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The definitive version is available at

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2009.1522a.x>

Beeson, M. and Jayasuriya, K. (2009) The politics of asian engagement: Ideas, institutions, and academics. Australian Journal of Politics & History, 55 (3). pp. 360-374.

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The Politics of Asian Engagement: Ideas, Institutions, and Academics

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The study of Australia's Asian engagement — just as much as the history of the process itself — has been shaped by structural shifts in the international system and the global political economy as they reverberate through domestic political debates. As a consequence, ideas about Asian engagement tell us as much about the character of national political debates as they do about Australian policy-makers' perceptions of the region. Understandings of Asia as a transnational political space are shaped by national conflicts and struggles over issues such as communism or national identity. Ideas and disputes over Australia's relationship with Asia become closely aligned with conflict between conservative and radical academic approaches to Asia. With the end of the Cold War in the 1980s and 1990s, the triumph of neoliberalism and the waning of ideological politics of the 1960s were mirrored in academic approaches that adopted a policy or cultural approach to Asia.

Introduction

Understandings of “Asian Engagement” — or ideas about, and policies toward, what we now think of as East Asia — hold up a mirror to the central conflicts, issues and struggles that have shaped political life in Australia. The study of Asian engagement — just as much as the history of the process itself — has been shaped by structural shifts in the international system and the global political economy as they reverberate through domestic political debates. As a consequence, ideas about Asian engagement tell us as much about the character of national political debates as they do about Australian policy-makers' perceptions of the region.

We identify four key periods that have shaped ideas about Asian engagement in the academic literature on Asian politics and international relations. Constraints of space make this review somewhat arbitrary and artificial, but for our purposes we treat the period between Federation and the Cold War as a single entity, initially dominated by imperial relations and the search for political identity within a common order shaped by Britain. This period then gave way to a time when the study of Asia was dominated by the imperatives of the Cold War and the strategic priorities of Australia's new “great and powerful friend”, the United States.

It is a measure of just how much had changed in both Australia itself and within the wider East Asian region, that our third period is marked by an unambiguous and unapologetic “turn to Asia” signalled by what came to be known as policies of Asian

¹ We like to thank Roderick Pitty and two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on this article. The usual disclaimer applies.

Engagement. Or so it seemed. In reality, the process and the very nature of Asian engagement were surprisingly fluid and uncertain, and the Howard government's tenure marked another significant recalibration of Australia's foreign policy priorities. Indeed, Australia-Asia relations during the late 1990s were marked by a distinct cooling in enthusiasm for "Asia", and a renewed interest in reviving older strategic ties with the US. The importance of the relationship with the US and the continuing significance of strategic issues was highlighted and driven by the response to the events of September 11. This shift marks the start of our fourth period, which initially saw a renewed preoccupation with geopolitics, and subsequently came once again to be dominated by economic issues in general and the "rise of China" in particular.

Although our periodisation is arbitrary, it helps us to make sense of the scholarship that has emerged around the politics of Asian engagement. One of the themes that emerges when seen in a longer historical sweep is that domestic discourses about "Asia" have reflected a shifting external order over which Australian policy-makers have had little control. Our approach to the intellectual history of debates over the engagement with the Asian region is that these debates have been essential to constituting notions of nationhood, statehood and citizenship. In this way we argue that debates over Asian engagement were refracted through domestic political debates over the nature of citizenship and political identity.²

September 11 was a quintessential example of this: not only did these events profoundly affect Australia's foreign relations, but they also generated a new set of national and international debates around terrorism and national security. These debates were also reflected in the growth of an academic "security studies industry" that framed Asian engagement in terms of risk and threat rather than economic opportunity. Whatever we may think of the content of these analyses, they are in keeping with an established Australian tradition which has seen Australian policy-makers and academics alike largely adopting a reactive role that attempts to respond to, or make sense of, events and even ideas over which they have only marginal influence. Nevertheless, attempting to identify these ideas and the domestic institutions through which they have been mediated helps us to understand why relations between Australia and the region of which it is geographically — if not always geopolitically — such an important part, have been so contentious and susceptible to political and ideational change.

Political Identity between the Empire and the Pacific

The term "Asian engagement" came to prominence in the 1980s as a consequence of the determined diplomatic initiatives of the Bob Hawke and Paul Keating period. However, intellectual ideas behind what became known as "Asian engagement" have a longer history. David Walker's work highlights the deep-seated cultural and political anxieties created by what was seen as the fundamental dilemma of a settler society with a European history in a culturally hostile neighbourhood.³ In a related vein, Rawdon Dalrymple argues that the sense of vulnerability was the cornerstone of the Australian foreign policy towards Asia.⁴

² For an elaboration of this approach see Kanishka Jayasuriya, "From British Subjects to Australian Values: A Citizenship Building Approach to Australia-Asia Relations", *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 14, 4 (2008), pp. 479–495.

³ David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St Lucia, 1999).

⁴ Rawdon Dalrymple, *Continental Drift: Australia's Search for Regional Identity* (London, 2003).

Between the First World War and the Second World War, the study of Australia's foreign relations reflected the tensions and contradictions of a settler state coming to terms with its position as a remote outpost of empire. Consequently, we initially focus on a group of public intellectuals and academics who attempted to chart a more independent policy within the context of an imperial order. The study of Asia in this pre-war period reflected a search for constitutional and political identity — an identity that was to help forge a conception of sovereignty and statehood, in the context of the Empire. On this view, engagement with what is now known as the Asia Pacific is centrally concerned with issues of political and national identity.⁵

Yet, as Neville Meaney points out,⁶ there were important intellectual and political variants in this search for an independent and distinctive political identity rooted within the common racial and cultural order of the British Empire. These views range across notions of imperial federation, relative independence within the Empire, and nationalist ideas. Especially important in this regard are those liberal imperialists such as the historian Keith Hancock who articulated a view of the Empire as a political association of dominions with a relative degree of autonomy.⁷ This political association was based on cooperation organised around respect for “shared ideals” that presupposed a common racial and cultural consciousness. In Hancock's view, the political constitution of the Empire in terms of shared ideals and norms — which bear striking similarity to Hedley Bull's conception of international society⁸ — provided for a degree of relative autonomy in national and foreign affairs.

Contending views of Australia's involvement in Asia—or really in the Pacific—were a touchstone for a wider debate on political identity within the British Empire. The ideas of “liberal imperialists” laid the foundation for a nascent understanding of Australia as a middle power between London and Asia. These views found a hospitable reception within the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) based in the United States, with branches in New South Wales and Victoria. The IPR grew out of the general intellectual climate of liberal internationalism at the end of the First World War. The institutes were devoted to “defining ‘fundamental and universal’ Christian values, which might be made a common basis of ‘understanding and motivation for Pacific Peoples’”.⁹ It was a transnational intellectual network that fostered interest and engagement with the Pacific in a way that chimed with the growing military and economic power of the United States. A notable example of the work of the IPR was the study by Jack Shepherd — an Australian based at the IPR in New York — entitled *Australian Interests in the Far East* published in 1939.¹⁰ In some ways this remarkable

⁵ A excellent account of the intellectual history of international relations in the pre-Second World War period and the role of the Australian Institute of International Affairs is to be found in James Cotton, “Celebrating 75 Years: The Australian Institute of International Affairs and the Australia in the region”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 62, 4 (2008), pp. 541-557.

⁶ Neville Meaney, “In history's page: Identity and Myth” in Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward *Australia's Empire* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 363-387.

⁷ Keith Hancock, *Australia* (London, 1930).

⁸ Hedley Bull *The Anarchical Society* (New York, 1977).

⁹ Nicholas Brown, “Australian intellectuals and the image of Asia 1920-1960: Australian perceptions of Asia”, *Australian Cultural History*, Vol. 9 (1990), pp. 80-92.

¹⁰ Jack Shepherd, *Australian Interests in the Far East* (New York, 1939). Shepherd's work followed in the wake of the John Crawford (1938) analysis of Australia's role in Pacific. He argued that industrial expansion of Japan required an Australian commitment to collective regional security. In the post-war period Crawford was secretary of the Department of Trade and key architect of a pivotal

work foreshadowed the Garnaut Report of the 1980s in highlighting Australia's emerging role as a Pacific power in a culturally distinctive East Asian region with growing developmental potential. Like many other IPR studies, it sought to understand development and international relations through newly emerging social science techniques. The work of those such as Shepherd reflected an attempt to understand economic development in non-European contexts which in some ways anticipated modernisation theories of the 1950s and 1960s albeit without the Cold War backdrop. These early studies sought to understand economic development as an experiment in how "to secure cultural integrity while also engineering economic modernity".¹¹ Hence the Asia Pacific provided some clear lesson for Australia's own political and economic development.

A pivotal figure in this liberal milieu was Frederick Eggleston. He was perhaps the most prominent public intellectual of the interwar period. He was a Deakinite liberal, Victorian Cabinet Minister, adviser to Billy Hughes at the Paris Peace Conference, and Minister to China during the Second World War. He was also a key member of the IPR. In this capacity Eggleston visited Japan in 1929 and "he gained considerable respect for Japanese culture and for the manner in which the country had transformed itself from a medieval to a modern society".¹² The interwar years convinced him that Australia needed to be a Pacific power — to maintain alliance with the US but also become more engaged in the Pacific.¹³ Nevertheless, Eggleston remained committed to protecting Australia's British identity that was the source not only of cultural identity but also of its political institutions. For Eggleston as well as for other participants in the IPR network, Pacific engagement was always framed in the context of maintaining Australia's distinctive political identity. In fact, it was not so much a search for Asian engagement, but more a desire to create a distinctive role for Australia in the region while remaining tied to its imperial mooring.

Pacific engagement was also a theme that was of crucial importance to the more British-oriented Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) associated with a group of Melbourne intellectuals. Prominent members of the Institute included Eggleston, John Latham, Robert Garran and Edmund Piesse and, like the IPR, the AIIA was a product of the Paris Peace conference and Wilsonian liberalism. In fact there was considerable institutional overlap between the IPR and the AIIA.¹⁴ More importantly, both institutions were located within a broadly liberal intellectual milieu that combined the Wilsonian strand of liberal internationalism of the interwar period with the liberal imperial tradition represented by individuals such as Hancock and Eggleston. Like the IPR, the AIIA which published the *Austral-Asiatic Bulletin*, sought to grapple with the problems of national identity in a culturally different region moving towards economic

trade agreement with China. In 1960 he became Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies and later became Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University. J.G. Crawford, "Australia as a Pacific Power" in Walter George Keith Duncan, ed., *Australia's Foreign Policy* (Sydney, 1938). This book was published in collaboration with the Australian Institute of International Affairs.

¹¹ Brown, "Australian intellectuals and the image of Asia 1920-1960", p. 81.

¹² Meaney, "In history's page", p. 367

¹³ Warren Osmond, *Frederic Eggleston: An Intellectual in Australian Politics* (Sydney, 1985), see especially pp. 137-45.

¹⁴ See Cotton, "Celebrating 75 Years".

modernity.¹⁵ The *Austral-Asiatic Bulletin* was determined to advocate a more regionally centred economic and foreign policy and the group were especially interested in developing a knowledge and expertise of “Asian affairs”. In comparison with the IPR, this group adopted a more philosophical approach to issues of Pacific engagement.¹⁶

A leading intellectual in this group was William Macmahon Ball, Professor and Head of the Political Science department at Melbourne University. He was the first of the Labor Party intellectuals on foreign affairs, and an active contributor to public debate through newspaper columns and on the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), director of short-wave broadcasting during the war, and Commonwealth member of the Allied council for occupied Japan.¹⁷ In the latter role he was instrumental in proposing the far-reaching land reform program in occupied Japan that won the support of General Macarthur. He was close to Eggleston and was similarly active in the IPR and the Victorian division of the Australian Institute of International Affairs.¹⁸ However his sympathies were with the Labor Party and he had a close though difficult relationship with Herbert Evatt during and after the Second World War.

Ball differed from other members of the IPR in that his contribution to international relations straddled the period between the intellectual flirtation with ideas of Pacific engagement with the region in the pre-war period, and the rise of Asian nationalism and the Cold War ideas of Asia that took root in the post-war period. He, as with most IPR members, desired a more independent Australia with a distinctive political identity that could actively engage with Pacific Asia. However, especially in the light of his post-war experience, Ball had a deeper understanding of the social forces and ideologies shaping the post-colonial world.

These ideas found expression in Ball’s report on his goodwill mission to East Asia where he noted that:

[A] deep-rooted and passionate nationalism was the main political driving force in every country visited. The most striking expression of this nationalism was negative. It was a movement of resistance against (a) ‘political domination’, and (b) economic ‘exploitation’ by foreigners.¹⁹

These ideas came to be more systematically developed in his book on *Nationalism and Communism in Asia* published under the auspices of the Institute of Pacific Relations.²⁰ He makes three broad points: firstly that nationalism is a dynamic force in much of post-war Asia and this deserves recognition in “western” foreign policy; secondly, the importance of socio-economic issues and conflicts in the process of national development; and finally that the study of Asian politics requires an emphasis on the driving desire of Asian countries to forge their own destinies against the “west” or the “east”. Here he picked the rising strength of ideas of non-alignment, neutrality, and

¹⁵ Brown, “Australian intellectuals and the image of Asia 1920-1960”. This article is highly illuminating on the activities of the IPR and AIIA especially in relation to the association between developmentalism and culturalism.

¹⁶ Walker, *Anxious Nation*, pp. 231-232.

¹⁷ Alan Rix, *W. Macmahon Ball: A Pioneer in Australian Asian Policy*, Australians in Asia Series No 3 (Nathan, Qld, 1988).

¹⁸ Osmond, *Frederic Eggleston*.

¹⁹ William Macmahon-Ball, “Goodwill Mission to East Asia”, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. Historical Documents Project (June-October 1948).

²⁰ William MacMahon-Ball, *Nationalism and Communism in East Asia* (Melbourne, 1952).

anti-colonialism, all of which were soon to be enshrined in the resolutions of the Bandung Conference. In making these points, Ball departed considerably from the culturalist notions of Asia that marked the work of members of the IPR and AIIA like Eggleston in the interwar period as well diverging sharply from the Cold War intellectual warriors who came to dominate the study of Asia in the 1950s and 1960s. In his sympathy for, and understanding of, local social forces and ideologies — though it needs to be understood that he did not use class concepts — his work was the natural precursor to the radical work of Herb Feith, Rex Mortimer, John Girling and Richard Robison. But unfortunately the path laid out by Ball was not followed by mainstream international relations scholars who genuflected to Cold War politics.

Cold War Politics and Understandings of Asia

Asian engagement in the Cold War period was influenced by three central factors: the alliance between the United States and Australia in the Korean and Vietnam Wars; the dominance of anti-communism in national political debate and concomitant paranoia about China, and the emerging anti-Vietnam war movement and its influence on the academic study of Asia. Ideas and disputes over Australia's relationship with Asia become closely aligned with conflict between conservative and radical academic approaches to Asia. On the Right, Australia's external relations were seen largely in geopolitical terms and the domestic authoritarianism that emerged in Asia was understood as a function of "modernization". On the Left — which remained marginal within the academic and political establishment—external relations were understood in terms of the category of imperialism, and Asian political conflict in terms of radical nationalism and class politics. At the same time the ruling conservative coalition relied on Cold War politics and anti-communism to cement its hold on power. In this it relied heavily on the anti-communist and Catholic Democratic Labor Party, a breakaway from the Australian Labor Party. As this Cold War politics took shape, the study of Asian engagement became a proxy for domestic political debates and conflicts.

Ball was one of the few writing in the Cold War period who viewed economic development as the key to securing Australia's relationship to Asia. On the other hand, the mainstream academic community — like the Australian government — viewed stable security and military relationships with the United States as an indispensable element of Australia's engagement with Asia. Richard Higgott and Jim George persuasively argue that Australian international relations scholarship sought to identify protectors and threats to Australian security. On this view ANZUS was understood to "be Australia's bulwark against the 'red' and 'yellow' threats from the Soviet Union, China and the inevitable succession of falling dominoes in South-east Asia".²¹

Owen Harries well reflected this Cold War mindset when he argued that communist aggression and China could only be contained by support for American intervention in Asia.²² Harries later went on to become a key adviser to Andrew Peacock during the Fraser government, and produced in 1979 the influential report on the third world in the global order. After the election of the Labor government, Harries became editor of

²¹ Richard Higgott and Jim George, "Tradition and change in the study of international relations in Australia", *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 11, 4 (1990), p. 426. In a similar vein, see Michael Wesley and Tony Warren, "Wild colonial ploys? Currents of thought in Australian foreign policy", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, 1 (2000), pp. 9-26.

²² Owen Harries, "Is Communism a Threat to Australia?" in John Wilkes, ed., *Communism In Asia: A Threat to Australia?* (Sydney, 1967).

The National Interest — the home of American neo-conservatism. To be sure, the older culturalist understanding that shaped interwar interpretations of Asia and the Pacific did not disappear, but these understandings now became one dimension of the crusade against communism.²³

In the 1960s, international relations as an academic discipline became more professional and institutionalised. While institutions such as the AIIA continued to play an important role in shaping public policy and discussion over Asia, academic institutions came to play a prominent role in shaping interpretations of Asia. The pre-eminent academic institution was the Department of International Relations at the Australian National University. In its understanding of Asia it remained a bastion of the “realist school” of international relations. One of the consequences of realist dominance was that Australia’s relationship with Asia was primarily reflected through the prism of the global balance of power and the role of the United States in the region. There were some exceptions, such as the work of Gregory Clark on China. Curiously, Hedley Bull, who had a major influence on Australian international relations, had very little impact on the study of Asia.²⁴ In fact if anything, the institutions like the IPR and AIIA in the interwar period, with their emphasis on shared values and norms, were more in line with what was later to be known as the English School.

The attitudes of the international relations academy toward Asia became the battleground for Cold War politics. Three central issues continued to dominate the debates regarding Australia’s understanding of Asia: i) debates over the Vietnam war; ii) engagement with China, and iii) the response to the New Order regime in Indonesia that had brutally suppressed the Indonesian Communist party. This amounted to an academic Cold War that paralleled the politics played out on the national and international stage.

One especially prominent figure in this academic Cold War was the economist Heinz Arndt who founded the Indonesian Economy Project at the ANU and the *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*.²⁵ This journal proved to be highly influential in shaping the ideas of the economic technocrats advising Suharto’s New Order government. Arndt’s political commitments reveal that he was a “consistent supporter of the Cold War policies of the United States and Australia from the time of the Korean war up to and including Vietnam engagement, and he expressly subscribes to the ‘domino’ theory of communist expansionism”.²⁶ His writing on Indonesia reflected a desire for economic modernisation combined with political order and stability as seen through the lens of the battle between the “West” and communism.

On the other side of the academic Cold War, opposition to the Vietnam War generated interest in Marxist and radical approaches to understanding political and social change in Asia. Despite the many differences in approach, this critical work remained within the spirit of Ball rather than of Arndt. The edited volumes on

²³ See for example along these lines Thomas B. Millar, *Australia’s Foreign Policy* (Sydney, 1968); J.D.B. (Bruce) Miller, “Communist China’s Foreign Policy” in John Wilkes, ed., *Leninism and Asia* (Sydney, 1967), and Harries, “Is Communism a Threat to Australia?”. All were leading Australian international relations scholars during this period.

²⁴ Bull supported the shift towards a more independent policy during the Whitlam Period.

²⁵ He was for a time a co-editor with Peter Coleman of the conservative journal *Quadrant*.

²⁶ Rex Mortimer, “From Ball to Arndt : The Liberal Impasse in Australian Scholarship on Southeast Asia” in Rex Mortimer, ed., *Showcase State : the Illusion of Indonesia’s Accelerated Modernisation* (Sydney, 1973), p. 124.

Australian political economy by the political economists Ted Wheelwright and Ken Buckley in their five volumes *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism* sought to place Australia's political and economic developments within the global capitalist order. John Girling, working against the grain at the Australian National University, challenged the logic of the domino theory of communist expansion, and sought to develop a political economy explanation of US intervention in the third world.²⁷ At the Department of Government at Sydney University, Rex Mortimer analysed Indonesian politics and the New Order regime from a dependency perspective.²⁸ Herb Feith at Monash University founded the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies which formed the basis for much critical work on Southeast Asia. Monash provided an especially hospitable environment for anti-war protests and much of the new left inspired by interest in western Marxism.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a Prague spring of sorts on the campuses and within cultural institutions such as the ABC. For example, the ABC's Alan Ashbolt — the first producer of "Four Corners" — played a pivotal role through the program "Lateline" in bringing radical and critical scholarship, including commentary and discussion about political conflicts in Asia, to a broad audience. But this was not a simple analysis of current affairs but an attempt to analyse the social and political transformation in Asia through Marxist or radical methods. The nature of this Prague spring is well summed by Ashbolt:

I believed in fostering the growth of a national consciousness, but also that Australia had been too insular for too long. I believed [...] that the ABC's ideological ties with powerful forces in political society and key institutions in civil society had been too close for too long.²⁹

It needs to be recognised that there were some academics such as the sinologist Stephen Fitzgerald who, while dissenting from the mainstream orthodoxy on China, were not part of the radical camp. Fitzgerald played an important role in shaping the Labor party's view on China, culminating in then opposition leader Gough Whitlam's landmark visit to China in 1971. Fitzgerald, in 1973, became Australia's first Ambassador to China. While many of the academic debates during the Cold War were marred by personal acrimony and bitterness, this period also proved to be — perhaps because of the very personal bitterness — the most creative political debate and discussion on Australia's engagement with Asia. These debates largely disappeared after the end of the Cold War. One exception, though, was the work of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University in the 1990s. Under the directorship of Richard Robison,³⁰ the Centre made a significant contribution to the study of the political economy of Asia establishing a distinctive reputation for the analysis of the interaction of the local and global forces in shaping political and social change. In the 1980s,

²⁷ John Girling, *America and Third World: Revolution and Intervention* (London, 1980); John Girling, "Vietnam and the Domino Theory", *Australian Outlook*, Vol. 21, 1 (1967), pp. 61-70.

²⁸ Mortimer, "From Ball to Arndt".

²⁹ Quoted in David Bowman, "The lion of the ABC", *Australian Policy Online*, 15 June 2005. Available at: <http://www.apo.org.au/webboard/results.html?filename_num=12062> (17 June 2009).

³⁰ Robison was the author of major critical work on the political economy of Indonesia. See Richard Robison, *Indonesia: The Rise of Capital* (Sydney, 1986). He was a graduate student of Rex Mortimer.

Robison's graduate students, including Garry Rodan and Kevin Hewison, produced major works on the political economy of Singapore and Thailand.³¹

The Politics of Markets

With the ending of the Cold War, economics assumed a more central place in Australian foreign policy. This was part of a more general shift from geo-politics to geo-economics, which saw even the United States redefine its "national interest" and its policy priorities.³² For Australia, the growing economic importance of the East Asian region meant that Australian policy-makers had little choice other than to try to establish good relations with their northern neighbours. At the core of this transformation was the remarkable industrialisation and economic expansion of much of East Asia beyond Japan, which rapidly morphed from strategic threat to economic Eldorado. The consequent foreign policies of the Hawke-Keating governments and the pursuit of "Asian engagement" during the 1980s and early 1990s, marked an apparently decisive and irrevocable shift in both the terms of the domestic debate and the way in which the region itself was seen by Australian policy-makers and academics.

These efforts were significantly influenced by the Garnaut Report which effectively provided a blueprint and rationale for closer economic ties with the region.³³ While there has been a good deal of debate about both the Garnaut Report's suggested mode of engagement with, and of the Australian foreign policy establishment's understanding of, the developmental experience in Asia,³⁴ there was and has been less disagreement about the idea that Asia is likely to prove a decisive influence on Australia's economic future. The recent "rise of China" and the recent resource boom in Australia has only reinforced perceptions about the region's economic importance and the necessity of maintaining good relations, however ideologically unpalatable this may be at times.³⁵

Much of the domestic debate in the 1980s and 1990s revolved around the appropriate role of government in driving this process. In this context, the Asian developmental experience became something of an academic Rorschach test: for those observers who thought that an activist "developmental" state had been a central component of the region's remarkable, historically-unprecedented, and largely

³¹ Gary Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialization* (London, 1989); Kevin Hewison, *Bankers and Bureaucrats: Capital and the Role of the State in Thailand* (New Haven, 1989).

³² Mark Beeson and Richard Higgott, "Hegemony, Institutionalism and US Foreign Policy: theory and practice in comparative historical perspective", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, 7 (2005), pp.1173-1188.

³³ Ross Garnaut, *Australia and the Northeast Ascendancy* (Canberra, 1990).

³⁴ Richard Leaver, "The Garnaut Report: The quality of realism", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 44, 1 (1990), pp. 21-28; Trevor Matthews and John Ravenhill, "The neo-classical ascendancy: The Australian economic policy community and Northeast Asian growth" in Richard Robison, ed., *Pathways to Asia: The Politics of Engagement* (St Leonards, 1996), pp. 131-70; Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty, "Still calling Australia home? International integration and the framing of national economic problems in recent official reports", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 51, 1 (1997), pp. 5-20.

³⁵ See Jian Zhang, "Australia and China: Towards a strategic partnership?" in James Cotton and John Ravenhill, eds., *Trading on Alliance Security: Australia in World Affairs 2001-2005* (Melbourne, 2007), pp. 89-111.

unexpected growth, not only were there potential lessons to be learned from this, but they might also have direct policy relevance in Australia. Some thought Australia might even benefit from developing Japanese-style industry policies to compensate for Australia's comparatively lacklustre economic performance.³⁶ At a minimum, others contended that Australian policy-makers needed at least to understand what the sort of policy regimes and strategies other regional economies were employing if they hoped to compete successfully.³⁷

The mainstream view, however — which was seen by some observers as a consequence of the dominance of “economic rationalism” at the top of Australia's policy-making hierarchy³⁸ — was one that advocated domestic reform and the bracing impact of market forces as the cure for Australia's economic malaise. As a consequence, the “turn” toward Asia, which the Hawke-Keating governments largely initiated and drove, was one that was predicated on multilateral institutions at the political level and the unencumbered operation of market forces at the economic level. The centre-piece of this process was the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum, an institution that Australian policy-makers played a prominent part in bringing about, and which reflected the influence and ideas of prominent mainstream economists like Ross Garnaut and his colleague at the ANU's Australia-Japan Research Centre, Peter Drysdale.³⁹

Like the Asian engagement process more generally, APEC has tended to generate wildly divergent responses that tell us as much about the ideological and normative predispositions of the authors as they do about the organisation itself. For the likes of Garnaut and Drysdale, APEC was seen as a mechanism with which East Asians might be convinced of the merits of free trade, neoliberalism and the sort of policy agenda that had figured so prominently in the “Anglo-American” economies since the 1980s.⁴⁰ For critics, however, APEC seemed at odds with historical reality and unlikely to win over sceptical Asian elites who were comfortable with — even proud of — the sort of state-led, neo-mercantilist developmental strategies that had been pioneered by Japan and emulated elsewhere across the region.⁴¹

The fact that Australian commentators could come to such divergent views — not just about the best way of dealing with “Asia”, but the nature of the region's developmental experience more generally — highlighted the politicised nature of the policy debate. On the one hand, ownership of the “engagement” process became

³⁶ See, for example, John Carroll and Robert Manne, eds., *Shutdown: The Failure of Economic Rationalism and How to Rescue Australia* (Melbourne, 1992).

³⁷ Mark Beeson, *Competing Capitalisms: Australia, Japan and Economic Competition in the Asia Pacific* (London: 1999).

³⁸ Michael Pusey, *Economic Rationalism in Canberra: A Nation-Building State Changes Its Mind* (Cambridge, 1991).

³⁹ Peter Drysdale, *International Economic Pluralism: Economic Policy in East Asia and the Pacific* (Sydney, 1988); Peter Drysdale, *Open Regionalism: A Key to Asia's Economic Future*, Pacific Economic Papers, No 197 (Canberra, 1991). An overview of these debates is to be found in Roderic Pitty, “Regional economic co-operation” in Peter Edwards and David Goldsworthy, eds., *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia* (Melbourne, 2003).

⁴⁰ Peter Drysdale and Ross Garnaut, “The Pacific: An application of a general theory of economic integration” in C. Fred Bergsten and Marcus Noland, eds., *Pacific Dynamism and the International Economic System* (Washington, 1993).

⁴¹ Richard Higgott, “APEC – A Skeptical View” in Andrew Mack and John Ravenhill, eds., *Pacific Cooperation: Building Economic and Security Regimes in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Sydney, 1993).

increasingly contested as the importance of the region to Australia's long-term future become clearer and the necessity of maintaining good relations became increasingly apparent.⁴² Some of the institutions and ideas that had underpinned Labor's engagement push were marginalised by a Liberal government that eschewed the "big picture" and concentrated on pragmatic bilateralism.

At times, this led to some rather fanciful and implausible retrospective claims about the relative significance of key historical figures like Bob Menzies — a notorious Anglophile, and not normally noted for his enthusiastic embrace of Asia.⁴³ In fact under the Howard administration, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer commissioned — written by well-known and impartial academics — a history of Australian diplomatic engagement with Asia.⁴⁴ There can be little doubt that the commissioning of this volume was a riposte to Labour's perceived ownership of "Asian engagement". But even less partisan and polemical observers were concerned that Australia's relations with — indeed, the very understanding of — relations with Asia were compromised by a basic lack of "Asia literacy".⁴⁵ The egregious neglect of Asia studies and the under-investment in language skills in Australia over the last decade or so seemed to confirm some of these predictions,⁴⁶ although this has clearly done little to inhibit the development of ever stronger economic links.

Supporters of the Howard government's policy toward the region pointed to the growth of economic interdependency as proof of the efficacy of the Coalition's approach. While the Howard government's policy towards Asia was punctuated by some spectacular and unnecessary own goals — the most notorious of which was the cringe-making "deputy sheriff" episode⁴⁷ — generally, relations with Asia were better than some commentators had feared.⁴⁸ In some ways, they could hardly have been otherwise: the overwhelming geographical and geophysical reality underpinning Australia's relationship with the region was that its resources and supplies of energy meant that, no matter what Asians thought of Australia, its importance as a source of raw materials ensured that it could never be irrelevant to the strategic calculus of regional political elites.⁴⁹

What was most significant and innovative about the Howard government's approach to the region in particular and to foreign policy more generally was a marked preference for bilateral, rather multilateral relationships and a marked disdain for intergovernmental institutions like the United Nations (UN). Remarkably — and hypocritically — enough, Alexander Downer has taken up a position with the UN since

⁴² Meg Gurry, "Identifying Australia's region: From Evatt to Evans", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 49, 1 (1995), pp. 17-32.

⁴³ Martin Jones and Mike Lawrence Smith, *Reinventing Realism: Australia's Foreign and Defence Policy at the Millennium* (London, 2000).

⁴⁴ Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia*.

⁴⁵ Stephen Fitzgerald, *Is Australia an Asian Country?* (Sydney, 1997).

⁴⁶ David T. Hill, "Return to Asian studies", *The Australian*, 23 May 2007.

⁴⁷ When questioned on Australian foreign policy in Asia Howard initially failed to repudiate the idea that Australia would play the role of the US's "deputy sheriff" in maintaining regional stability. See Fred Benchley, "The Howard defense doctrine", *The Bulletin*, 28 September 1999, pp. 22-24.

⁴⁸ Anthony Milner, "What is left of our engagement with Asia?", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, 2 (2000), pp. 177-184.

⁴⁹ Richard Leaver, "Is Australia being economically excluded from Asia?", *Policy, Organisation and Society*, Vol. 20, 1 (2001), pp. 141-156.

quitting politics,⁵⁰ but while he was Australia's Foreign Minister he oversaw a significant shift away from multilateralism. For some, the return to "realism" and the pragmatic pursuit of an apparently self-evident national interest was the key to more effective relations with the region and countries that were seen as inherently problematic and prone to instability.⁵¹ And there was, indeed, some notable success for the Howard government during its incumbency: Australia's rapid response to the disastrous tsunami in Indonesia did more to repair the fragile bilateral relationship than anything else it did during its time in office. As a consequence, there were important revisionist readings of the overall legacy of Howard and his government, which suggested that "the Howard government has not been the disaster for Australia's regional relations that many expected".⁵²

When seen in a longer time frame, however, what was most significant about the Howard government's period in office was the deepening of relations with the United States, something that was driven by the Coalition's ideological proclivities and the return of strategic imperatives to the top of the policy-making agenda.

After 9/11

Australian perspectives on its strategic relations with Asia have often been divergent, if not polarised, reflecting a variety of theoretical and normative assumptions. For more critically-minded observers, Australia's security policies have always been shaped by a pervasive sense of *insecurity* in which "Asia" loomed-large: as we have seen, Australia's predominantly Anglo-Celtic population had been a congenitally "anxious" nation as a consequence of its geographical location.⁵³ Anthony Burke, one of the most thoughtful of a new generation of critical scholars working in Australia, argued that the very basis of security needed to be rethought if we were to understand the way that particular issues became "securitised" and the object of government policies. The Howard government's treatment of asylum seekers and refugees became the *locus classicus* in this regard.⁵⁴

But despite the fact that a number of Australian scholars were beginning to make major contributions to unfolding international debates about the nature of security, the mainstream perspective remained fairly impervious to such innovations. For an older generation of scholars, "Asia" remained a potential source of threats and dangers, even if the discourse became somewhat more sophisticated and nuanced. What came to be described as the "arc of instability" to Australia's north was populated by failing or unreliable states, about which Australian policy-makers need to be on their guard. Geography still mattered.⁵⁵ Paradoxically enough, the selfsame Howard government that had come to office vowing to eschew the "big picture" and concentrate on domestic affairs, found itself involved in more overseas adventures than any

⁵⁰ Peter Hartcher, "Vale, Alexander the not-so-great", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July 2008.

⁵¹ David Martin Jones and Andrea Benvenuti, "Tradition, myth and the dilemma of Australian foreign policy", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 60, 1 (2006), pp. 103-124.

⁵² Michael Wesley, *The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia 1996-2006* (Sydney, 2007), p. 213.

⁵³ Walker, *Anxious Nation*.

⁵⁴ Anthony Burke, *Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety* (Cambridge, 2008). Also, see Anthony Burke and Matt McDonald, eds., *Critical Security in the Asia Pacific* (Manchester, 2007).

⁵⁵ Paul Dibb, "Is strategic geography relevant to Australia's current defence policy?", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 60, 2 (2006), pp. 247-264.

government since the Vietnam War. In one of the most remarkable transformations in Australia's recent regional relations, the Howard government undertook major interventions in the Solomon Islands and East Timor, in addition to its commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵⁶

From the perspective of Australia's evolving policy toward the "Asia-Pacific", it was striking that one of the principal sources of policy advice was the newly established Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). Established by the Howard government in 2001 as a source of independent strategic advice, ASPI has produced a stream of policy documents some of which, especially those on the troubled South Pacific Islands, have been especially influential. ASPI's first director, Hugh White, became a prominent commentator on Australia's strategic relations, and was noteworthy for recognising that the nature of warfare and the sort of threats Australia faced had changed radically. White was also instrumental in drawing attention to the contradictions and complexities inherent in Australia's relations with China, a relationship that looked set to become the defining Australian foreign policy issue of the early twenty-first century.⁵⁷ Rather tellingly, both of these articles appeared in the pages of the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, which continued to be the principal outlet for academic commentary on foreign affairs and strategic relations. Under the editorship of William Tow and latterly Michael Wesley, the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* has quite self-consciously become more policy-oriented in the style of *Foreign Affairs*.

American influences on Australian intellectual life extend beyond publishing styles, however. The inauguration of the Lowy Institute in 2003 marked the first US-style, privately funded think tank dedicated to "producing distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia's international policy". Although the Institute has produced useful research and been largely free of the ideological baggage that invariably characterises its American counterparts, it is striking how small and interconnected Australia's mainstream international policy-oriented community actually is. The institute's director, Alan Gyngell, was formerly with the Office of National Assessment, as was Michael Wesley (the newly-appointed director in June 2009), and a number of ASPI's key personnel. Hugh White and the now venerable Owen Harries are both visiting fellows at the Institute, while former fellow Alan Dupont moved on to take up the new Chair in International Security at the University of Sydney. Given the limited number of scholars and commentators based in Australia — or the small number whose views are actually taken seriously by policy-makers and the media, at least — it is perhaps surprising that there is as much plurality of opinion as there is.

True, broadly conceived security questions have assumed a renewed prominence in the aftermath of 9/11, but the way security is conceived and the possible cause of insecurity have become more sophisticated and broader even in the mainstream.⁵⁸ Indeed, one of the most striking, inadvertent consequences of US policy post-9/11 has

⁵⁶ For an insightful analysis of Australia's intervention in East Timor see James Cotton, "The East Timor commitment: results and consequences" in James Cotton and John Ravenhill, eds, *The National Interest in a Global Era: Australia and World Affairs 1996-2000* (Melbourne, 2001).

⁵⁷ Hugh White, "Australian defense policy and the possibility of war", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, 2 (2002), pp. 253-64; Hugh White, "The limits to optimism: Australia and the rise of China", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 59, 4 (2005), pp. 469-480.

⁵⁸ One of the best analyses of Asian security questions in this regard is Alan Dupont, *East Asia Imperilled: Transnational Challenges to Security* (Cambridge, 2001).

been to encourage a rather radical re-think about the benefits of close ties with the US in decidedly non-radical circles.⁵⁹ This has obvious and major implications for Australia's relations with Asia: if Australia does recalibrate and downgrade strategic ties with the US, this opens up the possibility, perhaps the necessity, of consolidating ties with its immediate region. As we have seen, there have always been voices in Australia urging this course of action and stressing the need for closer engagement with the region — often at the centre of government itself.⁶⁰ To judge from the actions of Kevin Rudd since becoming prime minister, this impulse remains strong on the Labor side of politics, at least.⁶¹

Whether closer ties with, let alone grand visions for, the region as a whole are realisable remains a moot point, but Australian policy-makers would seem to have little option other than to try. The seemingly irresistible rise of China ensures that relations with East Asia continue to determine Australian living standards and shape the regional and international geopolitical context in which Australian foreign policy is conducted. Given the potential importance of institutions in consolidating and mediating this process, it is surprising how ineffective Australia-sponsored efforts have been thus far, and how modest the analysis of such institutions has tended to be.⁶² If there is one area in which Australian scholars might have been expected to exploit their comparative advantage it is in explaining how countries cope with being something of an outlier in the region of which they are a part; or in Australia's case, of which they would like to be a part. Somewhat surprisingly, however, little that is distinctive or different has emerged in institutional analysis in Australia;⁶³ it is a field that remains dominated by North American scholarship,⁶⁴ something that may be reflective of the wider set of hegemonic relations within which Australia's foreign relations remain embedded. It remains an area in which Australian scholars may yet distinguish themselves.

Concluding Remarks

“Asia” has always mattered to “Australia”. Thankfully, our collective understanding of each end of that rather imprecise and all-encompassing dyad has improved steadily over time, even if our sense of quite what to do about it remains contested and at times uncertain. It could hardly be otherwise, for Australian policy-makers and commentators come and go, and “Asia” is, of course, a complex place. More importantly for our purposes, understandings of Asia and Australia's engagement with the region closely track domestic political debates and conflicts. This is why the Cold War battles over Asia came to be replaced in the 1980s and 1990s with a distinctive policy turn in academic studies that reflected the triumph of neoliberalism and the

⁵⁹ Coral Bell, *Living with Giants: Finding Australia's Place in a More Complex World* (Canberra, 2005); Owen Harries, *Benign or Imperial? Reflections on American Hegemony* (Sydney, 2004).

⁶⁰ Paul Keating, *Engagement: Australia Faces the Asia Pacific* (Sydney, 2000).

⁶¹ Rowan Callick, “Kevin Rudd's pan-Asian vision”, *The Australian*, 23 August 2008.

⁶² For important exceptions, see John Ravenhill, *APEC and the Construction of Pacific Rim Regionalism* (Cambridge, 2001); Ann Capling, *Australia and the Global Trading System* (Cambridge, 2001).

⁶³ But for a distinctive Australian contribution, see Chris Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton, NJ, 1999). Our own modest contribution may be found in Mark Beeson and Kanishka Jayasuriya, “The political rationalities of regionalism: APEC and the EU in comparative perspective”, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 11, 3 (1998), pp. 311-36.

⁶⁴ Steve Smith, “The United States and the discipline of international relations: ‘Hegemonic country, hegemonic discipline’”, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 4, 2 (2002), pp. 67-85.

waning of ideological politics of the 1960s. In this way, the study of Asian engagement becomes a mirror not just into our anxieties and vulnerabilities — a point that has been made in different ways by Walker, Burke and Dalrymple — but is also a reflection of the debates over the national and political identity of settler society that is both “in and out” of its immediate region.

It is also significant that a small number of individuals, such as Eggleston, Ball, Arndt and Garnaut, have proved to be highly influential in developing and sustaining political and policy consensus in Asia. The success of these individuals in fashioning public debate and policy is due to their having moved easily and often between the worlds of academia and policy-making, aided by what Collins calls Australia’s Benthamite public culture⁶⁵. However, the increasing complexity of policy issues and the professionalisation of the disciplines of economics and international relations make it unlikely that such dominant public intellectuals will emerge in the future.

The more pressing question is this: have the ideas of Asian engagement now been exhausted?

Even at the level of reified bilateral relations between states, there are a multitude of inter-connections and possibilities, some more alluring, important or productive than others. But there are other levels of “engagement”, too, which occur whenever Australians visit the region — something that Islamic militants have been quick to recognise when targeting holidaymakers in Bali. Whether mass tourism counts as the sort of Asia literacy the likes of Steven Fitzgerald hoped for is debateable, but travel and steadily rising levels of immigration from the region have probably done as much to make Australians feel “relaxed and comfortable” about their place in the region as any conventional inter-state initiative has.

The election of Australia’s first Mandarin-speaking prime minister is also emblematic of the changing order. True, Kevin Rudd is one of the strongest supporters of the alliance with the US in the Labor Party, but the fact that he is unambiguously Asia-literate can only be a positive as far as inter-state regional relations are concerned. Having said that, Rudd may come to be judged by his actions rather than his words, however dazzling his linguistic skills may be: the fact that Rudd has recently moved to increase significantly Australia’s defence spending in response to an “Asian arms race” suggests that the realists are still ascendant in Canberra when it comes to shaping regional relations.⁶⁶ Depressingly enough, it seems that as far as at least some aspects of Asian engagement are concerned, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

⁶⁵ Hugh Collins, “Political Ideology in Australia: The Distinctiveness of a Benthamite Society” in Stephen R. Graubard, ed., *Australia, the Daedalus Symposium* (Sydney, 1985).

⁶⁶ Matthew Franklin, “PM flags major naval build-up in response to Asian arms race”, *The Australian*, 10 September 2008.