

8. CROSSING THE FRONTIER

Since the Second World War a pervasive uncertainty about Australia's regional presence has spread across the political landscape. True, that anxiety had been there since settlement, but the experience of war and its aftermath intensified national ambivalence towards the region. A monolithic 'Asia' emerged as Australia's northern frontier, a place whence future enemies might come, but a place most knew needed to be more deeply understood. Paul Carter, in his history of Australian settlement, *The road to Botany Bay*, argued that the notion of the frontier as a barrier, a 'one-sided, unified line of defence or attack', was of limited value in explaining the settlers' relationships to each other, the land and the indigenous people. It was better, he argued, to look at the frontier not as a barrier, but as a place of communication and exchange: 'It enables the

settler to establish who and where he is. This is my clearing, that beyond is not'. We can understand the settler's presence, not in exclusive opposition to those around him, but only in relation to his surrounding. 'The settler himself takes advantage of his distinction to make his own position clear. The boundary is not a barrier to communication. Quite the opposite: it gives the settler something to talk about'.¹

Carter's interpretation is particularly useful for understanding the nature of Australia's relationship to Asia since the end of the Second World War. In 1950, when Spender told parliament of the immutable limitations and responsibilities of Australia's geography, it was as much an admission of territorial and cultural vulnerability, as it was a call to recast the outmoded concept of the frontier which had retarded Australia's engagement with the region. The fluidity of political and social change in the region, the uncertainty of decolonisation and the mounting tension of the Cold War moved Australia to question where the boundary with Asia lay. The frontier could not be a 'unified line of defence' — the nature of communism (as defined by Percy Spender and others) would not allow it. Australia's conception of — and approach to — the Cold War meant that two frontiers were in operation. One, a tangible strategically defined boundary measured by borders and armed encounters, and the other, an indeterminate and vague mental frontier requiring a sustained propaganda battle. The frontier had become amorphous and Australia's security and prosperity would not come from isolation, but only through helping others to develop and resist. The cornerstone of this policy, Spender declared, was engagement via a 'sustained and determined effort in every field of human activity, including the political, economic and spiritual fields'.²

If the intangible nature of ideological conflict helped bring the Colombo Plan into existence, the outbreak of war in Vietnam cast the merits of the aid program into much sharper — and starker — relief. On 13 August 1964, the first full debate on the regional and global implications of conflict in Vietnam took place in the House of Representatives. Although the debate was ostensibly over the merits of the Menzies Government's decision to issue a statement wholeheartedly supporting the US decision to increase its involvement in Vietnam in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incident,³ it was quickly transformed into a much wider debate about the use of foreign aid versus military might in the struggle against communism. The faithful continued to use foreign aid to attack the government's claim that there was 'no current alternative' to military intervention. Labor leader Arthur Calwell spoke of the need for an 'expanded programme of economic and social aid' which would help to 'ensure that the inevitable economic and social revolution in South East Asia is not a Communist revolution'. To back his claim, he stated that the Labor Party pledged one per cent of national income for overseas aid, roughly twice the Menzies Government's allocation. Another member, drawing inspiration from Colombo Plan initiatives and the personal contacts they fostered, protested vainly: 'We must convince both the South and North Vietnamese that we have a better way of life than the Communists have. That is the only answer. We must live amongst them, talk to them and work with them as the Communists are doing'.⁴

Yet fifteen years of giving aid to the Asian region had failed to 'draw the teeth of Communist imperialism' and remove popular sympathy for revolution.⁵ In the mid-1960s,

on the crest of Asia's most bitter and divisive conflict, rarely had the commitment to Asian economic development seemed so marginal to Australia's approach to containing the spread of communist ideology. Evatt's idealistic vision of first securing 'freedom from want' and thus removing the systemic basis of instability had been turned on its head.⁶ The Minister for the Navy, Fred Chaney (Snr), unwittingly reversed Evatt's rhetorical hook when he said that 'people should first be given freedom from attack and freedom from the fear of attack' before experts could offer advice on health and social welfare. More colourfully, Henry Turner, Member for Bradfield (NSW), asked: 'How can the man who fears, when he leaves his village, that, while he is away his child may be kidnapped, his wife may be murdered, or his village burnt down, give attention to instruction from an agricultural expert on how to tend his rice paddy?'⁷ Opposition protests were in vain and with the outbreak of war, it became clear to all that the plan to create a model Western-style democracy, and thus forestall regional disquiet, was little more than a fantasy of the post-war imagination. The technical and financial aid Australia gave to political trouble spots in Asia did little to allay feelings of insecurity and the need for a military alliance. Armed resistance was part of Australia's strategy to check the advance of communism, Paul Hasluck told Parliament: 'behind the shelter provided by regional security arrangements the countries of South and South-East Asia wish to pursue their objectives of social and economic progress. To help them to do that is the purpose of the Colombo Plan'.⁸ In the official rhetoric, the success of the Colombo Plan now depended on the military intervention it was nominally supposed to have precluded.

The apparent failure of aid to prevent conflict, however, did not stop Hasluck from generating greater

interest in the Colombo Plan, in large measure because of his strong Cabinet performance. Between 1964 and 1967, Hasluck increased the bilateral aid budget (excluding Papua New Guinea) from \$14.1 million to over \$34 million.⁹ Indeed, from retirement, Hasluck wrote that the expansion of Australia's aid program gave him the greatest sense of achievement while foreign minister.¹⁰ He also took an interest in the administration and organisation of aid programs, and he confronted the tendency to tie bilateral assistance to Australian produce and the crippling effect this had on the real value of foreign assistance.

Most welcomed the Colombo Plan as a valuable contribution to regional relations, but open, generous, and responsive engagement with Asia did not always command broad endorsement. Although giving aid to Asia became a consistent and important facet of Australian foreign policy, it was not central to the government's political agenda and was often overlooked when more important and immediate issues were raised. To suggest that Australian policy-makers worked towards a clear set of policy objectives for the Colombo Plan would be to attribute, somewhat artificially, a coherence and direction to Australia's foreign aid policy that did not exist. The imprecise and largely unquantifiable nature of many of the Colombo Plan's objectives frustrated those eager for a more concrete basis on which to base their aid policies. The administration of aid projects involved many bureaucrats and diplomats in detailed and difficult work, associated them with corruption and failure, and strained the resources of their posts. Many were dismayed and angry at the lack of gratitude displayed by Asian leaders, and preferred to get on with tasks which they saw as central to diplomacy. Casey's obsession with publicity and propaganda was as much an attempt to overcome bureaucratic resistance and enlist the support of those who

were otherwise indifferent, as it was to burnish Australia's national image in the fight for the hearts and minds of Asia. A successful public relations campaign offered an alternative way to assess the Colombo Plan other than by using quantitative economic measures.

The equivocal attitude of Australian diplomats toward the Colombo Plan stemmed as much from inexperience and uncertainty about Australia's relationship with Asia as it did from a diminished faith in foreign aid to secure Australian interests. The ambivalent attitude of Australian officials towards the broader impact of the aid scheme is one measure of the anxiety the program caused, rather than allayed. Throughout the 1950s, Australian officials greeted the Colombo Plan with a range of emotions, from cautious approval to outright hostility. Sometimes, they held both views simultaneously. No one had more experience with the high-level administration and policy direction of the Colombo Plan than Arthur Tange, Secretary of the DEA from 1954 to 1965. 'We count too much on the Colombo Plan', he told Casey, the program's patron saint, in 1955:

Australia's contributions can be of no major significance in the eyes of the political leaders of India, Burma, Indonesia or Thailand ... It has no effect upon their assessment of where Australia stands in international political issues because it is a thing apart, except in so far as it demonstrates a willingness to offer a small amount of friendly help ... I also fear that, by overemphasis in our publicity, we may arouse a counter reaction, not always indulgent, against patronage and what may be regarded as an effort to compensate for lack of Australian support on more fundamental

questions such as 'American intervention' or 'colonialism'.

Yet he claimed with equal conviction that Australia's 'standing is certainly better than if we contributed nothing. We pick up the goodwill disseminated by students, and technical ministries with whom we co-operate. We take the edge off our immigration policy ... It is a most valuable arm in our foreign policy'.¹¹

Politicians and policy-makers felt that after fighting in two world wars Australia had earned a right to act in concert with the great powers. Liberal parliamentarian Kent Hughes captured this sentiment candidly in 1954, when he remarked that Australia deserved to have its 'voice heard in the councils of the world' but 'must avoid the two extremes of making too much noise and of sitting silent on the sidelines'.¹² As Australia juggled its commitment to alliance politics and regional engagement, the Colombo Plan offered a gentle means of building rapport with Asia. Even a cursory survey of inward correspondence from Asian posts shows how frequently the Colombo Plan formed the basis of diplomatic contact, being often used as an icebreaker before broaching weightier issues. Neighbourly goodwill, although built on shaky foundations, still had the capacity to determine the mood of the next diplomatic meeting, the next regional conference, or, at worst, the next confrontation. It was crucial to building relations, especially where previous dealings had been limited or even hostile. The establishing of closer economic relations with Japan and the maintenance of diplomatic contact during Indonesia's policy of 'confrontation' form but two examples.

While the Colombo Plan was a step towards engagement and mutual understanding, it did little to challenge the geo-political precepts that shaped the official

imagination. The basic premise from which Australian policy-makers approached the region in the decades after the end of the Second World War (namely, that South and South-East Asia were keystones in Soviet and Chinese plans to dominate Asia) remained largely unchanged. Asia, as it existed in the shadow of the Cold War, was both threatened and threatening. The looming threat of communist expansionism and Australia's proximity to a people they perceived as desperately poor, weak, and vulnerable struck at the centre of Western ideas about progress and stability and formed a powerfully unsettling image. The military and strategic objectives — and their associated cultural and economic objectives — that drew Australian policy-makers into Asia defined and limited the terms on which Asia was represented and understood. Trapped by the seemingly inescapable polarities of the Cold War, this reductive view gave the Colombo Plan much of its momentum. Of course, the simplistic and fearful interpretation militated against the recognition and acceptance of differences between Asian countries and their peoples. In time this would change, but it would take a bitter, divisive, and ultimately futile war to convince them that Asia was more than a collection of politically malleable and culturally homogenous buffer states.

And yet, on university campuses and in homes and hostels across the country, interactions between Australians and Asian students enriched and challenged Australia's knowledge of the region. Partly because these exchanges brought about by the scheme precluded overt control, they were able to circumvent the distortions imposed by the Cold War agenda. The government had no way of predicting how Australians would respond to Asian students, or how students would interpret and tell of their experiences once they returned home. For many Australians, the exposure to

Asia that the Colombo Plan facilitated came in a remarkably contradictory form. The devious and ruthless communist insurgents penetrating vulnerable minds throughout Asia and beyond, as described in parliament, the popular press, and official appraisals, must have seemed a world apart from the urbane, middle-class Asians seen in ever increasing numbers in Australian universities. The experience for the thousands of experts sent to Asia on their first assignments was similarly challenging.

Cultural exchange proved to be the most enduring aspect of the program. In Australia, some welcomed the exchange, others were apprehensive, but few could deny the growing awareness of Asia taking place in Australian society. Under the Colombo Plan those Asians perceived as poor, numerous, diseased, different, and threatening stayed at home, and those who were young, clean, English-speaking, and not seen as competitors for Australian jobs journeyed to Australia — and they came temporarily. Generally, they were welcomed. They were Australia's guests and Australians thought themselves good and generous neighbours by having them. Suspicion of inferiority, racial pollution, political disruption, and moral contamination — long associated with Asian people — began to fade. Instead, the presence of Asian students stimulated a desire for genuine social pluralism and a distaste for the hollow trappings of government and media propaganda. One student, writing in the University of Sydney newspaper *Honi Soit*, asked earnestly, 'How long will it be before they notice that each time they are invited to a social function they meet the same small group of people — those thoughtful few to whom "international friendship" is something more than a phrase occasionally heard in overseas news items, something in fact personal and relevant to our own daily lives'.¹³ The acceptance of

Colombo Plan scholars and the arrival of more students, who were seen in a similar light, resulted in a significant weakening of the basic arguments that bolstered the white Australia policy. People who were manifestly different were not necessarily a threat. Colombo Plan scholars did not provoke racist incidents or endanger social and economic stability, and they paved the way for the acceptance of thousands of private Asian students, who have become an important element of today's tertiary education system.

The Colombo Plan also exposed the ambiguities of Australian loyalty to Britain and America. In June 1961, the heads of Australia's diplomatic posts across Asia met in Bangkok. They agreed that while the flow of Colombo Plan students afforded Australia a distinctive regional presence, they wanted an identity that would help them avoid the undercurrent of 'envious resentment' directed against the United States and the automatic assumption that Australia was the same as Britain. The process could be accelerated if they could 'discard some of the constitutional forms and terminology which to unsophisticated minds suggest dependence on the UK'. For a start, they wondered whether 'the Queen might be described more often simply as the Queen of Australia and that Australian representatives might perhaps be "Her Australian Majesty's Representatives" rather than "Her Majesty's Australian Representatives"'. While not the cry of a rabid republican, such gentle resistance to the trappings of empire signalled that those representing the country to the outside world thought Australian interests would be better served by an 'independent country with its own identity'.¹⁴ And foreign aid had proved a valuable and relatively inexpensive tool for the assertion of that distinctiveness.

This argument is not a case of 'leaching the "empire" out of Menzies', to borrow Greg Pemberton's colourful

phrase. Nor is it to imply that political leaders always exuded strongly nationalist sentiments, as opposed to imperialist inclinations. Instead, the point is to suggest that the Colombo Plan was part of a realisation that Australia would have to establish intimate bilateral relations with Asia on a myriad of economic, political, and defence issues, irrespective of its military connections to the United States. Again, this is not to argue that Australia did not agree with and support the approach of Western powers. Rather, that loyalty did not denote servility or pliable dependence. In relation to the Colombo Plan, Pemberton's argument that 'Menzies and his close associates admitted to themselves that their policies meant the denial of national sovereignty in foreign policy' is clearly overstated.¹⁵ Australia capitalised on the inflexibility or absence of US aid as a means of creating a distinctively Australian connection with Asia. Australia took a leading role in actively drawing as many non-Commonwealth Asian nations as possible into the Colombo Plan, partially as a means of enhancing the Australian flavour the scheme came to possess. Indeed, the independent nature of the approach irritated officials in Washington and London. Australian diplomats and policy-makers alike quickly seized upon the unprecedented and unexpected success of the student program as an ideal way of projecting Australian values into the region and conferring a uniquely Australian influence upon Asian scholars. The aid program also helped to create a dialogue between Asians and Australians, on an official and personal level, that had hitherto scarcely existed. Through the Colombo Plan, Australia came to see the virtue, if not the necessity, of sustaining an identity that was at arm's length from the United States and outside the old bonds of empire.

The Colombo Plan's bilateral aid structure gave the program its particular salience in the fractious regional

climate and allowed donor nations to secure their own foreign policy objectives. For Australia, this feature was particularly useful in order to build a regional identity via its aid contributions. These congenial and non-coercive administrative arrangements, and the Consultative Committee's lack of decision-making power, rendered the Colombo Plan something of an international curio. According to an appraisal from the UK Foreign Office, the plan resembled 'a building which, though constructed in defiance of the rules of architecture, gives admirable service only as long as no one attempts major changes liable to overload the structure and bring about its collapse'.¹⁶ Indeed, the shallow inclusiveness of the Colombo Plan continued to be one of its defining characteristics. Four 'fringe members' joined the program in the early 1960s: Korea and Bhutan (1962), and Afghanistan and the Maldivian Islands (1963). Australia lobbied vigorously for each inclusion, with the aid relationship 'our only real point of contact with these states, in none of which does Australia have resident representation'. First Assistant Secretary Ralph Harry told Tange that tiny states such as Bhutan, wedged between India, China, and Tibet, needed 'some added Western stiffening', but he also admitted that Australia's aid to these new members was 'purely of a token character'.¹⁷ The tradition of providing small amounts of assistance to an increasing number of geographically and politically diffuse nations continued into the 1970s, with the membership of Iran (1966), Singapore (1966), Fiji (1972), Bangladesh (1972), and Papua New Guinea (1973) bringing the total number of member nations to 27.

Despite the limitations of the Colombo Plan and the pre-eminence of geo-strategic considerations, Australia's relations with Asia had become increasingly complex since 1945. In spite of the hope of the principal designers and

advocates of the Colombo Plan, Spender and Casey, the aid program had not rendered the complexities of Asia less threatening and more comprehensible. Although conceived at a time of great uncertainty, the plan embodied the optimistic view that, with but slight encouragement, progressive, liberal development had the capacity to solve a panoply of international issues. Commonwealth policy-makers genuinely believed that the plan would go some way to building a cooperative, anti-communist regional association under the protective wing of the United States. Yet if Australian policy-makers hoped that the Colombo Plan would make their lives easier, they must have been sorely disappointed. Rather than stimulate an Asian economic recovery, the Colombo Plan drew greater attention to the massive task of building economic and social infrastructure and exposed a haphazard and piecemeal handling of complex development projects. Australian policy-makers also found it far more difficult to cozen Asian societies into Western modernity than they expected. Rather than foster a grateful and supine body of Asian political elites, the process of giving aid exposed Australia to Asian nationalism and the practical difficulties of building positive rapport with independent nations.

Given that the Colombo Plan development program, as it functioned in Asia, appeared to be riddled with inefficiency and inconsistency, why, then, did it survive to become an entrenched feature of the regional aid-giving environment? A number of interrelated factors sustained the Colombo Plan: the relatively low burden on Australian taxpayers, the limited official analysis undertaken by the Consultative Committee, and, irrespective of its practical limitations as a development scheme, the fact that it functioned symbolically as a bridge between disparate and divergent political and economic systems, thus becoming

a unifying force in the fractious climate of the Cold War. It comforted Australian politicians and diplomats who could point to the plan as concrete evidence of Australia's regional awareness and generosity. Any success associated with the Colombo Plan was Australia's success because Australians could claim that they were responsible for the plan's conception and implementation. Failures could be blamed on inefficiencies in the recipient countries and on the vicissitudes of international markets. The critical and moderate opinions offered by the likes of Macmahon Ball threatened to undermine the popular rationale for Australia's aid program. Although some in the DEA would have had sympathy with Macmahon Ball's analysis, diplomatic staff and senior policy officials were already overworked and nervous about attaching too many strings to foreign aid. The imposition of further conditions would have been next to impossible. For their part, the Labor Party began to target the government's preoccupation with strategic objectives at the expense of humanitarian aid. Delegates to Labor's 1961 national conference specifically advocated a 'widening of the Colombo Plan to assist Asian nations on a basis of common need and mutual co-operation and not in the narrow limits of so-called "enlightened self-interest"'.¹⁸ Most importantly, the program yielded other benefits and objectives, not necessarily present or obvious at its creation. The conspicuous benefits generated by the student program were incommensurate with the relatively small outlay of government funds, which the international affairs commentator Douglas Wilkie claimed as one of the 'cheapest strokes of foreign policy in all history'.¹⁹

In the volatile and uncertain aftermath of the Second World War, Australia searched for an active remedy for the dangers inherent in decolonisation and the beginning of the Cold War. Australians did not seek to become part of Asia; rather, they gradually came to see Australia's future as inexorably linked with the 'near north'. Since then Australia has sought to maintain strategic interests, express neighbourly goodwill, fulfil humanitarian obligations, and establish a cultural, diplomatic, and economic dialogue with the region — all without appearing to violate Asian sovereignty. Historian Manning Clark observed that during the 1950s Australia faced Asia with twin offerings: with one hand, she offered 'welfare, and with the other, a sword'.²⁰ As Australia faced Asia in 1964, on the verge of its longest and most divisive military commitment, his observation seemed apt. But what this book has shown is that, through the genesis of the Colombo Plan in the late-1940s and its implementation in the 1950s, attitudes and understandings of Australia's place and security in the Asian region expanded to incorporate a more organic and flexible appreciation of economic, social, and cultural engagement. Australian geo-strategic, economic, and cultural security was — and is — intertwined with the management of its relations with Asia. The decision to create the Colombo Plan and maintain it for so long signalled Australia's official admission that engagement with Asia simply had to occur and that Australia should be among those taking the initiative. Although the financial commitment was small, the Colombo Plan had considerable cultural and political significance. It brought together those who wanted Australia to be a humane and generous neighbour, those who thought modern, liberal values could be transplanted easily into Asia, and those hard-nosed realists who hoped for little more than a slim

strategic advantage in the Cold War struggle. The Colombo Plan captured this amorphous and changing approach to regional engagement — one that spanned a remarkable diversity of governmental considerations of a strategic, cultural and economic nature.

Full of quasi-imperial intent, the Colombo Plan was a defensive response to a particular construction of Asia and the anxieties, threats and promises that lay within that region. Yet its creation represented a shift away from the often insular concerns of the Menzies Government and actively — if with considerable ambivalence and trepidation — breached the barriers, both geographic and mental, of Australia's northern frontier. This cautious and conditional opening embodied a much broader tension of post-war Australian life: the preservation of Australia's political, economic, and military sovereignty meant engaging with the region and reconceptualising its regional identity outside the boundaries of a defensive and insular nationalism. That tension is with us still.

Footnotes

- 1 P. Carter, *The road to Botany Bay: an exploration of landscape and history*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 158–59
- 2 P. Spender, *Politics and a man*, Sydney, Collins, 1972, p. 328
- 3 The Gulf of Tonkin resolution was passed with overwhelming support by the US Congress on 5 August 1964, in response to two allegedly unprovoked attacks by North Vietnamese patrol boats. Its stated purpose was to approve and support President Lyndon Johnson's determination to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.
- 4 CPD (HoR), vol. 43, 11 August 1964, p. 21; CPD (HoR), vol. 43, 13 August 1964, pp. 180–81, 257
- 5 CPD (HoR), vol. 206, 9 March 1950, p. 632
- 7 CPD (HoR), vol. 43, 13 August 1964, pp. 247, 260
- 8 CPD (HoR), vol. 45, 23 March 1965, p. 235
- 9 R. Porter, *Paul Hasluck: a political biography*, Perth, University of Western Australia Press, 1993, p. 270
- 10 P. Hasluck, 'Foreign affairs', vol. 2, p. 14, box 37, Hasluck papers, MS 5274, NLA
- 11 Memo, Tange to Casey, 'Policy critique', 22 June 1955, Tange papers, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- 12 CPD (HoR), vol. 4, 10 August 1954, pp. 132–33
- 13 *Honi Soit*, 8 May 1956
- 14 'Heads of mission conference — Bangkok', 19–22 June 1962, A1838, 3004/11 part 7, NAA
- 15 G. Pemberton, 'An imperial imagination: explaining the post-1945 foreign policy of Robert Gordon Menzies', F. Cain, ed., *Menzies in peace and war*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1997, p. 156–59
- 16 Joint memorandum by South-East Asia and Economic Relations Department, Foreign Office, 'The future development of the Colombo Plan', 28 August 1961, FO 371/160010, PRO, UK
- 17 Note, Harry for Tange, 26 February 1965, A1838, 2020/1/24 part 3, NAA
- 18 Quoted in, A.A. Calwell, *Labor's role in modern society*, Melbourne, Lansdowne Press, 1963, p. 181
- 19 *Sun News-Pictorial* (Melbourne), 6 November 1953
- 20 M. Clark, *A short history of Australia*, New York, New American history, p. 257.