Australia's Pursuit of Place in the World

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Abstract and Keywords

Australia's place on the world stage has evolved dramatically over the past century. Although no longer preoccupied with isolation from the British Empire, Australia grapples with the challenges of its proximity at the apex of a diverse and dynamic Indo-Pacific. While holding out the aspirations of regional power with global interests, the island continent continues to be plagued by anxiety in its pursuit of place in a contested world. This chapter explores the contours of Australia's contemporary place-making project. Recognizing the complexity of the subject matter, in which dimensions of history, memory, geography, economics, and culture collide, the chapter draws on the nation's diplomatic practice as a lens through which to view the competing forces of change and continuity at play. It begins by noting that the theoretical underpinnings of Australian diplomacy raise interrelated concerns about material power and powerlessness, national security, and broad cultural values, all of which contribute to Australia's evolving sense of place over key points in time. Despite claims that Australia's approach to the outside world is gripped by repetitive impulses to 'engage or retreat', this chapter finds that ultimately, the nation's place-making project tends towards openness over insularity, engagement over isolation, and activism over passivity. The central claim is that Australia's constructive, yet pragmatic style of diplomacy—in its many forms—plays a critical though undervalued role in positioning the nation on the global and regional stage.

Keywords: diplomacy, Asia-Pacific, Commonwealth, alliance, soft power

Australia in the twenty-first century defines itself as a 'regional power with global interests' (Australian Government 2017: v). Marking a striking turnaround from past narratives of an 'Antipodean outpost', this description reflects the ongoing evolution within the island continent's place-making project. And it is fitting, given Australia's contemporary emphasis on active engagement across key spheres—diplomacy, defence, trade, and culture—within the nearby Indo-Pacific region,¹ and more broadly on the world stage. Australians themselves—an increasingly diverse citizenry—are living, working, studying, and travelling beyond the nation's shores in greater numbers than ever before. Together, these developments speak to an ambitious place-making project, rooted in the notion that

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'an outward-looking Australia, fully engaged in the world, is essential to [ensuring the nation's] future security and prosperity' (Australian Government 2017: 2).

Australia's contemporary approach to the world is underpinned by two enduring features. First, whether motivated by fear of abandonment, as Allan Gyngell (2017a) suggests, or by the confidence and optimism 'born of ambition', as former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (2017) claims, Australia actively seeks to shape its place in the world. Responding to and influencing the conditions of that outside world reflect the core challenge and aspiration of Australian foreign policy. Second, the meaning and significance of 'place' for Australia is a far more complex matter than simply negotiating coordinates on a map. For Australia, defining 'place' is a dynamic ideational project. It requires a careful navigation of the 'unique intersection of history, geography, culture and economic opportunity' (Howard 2005), and it draws, as Graeme Dobell (2010) suggests, on a complex evolution of ideas, community, purpose, and identity, reflecting both internal dynamics of the nation and the external forces that shape its environment. Traditionally crafted and articulated by political elites, these notions of place are emblematic of a collective narrative and identity, and are underpinned by notions of power—or, as Michael Wesley (2009) argues, in Australia's case, by notions of 'powerlessness'. Yet today, this ideational project is no longer a field dominated by officials and elites; instead, it draws on unconventional actors including business leaders, civil society representatives, sports people, and ordinary citizens, alongside new modes of engagement including sport, science, arts and culture, and international education.

These two features constitute an inherent duality in Australian place-making that brings multiple tensions to the fore while offering fertile ground for exploration. On the one hand, place-making is externally oriented; the way in which nations 'engage with the outside world in a clear, coordinated, communicative way' (Anholt 2008: 3). The primary concern, as noted here, is to respond to the external environment in ways that protect and promote the core interests—security, prosperity, and, more recently, values—of the nation. On the other hand, place-making is inwardly focused, an ongoing negotiation of the cultures, values, institutions, and ideas that contribute to the overarching identity of the nation. These ideational dimensions of identity hold increasing validity in the contemporary world. Both tangible and intangible, this potent mix of interests and values gives substance and credibility to outward notions of place that exist in both a physical and imagined sense. Yet as Hudson and Stokes remind us, 'like so many other foundations of identity ... the content and meaning of "place" are subject to dispute, especially among those who hold or contest political power' (Hudson and Stokes 1997: 156). The complexities bound up in debates surrounding national identity are substantial and there is much at stake, including, as John Kane notes, 'the country's moral perception of itself, and of its standing in the international community' (Kane 1997: 118).

Contemporary Australia wrestles with the calibration of these multiple dimensions of its domestic and external identities in the pursuit of national interest. The legacy of colonialism embedded and reproduced through structural and normative frameworks of terra nullius and 'white' Australia linger within the ongoing discourse of equality, citizenship,

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and reconciliation. These are the issues that capture the attention of the world. There is, of course, some way to go in recognizing and reconciling Australian Indigenous narratives within the mainstream identity. Yet the reality is that Australia has opened significantly to the outside world over recent decades. Today, Australia is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse nations in the world. According to the 2016 census, 75 per cent of Australians identify with an ancestry other than Australia, while 45 per cent report at least one parent as being born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). In 2018, 29 per cent of Australians were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). More than ever before, Australia is connected through cultural, linguistic, and diasporic bonds to its near neighbourhood and other locations around the globe.

New global realities challenge established ideas of Australia's 'place' in the world. Intensifying patterns of global trade, coupled with the spread of new media technologies and the increasing mobility of people and ideas within and across the Asia-Pacific region, continue to blur traditional boundaries and physical demarcations of place. This picture is further complicated by shifts—underway in many corners of the globe—towards populist, strongman politics and an emphasis on nationalist sentiment. Sparked largely by deep fears of uncertainty, these forces together appear to be fanning the flames of anti-global sentiment, generating a renewed emphasis on borders and boundaries and forcing the resurgence of traditional geopolitics. For Australia, located at the apex of the so-called Indo-Pacific, these shifting dynamics have become ever more palpable. China's rising influence, power projection, and increasing rivalry with the United States presents challenges to the established order and has given rise to new anxieties. Other regional disruptions and instabilities ranging from urban terrorism to massive global displacement of people and the increasing impacts of a changing climate are concentrating the minds of foreign policy-makers and diplomats.

In the face of increasing disruption and uncertainty, the prosecution of foreign policy interests through diplomatic practice demands innovation. No longer the sole domain of states, diplomacy is an inherently social project involving a wide array of global, transnational, and subnational actors in what was traditionally the dialogue of nations. Furthermore, this contemporary diplomacy is Janus-faced, working simultaneously with internal and external audiences, whereby investments in the former can play an important role in engaging of the latter (Huijgh and Byrne 2012). Australia is no stranger to these challenges, and while it might not regularly be cast as the 'exemplar' of diplomatic reach or best practice, it continues to punch above its weight in global and regional influence. At least for now.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the contours of Australian diplomacy as a primary instrument for place-making in the twenty-first century. At its core, the chapter argues that Australian diplomacy—in its many forms—plays a critical though undervalued role in positioning the nation on the global and regional stage. As a nation that does not have the capacity to 'buy or bully its way in the world' (Varghese 2015), there is much at stake for Australia in promoting its interests and values through the various bilateral and multilateral channels, and in the public sphere. The discussion begins by canvassing the broad

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theoretical approaches that underpin Australia's foreign policy and thus define the parameters, set the direction, and shape the nature of Australia's engagement with the world. The second section reviews three broad phases of Australia's diplomatic engagement, highlighting the debates, priorities, and mechanisms that have anchored Australia's diplomatic practice to date. The third section brings attention to new issues and contestations that continue to shape and challenge Australia's place in the contemporary world.

The approach taken through this chapter is one that aims to be evocative rather than didactic, subscribing to the view that place is a 'complex theoretical matter' that cannot be reduced down either to geographic coordinates or singular representations of perspective (Hudson and Stokes 1997). Drawing on primary and secondary sources of Australian foreign policy, the chapter seeks to contextualize the relationship between the foreign and the domestic, and sheds light on the material and ideational structures that shape Australian perspectives of the outside world. Ultimately, the chapter seeks to highlight the dynamics that drive and underpin Australia's influence, relationships, and reputation—in the Asia-Pacific region and globally—as indicators of place. By bringing multiple and contested views to the fore, the chapter aims to contribute to the discussion of place as a dynamic concept that offers possibilities for, rather than imposing limits on, Australia's future.

Perspectives on Australian Foreign Policy

Foreign policy provides the foundation from which diplomatic practice—its primary instrument—takes its cue. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of Australian foreign policy provides insights into the ambitions, agendas, and structures that have come to shape the nation's engagement with the wider world via traditional and non-traditional forms of diplomacy. The foreign policy of any nation tends to reflect the shifting forces of continuity and change. In Australia's case, continuity comes from the interplay of three core assumptions: (1) the reliance on a great and powerful protector; (2) a commitment to multilateralism; and (3) deep engagement with nations of the Asia-Pacific region. Change arises from the priority and weight attached to each of these at any given time, which depends on external threats and opportunities alongside the range of internal political interests and expectations at play.

As the recent shift away from 'isms' in international relations suggests (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013), no single perspective on foreign policy can capture the complexity of its practice. Australian foreign policy is driven by interrelated concerns over material power, national security, and the broad cultural values that given these national projects a specific shape. Thus, while a realist world view is widely accepted as the dominant perspective in Australian foreign policy thinking (Wesley 2009), it is clear when reviewing the stages in Australia's global engagement that a given approach cannot be neatly defined. Instead, Australia's evolving identity and sense of place influences, and is influenced by, conceptions of the national interest and strategic priorities.

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Competing priorities exist in a constant state of tension, played out over time through political debates and electoral cycles. In turn, metaphors of place receive distinct meanings according to which priorities are emphasized, with a pessimistic focus on national security and the national interest underpinned by a preoccupation with Australia's place in an international hierarchy of states; that is, its place in the international pecking order. This informs associated world views of threats that emerge from the region and Australia's place in it. Within this context, it may appear that Australian foreign policy—marked by unshakeable undertones of vulnerability—is gripped by competing impulses 'to engage and retreat' (Megalogenis 2017: xi). Yet this chapter argues that the trajectory and patterns of Australia's place-making project tends, over the long term, towards openness over insularity, engagement over isolation, and activism over passivity. As the next section of this chapter reveals, when faced with volatility in the external environment, Australian foreign policy demonstrates capacity to adapt with resilience.

Australia's Evolving Place in the World

Applying a temporal lens to Australia's global positioning allows us to understand the broad context in which decisions are made, policy agendas are advanced, and resources are allocated. Scholars and practitioners differ on their approach to this task depending on the issues or agenda they wish to explore (Howard 2016; Gyngell 2017a). It is important to note that Indigenous Australians were interacting and trading in the region long before Europeans arrived—the signs of which can still be traced in local dialects and cultural artefacts of key communities in northern Australia and southern Sulawesi to this day (Russell 2004). Similarly, Australia's early colonies were engaged in commercial activities with near neighbours. However, for the purpose of this chapter, the Federation of Australia in 1901 marks the starting point for analysis. Taking a broad-brush view, three distinct phases become evident. The first of these spans the anxious formative years from Federation through to 1942, during which Australia engaged with the world primarily as an outpost of the British Empire. The second phase from 1942 through to 2000 saw Australia turn its gaze to the outside world, including through the newly established United Nations, solidify its alliance with the United States, and engage more deeply with the nations of Asia. It was during this phase that the three pillars of Australian foreign policy (discussed earlier) were established and embedded in Australian statecraft. The final phase, commencing in 2001 and continuing today, reflects the onset of a period marked by external shocks, turmoil, and uncertainty. For Australia today, the rise of China as a regional power and changing strategic order looms large on the regional and global agenda, demanding greater investment in and calibration of the instruments of diplomacy than ever before.

Anxious Outpost (1901-1942)

From the time of European settlement, Australia's early world view was shaped by a bleak outlook 'centering on the vulnerability of an isolated continent surrounded by alien threatening forces in an unremittingly dangerous world' (Harper 1955: 203). Given, as

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Don Watson observes, that 'threat was one of the progenitors of the Commonwealth' (2002: 76), it was bound to show up in the offspring. Yet others point to the emergence of a distinctly Australian variant of realism, which Wesley suggests fosters 'a particular attitude towards the outside world, and imbued Australians' thinking about the world and their place in it with a distinctive character' (Wesley 2009: 325). This Australian variant is characteristically *experiential*, grounded in *systemic pessimism*, and ultimately shaped by a *pragmatic* appreciation of the nation's limits and approach to decision-making. It is a view repeated and reinforced by politicians, scholars, and commentators (Andrews 1972). As former Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007) reminded us, 'there is very little to be gained from trying to influence the direction in which international affairs is moving, rather one is better served adapting to issues as they emerge' (quoted in Bisley 2007: 4). And so, Australia's distinct realist outlook—anchored in notions of 'powerlessness'—took its formidable hold.

The Australian Constitution makes provision, by virtue of section 51, for the external affairs of the nation to rest solely with the federal government, thus providing 'prime ministers and their foreign ministers with an opportunity to play on a large stage and to influence great causes'. Yet, such constitutional authority did not translate into an independent foreign policy. Rather, imperial Britain took the lead. Every four years, Australia joined with the self-governing dominions of the British Empire, including Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand, to discuss imperial foreign policy, 'but none of the participants were in any doubt that it was set by London' (Gyngell 2018: 6). Australia, like the others, relied on Britain's diplomatic representation, military power, prestige, and world view instead of carving out its own distinct place. For the fledgling Australian nation, 'external affairs' comprised largely of managing the relationship with Britain, which was done by 'a few clerks and typists attached to the Prime Minister's Department' (Andrews 1972: 32).

Over time, a range of practical issues, mainly relating to the movement of people and goods, forced the Australian government to consider how it might manage low-level transactions and interactions with the external world. The Department of Trade and Customs and the Department of External Affairs were among the earliest government agencies established. Matters of international commerce and trade took priority, and the establishment of the Trade Commissioners Service in 1934 provided the nascent beginnings of Australia's international representation, which was based on commercial rather than diplomatic interests. Notably, and consistent with the view of the day, women were excluded from these early representational roles.

The Department of External Affairs (later to become the Department of Foreign Affairs) oversaw a range of miscellaneous activities relating to the outside world, including off-shore fisheries, immigration and passports control, promotion, and management of relations with the Pacific and the colony of Papua. Importantly, the Department of External Affairs was initially responsible for the implementation of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901. The first Act of the Australian Parliament was intended to protect the nation from the imagined hordes of Asians who, it was feared, would flood into Australia from the near north (Watson 1984). Enforced at border entry points, the Immigration Restriction

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Act and associated policies became emblematic of Australia's deep alienation within its own Asia-Pacific neighbourhood.²

Justified on the basis of racial purity and the preservation of working conditions, the legislation embedded a 'white Australia' narrative into the national psyche for decades to come, conflating notions of whiteness with British civility. Asian and Pacific Island communities already settled in Australia—including those who had come through indentured labour programmes prior to Federation—found themselves without rights, unable to earn a decent living, and disconnected from family. Many were forcibly returned to their country of origin. Notably, the ideals of the White Australia policy also encompassed Australia's own Indigenous communities, which, as the subjects of a range of deeply discriminatory structural and cultural policy barriers, became invisible within their own country. Memories of a 'white Australia', though faded, continue to haunt Australia's understanding of its own story and its engagement within the Asia-Pacific region (Wesley 2009), rising up on occasion in rebuke of perceived Australian diplomatic insensitivity or as an occasional reminder of Australia's ill fit within the neighbourhood.

Anchored to wider concepts of reliance, the application of Australia's realist world view resulted, from the earliest years, in substantial human cost to the nation. Preoccupation with vulnerability, coupled with a persistent fear of abandonment, has seen Australian troops engaged in a multitude of conflicts across the globe to protect the wider interests of its protector ally, first imperial Britain (until 1942) and later the United States (1942 until the present day). Successive Australian governments committed the nation's troops, in a kind of insurance policy, to fight for allied interests in far-flung corners of the globe (George 2012). As Gynge suggests, it was an approach that has seen 'war [become] central to Australians' image of their nation in the world' (Gynge 2017a: 1). Indeed, war offers a nation wracked by its own vulnerability a powerful narrative, in particular feeding into the heroic myths of sacrifice for a greater cause and 'mateship'. Underpinned by political rhetoric of shared values, these stories reveal enduring anxieties and perpetuate particularly masculine narratives at home (Fitzgerald 2019). At the same time, they are 'designed to serve particular cultural and political perspective[s] on Australia and its role in the world' (George 2012: 19), and persist today in Australia's contemporary discourse on place.

Active, Allied, and Engaged (1942-2000)

The devastating impact of the Second World War, coupled with the overwhelming threat posed by Japanese forces across the Asia-Pacific, demonstrated that imperial Britain was neither willing nor capable of protecting the Australian island continent. Though Australia was reluctant to let go of the imperial ties, the passing of the Statute of Westminster Adoption Act 1942³ brought a measure of independence from Empire (though cushioned by membership of the Commonwealth of Nations), and triggered the next phase in the nation's reckoning with the realities of place.

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During the formative years prior to 1942, vulnerability was associated with the external world and Australian governments expended significant effort in keeping aliens out of the new nation. However, in the post-war era it became clear that a sparse population in a vast continent was a source of internal vulnerability. Making the claim that Australia would 'populate or perish', Australia's first immigration minister, Arthur Caldwell, embarked on an ambitious immigration campaign targeting Caucasian migrants from across war-torn Europe to 'Australia—the Land of Tomorrow' (Museums Victoria n.d.).⁴ Notwithstanding its discriminatory nature, immigration thus became a central feature of Australian survival. And, though an ardent advocate of White Australia, Caldwell unwittingly laid the foundations for contemporary Australia's multicultural diversity, irrevocably changing the nature of the country's social fabric, identity, and its place in the modern world.

An Outward Orientation: Australian in the United Nations

The emerging liberal international framework of the post-war era, based on collective security, economic openness, and social progress, also drew Australia's interest. Foreign minister H. E. Evatt, 'ever alert' to the external forces that might affect the nation and irritated by the manoeuvrings of great powers, pushed for Australia to play a more active global role (Gyngell 2017a). Addressing the Australian Parliament in 1944, he argued: 'No sovereign state, however small, will wish to think its destiny had been handed over to another power, however great. Nor does history at all support the view that wisdom is confined to the strongest nations, or that knowledge is found only at the centre of power ...' (Gyngell 2017a: 79).

Evatt led Australia's involvement in the establishment of the United Nations. He advocated for the rights of small and middle powers on the international stage, seeking to lessen the overarching veto power of great powers while elevating the significance of the General Assembly. He successfully championed the 'the faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small'—sentiments that were ultimately enshrined in the UN Charter Preamble. Embodying Australia's early internationalist persona, Evatt forged Australia's early reputation as an active diplomatic player on the global stage, setting the scene for years to come. Indeed, Paul Hasluck observed at the time that, as a result of Evatt's work, 'Australia's name stands higher in world affairs, and we have won a great deal of respect and many friends' (quoted in Bolton 2015: 148).

In the decades to follow, Australia's commitment to the United Nations expanded, with the establishment of permanent diplomatic representation to UN missions in New York, Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi, and the opportunity to serve on the UN Security Council five times.⁵ For some, this activity is simply reflective of the nation's aspiration to be a 'good international citizen'. Naturally, such aspirations do not always go unchallenged. Domestic concerns, arising from the potential for conflict between international obligations and national interests, as well as more practical issues of budget accountability and resource constraints, occasionally lead to variations in Australia's engagement in the mul-

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tilateral system. Overall, however, underlying commitment to multilateralism as a feature of Australia's middle power diplomacy remains strong.

Building the Alliance: Australia and the United States

Having many friends in the world has never provided the same kind of reassurance as having one great and powerful friend. In the post-war world, Australia's political leaders were drawn towards the dominant power of the United States. But America was not an unknown entity to Australia, and its presence in the Pacific had been noticed in the earlier decades. The goodwill visit by the US navy's 'Great White Fleet' to Australian shores in August 1908 had inspired interest and awe, with some 500,000 Sydneysiders flocking to greet the ships on their arrival into the harbour (Edwards 2005). Comprising some sixteen battleships and 14,000 soldiers, the Atlantic Fleet provided a demonstration of sea power the likes of which had not been seen previously in Australia. Promoting shared interests and cultural familiarity, the visit laid the groundwork for Australia's subsequent strategic transition towards the US (Brown and Raynor 2001). Although, harking back to deeper anxieties, Peter Edwards points out that the "'Great White fleet" may have gained its name from the colour of its paintwork, but it had an unmistakably racial resonance in Australia' (Edwards 2005: 6).

The emergence of communist forces within the region and the threat posed to a destabilized South East Asia amplified Australian fears in the post-war era, prompting government interest in drawing the US more fully into the Asian region (Oakman 2004). Intensive lobbying combined with a tangible show of commitment to fighting communism on the Korean Peninsula and visible support for US foreign policy elsewhere helped Australia to secure its strategic alliance with the US via the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and US) Treaty in 1951. New Zealand is no longer a formal member of the alliance; however, the terms of ANZUS continue to underscore security in the Pacific region and the nature, tone, and conduct of Australia's relationship with the US.

Though usually the subject of bipartisan support, the ANZUS alliance has not gone without criticism. Key issues, including the US's substantial military presence in Australia and requests for Australian assistance in remote and unpopular conflicts, can, from time to time, draw public ire and political attention. How Australia's political leaders engage with the US can further shape perceptions of the alliance relationship at home and abroad. Paul Keating, for example, was adamant during his tenure as prime minister (1991–1996) that Australia not become just another node in America's hub-and-spokes model of security alliances within the Asia-Pacific (Watson 2002). John Howard's failure to rebuke suggestions some years later that Australia played the role of US 'deputy sheriff' in the region following the nation's military intervention in the East Timor independence process rankled many within the neighbourhood, not least Australia's most significant neighbour, Indonesia. One of Australia's controversial political figures, Mark Latham, sought to discredit the ANZUS alliance by calling it 'the last manifestation of the White Australia mentality' (Latham 2005: 393). More recently, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's close relationship with US President Donald Trump has raised further questions about how the al-

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liance might hinder Australia's wider engagement in the region (Crowe 2019). Yet, the underlying strategic value of ANZUS, including the influence and access it offered Australia to the wider Five Eyes⁶ security network and to the US market, has never been seriously opposed. Indeed, Australian governments have consistently argued that the benefits have outweighed the costs and the dangers incurred by membership of the alliance (Edwards 2005).

Engaging Asia

The third key feature of this phase relates to the necessary, though slow, reorientation of Australia's gaze towards the Asia-Pacific, not simply as a region that might harbour threat, but as a region within which Australia's prosperity and security might be found. Prompted by the rise of communism, Australian political leaders in the post-war era were alert to the correlation between economic disadvantage and political vulnerability throughout much of the region. The view emerged among policy-makers that by providing economic development to its neighbours, Australia might remove 'the (assumed) incentive for Asians to inundate Australia' (Wesley 2009: 330). And so, the region came to be seen, in crude terms, as a significant development project, the outcomes of which were firmly tied to Australian national interests. One notable example came in the form of the Colombo Plan,⁷ a multilateral framework launched in 1951 that engaged a coalition of wealthy nations, such as the UK, US, and even a post-war industrialized Japan, in the delivery of multipronged development assistance programmes to the people and nations of South and South East Asia.

When signing Australia up as a founding Colombo Plan nation, then Minister for External Affairs Percy Spender (1949-1951) highlighted its significance for Australia's regional engagement:

Geographically Australia is next door to Asia and our destiny as a nation is irrevocably conditioned by what takes place in Asia. This means that our future depends to an ever increasing degree upon the political stability of our Asian neighbours, upon the economic well-being of Asian people, and upon the development of understanding and friendly relations between Australia and Asia

(quoted in Bishop 2013: n.p.).

Spender's statement was, as Daniel Oakman notes, 'as much an admission of territorial and cultural vulnerability as it was a call to recast the outmoded concept of the frontier which had retarded Australia's engagement with the region' (Oakman 2004: 264). A core element of Australia's engagement in the Colombo Plan was the delivery of education and technical skills across a vast array of fields. This particular dimension proved enormously successful, not just in the immediate outcomes but also in training people from across the region, some of whom ended up in positions of influence in their own countries, and retained significant goodwill towards Australia (Megarrity 2007). But the benefits were not simply one way. Notably the scheme also saw many students spending time living in Australian homes for the duration of their study. Lyndon Megarrity (2007) argues that

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through this feature in particular, the Colombo Plan also helped to change Australians' attitudes towards an otherwise 'alien' Asia, paving the way for the abolition of the White Australia policy in later years and shifting Australia's gaze towards opportunities within the region. Decades later, in 2014, foreign minister Julie Bishop (2013–2018) drew inspiration from the Colombo Plan success. Reverse engineering the successful programme approach, her signature New Colombo Plan took hold, sending scores of Australian students to live, work, and study in the region as a 'rite of passage' that would further deepen Australia's engagement with Asia (Byrne 2016).

Gradual change to remove cultural barriers from Australia's immigration practices during the post-war decades resulted in Australia becoming a destination for Asian trade, students, immigrants, and even refugees. During this time, the underlying fear of Asia that had characterized Australia's early outlook dissipated. Australia's recognition of the Republic of Indonesia in 1946, its signing of the bilateral Commerce Agreement with Japan in 1957, and its extension of diplomatic recognition to China in 1972 were milestones that pointed to Australia's gradual diplomatic embrace of its region, and to what some termed 'Australia's awakened Asia-mindedness' (Downer 1997).

Government approaches towards the region remained fragmented and ad hoc until major trade liberalization reforms, combined with regional institution-building strategies, were implemented in the 1980s and 1990s. By the 1990s, Australia's political leaders sought to relocate Australia's place—both physical and imagined—in Asia (Capling 2008, 605). As former foreign minister Gareth Evans (1988–1996) suggested:

The great turnaround in contemporary Australian history is that the region from which we sought in the past to protect ourselves ... is now the region which offers Australia the most. It has come to be accepted now almost as a commonplace that our future lies in the Asia-Pacific region. This is where we live, where we must survive strategically, and find a place and role if we are to develop our full potential as a nation

(Evans 1995: 113).

Paul Keating, who was prime minister at the time, remarked that 'while the Australian nation and identity had been forged from values which were in both spirit and substance "anti-Asian", these were now being reshaped and the last vestiges of the colonial past were being discarded' (Watson 2002: 178). And yet, not everyone agreed, including those in the region. Abdulla Ahmad Badawi, the Malaysian foreign minister at the time, observed: 'If I look at a map, I believe that it says that Australia is not a part of Asia ... We are a part of Asia and Australia is down there. Australia is another continent' (Milkin 1995: n.p.). Australian motives were reportedly questionable given the nation's regional reputation as 'a white race down South', while the Asian values debate promoted by key political leaders in the region, including Singapore's founding stateman, Lee Kuan Yew, cast Australia more firmly as an outlier, the 'white trash of Asia' (Milkin 1995). The observations of former Australian career diplomat Richard Woolcott confirmed the view at the time that 'some of our neighbours see us—or some of us—as still racist, uncouth, as-

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sertive, self-righteous, intrusive and pre-occupied with sporting prowess; as unwilling to make the effort to understand their cultures and the complexities of their societies' (Woolcott 2000: n.p.).

Australian public audiences remained uneasy about the pace of Australia's engagement with Asia, or what some saw as the 'Asianization of Australia', and its implicit challenge to Australia's identity and associated values at the time (Sheridan 1999). A change in government brought a change in approach. This included the downgrading of regional institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), with preference towards bilateral economic and security relationships, and a reversion to more traditional narratives in Australia's identity. For the Howard government, 'closer engagement with Asia [did not] require reinventing Australia's identity or abandoning the values and traditions which define Australian society' (Australian Government 1997: iv).

Problematic issues and misunderstandings continue to generate angst about Australia's emerging Asian identity while offering domestic political capital. A rise in the number of asylum seekers, the election of Pauline Hanson to the federal parliament in 1996, and the subsequent rise of her One Nation Party drew sharp gasps from around the nation, but played into its racist undercurrents. Hansen's 1996 maiden speech, which she claimed spoke to the interests of the mainstream, revived deep anxieties of Australia 'being swamped by Asians'. It was an uneasy moment for an Australian nation poised on the cusp of a new millennium yet appearing to take a backward step in foreign policy. While the Howard government avoided a public rebuke of Hansen's comments (Thakur 1998), Australian diplomats in the region moved into overdrive in an effort to assure and reassure Asia-Pacific counterparts that Australia remained engaged and interested in the region. Importantly, Australian attempts to imagine Asia, and its own place in it, engaged domestic audiences in an evolving national conversation about place. These conversations, whether conducted through formal mechanisms such as foreign policy white papers, or less formally on the street or in the classroom, continue to tilt more readily, though not always easily, towards engaging Asia.

Australia in an Uncertain World (2001 to the Present)

The arrival of the new millennium, marked by new forces of volatility and disruption, generated uncertainty for many nations—including Australia—about their place in the world. Terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in September 2001 saw the first ever invocation of Australia's obligations under the ANZUS Treaty and led Australian troops to war along with the US in Afghanistan, and later, as part of the 'Coalition of the Willing', into Iraq. Australians rallied publicly across the nation's capital cities against the decision to invade Iraq, but the political imperative led by then Prime Minister John Howard held sway. Gyngell (2017a) refers to the first decade of foreign policy in the new millennium as one dominated by national security concerns, a characterization that was to become the hallmark of conservative government foreign policy leadership.

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Close to home, instabilities to Australia's near north from the archipelagic region of South East Asia through to the South West Pacific prompted Australia to play a more assertive—or as some suggest, more interventionist—role in the region. Although brewing for the decades leading into the new millennium, the region had become vulnerable to corruption, crime, conflict, and climate change. Australia's leadership of humanitarian and military interventions close to home in East Timor (2000) and the Solomon Islands (2003) dominated Australia's engagement with the near neighbourhood at this time. In addition, Australian responses to perceived influxes of unregulated asylum seekers saw the ramping up and promotion of punitive response measures, including boat turn-backs and offshore detention. While such interventions played well to a domestic audience, they did not reflect positively in the region. More importantly, they reinforced a view of Australia as pushy, patronizing, and arrogant (Dobell 2010), yet happy to play the unhelpful role of US 'deputy sheriff' (McGrath 2003). For John Howard, Australia's actions reinforced its 'special characteristics' as a nation located in the Asian region with a 'European, Western civilization and strong links to the United States' (Capling 2008: 612), enabling it to do what other nations could not. In his view, Australia just needed to 'get on with the job of being Australia in the region' (Gyngell 2017a: 250).

But for Australia, far bigger waves were beginning to shape the new era. By the end of the first decade of the millennium, the rise of China and the arrival of the Asian century—no longer merely the subject of academic debate, but the emerging reality of shifting strategic dynamics—had become the most significant disruption of the new century. In 2007 China overtook the US as Australia's largest trading partner. In 2009 Australian defence assessments highlighted China's rise and its associated power projections as a strategic threat to peace and security within the Asia-Pacific region. These were repeated in Australia's 2016 strategic assessments and echoed in stronger terms by the 2017 US National Security Strategy. The emergence of strategic rivalry between China and Australia's primary ally continues to intensify, while US President Donald Trump's questions about the value and nature of key alliances in the Asia-Pacific region raises uncertainties about America's ongoing strategic leadership there. As Gyngell observes, 'This world presents significant challenges in the places that matter most for Australia and demands careful and calculated changes in the way it approaches all its key relationships' (Gyngell 2017b: 54). The magnitude of these global and regional realities was acknowledged by former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull when he observed, in fairly sanguine terms, that 'the economic, political and strategic currents that have carried us for generations are increasingly difficult to navigate' (Turnbull 2017: n.p.).

While assumptions of Australian foreign policy remain unchanged, the new millennium has seen a recalibration of the nation's strategic policy priorities. Hugh White (2019) suggests that in the struggle for strategic leadership in Asia, China will outplay the US, making Australia's traditional approach to foreign policy—underpinned by an alliance with the US—somewhat redundant. Gareth Evans calls for a rethink, suggesting the of the mix of Australia's foreign policy priorities needs 'less United States, more self-reliance, more Asia' (Evans 2018: 14). Noting Australia's role as a 'regional power with global interests', the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper advocates greater emphasis on the rules-based or-

der, while offering a more nuanced approach to strategic alignments across the region, including with India, Japan, and other regional democracies, while emphasizing a diplomatic 'step-up' into the Pacific.

Picking up on Australia's renewed interest in the Pacific, Prime Minister Scott Morrison makes the striking claim that this 'is our patch ... our part of the world ... where we have special responsibilities. This is our home. It's where Australia can make the biggest difference in world affairs' (Morrison 2018: n.p.). Morrison's attempts to anchor Australia's strategic positioning in the Pacific is welcomed by many, including in the region. The Pacific perspective underscores, in rhetoric at least, the strategic importance of a 'regional approach to both security and prosperity is of national importance to Australia' (Edgeley 2019). Yet it raises familiar concerns about a tendency towards transaction, and questions about how Australia's broader complex interests in the region will be managed and advanced.

Contemporary Issues and Innovations in Australian Diplomacy

As a middling power that relies on deep regional and global connections for security and prosperity, Australia must make creative use of the many instruments of diplomacy and statecraft available to it to find and maintain its place on the world stage. To some degree, Australian diplomacy has achieved notable successes over recent decades, drawing on the three core pillars of foreign policy (commitment to the US alliance, engagement with the region, and support for multilateralism). Yet the degree to which these pillars will remain relevant in a fast-changing world is yet to be seen. Australian policy-makers should remain open to some contestability on this point, at least in terms of the weight and priority attached to these traditions in the years ahead.

Australia's quest for a place in the contemporary world is motivated by a desire not only to belong but to also to influence. On that score, the outcome is mixed. As a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, Australia continues to reimagine its links to the legacy of the British Empire. And yet, attempts to create new homes in the near neighbourhood have also found some success. More revealing still are the forums and clubs that Australia has been invited to join. From the global economic steering committee of the Group of 20 (G20) to the East Asian Summit (EAS), or the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Australian diplomacy has ensured the nation has a seat at strategic tables. Australia's cultural and sporting reach is simultaneously impressive and perplexing, with the nation now a regular competitor on the stage of the Eurovision Song Contest and an emerging contender in Asian Football Federation competitions. The increasing significance of cultural initiatives at home, from the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) to the Asia Pacific Screen Awards, are emblematic of an emerging regional outlook and cultural curiosity, while a peek into kitchens across Australia will reveal an incredible diversity of culinary preferences from dolmades to dumplings.

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Importantly, the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper explicitly articulated the significance of Australia's soft-power assets as enablers of policy outcomes and a reflection of 'who we are and how we approach the world' (Australian Government 2017: 2). The articulation of a soft-power approach holds significance for Australia's place-making project. First, it reflects a new reality that Australia must engage more strategically through official and public diplomacy if it is to remain a 'persuasive voice' in its own region—and, coming at a time when the competition to influence narratives, set political agendas, and frame the rules of a changing regional order is intense, the stakes couldn't be higher (Byrne 2019). Second, it challenges, albeit in a subtle way, the deeply entrenched idea that Australia should approach the world from a position of vulnerability or powerlessness. As former foreign minister Julie Bishop (2018) noted, when it comes to soft power, Australia works from a position of strength. However, the point has been made that not even the lucky country should rest on its laurels when it comes to soft power (McClory and Harvey 2016). Third, the focus on soft power brings others into the foreign policy equation: recognizing the strength and diversity of Australia's connections to the world, it draws attention to the fact that partnerships between all levels of government, and with business and civil society, cities and educational institutions, are essential as co-designers and co-producers of Australia's wider influence.

Public interest and involvement in Australia's place-making project, though still a novelty for traditionalists, is increasingly essential. Direct exposure to Australia—its people and places—remains a compelling form of persuasion alongside the more traditional levers and instruments of diplomatic engagement (Varghese 2013). And, given the challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead, a more complex and demanding kind of engagement is what is needed if Australia is going to navigate successfully through the twenty-first century. The Australian approach to diplomacy is imperfect, dogged by missteps and contradictions—particularly in the way that Australia relates to its own region, the Asia-Pacific. Nonetheless, elements of contemporary practice suggest an inherent resilience, a commitment to innovation, and an emerging self-awareness in Australian diplomacy, which bode well for navigating the future challenges to the nation's place in a changing world.

Conclusion

Australia's place-making project is one of an evolving orientation—both imagined and real—on what it means to be Australian in the world. It is a complex phenomenon marked by the inevitable interplay of history, culture, and geography, and while political leaders and commentators play a significant role, the project 'sits well beyond the ability of government to shape by itself' (Capling 2008: 619). While Australia's pursuit of place continues to evolve, what becomes all the clearer is its firm rejection of isolationism—evident across political, diplomatic, trade, and cultural spheres. And while variations might exist in the tone and texture of Australia's approach to the outside world, depending on the government of the day, the fundamentals are broadly bipartisan.

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Today, Australia's official diplomatic representation, though arguably not comparable with nations of a similar stature, is nonetheless at its highest level, with levels of gender and cultural diversity more reflective of the broader population. Yet, Australian diplomacy continues to lack a supportive domestic constituency, is under-resourced, and remains the target of regular budget cuts and efficiency measures. Finding ways to engage the interest and informed involvement of Australians is essential to the way the nation continues to look out and tell its compelling story to the world. Recognizing that Australia's story is neither uncomplicated nor entirely easy is critical. Issues relating to the treatment of Indigenous people, the White Australia policy, offshore detention, political ambivalence towards climate change, and a wavering commitment to the environment are all problematic. But they are elements of the Australian story. Engaging with those elements in the public and political spheres through thoughtful debate is critical to gaining a more nuanced understanding of place. At the same time, engaging with the multiple stories and identities of others—especially in our diverse region—holds potential for building trust and bridging difference in an increasingly complex and challenging world. Herein lie the ongoing challenges of Australia's place-making project.

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Notes:

(1.) The 'Indo-Pacific' is described in the *Opportunity, Security, Strength: The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* as the geographic region 'stretching from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, Northeast Asia and the United States' (Australian Government 2017: 1).

(2.) Alongside the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, the Australian Parliament also passed the Post and Telegraph Act 1901, which ensured that ships subsidized by the Commonwealth to deliver mail to Australia would only contract white crews, and the Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901 which facilitated the mass deportation of Pacific Islanders previously brought to the colonies as low-paid labourers.

(3.) The Statute of Westminster Adoption Act 1942 passed by the Parliament of Australia formally enacted the Statute of Westminster 1931, an act of the British imperial parliament that enabled total legislative independence of the various self-governing dominions of the Empire.

(4.) The poster carrying the slogan 'Australia—the Land of Tomorrow' was designed by Joe Greenberg, an illustrator with the *Herald* newspaper, and produced by the Department of Immigration around 1948. The poster, which was displayed in displaced persons camps throughout Europe, was intended to encourage immigration to Australia in the post-war era. It portrayed an almost fairytale image of Australia, which sat in stark contrast to the realities experienced by many immigrants on arrival to Australia. Today the poster is held in the Museums Victoria collection. See Museums Victoria Collection: <https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/246191>.

(5.) Australia was elected to a temporary seat on the UN Security Council during the following years: 1945–1946, 1956–1957, 1973–1974, 1985–1986, and 2013–2014.

(6.) Five Eyes refers to the sharing and exchange of security information that occurs between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and the United States.

(7.) Known formally in 1950 as the Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic and Social Development in South and Southeast Asia.

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