robert Menzies, then an opposition backbencher, savaged the logic of Labor's international liberalism: 'the very arguments used for throwing the Dutch out of the East Indies are the arguments which will be used to throw the British out of Malaya, to throw the British out of Burma, India, for throwing the Australians out of New Guinea'. Labor's approach to regional affairs, he claimed, threatened the 'continued existence of the British Empire' which was 'vital to the peace and the future of the world'.⁵ Some members of the Liberal/Country Party opposition who, perhaps privately, doubted the strength of the imperial connection saw the chance to rebuild those ties. In 1949, Sir Earle Page, the co-founder of the federal Country Party, berated Labor's volatile and combative foreign minister, Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, for his support of the Dutch withdrawal from Indonesia:

*When we find that the present occupants of territories which concern us have been told that they should get out of them for the sake of the original inhabitants, we wonder whether we are living in a chapter of Alice in Wonderland ... We should ask ourselves who are our real friends? ... Who are those who will support us in our hour of need? ... The only way we can ensure ... safety is to build a new British Empire. That Empire is held together by the great traditions of the past.*⁶

But for many, the bonds of empire had already begun to unravel, the fall of Singapore and the reliance on American forces to defeat the Japanese having been an object lesson in the irrelevance of Britain to Australia's strategic integrity. The Japanese wartime Prime Minister Tojo Hideki accurately assessed Australia's vulnerability and sense of betrayal when, in 1942, he gleefully dubbed Australia 'the orphan of the Pacific'.⁷

The man who brought most of the pressure to bear on the Chifley government and its apparent failure to adequately manage Britain's shifting priorities and prepare for future threats from South–East Asia was Percy Spender. As shadow Minister for External Affairs, he dogged Evatt for three years. With thin lips, a close-cropped moustache and narrow eyes, Spender appeared every bit as fiery and relentless as his political opponents knew him to be. His nickname, the Butcherbird, came from his earlier career in law and his reputation for merciless cross-examination of witnesses. Brilliant as a barrister, Spender took silk at the age of 35 to become one of the country's youngest King's Counsel. He carried his talent for debate and advocacy into federal politics in 1937, when he won the blue-ribbon seat of Warringah on Sydney's north shore. Within 18 months

of his election, Menzies invited Spender to join the United Australia Party and take up the position of Acting Treasurer. He later became Treasurer, Minister for Army in the wartime Cabinet, and a member of the Australian Advisory War Council. Among the most travelled members of Cabinet, Spender had visited Japan, Hong Kong and the Philippines during the late 1920s and 1930s. The experience left its mark. On one trip to Asia, he recalled watching a ship being coaled: 'it was almost inhuman to see these people with baskets of coal upon their backs. Throwing the coal upon their backs, almost like a treadmill, going up and down, throwing the coal down the hold, returning, filling their baskets again with coal and going on and on, an endless chain of humans'.⁸ The picture of poor, anonymous and vulnerable labourers stayed with Spender throughout his life. Indeed, what he saw informed his view that Labor policy-makers had grossly underestimated the unstable nature of Asian society and its susceptibility to communism.

Unlike Evatt, Spender had little faith in the UN, and he came to believe that the Charter was 'manifestly unable to protect Australian interests' and that, without external assistance, Australia was unable to guarantee its security. He attacked Evatt's commitment to liberal internationalism and cast aspersions on his patriotism. On one occasion Spender charged Evatt with addressing the parliament as an 'internationalist', not as an Australian. On another, Spender responded to one of Evatt's numerous speeches regarding the UN with a rhetorical question: 'The speech of the right honourable gentleman contained not one word about matters which are of vital interest to this country. The events which are taking place not only in Europe but also in Asia ... Where, in his speech, was any reference made to the Pacific and South-East Asia?' There is little

doubt that Evatt considered the UN to be the principal instrument for international conflict prevention and resolution. Evatt hoped that the UN, as an egalitarian international forum, would ensure that Australia's voice would not be lost amid the din of Cold War posturing by the great powers. Yet, despite his belief in self-determination as the 'best form of security' and the criticism levelled at him by the opposition, Evatt's 'internationalism' did not abrogate responsibility for regional security issues. He acknowledged that the mere existence of a UN Charter did not 'dispose of the need for national defence forces, and [offered] no absolute guarantee against armed conflicts and aggression'.⁹ Nor did the existence of the Charter obviate the need to create policies designed to foster positive foreign relations and collective security arrangements.

Evatt was perhaps the first to seek a more organic security policy, outside of the framework of alliance diplomacy. In 1944 he attempted to strengthen Australian and New Zealand strategic and territorial interests in the Pacific with the formation of the Anzac Pact, Australia's first international defence agreement without the United Kingdom. Among other things, the agreement envisaged a 'system of world security' based on a zone of defence 'stretching through the arc of islands north and north-east of Australia to Western Samoa and New Zealand's possessions in the Cook Islands'. While the defence 'zone' never materialised, regional security was now seen to involve much wider responsibilities. Monroe Doctrine-style isolationism gave way to a tentative regionalism, based on a wider understanding of defensive planning to encompass increased economic and social interaction. A statement issued in January 1944 by the Department of External Affairs (DEA) announced the new obligations for those

with territorial interests in the area: Australia and other regional powers now had a 'duty to advance the welfare of the native people and to promote their social and economic and political development'. Evatt further developed the idea that political stability and economic and social progress were inexorably linked, and in November 1944 he explained his vision for international peace and regional stability to the House of Representatives:

There cannot be freedom from fear unless there is a systematic attempt to achieve the objective of freedom from want. International order cannot continue indefinitely unless the conditions of social unrest are removed. It is urgently necessary to provide machinery for the promotion of human welfare in all parts of the world. But we feel a special responsibility for non-self-governing territories in the region in which we live and in neighbouring regions. We feel that great constructive work can be and should be done by the Governments responsible for territories in the South Seas and in the South-East Asia region to provide for mutual assistance, exchange of information and collaboration in particular problems, such as health, transport, economic development and native welfare.¹⁰

The United Kingdom made the first attempt to avert famine and social upheaval following the Second World War. Motivated primarily by the looming withdrawal from India and Burma and the fresh significance this conferred on her remaining possessions, in 1946 Britain appointed Lord Killern (Sir Miles Lampson), former Ambassador to Egypt, to the new position of Special Commissioner in South-East Asia. Based in Singapore, his job was to

coordinate food supply, promote social welfare, organise conferences on regional issues, strengthen political stability and secure economic advantages for the United Kingdom. Through Killearn's endeavours, the Foreign Office hoped, Singapore might become a 'centre for the radiation of British influence' and consolidate her strategic and economic presence.¹¹ The creation of the UN liaison body Economic Commission for Asia and Far East (ECAFE) in March 1947, however, initially appeared to threaten British regional hegemony. Although resistant to the idea of a regional forum where, as Australia's Commissioner for Malaya in Singapore, Claude Massey, put it, Britain feared they would be 'hopelessly outnumbered by Asiatic representatives', the Foreign Office also hoped that Australia's membership of ECAFE and Killearn's work in Singapore would be sufficiently credible — and conspicuous — to counteract any anti-western or pro-communist sentiment. Killearn made Britain's neo-colonial ambitions abundantly clear when he confessed to Massey that 'the big idea' was to get 'all the interested regions here jointly into consultation with a view to a discussion on the future world lay-out'.¹²

With UK officials preoccupied with getting South-East Asia to look to Britain for 'spiritual leadership', they were surprised when Australia mounted a challenge — even if it was largely rhetorical — as a regional leader. Evatt saw his chance to elevate Australia's regional presence immediately after Britain announced that India was to become independent. On 26 February 1947 he told the parliament that, as Britain's responsibilities declined, Australia's would rise: 'Just as far as the people of South-East Asia cease to be dependent upon the decisions of European Governments, so far do Australia's interests in the councils of South-East Asia increase ... The time has

now arrived where there should be formed in South–East Asia and the Western Pacific an appropriate regional instrumentality'.¹³ The expansionist ethos that governed Australia's national development was central to the achievement of international security. Evatt's plans to set the South Pacific on the road to progress was, in some ways, a judicious transference of the same motivations that drove Australia's quest to develop: if industrious and rapid cultivation of the country could protect Australia from conquest, then surely it could save the backward nations of Asia and the Pacific.

Evatt's subsequent proposal for a regional conference on trade, defence, and cultural relations threatened British hopes to retain the initiative. The Foreign Office despatched Killlearn to Canberra to discover the details of Evatt's plan and to remind the haughty colonial of the United Kingdom's existing efforts to foster collaboration via the Special Commissioner in Singapore. Killlearn's entreaties, combined with the more pressing question of the Japanese Peace Treaty, resulted in Evatt abandoning his plan for a South–East Asian conference. Nevertheless, Evatt's call for the rubric of regional security to be expanded to include welfare and development marked the convergence of the economic, social and strategic dimensions of Australia's approach to national defence and regional affairs. Although Evatt's plan for Asia faded away, he, along with senior DEA officials, successfully created a consultative regional forum for the Pacific. Australia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States officially launched the South Pacific Commission on 6 February 1947 to promote development in Pacific Island territories under their administration. Like the Anglo–American Caribbean Commission established in 1942, from which its creators drew considerable inspiration, the veneer of benevolence

belied the deeper concern that communist ideology might flow to the islands via the anti-colonial sentiment spreading across the world.

Evatt received diligent support from the secretary of the DEA, Dr John Burton, son of the leading Methodist missionary, the Reverend Dr John Wear Burton. Young, energetic and radical, Burton cut an impressive figure among Canberra's rapidly expanding bureaucratic corps and rose to become Secretary of the DEA at the age of just 32. Although he would not survive long as Secretary following the defeat of the Chifley government, his impact on the direction of Australian foreign policy was considerable. Burton was particularly enthusiastic about extending Australia's diplomatic presence throughout Asia. A recurring theme in DEA discussions on Australia's regional influence was the lack of expert knowledge about Asia and the need for increased diplomatic representation. One of Burton's initiatives to boost Australian awareness of South-East Asia and exert a positive influence on Asia's political elite was the 1948 Macmahon Ball Goodwill Mission to South-East Asia. William Macmahon Ball, a political scientist from the University of Melbourne who had served as the Commonwealth delegate to the Allied Council for Japan between 1946 and 1948, had developed an extensive knowledge of Asia. Charged with investigating the region's aid requirements while making contact with senior Asian diplomats, the six-week tour included 13 major cities in Indonesia, Malaya, Burma, Thailand, China, Indo-China, Singapore and the Philippines. But the timing of the mission was poor, taking place just a few months after 14 Indonesian and Malayan seamen were expelled from Australia in February 1948. On arrival, Macmahon Ball faced a 'storm of protest' against Australian immigration laws and he felt the press interpreted the entire mission as a tawdry effort

to make up for Australia's 'insult' to the people of Asia. To make matters worse, Malcolm MacDonald, Commissioner-General for the United Kingdom in South-East Asia, during an informal dinner party with Asian community leaders put Macmahon Ball on the spot by asking him to explain the reasons for the government's actions. With Macmahon Ball clearly under pressure, MacDonald, perhaps seeking political advantage at Australia's expense, added that he thought the incident had done 'irreparable harm' to British and European interests in the region. Macmahon Ball sarcastically thanked MacDonald for expressing himself so bluntly, skipped dessert, and left.

These setbacks certainly damaged Macmahon Ball's higher purpose of exerting a positive and independent influence over Asia's new political elites. But they did not stop him from making constructive observations about the development of Australia's foreign policy towards South-East Asia. 'Burdened by their newfound independence', Macmahon Ball wrote, 'Asian leaders recognised their need for outside economic and technical assistance'. Setting aside Asia's antipathy towards immigration restrictions, its lack of resentment or fear of Australia opened up a unique opportunity to provide 'aid and intellectual leadership'. Asians, he said, did not feel that engagement with Australia would compromise their political or economic independence. The key to cultivating such goodwill lay not necessarily in going through standard diplomatic channels, but in targeting Asia's youth: 'To win the friendship and goodwill of the students and technicians is to win the goodwill of people with great political influence', he reported. 'Goodwill towards these people must become a national habit, built on respect for the racial sensibilities and national aims of our neighbours'.¹⁴ Francis Stuart, the astute political secretary to the Australian Commissioner in Singapore, told Burton that

Australia had misjudged the depth of Asian antipathy to the white Australia policy and that he hoped the goodwill mission finally proved the folly inherent in pretending that foreign relations and immigration policy could be kept apart.¹⁵ Stuart's observations were prescient, for the tension he identified would shape Australia's approach to the region for the next two decades.

A more determined strategy intended to redirect Australia's foreign policy towards Asia took shape in late 1948 when Chifley, as acting Minister for External Affairs, sent a 'Political Appreciation' of the region to the Minister for Defence, John Dedman.¹⁶ Developed by DEA bureaucrats under John Burton, the appreciation outlined a broad long-term plan of strategic and political engagement with South-East Asia. The main features of this strategy were to develop financial and industrial policies to help meet the development needs of the area, to encourage the development of Northern Australia by increasing its population and use of resources, to develop Radio Australia in order to encourage 'genuine nationalist developments', to extend diplomatic ties with the region, to encourage Australian businessmen and other officials to establish commercial links with Asia, and to consult with the United States and stimulate their interest in the problems of South-East Asia.¹⁷ The broad thrust of the DEA's recommendations was that, while these suggestions varied in importance and practicality, they all had an 'important long-term defence aspect [that would be] best considered (though not executed) in a defence context'.¹⁸ Taking up ideas generated by the Macmahon Ball mission, a handful of scholarships were soon offered to foreign students under the South-East Asian Scholarship Scheme, supplementing another small offering made in 1947 through a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

(UNESCO) program.¹⁹ By the end of 1948 the major part of a one-off allocation of £A500,000 of clothing, x-ray equipment and medical supplies (taken from £A4 million offered to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration [UNRRA]) had left Australian shores. But this supply of war surplus was something of a windfall. In the future the provision of aid would not be so painless because it would be necessary to give away goods destined for Australia's domestic markets. The agricultural supplies, steel, timber, locomotives, tractors and construction equipment desperately needed in Asia were also in strong demand in Australia, the DEA lamented.²⁰

While bureaucrats embarked on the onerous task of challenging Australia's history of regional passivity, diplomatic activity in Europe and Asia threatened to overtake Australian planning. Since the formation of ECAFE, regional governments had cautiously inquired about the prospect of a Marshall Plan aid program for Asia. But it was not until October 1948, when Britain's Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin privately suggested the idea to his department, that a Western government appeared willing to take the idea seriously. However, the Foreign Office did not embrace Bevin's audacious suggestion. Not only might such a plan burden Britain with providing the lion's share of financial aid, it also threatened to upset the complex financial and trading arrangements which had developed since the end of the war. Australia, New Zealand, Malaya, India, Pakistan, Ceylon and the United Kingdom belonged to what became known as the Sterling Area, a fiscal arrangement which served to strengthen the pound and Britain's balance of trade. In order to fund the war effort and purchase desperately needed US supplies, Britain purchased the hard currency from the area in exchange for sterling credits. After the war, countries could then draw on

their balances in order to finance their own trade deficits. And at this time, retaining control of Malaya's dollar-earning rubber plantations took on an important economic significance. The prospect of a foreign aid-funded Asian trading bloc threatened to disrupt the trade relations between Britain, Malaya and the United States, and jeopardise Britain's capacity to earn dollars.²¹

Bevin soon came to see that fostering economic growth, girding the region from communists, and protecting British financial and strategic interests required a more robust and inclusive organisation rather than Killearn's piecemeal endeavours, especially at the time when the region appeared increasingly unstable. In 1948 alone, Britain saw communist activity in Burma turn violent, and a state of emergency arose in Malaya after repeated attacks by communist guerrillas on British-owned enterprises and police outposts. Even more worrying for British interests in northern Asia, notably Hong Kong, were the spectacular military advances by Mao Tse-tung's army over Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists. The inevitability of a communist China posed an indirect threat, though no less intimidating, to neighbouring India and Pakistan. But at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in October 1948, it was India, not Britain, that reinvigorated its interest in building a non-communist regional association. In a similar vein to his speech at the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi — the first meeting of its kind — where he stated that India was the 'natural centre and focal point of the many forces at work in Asia', India's Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, made only veiled references about the creation of an Asian alliance dedicated to bringing aid into the region.²² He assured the meeting that Asians had little sympathy for communist ideology: the fortunes of communism would rise or fall on the strength of indigenous

political and cultural fortitude, he said, and as long as other forces championed nationalism and the betterment of living standards 'the ground would be cut from under the feet of the communists'. And by flagging the more specific problem of obtaining capital goods and specialist equipment, the lack of which hampered Asia's economic progress, Nehru tactfully prepared the way for future requests of technical and financial aid. Britain was still nervous about Asia's need for financial support and the likely resistance to suggestions that France and the Netherlands join a regional body. In this context, Bevin merely proposed that South-East Asian and Western governments meet periodically to discuss ways of stabilising the political and economic climate. But the prospects for Bevin's recommendation did not look promising, and once again the plan seemed destined to flounder in the fractious regional climate. First, his recommendation was diluted to a proposal for regular discussions on international affairs in general, and not necessarily the affairs of South-East Asia. Second, the unresolved Dutch-Indonesian dispute meant that Indonesia would be unrepresented, a prospect that Killearn's replacement, Malcolm MacDonald, likened to a performance of *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark.²³ In fact, regional instability resulted in the proposed discussions being postponed until the Colombo conference of January 1950 — a time when the affairs of Asia could no longer be ignored. From such an inauspicious beginning, the planned meeting turned out to be the kernel from which a regional organisation would grow.

Nascent plans for building a means of providing aid to the developing world gained fresh momentum when the American president, Harry Truman, devoted his inaugural address on 20 January 1949 entirely to foreign policy. He vowed to support the UN, to continue to fund the Marshall

Plan for the reconstruction of Western Europe, to support the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in order to resist communist aggression, and to bring American scientific and industrial technology to bear on the economic problems of the developing world. With the final proposition, henceforth known as 'Point Four', Truman was careful to offer only limited technical assistance for agricultural expansion, public health and education; it was not a promise to underwrite capital formation in the third world. 'Democracy alone can supply the vitalizing force to stir the peoples of the world into triumphant action', he said, 'not only against their human oppressors, but also against their ancient enemies — hunger, misery, and despair'.²⁴ Truman's evangelical fervour and apparent willingness to support economic growth in developing countries set the imagination of the world running. But Truman's sonorous mission statement concealed a deeper reluctance to take up the affairs of Asia. In part, those concerns were economic (the burden of aid to Europe was considerable and Asia was, at this point, of secondary strategic importance), but American policy-makers were also unwilling to risk initiating any regional arrangements that might be interpreted as covert economic imperialism.

At the same time that Truman reaped the rewards of his stirring address, Nehru brought together 18 nations in New Delhi to discuss a range of regional issues, including the means to help Indonesia achieve stable independence. Australia, the only Western country to be fully represented, provided some ballast to the proceedings, but most delegates took the opportunity to attack colonialism, demanding that the Dutch transfer power to the Indonesian Republic by 1 January 1950. In a calmer moment, Nehru recommended that delegations 'consult among themselves in order to explore ways and means of establishing suitable machinery,

having regard to the areas concerned, of promoting consultation and cooperation within the framework of the United Nations'.²⁵ Australian–Indian relations were cordial, in part enhanced by Australian facilitation of India's entrance into the international cricketing fraternity. But that did not divert Nehru from his purpose of building an exclusively Asian regional alliance. With a keen eye for the telling symbolic gesture, Nehru postponed the discussion of this resolution until after the Western attendees had returned home. The suggestions adopted by the remaining delegates stopped short of calling for a program of international aid, but a range of activities which could bring Asian governments closer together were proposed. Among other things, the meeting called for a greater exchange of information between Asian governments, periodic meetings to discuss matters of common interest, and increased emphasis on cultural relations, including the exchange of teachers, students and technical advisers. The DEA told Indian officials that, although the plan was 'broadly in accord with the conception of regional association' proposed by Evatt, there was no need to encroach on the UN mandate. Yet the real reason for Australia's ambivalence, however, was fear of interference from the communist powers. Equally cool responses from Burma, Thailand and Indonesia saw the Indian proposal shelved. But India's attempt alerted British and Australian policy-makers to the prospect of a regional initiative created and led by Asians, a prospect that did not bode well for the achievement of Western strategic and economic ambitions. A shared distain for post-colonial domination did not necessarily translate into shared political or economic aspirations. Indeed, in the wake of decolonisation, smaller Asian states grew even more suspicious of the motives of their larger neighbours. A wise assessment came from Australia's High Commissioner in New Delhi, Herbert Gollan. 'In this

period of flux', he wrote, 'no Asian country will take the risk of keeping entirely aloof from any proposal for an Asian grouping', but there was no 'great cohesion in the present show of union'.²⁶ Asia's smaller states rejected Nehru's proposed forum, with most reluctant to become associated with an overtly Western or anti-communist bloc, and especially one that promised little in the way of aid or technical assistance. And the blatant anti-colonialism that underpinned the Delhi conference dashed British hopes for a regional forum involving the Netherlands or France.

Australian involvement in the creation of a new regional forum intensified two months after the New Delhi meetings, when the Australian ambassador to China, Keith Officer, met with the Indian, US and UK ambassadors to discuss the consequences of a communist victory. The Indian ambassador, K.M. Panikkar, claims to have revived the spirit of the New Delhi conference, by presenting a paper calling for the establishment of consultative machinery bringing together Asia and the West. He argued that 'without immediate and adequate help in the economic field, the political structure of South-East Asia would provide no more than a frail barrier to the expansion of Communism'.²⁷ The group then modified Panikkar's proposals and eventually reached, in the US ambassador's words, 'a tentative consensus of opinion'.²⁸ On 7 March 1949 Officer sent Evatt a copy of the joint memorandum and urged him to take 'more than a defensive stand' against the advance of communism. The memorandum synthesised many of the ideas about the economic and political future of the Asian region circulating since the Second World War. The achievement of independence, it claimed, could not solve the problems at the heart of the pre-modern, underdeveloped economy and merely paying lip service to Asian self-determination

was not enough to guarantee the emergence of non-communist government. The problem was that transforming an 'oriental' society based on 'anachronistic social bonds and ... a starvation economy' into a modern society based on the 'principles of social justice and economic freedom' was inherently revolutionary. The underlying assumption was that a homogenous and generic Asian economy had been denied the slow process of economic evolution which typified European civilisation. Such destabilising forces, therefore, exposed the people to 'new and destructive' ideas.²⁹

What then was the solution to the 'immense appeal' of communism, feeding as it did off the turmoil induced by the social and economic transition? The memo was, in fact, far more ambitious than earlier proposals for regional collaboration and suggested the creation of a permanent consultative council, a confederation with 'a planned and integrated economy, which would increase food production through the application of modern technology, embark on a program of industrial expansion, build intra-regional trade networks, develop a 'common system' of liberal-democratic education, and build medical and sanitary facilities to counter the 'enervating effects' of South-East Asia's tropical climate. More than a proposal for the simple correction of Asia's apparent economic stagnation, it called for a cultural and social conversion and the formulation of principles upon which the 'New Society in South-East Asia should be fashioned'.³⁰ Overlooking the Soviet-style emphasis on planned and integrated economic systems, the Nanking model was reminiscent of the Marshall Plan and underscored the necessity of Western finance. Risking the ire of anti-colonial Asia, the authors suggested that, in order to ensure that development programs were of an anti-communist nature, contributing powers should retain some

discretion over the funding and management of aid projects. In Canberra, the Nanking proposals met with a cool response. Burton, although sympathetic to both the thrust of the memorandum and Officer's observations, did not see any value in merely duplicating the UN-managed organisations already in existence, such as ECAFE and the Food and Agricultural Organisation.³¹ Officer countered Burton's response by suggesting that the communist influence within these organisations rendered them impotent, mere producers of propaganda and endless discussion. In case his secretary had missed the point, Officer repeated himself: 'What I want is a small very informal machine confined to those who are really prepared to fight Communism of the Soviet variety in the proper way, namely by improving conditions and so providing no field for it'.³²

The Nanking proposals were never formally implemented, but they at least brought many of the ideas that had been circulating in secret into the open. Commonwealth officials moved closer together on significant issues: the communist strategy had far-reaching regional (perhaps global) consequences; any measures to counter communist expansion required substantial external finance; and, most importantly, Asian governments needed to have considerable discretion and control over that assistance.

Meanwhile, the British Foreign Office made a series of valiant, but unsuccessful, attempts to persuade the US State Department that they should consider providing financial aid to the region. The rhetorical power of Truman's address was not enough to overcome Congressional reluctance to underwrite the reform of the economies of South and South-East Asia. In talks with Britain, the State Department played down the likelihood of American support, dismissed suggestions of a Marshall Plan for Asia as impractical, and hoped that Asian states would tackle the

communist problem themselves.³³ American resources were already stretched to cover the Cold War in Europe, and no funds could be spared for Asia. Needless to say, the billions of dollars wasted bolstering Chiang Kai-shek dampened American enthusiasm to embark on another mission to save Asia from communist revolution. These halting attempts to build a regional group faltered also because Western powers, hoping for a tacitly non-communist forum, were still reluctant to enter into a deeper dialogue that inevitably would expose the extent of Asia's technical and capital needs. And without the prospect of aid, there was little incentive for Asian nations to suspend their misgivings about joining a union with their former colonial masters.

Unbeknown to British and Australian officials, American policy-makers were secretly considering the strategic ramifications of a communist Asia and the potential role Western countries such as Australia and New Zealand might serve. An important analysis commissioned by the US State Department proposed that Congressional support for any regional initiative, economic or otherwise, required the dramatisation of the communist threat and the alternative offered by regional collaboration. In order to foster a bulwark against Soviet imperialism, the report recommended US policy should aim to coordinate the discussion of economic and political problems, promote the economic integration of Japan, and facilitate a program of economic and cultural assistance. Significantly, the report suggested that the United States should endeavour to draw regional powers such as 'India, Australia and New Zealand into more direct responsibility for the welfare and stability of the area as a whole'.³⁴ While British policy-makers concluded that the Commonwealth remained the preferred instrument for achieving regional unity, they too envisaged a pivotal role for the dominions. After conducting investigations into food

supply and other counter-measures to communist disturbance, the Foreign Office determined that 'not only are we in the best position to interest the United States in active participation in maintaining the stability of the area, but our relations with the Commonwealth provide a means of influencing and coordinating the policies not only of the Asiatic Dominions, but of Australia and New Zealand, whose strategic interests in the area are, in fact, equal to our own'.³⁵ Throughout the year bureaucrats on both sides of the Atlantic produced papers and continued negotiations, but the opportunity for the Commonwealth to take the lead went begging.

The British–American talks only recognised Australia to the extent that she supported a much broader vision of regional economic and political hegemony. Men like John Burton, however, envisaged a more active Australian presence — particularly in regard to Indonesia — working in concert with the United States and other international agencies.³⁶ Aside from disputes between the DEA and the Department of Defence over the emphasis on defence preparations, the notion that development promoted stability was widely endorsed. By seeing poverty as the major cause of socio-political instability in South–East Asia, the Defence Department conceded Burton's main proposition that 'appropriate political and economic measures' should supplement military preparations.³⁷ In April 1949, just before Mao's troops captured the Chinese capital, the Minister for Defence, John Dedman, threw his department's weight behind the DEA and endorsed the creation of a 'programme of political and economic action' intended to remove the possibility of a 'political and military vacuum' and arrest the spread of communism throughout Asia.³⁸

To this end, the DEA recalled its representatives in Japan, China, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaya and India to Canberra in November 1949 for an informal exchange of

views with departmental heads. Also invited to the first two days of the meeting were M.E. Dening, Assistant Under-Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs at the Foreign Office, and Alister McIntosh, Secretary of New Zealand's Department of External Affairs. With Evatt in the chair, discussions focused largely on recent political developments and the 'threat of communism through Asia and the possibility of armed conflict' involving Australia, while a cooperative arrangement with South-East Asia 'through some form of regional pact or association' was formally, although inconclusively, debated. Delegates discussed the apparent show of unity at New Delhi earlier in the year and yet another attempt to establish an anti-communist league, this time from the President of the Philippines, Elpidio Quirino. All remained concerned that 'mutual suspicion among countries of the region were deep-seated and must be eradicated before much real political cooperation could be expected' and New Zealand signaled its reluctance to become involved in the affairs of Asia.³⁹

When the representatives from the United Kingdom and New Zealand departed, the conference turned to the specific economic, political and diplomatic challenges to Australian interests: namely, the lack of awareness among Australian officials of potential dangers from Asia; the limited number of skilled diplomats able to represent Australian interests; the language barrier; Australia's 'bad reputation' in Japan; the economic problems faced by South-East Asia; Australia's commercial policy and tariff restrictions; supply shortages in Australia; and, not least, the need for greater American assistance.⁴⁰ Capturing the general tenor of the group, Burton's working paper for these meetings, entitled 'Australia and South-East Asia', stated that Australia was 'no longer in a position to assume that its future security and progress [were] assured within the framework of the British Commonwealth alone'. Building the 'weak states' of South-East Asia into a 'buffer region

between us and the Asian mainland' required 'a substantial re-orientation of Australian thought and practice' and a movement away from the tendency to form alliances with Western powers.⁴¹

Burton's ideas reached the highest level in the form of a tightly argued Cabinet paper, submitted after the November conference and just before the December 1949 federal election. Evoking the memory of Australia's vulnerability during the Second World War, the paper stated that the Japanese advance southwards had 'brought home to us the extent of our geographical relationship with Asia and of our geographic isolation from our traditional points of cultural and economic contact in Europe and America'. Although active military intervention was thought unnecessary to prevent the spread of communism, Burton conceded that an armed response might become necessary should events change rapidly. But the substantive changes he proposed were of a deeper and more far-reaching character. Asia's movement towards autonomy was 'inevitable and natural', and the changing international environment demanded nothing less than a 'permanent re-orientation of Australian outlook and policy'. The Cabinet paper recommended that Australia's national interests would be best served by fostering the technological, economic and social advancement of the region through increased diplomatic representation, a greater emphasis on local language and customs, trade promotion, the relaxation of trade restrictions, closer relations with the Indonesian military, and an extensive program of technical education. He also acknowledged that, owing to material shortages in Australia, any attempt to distribute aid equally among South-East Asian nations would be counter-productive. Rather, it would be better to concentrate on countries, such as Indonesia, where Australia would

achieve the most benefit. The Australian people also needed to ready themselves for Japan's industrial resurgence as a supplier of manufactured goods and importer of raw materials. Significantly, official and public attitudes towards Japan had the potential to nullify Australia's broader policy of increased commercial, political and cultural engagement with South-East Asia. The government, therefore, was obliged to follow a 'conscious policy of educating the public to a greater awareness of the growing interdependence of Australia and South-East Asia'. Burton's appraisal was perhaps the most sharply observed and radical to have been presented before Cabinet. But not everyone was ready to embrace the DEA's recommendations. Indeed, Chifley had only recently denied a British request to provide aid to Burma — the region's greatest food exporter — because he feared the money would be wasted and that it would be impossible to garner popular support for such a decision. Yet, despite this early resistance, the basic thrust of Burton's analysis would go on to form the central pillar of Australia's international aid policy.⁴²

The defeat of the Chifley Labor government by the Liberal-Country Party coalition in December 1949 appeared to end the independent trend in Australian foreign policy mapped out by Evatt and Burton. Labor and the Coalition may have shared a deep interest in Australian security, but there was no doubt that a new era in Australian foreign relations had begun. The Cold War polarised world politics into two diametrically opposed camps. For the Menzies government, the spectre of international communism posed the most serious threat to the nation. The United Nations was seen to be manifestly unable to protect Australia from this threat, and establishing an alliance with a great power became a fundamental objective. Australia aligned its foreign policy

with the United States by withholding recognition of China, working to keep both China and India out of the Soviet orbit, and seeing that Japan remained militarily weak although industrially strong. Significantly, as the DEA noted, Australia would support the aspirations of independent Asian nations provided they were 'capable of contributing to the economic, political and military strength of the West'.⁴³ But there was some continuity between Spender's approach to regional affairs and that of his predecessors. They each shared a conviction that Australia needed to guard against its isolation, not just by retreating to the secure embrace of powerful Western allies, but also by helping poor nations to develop and by actively projecting political and cultural influence outside Australia's borders. They each shared the faith that technological, economic and cultural advancement was the natural antidote to the instability that seemed to be creeping across the region.

The proclamation of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949 quickened Britain's desire to hold a conference to discuss Asian economic and political affairs. On 3 November 1949, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee asked his opposite number in Ceylon, Don Stephen Senanayake, to prepare for a meeting of Commonwealth foreign ministers in January the following year. The conference was, at least superficially, simply another in a series of discussions between Commonwealth representatives that had been taking place since 1944. However, this meeting differed in three significant ways. First, in addition to the issues of European reconstruction and the Japanese Peace Treaty, delegates were to consider the ramifications of

the victory of the Chinese Communist Party. Secondly, this was the first time that representatives from the newly independent countries — Pakistan, India and Ceylon — were included on the council and given the opportunity to discuss their views on regional issues. Thirdly, this was the first Commonwealth ministers' meeting convened on Asian soil.

For Australia, the decision to hold the meeting in the Ceylonese capital, Colombo, confirmed a shift in the epicentre of world affairs. Commonwealth forces had been called upon to fight communist insurgents in Malaya, Dutch troops had only recently stopped fighting Indonesian nationalists, and the French were struggling to retain control of Indochina. Most agreed that events in Asia were set to further impinge on Australia's regional future and, as one parliamentarian said, Australia had a 'duty to the awakening giant of Asia that is seeking a place in the world.'⁴⁴ But there was still no immediate or obvious means of fulfilling this duty. No forum, political or economic, united Asia, save for the sporadic efforts of UN agencies such as ECAFE, UNESCO, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). In fact, the Commonwealth remained the main organisational and political link that joined Asia and the West, and that link was tainted with the history of colonialism. If Western powers hoped to foster an independent, stable and non-communist Asia, a new system of cooperation had to be devised. Expectations for the Colombo conference were high. After all, a meeting of this kind had been four years in the making. But exactly how Asia and the West could be brought together remained to be seen. What role Australia might play at this historic conference was similarly unclear.

Footnotes

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