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On Re-engaging Asia

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This collection of papers focus on the domestic and international politics of Australia's recent engagement with Asia. The theme of Asian engagement appears to be of particular pertinence to the current study of Australian politics given numerous pronouncements that we are entering an 'Asian century' in which key Asian economies will gain greater ascendancy and certain Asian states will come to play a more prominent role in global politics. We employ the idea of 're-engagement' in order to show how engagement with Asia has been turned to again and again by Australian governments, albeit in different political and strategic contexts. This collection aims to consider the politics of re-engagement from a number of different theoretical positions as well as from a number of different perspectives (be it international relations/foreign policy, domestic politics, identity politics, or from the perspective of bilateral Asian partners). Emphasis is placed not simply on the foreign policy prerogatives behind re-engagement but also on the implications of the 'Asian century' for domestic politics.

This special issue of *Australian Journal of Political Science* focuses on the theme of Australia's re-engagement with Asia seeking to uncover the ways in which, in recent years, the Australian government has sought to reassert the significance of its relations with specific Asian states (in

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particular Japan, China, Indonesia and India) and Asian regional forums such as ASEAN. Such strategies of engagement can be read within the context of pronouncements that we are entering an 'Asian century' – in which key Asian economies will gain greater ascendancy and certain Asian states will come to play a more prominent role in global politics. Although Australia's relationship with Asia has always played a particularly important role in shaping its international and domestic policies, this special issue focuses on how and why Asia has become increasingly central to Australian politics and policy-making over the last two decades. The concept of 're-engagement' with Asia is not intended to imply that engagement has halted and been re-commenced but rather that engagement has been turned to again and again, albeit in different political and strategic contexts. The theme of re-engagement is perhaps best encapsulated in the opening line of David Walker's book *Anxious Nation* (1999, 1): '[o]ne of the most remarkable features of Australian history is the periodic rediscovery of our proximity to Asia'. It would appear that in the context of claims that we are now living in an Asian Century in which the power of China and India will come to eclipse that of the US, we are living yet again in one such historical juncture.

Engagement with Asia has, invariably, been shaped by the prevalent political climate, with the Keating, Howard and Rudd governments employing relatively distinct strategies of engagement. Thus the Keating government's engagement with Asia was based on a conception of a postcolonial Australia, independent of its British heritage, carving out its own unique identity, while still retaining links with its traditional allies (Keating 1992; Johnson 2002, 174-7). The Keating government's engagement with Asia was tied to the government's twin commitments to economic globalization (or more specifically, neoliberalization) and multiculturalism as part of a programme of economic and cultural modernization (Capling 2008a, 608). Howard, by contrast, argued that Australia need not choose between its history and its identity. Australia could celebrate its predominantly British heritage and privilege

traditional alliances, while still having good relations, including trade relations, with its Asian neighbours (Howard 1995, 15; Johnson 2007, 200).

As a number of scholars have noted (e.g. D'Cruz and Steele 2003), and as a number of papers in this special issue reinforce, Australia's recent engagement with Asia is highly ambivalent. This is seen, for example, in the way in which Australia continues to promote itself as a 'bridge' between Asia and the US, for example in regard to the G20 (Rudd 2009a, 2009d) or in regard to proposals for tackling climate change (Wong 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). Such strategies presuppose a construction of Australia's identity in international affairs as a geographically close, yet essentially external, actor in Asia's political and economic affairs. Indeed, Australia's identity as a non-Asian state is stated relatively explicitly in some versions of conservative thought. The former foreign minister under Howard, Alexander Downer, in an interview some months after the Coalition's election defeat, characterised engagement with Asia in the following terms:

I think the Howard years will always be remembered for building Australia's confidence in itself... From a country that was pleading to be accepted in its own neighbourhood to a point where it was almost embarrassing, and a country that was debating its own identity, to a country that is embraced in its own neighbourhood as a significant albeit occasionally controversial contributor to the neighbourhood and a country that is proud of its identity and understands its place in the world. (Alexander Downer cited in Lyons 2008, 11)

Despite Downer's attempt to characterise Australian policy towards Asia in terms of this narrative of Australia 'finding its place in the world', as Capling (2008a) notes there was no such clear-cut narrative underlining Australia's relations with Asia. Rather, the Howard government's engagement with Asia was frequently propelled by a politics of pragmatism (see also Wesley 2007; Cotton and

Ravenhill 2007) – engagement took place due to the rising economic power of China, in response to the Bali bombings and the Boxing Day tsunami and with the fostering of closer political ties with a democratising Indonesia. Furthermore, the earlier resistance that ASEAN member states (in particular Malaysia under Mahathir Mohamad) had towards Australia's involvement in Asian regional projects has diminished in large part due to fears amongst Southeast Asian states over the growing power of China. Hence 'the more recent "success" of the engagement with Asia project is as much about the responsiveness of the Howard government to events in the region as it is about carefully planned policy trajectories' (Capling 2008a, 619). At the same time, however, the Howard government pursued an overt agenda of fostering and enhancing Australia's political, security and economic ties with the US (Clarke 2008, 286), a strategy that Kelton (2008, 31) notes was propelled by fears within middle Australia about strategies of Asian engagement.

For Rudd, whose credentials as a political leader thoroughly engaged with the Asian region (and, crucially, with China) were stressed during the 2007 election campaign, a key reason behind the Coalition's electoral defeat was its failure to recognise the global power shifts associated with the rise of India and China.¹ Arguing that 'the world was changing around them [Australians] in ways that were potentially quite threatening to their long term interests' Rudd went on to state that:

Australians were becoming more concerned that they were now facing a much more complex world than ever before. With China and India looming to dominate the 21st Century, just as the United States and the United Kingdom had dominated the 20th. (Rudd 2008)

Such sentiments hinted at a break with the Howard government's tendency to prioritise ties with the US over those of regional powers (a tendency encapsulated in Howard's much criticised 'deputy sheriff' comment). By contrast, Australia, Rudd seemed to suggest, needed to wake up to

the new economic and political realities of the 'Asian Century'. Thus education reform and improvements to broadband technologies were presented as central to Australia's economic success in the face of rising Asian economic competitiveness (Rudd 2008) and Rudd expressed his concern at the decline of Asian language teaching and raised the need for Australians to be more culturally literate in their region (Rudd, *Parliamentary Debates Representatives* 10 May 2007, 134). Foreign Minister Stephen Smith (2009a) has particularly drawn attention to the need to improve Australia's Mandarin language teaching ability.

Despite the fact that the Rudd Government is frequently portrayed as being both more Asia focussed and more 'Asia literate', as many of the papers in this issue point out, the Rudd Government's engagement with Asia also cannot be understood in terms of a totally coherent strategy or grand narrative – but often tends to echo the 'pragmatic' approach of the Howard Government (Sheridan 2009) and, at worse, embodies only an (albeit important) symbolic commitment to enhancing Australian ties with Asia. This is seen most clearly in the somewhat contradictory stance that the Rudd government has taken on the issue of multilateralism. Although the Rudd government has sought to endorse multilateralism in its calls for an Asia-Pacific Community by 2020 (Walters 2009), it has continued with the pragmatic bilateralism (Kerr and Tow 2007) of the Howard years in its continued pursuit of preferential trade agreements (PTAs) with specific Asian states (notably Japan and China). Even the recently concluded ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area sits at odds with the government's claims in opposition that it was in favour of the pursuit of multilateral negotiations on trade liberalisation through the WTO (Capling 2008b; Ravenhill 2010). Commentators have suggested that such trade agreements bring very limited benefits (Dee and Gali 2005) and are only pursued in the face of a narrowing of alternatives – specifically in relation to the collapse of multilateral trade negotiations at the WTO (Dee 2008). Furthermore, the Australian government has continued with the Howard government's tendency to

¹ This was, of course, not the sole reason given for the electoral defeat. Rudd also pointed to economic factors such as interest rate rises, concerns about the limits of the resources boom, the need for technological and

engage with Asia with an eye on the mores of middle-Australia – seen most alarmingly in the re-igniting of the ‘China threat’ in the current Defence White paper (see Tubilewicz, this volume). What connects the strategies of Asian engagement endorsed by the Keating, Howard and Rudd governments, is an emphasis on the instrumental value of Asian engagement – most notably, reflecting the economic importance of Asian states (particularly Japan, China and increasingly India) to Australia’s economic viability in a competitive global economy (Stevenson 2008, 172; see further Swan 2009; Smith 2009a and 2009b). And yet, the implications of Australia’s relationship with Asia go far beyond foreign and security policy, trade policy or even questions of values and identity. The projected rise of the Indian and Chinese economies will not only impact upon trade policy but also have far-reaching implications for technology, environment, cultural, and education policy as well as domestic economic policy.

For example, what does the rise of statist capitalism in China, or the relatively interventionist role of the state in countries ranging from South Korea to Singapore, mean in terms of Australia’s linkage to a US-centric model of neoliberalism (particularly in the face of the rising criticism of the Anglo-American laissez-faire neoliberalism that exacerbated the subprime mortgage meltdown)? Are we likely to see a continuing policy shift away from neoliberalism, and if so, what the implications of this shift in terms of our relations with Asia? After all, even before the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), Rudd (2007) had identified market failure in areas such as broadband, negatively contrasting the Howard government’s performance with the major role of the Singaporean and South Korean governments in providing high speed broadband as an essential part of their countries’ economic infrastructure. Rudd’s (2009b, 20) major essay on the GFC not only considerably strengthened his pre-existing critique of neoliberalism but also acknowledged the ‘long-term geo-political implications of the implosion on Wall Street’ including ‘its impact on the future strategic leverage of the West in general and the United States in particular’ (see further

educational investment, and fears concerning climate change and water resources (see Rudd 2008).

Swan 2009; Smith 2009b). Thus Asian 'competitiveness' matters not simply because Australia is able to export coal, iron ore and crude petroleum to booming Asian nations, but because certain Asian states may well provide some alternative strategies for economic governance. At the same time, Asian 'competitiveness' also matters because of the direct impact it will have on the nature of the Australian domestic economy. As Treasury secretary Ken Henry (2009) has pointed out, China and India's demand for mineral commodities could result in a 'two speed' economy in which manufacturing and other sectors find it much harder to compete for capital and labour with the resources sector, with possible ongoing reductions in real wages as a result. Indeed, Henry (2009) argues that 'the re-emergence of China and India ... has set up a set of structural adjustments that will challenge [Australian] policy-makers for decades'. It is the intersections between international and domestic policy that this special issue particularly seeks to draw attention to. Once again, it is noticeable that in both domestic and international policy, engagement with Asia is seen as being both extraordinarily positive but also as potentially challenging or even threatening.

Evaluating Asian Engagement

The title of the recently released 2009 Defence White Paper, 'Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century' (DOD 2009), conveys an image of 'Asia' as both offering opportunity and posing threat. The papers in this special issue all demonstrate the myriad ways in which these themes of opportunity and threat are played out in both Australia's international and domestic politics. This special issue brings together scholars working on Australian domestic politics and the international relations of Asia/Australia in order to unpack what the 'Asian Century' means from an Australian perspective (as well as understandings of what engagement with Australia means from the perspective of Australia's Asian 'neighbours'). In particular, the contributors to this special issue reflect on either or both of the following questions: Firstly, what are the domestic implications for Australia of engagement with Asia? For example, what will be the impact of engagement in terms

of specific policy shifts or broader understandings of Australian identity and citizenship? And, secondly, how might we evaluate the international implications of Australia's engagement with Asia? For example, what role can Australia play in Asian-centred regional forums or in regional security policy and practice? Or, as Griffiths and Wesley argue in their paper in this issue, what are the implications for Australia's diplomatic practice as the diplomatic environment shifts ever increasingly away from Western states and diplomatic culture.

What is evident from the broad range of papers presented here is that the issue of Asian engagement (or 're-engagement') has been understood in very different ways – 'Asia' is understood as a tangible geographical region, as an important idea or symbol (that plays a role in (re)constructing Australian identity and notions of citizenship, and in terms of specific bi-lateral relations with states in the Asian region. This diversity reflects the fact that the papers included in this special issue bring together a number of different theoretical positions and have approached the topic of Australia's re-engagement with Asia using a variety of different lenses (be it Australian domestic politics, identity politics, international relations or from the perspective of bi-lateral partners). The theoretical and empirical diversity of the papers in this issue reflects, in many ways, the variety of perspectives on Asian engagement that exist within Australia (Beeson and Jayasuriya 2009).

We open this special issue with a paper by Martin Griffiths and Michael Wesley that traces the evolution of Australian policy towards Asia. The authors suggest that, diplomatically, Australia has always viewed itself as a middle power, part of a Western status quo and has tended to punch above its weight in international affairs (and in particular in its dealings with Asian states). The rising importance of Asia as a region and specific Asian states (notably China) both politically and economically poses a significant challenge to the way in which Australia has traditionally regarded itself in relation to the Asian region – as either a representative of Western (in particular, US) political interests, or as a 'bridge' between the West and Asia. The authors suggest 'that Asia's

rivalries are no longer subordinate to global dynamics, rather they may be driving them' and that this means that 'Australia's diplomatic challenge is to understand Asia's power dynamics on their own terms'.

Whilst Griffith and Wesley's paper is less focussed on the domestic politics of Asian engagement, the paper by Kanishka Jayasuriya is usefully read alongside this account of Australia as a 'middle power'. Whereas Griffiths and Wesley point out that Australia's self-appointed status as a (Western) middle power served, in a sense, to inflate Australia's sense of importance in its dealings with Asian states and regional forums, Jayasuriya suggests that the concept also fundamentally shaped domestic politics – in particular, a politics of statehood and citizenship centred on exclusionary identity-based claims that were implicit to the Australian Settlement. In the process, Jayasuriya traces the influence of differing visions of relations to Asia on domestic models of governance, including forms of early twentieth century racially exclusionary labourism, Hawke and Keating's neo-liberal modernisation project and Howard's conception of protecting 'Australian values'.

David Walker's paper provides an important (cultural) historical grounding to the analysis of Australia's relations with Asia. The paper explores the dominant tropes that continue to circulate in Australia's understandings of engagement with Asia. Walker's paper reminds us that debates over Australia's relationship with Asia also have a long history in the politics of popular culture. He establishes key continuities, including arguments going back to the 1880s regarding the need to engage with Asia and to improve Australians' understanding of Asia. However, Walker notes that the need to engage with Asia was not always seen in a positive light. It was sometimes driven by a fear of Asian 'cleverness' — an anxiety that Walker also detects in contemporary political debate. Similarly, that anxiety did not only have racial inflections but also gendered ones, and included a belief that effete cosmopolitan elites were potentially betraying ordinary Australians. Walker suggests that the diverse arguments of Howard, Keating and Rudd, amongst others, need to be

located in the broader, historical cultural context that helped to frame conceptions of the relationship between Australia and Asia.

The paper by Carol Johnson, Pal Ahluwalia and Greg McCarthy builds upon Walker's analysis, showing how Australia's ambivalent relationship with Asia has evolved in Australian government policy and the key differences in policy that underpinned Labor and Liberal approaches, particularly in regard to the Howard years. There are clear links between the Rudd government's policies and those of its more recent Labor predecessors, although Rudd is more aware than Keating or Whitlam of the possibility that Australia may be left behind in its region. Above all, the paper argues that one cannot understand relations with Asia just in terms of foreign relations between Australia and a range of Asian countries. Domestic political considerations played a very influential role, including debates over immigration and issues of Australian 'values' and 'identity'. The authors conclude that "Asia" was not just a region, or a collection of trading partners, it was a potent sign mobilised by Australian politicians for domestic political advantage'.

These questions of identity are also taken up in Anthony Burke's paper. Burke suggests that identity politics have played a significant role (although they are not, he argues, the only factor) in shaping engagements between Australia and Asia. Burke seeks to reject fixed notions of 'Australian' and 'Asian' identity in favour of an understanding of identity as 'neither stable nor deep rooted' and argues for a de-emphasis on identity ('or at least its profound ethical and political transformation') in order to build a more meaningful basis for co-operation centred around cosmopolitan political ideals. The author tentatively suggests that an East Asian cosmopolitanism underpinned by the emergence of an ASEAN human rights framework could form the basis for dialogue with Australia in addressing common problems. Burke warns, however, that if this is to take place 'Australia would do well to avoid narcissistic boasts about Western liberal values and altruism'.²

² See also Higgott and Nossal (2008) for a discussion of Australia's status as a liberal democratic state and the implications of this for its engagement with Asia.

One potential area for the building of co-operative engagement in this manner is in confronting the issue of climate change. However, as Doyle and Chaturvedi argue in their paper, the way in which Australian governments have sought to understand climate change too often reflects 'realist, affluent-world climate frames'. Furthermore, common to the arguments presented in many of the other papers in this issue, the authors also point to the role of ideas of an Asian 'threat' (be it in the form of China's rising carbon emissions or flows of so-called climate change refugees) in influencing the political terrain within which Australia has debated the climate change issue. This 'securitization' of climate change (seen for example in the 2009 Defence White Paper), the authors' argue, feeds into the construction of an Australian national identity by giving rise to 'cartographic anxieties about safeguarding boundaries of "our" identity and prosperity ("our way of living") in the wake of allegedly threatening flows and forces (including migrations) allegedly unleashed by the unfolding climate change.'

The final three contributions to this special issue move away from the broad brush analysis of Australia-Asia engagements and turn to look to specific bilateral relations between Australia and key Asian states (India, Indonesia and China). These contributions differ significantly from the other papers in this issue, which have tended to emphasise Australian-Asian engagements from an Australian perspective. These final three contributions (two papers and one research note) are focussed much more on how the relationship is perceived from the perspective of key Asian states.

Priyambudi Sulistiyanto focuses on the Australia-Indonesia relationship arguing that the democratisation that has taken place in Indonesia since the fall of Soeharto has acted to strengthen the ties that exist between these two neighbouring states. This paper emphasises the role of key players and actors involved in shaping the Indonesian side of the relationship (such as think tanks and parliamentary bodies) which have come to play an increasingly important role in foreign policy-making in the democratic era. Democratization has opened up foreign policy-making to a greater range of civil society influences and Sulistiyanto suggests that this will have a number

of different impacts on the evolution of the Australia-Indonesia relationship. On the one hand, there exist within civil society voices that are deeply critical of Australia's policies toward Indonesia. But on the other hand, the author points to the role that Australian-educated public intellectuals and networks of ordinary citizens (including an Indonesian student *diaspora* based in Australia) can play in strengthening the ties between the two states. Furthermore, democratization has engendered a greater openness to critical voices within domestic civil society and, argues the author, this means that the Indonesian government is better able to accommodate and deal with potential criticisms of its policies that come from Australia. In this sense, democratization may well serve to undermine Indonesian fears of an interventionist Australia in favour of a spirit of neighbourliness (*hidup bertetangga*).

Whereas the Australia-Indonesia relationship has attracted much media and scholarly attention (see, for example, Ball and Wilson 1991; Mackie 2007; Philpott 2001; Gyngell 2007), the central argument articulated in the paper by Peter Mayer and Purnendra Jain is that Indian-Australian relations have been marked by neglect on both sides. Australia has tended to focus on East and Southeast Asia in its foreign policy-making while India's global interests tended to exclude any focus whatsoever on Australia. More recently the relationship has shifted. In part, this is a reflection of India's growing economic status but it is also a reflection of the controversies over the supply of uranium to India and, most recently, the diplomatic fall out over attacks on Indian students in Australia. Nonetheless, the relationship does appear somewhat one-sided. Thus, 'Australia has begun to move India from the periphery of its Asia vision' but 'India does not position Australia highly on its diplomatic agenda', although the authors tentatively suggest that this may be shifting.

Later events reinforce Jain and Mayer's argument regarding Australia's position. Foreign Minister Smith (2009b) recently acknowledged that 'for many decades, Australian Governments underappreciated India, its potential and its importance for the future not just of our region, but of

the world.' On his late 2009 trip to India, Rudd made it particularly clear that such underappreciation is no longer the case. Rudd (2009c) acknowledged the importance of India given, as Nehru had foreseen, 'the rise of Asia following centuries of European colonialism to become the centre of global strategic and economic gravity that beckons for the century ahead'. He stressed the common values, including support for democratic institutions, which India and Australia shared and emphasised not just the economic, but also the strategic importance of India's role as a result.

It is crucial that the shifts in economic power from west to east do not open the door to instability and conflict. History teaches us that times of change in the distribution of global power can be potentially dangerous. And this is why an India which is economically strong, an India anchored in the principles of pluralism and political democracy, an India deeply committed to the building of the global and regional institutions of cooperation is so important (Rudd 2009c).

Prime Ministers Rudd and Singh (2009) also announced a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.

Rudd's emphasis on India's strategic role may also suggest that India is increasingly seen as balancing China. Our final contribution takes the form of a research note, and considers the Australia-China relationship by providing an account of China's reaction to the 2008 Defence White Paper. In this contribution, Czeslaw Tubilewicz suggests that the Defence White Paper's portrayal of China as a challenge to US pre-eminence in the region as well as a regional security threat represented a significant shift in Sino-Australian relations. Whereas Australia's bilateral relations with China had, prior to the Howard years, been broadly shaped by Sino-US relations, under Howard Australia began to forge a closer, less US-driven relationship with China. For many

commentators in China, the Defence White Paper signals a return to the politics of the past driven by fears of China's economic and military power. More astute political analysts in China, however, recognised that the portrayal of China in the White Paper was driven more by the desire to portray Rudd as a 'China Realist' to a domestic political audience rather than the existence of any imminent Chinese threat to regional politics.

Conclusion

The papers published in this issue therefore reflect, and cover, a variety of views and issues regarding Australia's engagement with Asia. Nonetheless, there are a number of common themes that have emerged. These themes include the ambivalence underlying Australia's engagement that can reflect the enduring significance of identity politics, as well as key geopolitical and economic concerns, and concerns regarding the authoritarian and undemocratic nature of some Asian regimes. The need to historicize Australia's engagement with Asia has also been emphasised given both the complexity of the trajectory of that relationship and the underlying continuities which are still evident, including in conceptions of Asia as both promise and threat. Historicizing that relationship also contributed to the 'problematization' of some influential contemporary understandings of Australia's possible role in regard to Asia. These include those conceptions of Australia's 'bridging' role that underestimate both the implications of Australia's traditionally Western positioning, and the undifferentiated conceptions of 'Asia' that can result.

Australian-produced political science scholarship has produced a significant body of research focussed on East and Southeast Asia (for a review see Kirkvliet 2010; Seabrooke and Elias 2010; Sharman 2009, 221-2; Lee Koo 2009, 422-3), Australia's relations with Asia (see Beeson and Jayasuriya 2009) and Asian Regionalism (see Ravenhill 2010).³ Nonetheless,

³ Rather than overview all of this literature, we instead point the reader toward a number of recent reviews of these areas of study.

concerns have been raised that even within Australian International Relations, scholarship shows tendencies of neglecting the region in which we live, raising fears that 'our work may become divorced from our local and regional empirical realities' (Bellamy and Davies 2009, 322). More importantly, however, there will be a need for far more analyses of the domestic politics of Australia's Asian-engagement as the 'Asian Century' progresses. With Asia's economic and geopolitical rise, the major domestic political implications of engagement will extend far beyond debates over national identity or immigration to have an increasing influence on issues such as industry, technology, economic, cultural and education policy (including arguably the Amero and Eurocentric nature of the intellectual traditions taught).⁴ In other words, we would call upon scholars whose work focuses on Australia's domestic politics to give more thought to how the economic, social and political transformations associated with the 'Asian century' might play out in their work. As Bellamy and Davies (2009, 322-3) argue, this is not just a challenge for scholarship, but also raises pedagogical concerns about how we as academics produce Asian-literate students.

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