

Australia's Involvement with Asia

David Goldsworthy and Peter Edwards (eds), Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia, Volume 2: 1970s to 2000, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Melbourne University Press, 2003

Reviewed by Rawdon Dalrymple

This very useful book is a remarkable achievement. The Preface describes the complex bureaucratic and scholarly machinery involved in its creation. That this all succeeded in creating a finished product of such a standard is a compliment to those principally involved, and especially, one assumes, the two editors Peter Edwards and David Goldsworthy. The main text of the book—the Introduction, eight chapters and Conclusion — is 330 pages, which is not a lot to cover Australia's involvement with Asia from the 1970s to 2000. It would have been essential to choose chapter themes that dealt with as much of the main ground as possible in the available space and to have those themes relate to one another in a coherent way without duplication or puzzling gaps. On the whole the chapters work well in this sense. For one who was involved through the period in the issues discussed there seems a good balance, even if in some places (Chapter 4 'Regional Relations') it has obviously been very hard to cover the necessary ground even at a gallop, while in others (Chapter 7 'Social and Cultural Engagement') the scenery is surveyed in a relatively detailed way.

Goldsworthy's Introduction sets the scene for the book by sketching in some of the relevant history. He notes that already in the 1930s 'the case for more substantial engagement with the region was being pressed by... people such as Latham, Eggleston and Ian Clunies-Ross who were few in number but politically influential'. (Yet that period and the Pacific War were in fact rather inglorious chapters in the history of Australia's regional involvement.) Goldsworthy looks at the factors which induced the later post-war intensification of Australian engagement with the region, and concludes (on solid grounds) that the principal driver was economic opportunity. Indeed, in the 1970s, after the British entry into the European Community, it was economic necessity.

The first chapter takes up that theme under the heading 'Regional Economic Co-Operation'. In it Roderic Pitty has done an excellent job of telling clearly and concisely the complex story of the development of Australia's regional economic co-operation policy from the Crawford – Okita relationship and related Australian National University initiatives, the first Pacific Economic Co-operation Council meeting in Canberra in 1981, and the continuation of that attempt to lay the basis for structured and institutionalized economic cooperation with the region. But not just with the East Asian region. The United States was also involved, which was immediately a cause for some ASEAN uneasiness, and was in due course a sleeper issue for Australia that is still unresolved. Pitty deals well with the APEC story.

At the end of the chapter he refers, as most commentators have, to Australia having been alone with Japan 'in sponsoring all three of the IMF packages, for Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea'. This has become an Australian mantra that, while literally correct, is rather misleading. There was a standby commitment of \$1 billion in each case, but none of this has been drawn on, to my knowledge; that is to say, Australia did not in the end provide any funds at all. The Japanese commitment was, I think, \$40 billion, and Japan actually delivered substantial assistance outside the IMF rescue packages.

The second chapter, 'Strategic Engagement', was also produced by Pitty. He takes the reader through the new thinking set out in the Dibb Report and the point-counterpoint of Defence (Kim Beazley) and Foreign Affairs (Gareth Evans) reviews and statements on strategic policy. The latter was especially concerned with consultation and the promotion in the region of schemes for cooperation and institutionalization. It records that my old friend, the late Raul Manglapus, then the Philippines Foreign Secretary, 'commended the Australian sensitivity to ASEAN's concerns' at the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference in Jakarta in 1990, when Gareth Evans was promoting the idea of a Conference on Security and Co-operation in Asia (CSCA). This was a testing initiative because of reservations by other ASEAN nations. At the same time Evans 'sought to allay American concern that his discussion of new ideas on security issues would involve anything inimical to US interests'. In this he was not successful, as Pitty's account of the subsequent correspondence with Secretary of State Baker shows. There were also reservations on the part of the main academic experts in Canberra, Paul Dibb and Des Ball. In the end the Prime Minister found a formula that 'closed the gap that had appeared between American and Australian policies, thus enabling Evans to advance regional security dialogue with ASEAN'. The chapter goes on to deal with bilateral military cooperation leading to what at the time seemed (including to this observer) a striking achievement of Australian defence diplomacy: the Agreement on Maintaining Security with Indonesia. It concludes with success of a very different kind: the INTERFET intervention in East Timor.

A reading of these two first chapters, especially the second, reinforces one's recollection of this period, especially the years between the late 1980s and 1996, as a period of quite extraordinary activity by Australia in its relations with East Asia, from China to Indonesia. The Garnaut Report in 1989 was a landmark, and much flowed from it and other reports initiated by the Hawke Government. The pace quickened after Gareth Evans became Foreign Minister, and indeed became at times almost frenetic, especially during the Keating years. In retrospect it was not surprising that there was a reaction after the Coalition took office in 1996. It was not much in evidence at first, but the East Asian financial crisis in 1997/8 and the collapse of the Soeharto regime, followed by the East Timor crisis, took the shine off the region for much of Australian opinion, and the government shifted ground accordingly.

The 'Regional Relations' chapter covers some of what I see as the durable underpinning of Australian policy in the region into the future, and it is done well. But the format of just a few pages on each country means that it does not provide

the satisfying exploration of decisions and negotiations, based on original documents, that is provided by the two chapters just discussed. The chapter on Indochina allows its authors a bit more space per country than the 'Regional Relations' chapter, although barely sufficient. There is enough here, however, to convey a sense, or a reminder, of what a large role Indochina played in Australia's relations with Asia over the period under review. It included Australia's most intensive ever diplomatic campaign (on Cambodia), in a role that probably only two or three countries could have played. It was worth the effort, although its longer term success was less than had been hoped. Goldsworthy's East Timor chapter is a judicious and expert treatment of a watershed in Australia's foreign policy, and I wish I had space to discuss it here. But he ends with what seems an odd observation:

One last point is worth emphasizing. For all the difficulties, reversals and costs incurred, Australia's participation in the East Timorese transition laid a foundation for a defence and development relationship with East Timor which is bound to continue for a long time to come.

There is no arguing with that, but what is the implication? Some would say it means ongoing large costs, and few benefits, for Australia.

The book has two chapters on the domestic Australian end of the relationship: 'Social and Cultural Engagement' and 'Immigration and Multiculturalism'. The former covers a large canvas and will be a useful chronicle of developments in business, education and tourism contacts, and on relevant exhibitions, tours and so on in various areas of the arts. It mentions with approval *Celebrate Australia*, a large scale pioneering festival mounted in Tokyo at the end of 1993, and that was the forerunner of similar events in other countries in the region. The prime planner and executor of this was Gregson Edwards in the Australian Embassy in Tokyo (who is not mentioned). Reading these two chapters in 2003 one is left with two thoughts: Yes, no doubt there was some excess of enthusiasm of engagement at times. But surely we have retreated much too far from that enthusiasm for our own long term good.

In his thorough and interesting chapter on 'Human Rights Diplomacy, David Dutton deals with the complex and difficult issue of consistency, without concluding (as most practitioners would) that it is just not possible for a country situated as is Australia to apply human rights tests consistently to all other countries, whether they are large or small, remote or very near. He concludes that 'at the end of the century issues of human rights remained vital to Australia's engagement with Asia'. Certainly some community opinion would regard them as 'vital', but that does not appear to be the view of the government or of most of the electorate. Dutton notes that

Whereas previous governments had emphasized the ways in which Australia needed to change in order to engage successfully with Asia ... the Howard government exhibited a determination to engage Asia on

Australia's own terms without sacrificing Australia's values, traditions or heritage.

That brings us to Peter Edwards' concluding 'thoughts about the future' in which he argues that Australians will prefer to think of their region in terms of 'the Asia-Pacific' rather than 'Asia' because the former would include the United States and the South Pacific. He thinks that tensions between Australia's links with Asia and its many links with other parts of the world could be resolved if we 'posit Australia as a sub-region of its own, within the greater Asia-Pacific region'. That may well be an accurate estimation of current mainstream Australian opinion, but there are few signs that 'the Asia-Pacific' has much resonance anywhere but in Australia. Is it plausible to think of Australia as a 'sub-region' of its own, going on through the twenty-first century with a population of a bit over twenty million in this part of the world? There is no need for Australia to seek engagement with its near region that would exclude its links with others further afield. The present members of ASEAN + 3 (China, Japan and Korea) are not so constrained. But for all their differences they do have a nascent sense of community. Australia could hardly do less than it now does to seek to share in that. Perhaps it will never want to do so. But it might be pretty lonely protesting that there should be a community of the Asia-Pacific, whatever that is.

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