From Cold War Solidarity to Transactional Engagement

Reinterpreting Australia's Relations
with East Asia, 1950–1974

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Introduction

The academic treatment of Australia's engagement with Asia has concentrated almost entirely on Australian initiatives in the region and their perceived successes and failures. Historical work has focused on Australia's postwar relationships with Britain and the United States and their ramifications for Canberra's Cold War policy of "forward defence," including involvement in the Vietnam War.¹ This article offers a reinterpretation of the historical pattern of Australia's Cold War engagement with East Asia based on new archival research conducted in Australia and the United Kingdom.² The article marks an important shift in focus from previous work in seeking to emphasize the agency enjoyed by non-Communist East Asian states in their relationships with Australia during the Cold War.

Australia's outlook on the world tended to reflect global British Empire concerns until the Pacific War of 1941–1945 thanks to its Anglo-Celtic-derived society and geographic isolation on the fringes of an Asian-Pacific region dominated by European colonial powers. The fall of Britain's Singapore base to the advancing Japanese in February 1942 brought home to Australians the geographic reality that their country was firmly located in

1. See, for example, Gregory Pemberton, *All the Way: Australia's Road to Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987); Peter Edwards, with Gregory Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1965* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992); Garry Woodard, *Asian Alternatives: Australia's Vietnam Decision and Lessons on Going to War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004); and Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War* (Sydney: New South Publishing and Australian War Memorial, 2014).

2. The UK sources are particularly useful in reevaluating the 1967–1974 period.

Asia. The defense of Australia has traditionally been predicated on seeking security guarantees from “great and powerful friends,” initially from Britain and then increasingly from the United States after 1941. As the Cold War deepened in East Asia with the Communist victory in China in 1949 and the Korean War (1950–1953), Australia’s conservative Liberal–Country Party coalition government of Prime Minister Robert Menzies (1949–1966) sought to foster a close relationship with Washington while maintaining traditional Commonwealth ties with Britain.³ The Australia, New Zealand, United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty signed in 1951 provided the strategic framework for Canberra’s Cold War policy of “forward defence” in Southeast Asia.⁴

Australian governments “worked tirelessly” throughout the 1950s and 1960s “to keep the Americans and the British engaged militarily in Southeast Asia.”⁵ But the announcement in January 1968 of Britain’s withdrawal from East of Suez by 1971, the U.S. de-escalation in Vietnam after the 1968 Tet Offensive, and the Nixon Doctrine of 1969 undermined the foundations of the coalition government’s policy toward the region. In the early 1970s, U.S. détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) coincided with the election in December 1972 of the first Australian Labor Party (ALP) government in 23 years under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam (1972–1975).

For the new Whitlam government, the easing of Cold War tensions provided the opportunity for Australia to forge a more independent and dynamic foreign policy. This resulted in a sharp deterioration of ties with Washington after several senior ALP ministers publicly and bitterly denounced the Nixon administration’s bombing campaign against population centers in North Vietnam.⁶ Whitlam also antagonized Australia’s non-Communist Southeast Asian neighbors not only with his immediate diplomatic recognition of the PRC upon taking office, but also with his advocacy of a new, broad-based regional organization to include Beijing and Hanoi.

This article challenges the orthodox position in the literature that genuine and substantive Australian engagement with East Asia began only in the 1980s.

3. Peter Edwards, *Learning from History: Some Strategic Lessons from the “Forward Defence” Era* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2015), p. 8.

4. Peter Gifford, “The Cold War across Asia,” in David Goldsworthy, ed., *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia*, Vol. 1, 1901 to the 1970s (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), pp. 171–172.

5. James Curran, *Unholy Fury: Whitlam and Nixon at War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015), p. 21.

6. See James Curran, “The Dilemmas of Divergence: The Crisis in American-Australian Relations, 1972–1975,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2014), pp. 377–408.

In this view, Australia was fearful of or blind to Asia until 1972, when the conditions for engagement were made possible by Canberra's recognition of Communist China, the formal ending of the last vestiges of the "White Australia" policy, and symbolic withdrawal of the last Australian personnel from South Vietnam by the Whitlam government.⁷ The acceptance in the late 1970s of large numbers of Indochinese refugees under the coalition government of Malcolm Fraser (1975–1983) is considered another important antecedent for Australia's subsequent engagement with Asia.

According to this narrative, sustained Australian engagement with Asia began with the ALP government's agenda from 1983 under Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1983–1991) to rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region Canberra's relationships with its traditional "great and powerful friends." Emblematic of this new era in Australian foreign policy was Canberra's role in creating the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in partnership with Japan in 1989 and the establishment of formal leaders' meetings from 1993 by the Paul Keating ALP government (1991–1996).⁸ This narrative tends to criticize the first half of the coalition government's tenure as being marked by

7. David Walker, "Cultural Change and Response to Asia: 1945 to the Present," in Mark McGillivray and Gary Smith, eds., *Australia and Asia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 11–12.

8. The majority of scholarship on Australia's engagement with Asia, despite recognizing the unevenness, difficulties, and ambivalences involved, reproduces this orthodox narrative. See, for example, Neville Meaney, "The End of 'White Australia' and Australia's Changing Perceptions of Asia, 1945–1990," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (1995), pp. 171–189; Richard Leaver, "The Evolution of an Asia-Pacific Policy Community in Australia," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1995), pp. 173–189; Andrew MacIntyre, "Pacific Drift: Southeast Asia and the US-Australia Relationship," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1996), pp. 607–608; Nancy Viviani, "Australia and Southeast Asia," in James Cotton and John Ravenhill, eds., *Seeking Asian Engagement: Australia in World Affairs, 1991–1995* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 149–169; Gary Smith, "Australia's Political Relationships with Asia," in *Australia and Asia*, pp. 100–119; James Cotton and John Ravenhill, "Australia's 'Engagement with Asia,'" in *Seeking Asian Engagement*, pp. 3–16; Russell Trood, "Australia and Asia," in Brian Galligan et al., eds., *New Developments in Australian Politics* (Melbourne: MacMillan Education Australia, 1997), pp. 213–230; Ramesh Thakur, "Australia's Regional Engagement," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1998), pp. 1–21; Derek McDougall, "Australia and Asia-Pacific Security Regionalism: From Hawke and Keating to Howard," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2001), pp. 81–100; Michael K. Connors, "Australia in the Asia Pacific," in Michael Connors et al., eds., *The New Global Politics of the Asia Pacific* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), pp. 88–103; and Ann Capling, "Twenty Years of Australia's Engagement with Asia," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (2008), pp. 601–622. The following authors recount the orthodox narrative with more historical complexity and nuance but also present a largely consistent viewpoint: Roger Bell, "Anticipating the Pacific Century? Australian Responses to Realignments in the Asia Pacific," in Mark T. Berger and Douglas A. Borer, eds., *The Rise of East Asia: Critical Visions of the Pacific Century* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 193–218; Carlyle A. Thayer, "Australia and Southeast Asia," in F. A. Mediansky, ed., *Australian Foreign Policy: Into the New Millennium* (Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia, 1997), pp. 251–266; David Goldsworthy, "Introduction," in Goldsworthy, ed., *Facing North*, pp. 1–20; and David Goldsworthy et al., "Reorientation," in Goldsworthy, ed., *Facing North*, pp. 310–371.

ambivalence and insensitivity toward Asia.⁹ But according to Michael Wesley, by 2006 Australia's bilateral relations under John Howard (1996–2007) were in good shape.¹⁰ Recent ALP governments from Kevin Rudd (2007–2010) to Julia Gillard (2010–2013) have continued to emphasize the pursuit of deeper and broader engagement with Asia. The landmark October 2012 “Australia in the Asian Century” White Paper describes this as engagement across the economic, sociopolitical, and security spheres.¹¹ In 2013, coalition Prime Minister Tony Abbott (2013–2015) emphasized that Australia's foreign policy direction under his government would be “more Jakarta and less Geneva.”¹²

Counter to this dominant narrative, I argue that the deepest points of Australia's political and security engagement with East Asia occurred during the Cold War period from 1950 to 1971, with perhaps the most intense phase being from 1966 to 1968. This integration is evident in that Australia saw itself, and was recognized by Asian states, as part of the Southeast Asian region and a core member of East Asian security arrangements and regional organizations. Australia's forward defense strategy in the 1950s and 1960s, with its background condition of reliance on “great and powerful friends,” also unequivocally placed it directly *in* the region, requiring policymakers in Canberra to view the world from an “inside-out” Southeast Asian standpoint rather than from the “outside-in” South Pacific perspective of the 1970s to the present.

From 1967 to the early 1970s, the framework for this deep Australian engagement with the region was progressively eroded by a series of compounding and mainly external factors: the formation in 1967 of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), U.S. de-escalation and gradual withdrawal from Vietnam, the 1969 Nixon Doctrine stipulating that U.S. allies in Asia must take up more of the burden of providing for their own security, and the U.S. rapprochement with China in 1972. These profound changes marked the start of Australia's political distancing from the region during the 1970s, despite the

9. For example, Meg Gurry, “Whose History? The Struggle over Authorship of Australia's Asia Policies,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (1998), pp. 77–88; Anthony Milner, “Balancing ‘Asia’ against Australian Values,” in James Cotton and John Ravenhill, eds., *The National Interest in a Global Era* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 31–50; and Purnendra Jain, “Australia's Attitude toward Asian Values and Regional Community Building,” *Politics and Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2007), pp. 26–41.

10. Michael Wesley, *The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia 1996–2006* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2007).

11. Australian Government, “Australia in the Asian Century,” White Paper, Canberra, 2012, pp. 1–3.

12. Cited in Dennis Shanahan, “Jakarta Relations beyond Boats, Says Tony Abbott,” *The Australian*, 21 September 2013.

intentions and policies of governments from Whitlam to the present to foster deeper engagement.

The circumstances of the Cold War provided for a mutual sense of solidarity with the non-Communist states of East Asia, with which Australia mostly enjoyed close relationships. These relationships transcended the narrow security interest of forward defense, being grounded also in shared values and non-Communist identity. The relationships were institutionalized through the South Korean–instigated Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC), the only East Asian organization in which Australia and New Zealand have ever been included as core members and in which no extra-regional powers took part. Australia’s engagement during this period was not based on Cold War strategic interests alone, but also on strong normative concerns shared with numerous Asian states.

In contrast, Australia’s current mode of engagement has been characterized as transactional.¹³ Broad but shallow, it involves a variety of societal actors and is centered mainly on functional issues of economics and business, education, sport and tourism, and transnational security. Engagement during the Cold War was narrower and elite driven but deeper and political. The position taken here is to view the “state” as its policy elites and decision-makers and to endeavor to view the world as these actors saw it.¹⁴ Cold War engagement was deeper because it impinged on foundational issues of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, whereas transactional engagement does not. The historical trajectory advanced here accounts for the increase in recent decades of Australia’s bilateral economic and transnational security relationships and people-to-people contacts in East Asia at the same time that Canberra has been distanced in political terms.

Australia’s self-conscious and sometimes awkward attempts to define itself back into the “Asia-Pacific” during the 1980s, as well as the reluctance of East Asian states to accept Canberra into core regional forums, is an important critical strand of the academic debate on Asian engagement.¹⁵ In this view, Australian governments have been relegated to second-tier “dialogue partners”

13. For example, Michael Wesley, “Howard’s Way: Northerly Neighbours and Western Friends,” *Griffith Review*, Vol. 9 (2005), pp. 39–50; and Ramesh Thakur, “Australia’s Engagement with Asia: Strategic or Transactional?” *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 69 (2013), pp. 335–350.

14. Richard C. Snyder et al., *Foreign Policy Decision-Making (Revisited)* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), p. 4.

15. For example, Michael Wesley, “The Politics of Exclusion: Australia, Turkey and Definitions of Regionalism,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1997), pp. 523–555; Richard Higgot and Kim Richard Nossal, “The International Politics of Liminality: Relocating Australia in the Asia Pacific,” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1997), pp. 169–185; Richard Higgot and Kim

or excluded from core East Asian organizations such as ASEAN and ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and South Korea). The only organizations in which Australia is a member—such as APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and East Asia Summit (EAS)—also involve extra-regional non-Asian powers, similar to the Cold War pattern with the exception of ASPAC.

By contrast, during the Cold War, several collective security agreements and political organizations established Australia as integral to the politics and security of East Asia: the informal Commonwealth defense planning arrangement known as ANZAM (Australia, New Zealand and Malaya) (1950); the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) (1954); Australia's formal association with the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (1957; 1963); ASPAC (1966); and the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) (Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Britain) (1971). Australia was also deeply involved in the Korean War (1950–1953), the Malayan Emergency (1950–1960), Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) of newly formed Malaysia (1963–1966), and in South Vietnam (1962–1973). Whether one agrees with these policies or not, Australia was clearly a core member of East Asian political and security arrangements during the Cold War, and Asian leaders welcomed Canberra's presence.

This article resonates with the work of David Martin Jones and Andrea Benvenuti, who write that in the

1990s a dominant myth in both the theory and practice of Australian foreign policy... held that only with the advent of the Whitlam government... had Australia begun to shed the vestiges of its dependency upon great and powerful friends... and charted an independent course in its foreign relations, "with a clearer focus on Asia."¹⁶

They make the point that "Asia" was not a monolith and that the diverse post-colonial Asian countries were more ignorant and suspicious of their neighbors than Australia was. Furthermore, the non-Communist states of East Asia, whether aligned with Washington or not, welcomed Australia's military deployments as part of the containment of China.¹⁷

Richard Nossal, "Odd Man in, Odd Man Out: Australia's Liminal Position in Asia Revisited—A Reply to Ann Capling," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (2008), pp. 623–634; and Mark Beeson and Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, "Asia's Odd Men Out: Australia, Japan and the Politics of Regionalism," *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 7 (2007), pp. 227–250.

16. David Martin Jones and Andrea Benvenuti, "Tradition, Myth and the Dilemma of Australian Foreign Policy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2006), p. 104.

17. David Martin Jones and Mike Lawrence Smith, "Misreading Menzies and Whitlam: Reassessing the Ideological Construction of Australian Foreign Policy," *The Round Table*, Vol. 89, No. 355 (2000),

My interpretation, though, diverges from that of Benvenuti and Martin Jones in their treatment of the Menzies era. They argue that the policies of the Menzies government in Asia were “pragmatic and prudent,” equivalent to Owen Harries’s classical “realist, power-and-interest-based tradition” of Australia foreign policy that was arguably revived under the Howard government.¹⁸ The evidence presented here, however, implies a sense of common identity and solidarity with regional states—one that was more than prudential—but that the conditions supporting this began to erode in the late 1960s.

The article proceeds through three sections. The first analyzes Australia’s Cold War relationships of solidarity with the non-Communist states of East Asia, emphasizing their geopolitical, normative, and institutional underpinnings. The second shows how the formation of ASEAN, de-escalation in Vietnam, the Nixon Doctrine, and U.S. rapprochement with China served to distance Australia politically from its formerly close relationships in East Asia. The third demonstrates that by 1974, despite the intentions and efforts of the Whitlam government to bring Australia closer to Asia, Australia was a South Pacific country, outside the political margins of East Asia with its engagement premised on a broadening but shallower transactional basis. The conclusion summarizes the historical pattern of Australia’s engagement with East Asia and makes some concluding remarks about its possible future trajectory.

The Cold War and Non-Communist Solidarity in Asia

Australia’s response in the 1950s to the “challenge” of a “rising and menacing tide of Communism in the East” drew Australia politically closer to the East Asian region. External Affairs Minister Percy Spender (1949–1951) said that “Australia, which with New Zealand, has the greatest direct interest in Asia of all Western peoples, must develop a dynamic policy towards neighboring Asian countries. We should give leadership to developments in that area.”¹⁹ The Cold War in Asia dramatically intensified in June 1950 when

p. 395; and Andrea Benvenuti and David Martin Jones, “Myth and Misrepresentation in Australian Foreign Policy: Menzies and Engagement with Asia,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Fall 2011), pp. 68–69.

18. Owen Harries, *Benign or Imperial? Reflections on American Hegemony* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2004), p. 78; and Benvenuti and Martin Jones, “Myth and Misrepresentation in Australian Foreign Policy,” p. 71.

19. Cited in “Australia’s Role in S.E. Asia,” *The Age*, 3 January 1950, in National Archives of Australia (NAA), Department of External Affairs (DEA) Press Cuttings, A1838/381/3/1/1, pt. 1.

North Korean forces invaded the Republic of Korea (ROK), marking the beginning of the three-year Korean War.

The archival record shows that all Australian postwar governments located the country *in* the Asia-Pacific region. This was hardly an innovation of the 1980s Hawke-Keating period. By June 1952 Australia had established diplomatic posts in all Southeast Asian states and remaining colonial dependencies.²⁰ External Affairs Minister Richard Casey (1951–1960) noted that the “facts of geography link the fortunes of Australia with those of the countries of South and Southeast Asia.” Australian officials may have been slow to understand this in the past, “but we have realized it now.”²¹ By September 1955 the bulk of Australia’s diplomatic efforts were recognized as being located in Asia.²² In the early 1950s Australian policymakers repeatedly claimed that their country’s “metropolitan territory forms geographically a part of Asia,” with Casey declaring that the “Australian people had a special responsibility for the countries of south and southeast Asia, and should know them intimately.”²³

In a global war with the Communist bloc, Australia was to assume direct responsibility for the Malayan area because the main British war effort would be in Europe and the Middle East.²⁴ The Menzies government has been criticized for committing Australian forces in the early 1950s to the Middle East in support of British and U.S., rather than Australian, objectives.²⁵ The archival record indicates, however, that potential Australian military deployments to the Middle East were always contingent on the prospects for the Malayan area, suggesting this was an equal or even higher priority for Canberra. Commonwealth defense planning “was only authorized on the dual basis that Australia’s

20. “Text of Report to the Australian Parliament, on International Affairs, by The Rt. Hon. R.G. Casey, Minister for External Affairs,” 4 June 1952, in NAA, A1838/3004/11, pt. 1.

21. *Ibid.*

22. “Discussions between Australian Ministers and Mr. MacMillan,” DEA Brief, September 1955, in NAA, A1838/3004/11/6.

23. “South-East Asia: General Review,” 31 March 1952, in NAA, DEA, A1838/3004/11, pt. 1; and “Australia’s New Role,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April 1952, p. 1, in NAA, DEA Press Cuttings, A1838/3004/11, pt. 1.

24. The wartime command organization was known as the “ANZAM Chiefs of Staff,” consisting of the Australian chiefs of staff and representatives from the United Kingdom and New Zealand but “acting through the Australian Higher Defence Machinery.” See UK Commonwealth Relations Office, “The ANZAM Region,” 29 November 1951, in NAA, A1838/TS687/1, pt. 1.

25. For a sustained treatment of this theme, see David Lowe, *Menzies and the “Great World Struggle”: Australia’s Cold War, 1948–1954* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999).

major effort might be made either in the Middle East or in the ANZAM area,” a position Great Britain clearly recognized.²⁶

In the event of war, the expectation was that Beijing would make an attempt to control at least mainland Southeast Asia, thereby posing a serious risk to the ANZAM area and Australia’s northern approaches.²⁷ Menzies wrote to the UK government in June 1951 that Australia’s defense planning provided for concurrent deployments of a first contingent to either the Middle East or Malaya depending on the situation. The Australian viewpoint was to take a “dual approach” because the “military position in Indo-China and Malaya . . . would exercise a powerful influence on Australian public opinion regarding the strengths of forces that could be dispatched to the Middle East.”²⁸ The archival record therefore casts doubt on the idea that Australia’s Cold War defense policy in the early 1950s committed forces to the Middle East at the expense of Southeast Asia. Rather, Cold War imperatives in the Asia-Pacific region meant that Australia needed to develop close political relationships with a range of East Asian states.

Throughout the period under consideration here, the Philippines was the most consistent advocate for Australia’s inclusion in all regional definitions and groupings. In June 1949, Carlos P. Romulo, then president of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (and later long-time Filipino secretary of foreign affairs) said,

We are more than pleased to have both Australia and New Zealand participate actively in Asian affairs. First of all, they represent, as we do, a Third Force in their political and economic outlook. Secondly, their participation prevents us from repeating the mistake the Europeans made: namely, that of putting Asian policies on a racial basis.²⁹

26. UK Commonwealth Relations Office, “The ANZAM Region.”

27. “Meeting of Commonwealth Defence Ministers, London, 21st to 26th June, 1951, Defence Policy and Global Strategy—Southeast Asia,” Cabinet Submission (Philip McBride, Defence Minister), 31 July 1951, in NAA, A5954/2317/3.

28. Ibid. Lowe’s analysis suggests British defense planners tacitly understood that the Middle East would receive Canberra’s priority because of Menzies’s desire for a Commonwealth role in global defense in light of Australia’s similar deployments in the two World Wars. Because the PRC lacked naval capacity, a Chinese territorial advance into Indochina would not immediately threaten the ANZAM region. In early December 1951, after the ANZUS Treaty had “bolted the back door,” the Australian Cabinet agreed to the “Middle East first” strategy, although the logic for this strategy unraveled in early 1953 and was never confirmed with Whitehall. See Lowe, *Menzies and the “Great World Struggle,”* chs. 2–3.

29. “Extract from an Article Entitled, ‘Romulo Speaks Out’ Appearing in ‘United Nations World,’” June 1949, in NAA, A1838/383/1/2/1, pt. 4.

With the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 1949, Filipino President Elpidio Quirino briefly pursued an equivalent “Pacific Pact” or “Pacific Union.” When this was met with a cool reception by Washington and regional capitals, Quirino proposed a non-military “Southeast Asian Union,” excluding Taiwan and extraregional powers, with a preparatory meeting to be held in early 1950. All proposals included Australia.³⁰

The formal invitation was issued on 14 February 1950 by Foreign Minister Romulo for Canberra “to be represented at a conference of ‘Independent countries of South-East Asia’ to be held at Baguio, Philippines in March of this year.”³¹ The original date was postponed, but the “Southeast” Asian countries of Australia, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand assembled from 26 to 29 May 1950 for the Baguio Conference.³² No concrete initiatives for a formal organization emerged from the meeting, but Australian officials felt the gathering had been worthwhile because it provided a forum for regional states to become acquainted and exchange views on matters of socioeconomic development and political stability.³³

The Geneva Conference held from 26 April to 20 July 1954 did not produce a peace settlement for the Korean War, but it was able to achieve a tenuous agreement on French Indochina. The subsequent withdrawal of France from Southeast Asia, the partition of Vietnam, and the establishment of the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north were perceived by the West as a significant victory for Chinese Communism.³⁴ In response, the United States, France, Great Britain, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines negotiated the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, or Manila Pact, in September 1954, creating SEATO. A U.S. protocol also included the newly independent non-Communist Indochinese states of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam in the treaty area, effectively circumventing the neutrality of Indochina provided for in the Geneva Agreement.³⁵

30. “Recent Proposals for a Conference of South-East Asian Countries to Form a Regional Organization,” DEA Paper for the Minister, 21 December 1949, in NAA, A1838/383/1/2/8, pt. 2; and “Pacific Pact,” DEA Pacific Division Brief for Prime Minister, 7 July 1950, in NAA, A1838/383/1/2/8.

31. Australian Delegation to UN to DEA Canberra, 14 February 1950, in NAA, A1838/383/1/2/8, pt. 2.

32. “Pacific Pact,” DEA Pacific Division Brief for Prime Minister, 7 July 1950.

33. “Notes by Dr. J. W. Burton, Australian Delegate to the Baguio Conference,” 26–29 May 1950, in NAA, A1838/383/1/2/8.

34. “Australia and SEATO,” Report by R. G. Casey, Minister for External Affairs, February 1957, in NAA, A1838/563/10/5.

35. Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945–1965* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 225–226.

SEATO brought Australia into a close political relationship with Thailand and the Philippines. For Thailand, which lacked other formal defense arrangements, SEATO remained the cornerstone of its Cold War security policy into the early 1970s. This was the main reason the treaty remained extant until 1977, even though its strategic relevance diminished from 1968 on. From Australia's perspective, the Manila Pact remained valuable in the late 1960s because it continued to provide a formal link and close ties with Thailand and the Philippines.³⁶ For example, in 1966, Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn expressly made the point that Thailand regarded Australia as a welcome member of the same "region." The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) assessed that "relations between Australia and Thailand, as fellow-members of SEATO, are close."³⁷

On 5 August 1954 Menzies delivered a major speech to the Australian Parliament about the Geneva Conference and developments in Indochina. In the literature on the Menzies period, the "high rhetoric" of this speech is prefaced as disingenuous in either justifying increased defense expenditure or playing on the Communist threat for domestic purposes by "marrying" it "to traditional popular Australian fears" about Asia.³⁸ As a consummate and highly successful politician in the 1950s, Menzies always had an eye to the coalition's electoral fortunes. But Judith Brett's influential study of Menzies's political rhetoric identifies numerous aspects of the Communist challenge—its threat to the fabric of capitalist social order and its perceived duplicitous methods, for example—that were a moral affront to Australia's longest-serving prime minister.³⁹

By all indications, Menzies's moral opposition to Communism was able to bridge his oft-cited cultural Anglocentrism by providing the common values needed to form a shared identity with the non-Communist states of East Asia.⁴⁰

36. "Notes by the Departments of External Affairs and Defense," April 1969, in NAA, A1209/1969/9019/ATTACHMENT.

37. "Australia and South and South-East Asia in Recent Years," UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Research Department Memorandum, 30 March 1970, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), FCO 51/160.

38. A. W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life*, Vol. 2, 1944–1978 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), pp. 272–273; and Lowe, *Menzies and the "Great World Struggle"*, pp. 170–171.

39. Judith Brett, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007).

40. On Menzies's Anglocentrism, see, for example, James Curran, *The Power of Speech: Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), p. 43; Frank Bongiorno, "The Price of Nostalgia: Menzies, the 'Liberal' Tradition and Australian Foreign Policy," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2005), pp. 409–410; and Andrea Benvenuti, "Difficult Partners: Indo-Australian Relations at the Height of the Cold War, 1949–1964," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2011), pp. 54–55.

Frank Bongiorno has argued that Menzies “was personally peripheral to many of his government’s landmarks in foreign and defense policy.”⁴¹ Regional policy, Bongiorno contends, was driven by the more Asia-literate external affairs ministers from Spender through Casey—Sir Garfield Barwick (1961–1964) and to a lesser extent Paul Hasluck (1964–1969)—as well as their leading departmental officials.⁴² Even if this interpretation is valid, several of the points Menzies made in his August 1954 speech demonstrate his nuanced understanding of postcolonial Southeast Asian sensitivities, something that has not been emphasized in the secondary literature. Australia’s Cold War sense of solidarity with the Southeast Asian countries was—at least for Menzies—based on moral sentiment, not solely material defense interests.

The prime minister noted that Australia had forged friendly contacts and increasing ties with its closest neighbors. These relationships were not always easily managed. The postcolonial states were “justly proud of their independence and zealous to maintain their national character, traditions, and integrity.” They bore “the spiritual marks of their past struggles, and are apprehensive lest any new foreign association should become a new form of foreign influence.”⁴³ The Australian government sympathized “with their desires” and sought to “understand their fears.” Menzies linked the independence of “our Asian friends” to “the rights and spiritual dignity of man which inhere in the genuinely held religions of the world, and which feed those noble aspirations which have led to democracy and national freedom.”⁴⁴ Menzies sought close relations with the non-Communist countries of Asia not simply because Australia wanted access to overseas bases and remote battlefields for Australia’s forward defense. Close relations were fostered by a sense of moral solidarity, as Menzies explained:

It is foolish, superficial, and dangerous to speak of the conflict in the world as a contest between two economic systems, capitalism and Communism. Nor can the cynics dispose of it as an old-fashioned struggle for military or physical power. . . . It is desperately important that the world should be seen as a moral contest; a battle for the spirit of man.⁴⁵

41. Bongiorno, “The Price of Nostalgia,” p. 401.

42. See also Goldsworthy, “Introduction,” p. 9; and Lowe, *Menzies and the “Great World Struggle,”* pp. 83–84.

43. “South-East Asia—Australian Policy,” Statement to the House of Representatives by the Prime Minister, The Rt. Hon. R.G. Menzies, C.H., Q.C., M.P., 5 August 1954, in NAA, A5954/1667/49.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

The idea that Australian policy elites were “blind to Asia” during the Cold War is not borne out in the documentary record. Australian policymakers shared the political and security concerns of East Asian countries and therefore were deeply interested in the region. Authors critical of Menzies-era foreign and defense policies, such as Meg Gurry, argue that the small states of Southeast Asia were simply used by Australia as part of the larger Cold War game that was of primary concern to Menzies.⁴⁶ Such claims fail to recognize that the postcolonial Asian states possessed agency. Like Australia, their fortunes were tied to the strategic game of the Cold War. Furthermore, like Australia, many were aligned with extra-regional great powers. They were not passively used or “acted upon” by Australia’s forward defense strategy, as was well understood in Canberra.⁴⁷

In 1955, Casey could report that he and other senior officials had “made a visit to Southeast Asia each year for the last four years.” The minister now had “the feeling of being quite reasonably at home in all of these countries—and that my Department and the government are in good contact with what is going on there.”⁴⁸ In a January 1955 conversation with the official secretary of the Indian high commissioner’s office in Canberra, James Plimsoll, then assistant secretary of the DEA, Geographical Regions Division, said Australians “regarded ourselves as having a common interest with Asian countries in very many matters. I thought that in some things we had an identity of interest with the Asian countries rather than with European countries.”⁴⁹

Australia’s “identity of interest” was given political expression through the stationing and commitment of forces in Southeast Asia during the Malayan Emergency in 1955 as part of the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve (CSR), in Malaysian Borneo in 1965, and in South Vietnam from May 1965. In addition to promoting forward defense, Australia demonstrated its willingness to play an important part in regional security, ready to accept costly regional obligations in partnership with its non-Communist neighbors. External Affairs Minister Hasluck expounded on this theme in 1967:

46. Gurry, “Whose History?” p. 80.

47. See, for example, “Prime Minister’s Visit to Asia,” Hansard Excerpt, 12 April 1967, in NAA, A1209/1967/7288.

48. “Text of a Broadcast over the A.B.C. by Mr. R.G. Casey, Minister for External Affairs, Thursday Evening, 10 March 1955,” 10 March 1955, in NAA, A1838/3004/1, pt. 7.

49. Record of Conversation between Mr. P. Ratnam, Official Secretary, Indian High Commissioner’s Office, Canberra, and J. Plimsoll, Assistant Secretary (Geographical Regions), DEA, 11 January 1955, in NAA, A1838/3002/1, pt. 2.

Australia's forward defense strategy is not to be looked at only in the selfish terms of trying to ensure that any fighting is as far away from Australian soil as possible. A major part of its purpose is to give the independent countries of the region the assurance and confidence they want while they are developing their economies, evolving their political institutions, and building co-operative arrangements with one another.⁵⁰

In the 1960s, the theme that Australia must seek its security "in Asia, not from Asia" was repeatedly emphasized by policy elites. For Hasluck, Australia's "security and welfare" was indivisible from the "security and welfare of the region."⁵¹

After Menzies's retirement, Harold Holt's short tenure as prime minister from January 1966 to his disappearance (and presumed drowning) in December 1967 has often been caricatured by his careless "all the way with LBJ" remark on the White House lawn in July 1966. Although much of Holt's policy direction was considered derivative of that of Menzies, D. J. Wyatt of the British High Commission at Canberra reported on 26 June 1967 to the Commonwealth Office (CO) that "[h]aving made a rough list of recurring themes in Mr. Holt's public pronouncements . . . I was struck by the fact that they all refer to Southeast Asia."⁵² Holt's position was that "geographically, we are part of Asia, and increasingly we have become aware of our involvement in the affairs of Asia."⁵³ His intensification of the coalition government's focus on East Asia is interpreted negatively through the prism of the Vietnam War in the orthodox narrative of Australia's engagement with Asia. For example, in acknowledging Australia's "greater orientation towards non-Communist Asia," Garry Woodard asserts that this was only one part of an "unholy alliance" along with "sycophancy towards the U.S."⁵⁴

In reality, rather than the crude caricatures usually painted of the coalition's approach to Asia during the Vietnam War era, Holt's statements show nuanced understanding of the region's complexity. For example, in April 1967 he spoke about

greater diversities of race, religion, tradition, appearance, and national economic development to be found in Asia than in any other region on earth. These

50. "Extract from Statement by Mr. Paul Hasluck, Minister for External Affairs in Parliament," 17 August 1967, in NAA, A 4359/221/4/31, pt. 1.

51. Ibid.

52. UK High Commission (HC) Canberra to Far East and Pacific Department, Commonwealth Office (CO), 26 June 1967, in TNAUK, FCO 24/192.

53. "Prime Minister's Visit to Asia," Hansard Excerpt, 12 April 1967.

54. Woodard, *Asian Alternatives*, p. 283.

differences establish the importance of better knowledge of those amongst whom we live and the value of our friendship with them.

Australia's "place in Asia," he added, was "no new discovery, but its significance has become heightened for us over recent years."⁵⁵ The Menzies and Holt governments sought and welcomed direct U.S. military intervention in Indochina as part of the containment of Communist China. However, this brought Australia closer to the countries of East Asia, not the reverse, insofar as nearly all nonaligned and overtly non-Communist Asian states feared the PRC.

The firmest indication of the Holt government's solidarity with the non-Communist Asian states was the invitation for Australia to join ASPAC extended by South Korea in June 1966. In the study of Australia's regional relations, ASPAC is either omitted or quickly dismissed as an instrument of Cold War policy. This is inadequate when the documentary record demonstrates that in the mid-to-late 1960s Australia considered ASPAC the premier vehicle for Asian regionalism. Noteworthy also is that ASPAC was a fully East Asian initiative that did not involve any extra-regional great powers, and it remains the only such Asian organization in which Australia and New Zealand have ever been included as core members. This alone was considered of great importance by the Australian government.⁵⁶

The "main aim" of ASPAC was "the development of regional cooperation itself, rather than for some specific functional purpose."⁵⁷ Hasluck's report from the organization's second ministerial meeting on 7 July 1967 emphasized the crucial importance of the organization to Australia: "ASPAC is an Asian organisation that includes Australia (and New Zealand) as full members but not the major Western powers so that our membership associates Australia with Asian countries on a basis of equality and associates us with the region in a unique way."⁵⁸ One of Australia's longest-serving and most influential diplomats and public servants, Sir Arthur Tange, then high commissioner to India, considered ASPAC particularly significant, in "that none of the major

55. "Prime Minister's Visit to Asia," Hansard Excerpt, 12 April 1967.

56. See "Asian and Pacific Council—Second Ministerial Meeting: Report by the Minister for External Affairs, The Rt. Hon. Paul Hasluck, M.P.," July 1967, in NAA, A1838/541/1/1, pt. 2; and "Briefing on ASPAC and ASEAN," Prepared by L.R. McIntyre, DEA, for Lord Casey, Governor-General, 15 November 1968, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 8.

57. New Zealand (NZ) Foreign Ministry, "Regional Cooperation in Asia," 25 May 1972, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 15.

58. "Asian and Pacific Council—Second Ministerial Meeting."

Western or Communist powers are members—these are the beginnings of true regional collaboration.”⁵⁹

ASPAC was recognized as formalizing ties, “with the exceptions of Indonesia and Singapore,” all the countries of Asia “with which we have the closest political relationships.”⁶⁰ Although the hardline anti-Communist members—Taiwan, South Korea, and South Vietnam—periodically called for ASPAC to take on a more security-based role, they were counterbalanced by Japan and nonaligned Malaysia, which were opposed to anti-Communist political discussion and preferred a development focus. Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines forged a middle path. Contrary to claims that during the Vietnam War era Australia failed to consult its regional neighbors, the archival records show that when Australian leaders met with their Asian counterparts at ASPAC meetings, they regularly discussed the various member-states’ political situations, including Communist subversion and infiltration.⁶¹

Alongside the perceived success of ASPAC, the development of a “regional consciousness” was also mentioned frequently in Australia’s diplomatic discourse in 1967.⁶² In addressing the ASPAC ministerial meeting on 7 July, Hasluck said:

[u]ntil now the histories of our countries have followed different courses, and the cultures of our peoples are diverse. The promotion among us of a sense of regional consciousness, a promotion of a feeling that we do enjoy a common destiny, and the promotion, above all, of the habit of working together may not be easy nor will they be accomplished overnight. It is sensible, in our view, to begin with groupings such as ASPAC, composed of like-minded countries.⁶³

Hasluck wrote in his later report for Parliament that fostering a sense of regional consciousness was essential to dealing with the problems of the area. For Australia, ASPAC was “the most promising organisation through which this objective [could] be pursued.”⁶⁴ The following year, 1968, also provided

59. “Australia and South-East Asia,” Address by the High Commissioner in India, Sir Arthur Tange, Defense Services Staff College, Wellington, Madras State, 9 October 1967, in NAA, A1838/3004/11, pt. 8. Tange served as secretary of the Department of External Affairs from 1954 to 1965 and as secretary of the Defense Department from 1970 to 1979.

60. “Asian and Pacific Council: Proposal to Establish an Economic Co-operation Centre,” Cabinet Submission No. 571, 13 May 1969, in NAA, A5882/CO310.

61. On the contrary claims, see, for example, Woodard, *Asian Alternatives*, p. 297.

62. “Statement at the Opening Public Session by the Minister for External Affairs, The Rt. Hon. Paul Hasluck, M.P.,” Asian and Pacific Council: Second Ministerial Meeting, Bangkok, 5–7 July 1967, 5 July 1967, in NAA, A10730, Box 1; and “Asian and Pacific Council—Second Ministerial Meeting.”

63. “Statement at the Opening Public Session by the Minister for External Affairs.”

64. “Asian and Pacific Council—Second Ministerial Meeting.”

the greatest endorsements for ASPAC from its Southeast Asian members. Malaysia confirmed its “strong support of the objectives of ASPAC—to promote solidarity among countries in Asia and the Pacific region through regional co-operation in matters of common interest.”⁶⁵ Thailand emphasized the value of the organization in providing a regular forum for the countries of the region to “exchange views, to compare notes, and in many small or large ways to forge an Asian and Pacific solidarity and to arouse an Asian and Pacific consciousness.”⁶⁶ The Filipino delegate explicitly made the point that “Australia today, more than at any other time in her history, is more closely linked with Asia and more aware of the inescapable imperatives of geopolitics and economics that bind her to her Asian neighbors.”⁶⁷

The years from 1966 to 1968 appear to be the “high water mark” for Australia’s engagement with Asia. British observations at the time confirm that by 1968 the Gorton coalition government (1968–1971) saw itself in relation to East Asia in a position similar to that of Britain vis-à-vis continental Europe: geographically on the fringe and somewhat different but still an integral part of the region.⁶⁸ However, a recasting of Australia’s disposition toward Asia is also evident by 1968. The political distance that began to build between Australia and East Asia from the late 1960s was conditioned by external factors evolving from 1967, factors that were largely beyond Australia’s capacity to control or influence.

1967–1971: The Winds of Change

The formation of ASEAN in 1967 and its consolidation by the mid-1970s as the leading regional organization, surpassing ASPAC, was a crucial factor in Australia’s political distancing from East Asia. ASEAN was partially the fruition of earlier, stillborn attempts at regional organization in the form of the 1961 Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) (Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaya) and the 1963 pan-Malay, Maphilindo, or Greater Malayan Confederation (Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia). Each of these carried fatal flaws in the regional context of the early 1960s.⁶⁹ What the initiatives did

65. “Extracts from Proceedings of Opening Public Session,” Third Ministerial Meeting Asian and Pacific Council, Canberra, 30 July–1 August 1968, in NAA, A10730, Box 1.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. 10 Downing St. to D.J.D. Maitland, FCO, 22 January 1969, in TNAUK, FCO 24/384.

69. “Regionalism in South-East Asia,” DEA Brief, 1967, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/17, pt. 5.

indicate, however, were the pressures building in the 1960s to forge a post-colonial regional identity based on diffuse cultural expressions of “Asian-ness” to overcome other divisions and antipathies. By the early 1970s, this form of regional consciousness for Southeast Asian countries had become more salient than Commonwealth sentiment (in the cases of Malaysia and Singapore) and the non-Communist solidarity of ASPAC, both of which more naturally included Australia.

By early 1967, after the end of Indonesia’s *Konfrontasi* policy toward Malaysia, conditions were favorable for a more cohesive regional organization. Political elites in Bangkok, Manila, and Kuala Lumpur were acutely aware of the need to bring Suharto’s Indonesia into an inclusive regional system, while understanding that Jakarta would join only if it were “*primus inter pares* in any organization.”⁷⁰ From the outset, potential expansion of the original membership was limited to Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, suggesting a newly formed coherent vision of regional identity that now excluded Australia.

For example, in response to calls in 1968 by ALP opposition leader Whitlam that Australia should join ASEAN, Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik said, “Australia and New Zealand could indeed not be made into Asian nations.”⁷¹ Previously sympathetic to Australia, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman affirmed in December 1969 that ASEAN was now the vehicle of “solidarity for the region.”⁷² Indonesia emphasized the “intangible psychological bonds” drawing together the ASEAN countries, with a Malaysian official describing the organization as primarily “an affair of the heart, not of the head.”⁷³ Despite the relative closeness of Canberra’s relationships with Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, Australia was now being ruled out on cultural grounds. A consequence of this, as noted by the Australian embassy in Bangkok, was that for its members ASEAN would increasingly become the most important regional organization and “the degree of attention” they gave “to the work of ASPAC” would necessarily be diminished.⁷⁴

70. Ibid.

71. Australian Embassy Djakarta to DEA Canberra, 9 January 1968, in NAA, A1838/541/1/6.

72. “ASEAN Membership—Australia and New Zealand,” Australian HC Kuala Lumpur to DEA Canberra, 29 December 1969, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 11.

73. Cited in “Attitudes of Member Countries to ASEAN,” Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Canberra to Djakarta, Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Seoul, Bangkok, New Delhi, Manila, London, Rangoon, Washington, Phnom Penh, Wellington, Vientiane, Paris, Saigon, and Moscow, 26 September 1972, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 18.

74. Australian Embassy Bangkok to DEA Canberra, 14 September 1967, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 3.

The U.S. de-escalation and withdrawal from Vietnam that began on 31 March 1968, as well as the subsequent Nixon Doctrine, did not bring Australia closer to the region. Rather, the waning of the U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia seriously eroded the major pillar supporting Australia's deep political engagement with the region at that time: non-Communist solidarity. Albeit with deep concerns expressed by Thailand and Singapore, the impending U.S. military withdrawal from Southeast Asia prompted ASEAN members to turn inward and consolidate the organization as a bulwark against Chinese influence, canvassing Malaysian-led proposals for "neutralization" that would exclude all great powers and their close allies (such as Australia) from the area.⁷⁵

President Lyndon Johnson's statement on 31 March 1968 limiting U.S. operations in Vietnam and announcing his decision not to seek reelection was met with "shock" by "the non-aligned countries" and by "America's allies."⁷⁶ The Australian government was deeply disturbed and embarrassed by the lack of prior consultation about Johnson's statement.⁷⁷ The subsequent Nixon administration decided to extricate the United States from Vietnam, depicting it as Johnson's failed war. A marked change in Canberra's rhetoric about Vietnam can also be observed at this time. For example, on 14 January 1970 in a meeting with Vice President Spiro Agnew in Canberra, the Australian position was that Vietnam "was not a war which could be justified, as World War I and II could be justified, by demonstrating a situation of proximate danger to the Australian community."⁷⁸ Statements such as these were starkly at odds with the previous alarmist rhetoric about the threat of Chinese Communist expansion into Southeast Asia, justifying the initial Australian military deployment.⁷⁹ Australia's disengagement from its 1965 commitment to South Vietnam

75. See, for example, "Neutralisation of Southeast Asia," DFA Policy Paper LP/3 (Revision of QP/2), 14 January 1971, in NAA A1838/625/14/3, pt. 1; "Neutralisation," Australian HC Kuala Lumpur to DFA Canberra, 27 July 1972, in NAA A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 16; and "Strategic Basis of Australian Defense Policy, 1971," June 1971, in NAA, A1209/1971/9495.

76. "Press Reaction to President Johnson's Statement," UK HC Canberra to CO London, 2 April 1968, in TNAUK, FCO 24/132.

77. "For the Prime Minister from Waller," Australian Embassy Washington to DEA Canberra, 2 April 1968, in NAA, A1209/1968/8615; "For Waller from Prime Minister," DEA Canberra to Australian Embassy Washington, 2 April 1968, in NAA, A1209/1968/8615; and UK HC Canberra to CO London (also to Washington, Wellington and POLAD Singapore), 8 April 1968, in TNAUK, FCO/24/132.

78. "Discussions with Mr. Spiro T. Agnew, Vice-President of the United States," Cabinet Minute, Decision No. 64, 14 January 1970, in NAA, A5882/CO795.

79. See Woodard, *Asian Alternatives*, p. 285; and Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. 119–120.

began on 1 November 1970 with the withdrawal of Australia's Eighth Army battalion.⁸⁰ On 18 August 1971, coalition Prime Minister William McMahon (1971–1972) announced “that the combat role which Australia took up over six years ago in Vietnam is soon to be completed.”⁸¹

Whatever its merits, Australia's forward defense strategy in the 1950s and 1960s, with its background condition of reliance on “great and powerful friends,” had unequivocally placed it directly “in” the region. The strategy required the forging and balancing of relations in a complex and sometimes delicate regional setting and demanded that Australian policymakers view the world from a Southeast Asian standpoint, as opposed to the South Pacific perspective of the 1970s to the present. The winding down of Australia's forward defense strategy in parallel with the British and U.S. withdrawals from direct involvement in East Asia was a disengagement from its previously deep regional integration, not the beginning of “genuine” engagement as is often claimed.

The final major external factor that pushed Australia outside the political margins of the region was the announcement on 15 July 1971 of Nixon's impending visit to Communist China and the U.S. rapprochement with that country. In conjunction with these developments and a more conciliatory Chinese disposition, some East Asian states were prompted, if only reluctantly, to move to accommodate Beijing. This meant cutting ties with Taiwan and further downgrading ASPAC, which had already been superseded by ASEAN, to the point of insignificance. Thus, Australia's primary vehicle for inclusion in regional organization, grounded in non-Communist Asian solidarity, evaporated in the early 1970s.

Whitlam's visit to Beijing from 4 to 9 July 1971 as leader of the Australian parliamentary opposition—almost coinciding with Henry Kissinger's secret visit from 9 to 11 July—is generally seen as a political masterstroke. However, although Whitlam's visit was able to garner maximum publicity, the coalition government was already moving, albeit more cautiously, in the same direction. In October 1970, then Foreign Minister McMahon's senior officials had initiated a study with a view to normalizing relations with the PRC. Australian diplomats held at least two secret meetings, on 27 May and 2 July 1971, with Chinese officials in Paris, in addition to informal embassy contacts in

80. UK HC Canberra to FCO South West Pacific Department, 17 November 1970, in TNAUK, FCO 24/692.

81. “Future of Australian Forces in Vietnam,” Statement in the House of Representatives by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. William McMahon, 18 August 1971, in TNAUK, FCO 24/1061.

Belgrade.⁸² These developments preceded the Whitlam and Kissinger visits, indicating that the coalition government's policy was converging with both the ALP opposition and the Nixon administration. As prime minister, McMahon said in May 1971 that Australia "would not oppose China's representation and admission to the United Nations" and that Beijing, not Taipei, "should hold the permanent seat in the Security Council."⁸³ However, unaware of Kissinger's preparations and because of the nature of diplomacy, Australian government initiatives could not be publicized. Thus, for domestic political consumption in placating the staunchly anti-Communist Democratic Labor Party (DLP), the McMahon government was publicly critical of Whitlam's visit to the PRC.⁸⁴ When the impending Nixon visit was made public shortly thereafter, McMahon's government looked inept.⁸⁵

For Australia's engagement with East Asia, one of the most significant consequences of the U.S. rapprochement with the PRC was the breakdown of ASPAC. Among ASPAC members, Japan and Malaysia were the most anxious to engage and accommodate Beijing. This meant that formal association with Taiwan was increasingly untenable.⁸⁶ Japan recognized the PRC and normalized its relations on 29 September 1972.⁸⁷ For most ASEAN members, however, significant suspicion of Beijing remained, with no prospect of diplomatic recognition in the foreseeable future. Indonesia's relations with China were suspended, and Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore had no formal relations with the PRC.⁸⁸ Not until 1974 and 1975 would these states grant diplomatic recognition to Beijing.

82. See "For Press: Relations with the People's Republic of China, Statement by the Prime Minister," 18 July 1971, in NAA, A1209/1969/9054, pt. 1; "Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon, Victorian Division State Council of the Liberal Party of Australia, Melbourne," 28 July 1971, in NAA, A1209/1969/9054, pt. 2; "China," FCO Brief for Visit of the Australian Prime Minister to the United Kingdom, 7–13 November 1971, 3 November 1971, in TNAUK, Cabinet Office Documents (CAB) 133/401; and UK HC Canberra to Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 11 June 1971, in TNAUK, FCO 24/1043.

83. "Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon, Victorian Division State Council of the Liberal Party of Australia, Melbourne," 28 July 1971.

84. See Roderic Pitty, "Way Behind in Following the USA over China: The Lack of Any Liberal Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy, 1970–72," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2005), p. 441.

85. Curran, *Unholy Fury*, pp. 122–124.

86. NZ Foreign Ministry, "Regional Cooperation in Asia."

87. For the Australian government's analysis of the agreement and its implications, see "Assessment of PRC/Japan Normalisation Agreement," DFA Canberra to All Posts, 9 October 1972, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 19.

88. DFA Policy Planning Paper No. 45, 5 October 1972, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 19.

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) saw no prospect that the Suharto regime would seek to reestablish relations with China.⁸⁹ Indonesia's stance was likely to discourage other ASEAN members from moving in that direction, too.⁹⁰ In response to Japan's initiative, the Thai government publicly stated that it would not follow suit because of China's continued sponsorship of insurgencies and Thailand's strong economic links with Taiwan. Singapore officials said they would move slowly on the issue and "regard Indonesia as the pace-setter with the ASEAN group."⁹¹ In the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos was combatting internal Communist subversion and was thus unlikely to support normalization.⁹² Thus, even if the much-lauded Whitlam government recognition of the PRC on 21 December 1972 may have been consistent with broader global trends, it was out of step with most of Australia's regional neighbors. As ASEAN turned inward to consolidate against Chinese influence, Australia increasingly was politically isolated from the region.

Australian policymakers also assessed that Taiwan would not leave ASPAC voluntarily but that the organization's "credibility as a representative forum would be seriously damaged by the withdrawal of either Malaysia or Japan."⁹³ Malaysia, which had always been ASPAC's most reluctant member, effectively ceased to participate from 1971.⁹⁴ Tun Abdul Razak, the Malaysian prime minister from 1970, was more determined than his predecessor to emphasize Malaysia's non-aligned status.⁹⁵ Thai officials said that without Malaysia they were unlikely to participate in any further meetings either.⁹⁶ The Japanese approach was quieter in deemphasizing its membership and letting ASPAC gradually wind down. This mirrored the views of Australian officials, who did "not want to see the collapse of the only regional political association of which we are a member, particularly as there is at present no foreseeable prospect of the setting-up of any alternative grouping."⁹⁷

89. Australia's DEA was renamed DFA on 6 November 1970.

90. DFA Policy Planning Paper No. 45, 5 October 1972.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. DFA Submission to Minister on China Policy, 4 November 1971, in NAA, A1838/541/1/3.

94. *Ibid.*; and DFA Canberra to Australian Embassy Seoul, 16 December 1971, in NAA, A1838/541/4, pt. 3.

95. "Neutralisation of South East Asia"; and Australian Embassy Seoul to DFA Canberra, 14 January 1972, in NAA, A1838/541/1/3.

96. DFA Canberra to Australian Embassy Seoul, 16 December 1971.

97. DFA Submission to Minister on China Policy, 4 November 1971.

The same dynamics applied to SEATO, which—although of enduring value to Thailand—had been moribund for some time, with no meaningful participation by Pakistan or France and little from the United Kingdom.⁹⁸ As leader of the opposition, Whitlam had advocated the immediate elimination of both organizations; however, upon attaining office, he took a less drastic approach.⁹⁹ In March 1973, his government directed that Australia's participation in ASPAC political activities and technical centers should be curtailed.¹⁰⁰ Planning for the dissolution of SEATO was instigated in August 1975.¹⁰¹ ASPAC was quietly dissolved in 1975 and SEATO in 1977, thereby formally ending Australia's role as a core member of East Asian political and security organizations.

From 1972: Outside the Margins

Despite the Whitlam government's intentions to bring Australia closer to the region with a more independent foreign policy, the effort failed because of external factors. The regional consequences of these factors—obscured in Australian public discourse at the time by the euphoria over Whitlam's victory after 23 years of conservative rule—put the new Australian government's priorities out of step with the ASEAN states.

The relationship of Australia, like that of Japan, with the Communist regime in Beijing could be superficial only in a political sense, focusing on transactional issues. The UK assessment of Australia's diplomatic recognition supports this: "Contacts between the two countries have hitherto been almost exclusively commercial. Trade is largely made up of sales of Australian wheat to China. . . . There is relatively little scope for the development of political

98. "Record of Seventeenth Meeting of the Council of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) Held in Canberra on 27–28 June," UK Embassy Bangkok to Douglas-Home (Foreign Secretary), 11 July 1972, in TNAUK, FCO 15/1663; and "SEATO," DFA Brief, 12 June 1973, in NAA, A1838/686/1, pt. 10.

99. On the Whitlam government's attitude toward SEATO, see UK HC Canberra to FCO London, Personal for Prime Minister (Heath) from Defense Secretary (Carrington), 21 February 1973, in TNAUK, FCO 24/1596. With regard to ASPAC, see "ASEAN, Neutralisation, Regional Organisations," DFA Section from Brief for Visit of Tun Dr. Ismail, 11–18 March 1973, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 23.

100. "DFA Policy Information Report," From Deputy Secretary to Heads of Mission, March 1973, in NAA, A1838/2036/30/1, pt. 1; and "ASEAN, Neutralisation, Regional Organisations."

101. FCO London to UK Embassy Bangkok (also to Canberra, Manila, Washington, Wellington, and UKMIS New York), 28 August 1975, in TNAUK, FCO 24/2061.

relations in any depth.”¹⁰² In September 1974, Alan Renouf, then secretary of DFA, averred that

Australia was trying to build up her relations with China but found it hard to conduct a meaningful political dialogue with her . . . the Chinese were happy for trade and cultural relations to develop but were not interested in political discussions. . . . Dr Fitzgerald, the Australian Ambassador to Peking, was perhaps better qualified than anyone else to open a dialogue with the Chinese but found it almost impossible.¹⁰³

The Whitlam government's focus on China, at the expense of Southeast Asian political sensitivities, meant that the trajectory of Australia's engagement with Asia accelerated from the political to the transactional.¹⁰⁴

Upon taking office, Whitlam instructed the DFA to canvass proposals for a new organization that would reflect Australia's "continuing and constructive involvement in the region." Several options were presented in a memorandum on 8 January 1973 that also set out the "formidable difficulties" involved. But the document erroneously suggested that even "if in the worst eventuality our efforts are not successful, no harm will have been done to our regional relations provided we . . . bring other regional countries into our thinking as soon as practicable."¹⁰⁵ The relative optimism of the brief seems pitched to appeal to the sensibilities of the new ALP government. Diplomatic reporting from the region and statements by ASEAN leaders since 1967 had repeatedly made clear that any organization like Whitlam's proposed Asia Pacific Community would be a non-starter. The Whitlam government's advocacy of this proposal was an irritation to Southeast Asian leaders because Whitlam either failed to understand, or insensitively disregarded, the delicate business of building regional consciousness and solidarity through ASEAN.¹⁰⁶ The Australians also underestimated the deep residual antipathy in Southeast Asia toward China.

102. "Mr. Whitlam's Visit to London, April 1973," FCO Omnibus Brief for Secretary of State (UK), 16 April 1973, in TNAUK, Prime Minister's Office Documents (PREM) 15/1299.

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

104. See Hedley Bull, "The Whitlam Government's Perception of Our Role in the World," in B. D. Beddie, ed., *Advance Australia—Where?* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press and Australian Institute of International Affairs, AIIA, 1975), p. 32; and Martin Jones and Smith, "Misreading Menzies and Whitlam," p. 399.

105. "Australia: Regional Political Organisations," DFA Brief for Foreign Minister (Whitlam), 8 January 1973, in NAA, A1838/3004/11, pt. 15.

106. See, for example, "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting," Australian HC Kuala Lumpur to DFA Canberra, 16 February 1973, in NAA, A1838/696/1/5/4, pt. 1.

Press opinion in Southeast Asia was generally negative about the Whitlam government's initial forays in the region. Reports from Singapore stated that "[i]n Jakarta . . . there is concern that its close neighbor Australia may under Mr. Whitlam adopt an over-friendly attitude to Peking."¹⁰⁷ Whitlam's first soundings in January 1973 about an Asia Pacific Community that might include the PRC and North Vietnam were met with derision. An editorial in Bangkok's *The Nation*, entitled "Playing the Big Brother," observed,

Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam . . . must be a tyro in Asian affairs because he goes and proposes to Indonesia the creation of a new regional grouping which would include China, Japan, and Australia. Maybe he thought Indonesia is another of those countries like his which are now caught up with the craze of climbing on the Peking-bound bandwagon [*sic*].¹⁰⁸

The Big Brother theme is an important one in Southeast Asian attitudes toward the Whitlam government. Despite the mythologization of the ALP in Australian political history, the Whitlam government's activist agenda and the prime minister's own imperious style were not welcome in ASEAN capitals. Max Walsh commented in the *Australian Financial Review*, "we have now . . . a Prime Minister who wants to be a Willy Brandt but looks uncomfortably like a Charles de Gaulle."¹⁰⁹

Despite being aware of the challenges of creating such an organization, Whitlam told New Zealand Prime Minister Norman Kirk that he was "not deterred by these difficulties."¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, rather than handling the issue slowly and delicately, Whitlam publicly announced on 22 February 1973 in a speech to the Indonesian parliament that Australia would seek a new broad-based regional organization. In response to a journalist's question afterward, Whitlam said he expected the formation of such an organization "before a couple of years" because "there is a general realization that the existing regional associations to which Australia belongs are inappropriate because they are transitory or because they're anachronistic or because they are losing members."¹¹¹

107. "AAP Reports," 5 December 1972, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 20.

108. "Thailand: Press Comment on Australia," Australian Embassy Bangkok to DFA Canberra, 23 February 1973, in NAA, DFA Press Cuttings, A1838/686/1, pt. 9.

109. "Statement on International Affairs by Australian Prime Minister," British HC Canberra to South West Pacific Department, FCO, 25 May 1973, in TNAUK, FCO 24/1596.

110. "Asian Regional Organisation," DFA Canberra to Australian HC Wellington, 7 February 1973, in NAA, A1838/696/1/5/4, pt. 1.

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

In cables to the UK government about Whitlam's visit, the FCO wrote that the agenda brought by Whitlam was far from what the Indonesians wanted, which was a "certain staunchness, more aid, and more alertness to the dangers they see of Communist subversion."¹¹² With regional organization, the Indonesians regarded "themselves as better judges of what is needed, and when, than the Australians."¹¹³ By driving such an unwanted proposal in the region—and placing Australia's concerns transparently at the center of it—the Whitlam government came across as arrogant and insensitive in its disregard for Southeast Asian sensibilities.

The Thai government appeared perplexed by Australia's behavior. Whitlam was pushing to create a new, larger organization when ASEAN states were still weighing whether further expansion to the other Indochinese countries would be at the expense of the organization's current solidarity. Thailand's Deputy Foreign Minister (and later Prime Minister) Chatichai Choonhavan said that he and "his ASEAN colleagues" were disappointed that at the same time Australia desired closer relations it was actually "withdrawing from the area."¹¹⁴ He said in a meeting with the New Zealand ambassador in Bangkok that Australia and New Zealand "should hold on" to their "memberships of SEATO and ASPAC." He then concluded: "I cannot understand you. You are both members of the region and you have a beachhead on the mainland. Why do you want to withdraw? You have been very good friends."¹¹⁵

These sentiments point to one of the paradoxes of the orthodox narrative of Australia's engagement with Asia: that "disengagement" somehow indicates genuine "engagement" with the region. This theme is also found in the treatment of the Whitlam government's withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore by 1975 of most Australian forces stationed there under the FPDA.¹¹⁶ The rapid drawing-down of the Australian military contingent was a disengagement from Canberra's previously deep involvement in postcolonial nation-building in Southeast Asia. The commitment to disengage was not well received by Singapore, where most of Australia's ground and naval forces were based.¹¹⁷

112. "Mr Whitlam's Visit to Indonesia, 20–23 February, 20 March 1973," FCO Report for Mr. Wilford and Sir E. Norris by J. K. Hickman, South West Pacific Department, in TNAUK, FCO 24/1600.

113. Ibid.

114. NZ Embassy Bangkok to DFA Wellington, 5 March 1973, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 23.

115. Ibid.

116. See Andrea Benvenuti and David Martin Jones, "Engaging Southeast Asia? Labor's Regional Mythology and Australia's Military Withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia, 1972–1973," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Fall 2010), pp. 32–62.

117. "AAP Reports," 5 December 1972.

The withdrawal of Australian forces from Malaysia and Singapore was also seen at the time as disengagement by some quarters of the Australian press. An editorial in Melbourne's *The Herald* labeled it a "cut and run" and noted that the "Indonesians do not want us to leave. The troops themselves do not want to surrender the posting. Australian public opinion has not demanded their return."¹¹⁸ The Whitlam government had thrown "away the substance of a modest, working, *wanted* agreement made with Southeast Asian nations, where our good influence has been welcomed for decades" in order to reach "for a grandiose 'regional association' which Asians have rejected."¹¹⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald* described the withdrawal as "shabby" and "discreditable."¹²⁰ When questioned about the motivations for this change in policy, Whitlam told British Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary Alec Douglas-Home on 24 April 1973 "that Australia now attached high priority to Indonesia, which was much more important in terms of resources and population than Singapore and Malaysia."¹²¹

Given Whitlam's stated priorities on this issue, his insensitivity to Indonesian concerns about China and regional organization appears inept. The dissonance created by Whitlam's "grandiose plan for a large Asian and Pacific grouping, including China and Japan," only exacerbated Australia's now-marginal position in the region.¹²² Singapore's high commissioner in Canberra, A. P. Rajah, explained in February 1973 that "Australia was placing too much importance on the position and role of China, and paying too little regard to the fears and apprehensions of Southeast Asian countries."¹²³ He said that ASEAN countries "were not yet ready to sit down with China. They were also suspicious of Japan. . . . Nor did they want to get entangled with India and bogged down with the problems of the Sub-continent."¹²⁴ In a later meeting with the Australian minister of state, Senator Don Willesee, Rajah said the

118. "We Wreck, Then Cut and Run," *The Herald* (Melbourne), 5 July 1973, in NAA, DFA Press Cuttings, FCO 24/1559.

119. Ibid.

120. "A Shameful Affair," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1973, in NAA, DFA Press Cuttings, FCO 24/1559.

121. "Record of a Meeting between the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary (Douglas-Home) and the Australian Prime Minister Held at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on Tuesday 24 April at 10.30 am," 30 April 1973, in NAA, A1838/686/1, pt. 9.

122. See "Whitlam's Mission," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 1974, in NAA, DFA Press Cuttings, A1209/1974/6181.

123. "Regional Organisation," Record of Conversation Mr. A. P. Rajah, High Commissioner for Singapore and Mr. H.D. Anderson, DFA Canberra, 22 February 1973, in NAA, A1838/696/1/5/4, pt. 1.

124. Ibid.

ASEAN states now considered Australia a South Pacific country, not a part of Southeast Asia. The most fruitful form of cooperation in the foreseeable future would be a formal association between the South Pacific Forum and ASEAN. This would give Australia the Asian relationship it sought.¹²⁵

The formal association Australia negotiated with ASEAN from January to April 1974 was only a consolation prize for the Whitlam government, even though it is sometimes erroneously presented as evidence of the success of Asian engagement.¹²⁶ Australia's association with ASEAN (a role later recast as "dialogue partner") established the current pattern of Australia's engagement as a second-tier player in Asia-Pacific international relations, the national perspective of looking in at East Asia from the South Pacific, and Australian inclusion in "Asia-Pacific" organizations only with other extra-regional powers. Australia's peripheral situation in 1974 was thus a long way from its integral position through the late 1960s. By 1974 the only functioning Asian organizations in which Australia remained a member were resolutely transactional: the Ministerial Conference for the Economic Development of South-East Asia; the 1950 Colombo Plan, which was still in operation; the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East; and the Asian Development Bank.¹²⁷

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

based increasingly on developing trade with the countries of the region, on promoting progress through constructive aid programs, on encouraging security through regional co-operation . . . and on the development of cultural contacts through the negotiations of cultural agreements with the countries of Southeast Asia.¹²⁸

This evolution to a broader-based but shallower, transactional pattern of engagement was a result of the momentous changes in the regional strategic

125. Record of Conversation, Mr. A. P. Rajah, High Commissioner for Singapore and Senator D. Willesee, Minister for State, DFA Canberra, 26 February 1973, in NAA, A1838/696/1/5/4, pt. 1.

126. "ASEAN/Australian Co-operation," Australian Embassy Bangkok to DFA Canberra, 12 January 1974, in NAA, A1838/3004/11, pt. 11; and "Talks with the FCO: ASEAN," DFA Brief, September 1974, in NAA, A1838/3004/13/21, pt. 28.

127. "Regional Co-operation," Official Brief, Prime Minister's Southeast Asia Visit, 7 January 1974, in NAA, A1838/3004/11, pt. 11.

128. "Speech by the Prime Minister of Australia the Honourable E. G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P., at a Banquet in his Honour Given by the Prime Minister of Malaysia," 29 January 1974, in TNAUK, FCO 15/1867.

environment occurring in the late 1960s that eroded the conditions for Australia's deep political and security integration. The pattern persists to this day and is reflected in the enduring calls from sections of the foreign policy community that Australia must deepen its engagement with East Asia. By 1974, Australia looked in at East Asia from Oceania with its engagement premised on a transactional economic basis rather than on the deeper political ties of solidarity evident through 1968.

Conclusion

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

From 1950 to 1971, and especially from 1966 to 1968, the non-Communist solidarity of the Cold War provided the conditions for Australia's political and security engagement with East Asia. The basis for this engagement was eroded from 1967 to 1971 by a series of compounding external factors that were mostly beyond Australia's capacity to influence but served to distance Australia politically from the region: the formation of ASEAN in 1967 and a more cultural understanding of regional consciousness that excluded Australia; and an easing of Cold War pressures from 1968 with U.S. de-escalation and withdrawal from Vietnam, the 1969 Nixon Doctrine, and Washington's rapprochement with China from 1971. These changes removed the material conditions as well as the normative and institutional underpinnings for Australia's political and security engagement with East Asia. By the time the Whitlam government took office in December 1972, the trajectory toward transactional engagement was in place. Whitlam's subsequent policies in Southeast Asia, which were consistent with trends at the global level but created dissonance among Australia's immediate regional neighbors, only intensified the trend. By 1974, Australia looked at East Asia from the South Pacific with its engagement premised on a broadening but transactional basis.

This history suggests that Australian approaches to Asian engagement will succeed only if aligned with larger regional trends or forces. Australia does not carry enough strategic weight to shape the regional environment on its own. The Pacific War and its immediate aftermath, the circumstances of British

decolonization, and the onset of the Cold War drew Australian governments into the East Asian region politically. Later, the Gorton and McMahon governments from 1968 to 1971 were subject to a series of profoundly destabilizing changes to the regional environment, changes that undermined the existing basis of Cold War engagement.

Whitlam overestimated Australia's influence, misinterpreting the significance of these changes for regional diplomacy, especially in Southeast Asia. By 1974, Whitlam was reduced to signaling a transactional basis for Australia's future engagement. The end of the Cold War and the acceleration of the globalization process from the late 1980s ensured that the transactional basis for Asian engagement in trade, tourism, and international education would remain entrenched. Efforts in the 2000s to move Australia's engagement beyond the transactional largely failed, as exemplified by Kevin Rudd's 2008 Asia Pacific Community proposal. However, recent trends indicating a more assertive and nationalistic China—the U.S. pivot back to Asia, the overt Sino-Japanese strategic rivalry, and the competing maritime claims in the South China Sea—suggest the conditions may again be developing to support a deeper Australian political and security engagement in East Asia.

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