



Australia's future by Alan Oxley

There is anxiety among Australia's Asia watchers that our involvement in Timor is leading to our exclusion from Asian affairs. They have been rattled by the formation of a new Asia Summit – the ASEAN countries plus China, Korea and Japan, which we have not been invited to join. The problem is not with what is going on in Asia, it is with some of the thinking in Australia.

Timor has caused problems with only two Asian countries – Indonesia and Malaysia. In Indonesia's case, missteps by Indonesian Governments have been the problem – Soeharto invaded the territory and B J Habibie called a UN referendum which he was bound to lose in the middle of an Indonesian election cycle. In both cases, Australia was dragged in. This is the inevitable consequence of being a neighbour of Indonesia. We better get used to it. The pattern will continue. There was nothing new in Dr Mahathir's criticism of Australia's role in Timor. If he hadn't criticised us for that, it would have been for something else. He simply doesn't like Australia.

It is important to note that the rest of the world welcomed our actions, including in parts of Asia. The Philippines were the most active supporters of intervention in Timor. Its leaders welcome an independent Timor as another Christian nation in the region. Other members of ASEAN were quietly grateful that a situation out of control was brought under control and now rightly worry whether ASEAN's incapacity to mount any effective response to the Timor crisis raises the old fear that ASEAN is toothless.

While Timor has spooked those who worry perpetually about whether Australia will be accepted in Asia, it is the new East Asian Summit however which really has them worried. If the leaders of the ten ASEAN nations want to meet annually with leaders of China, Korea and Japan, why should we expect to be invited? We already meet them once a year in the APEC Summit along with the leaders of the Pacific nations.

So why worry about the implications of not participating in the East Asian Summit? The concern has been most articulately set out by Dr Stephen Fitzgerald in "Is Australia an Asian Country" which he wrote in 1997. He argued that a new community was emerging in Asia and unless Australia was a member, we would not influence events which would shape our future. The only option is to be accepted by Asia as part of Asia. This view has generally currency among a number of Australian experts on Asia, particularly at ANU in Canberra. To his credit, Dr Fitzgerald is the only one who has fully thought this through. He knows that it is not possible for Australia to become part of Asia while it is a western society. We have to partially Asianize, he argues. We need to adopt Asian collectivist values as well as western individualist values. He is saying in effect that we have to de-westernize.

This is a breath-taking proposition. It implies a much more radical redesign of Australia's future than anything like Pauline Hanson put in front of us. No Australian Government could ever carry such a policy with the community. Fortunately, none will ever have to try.

There is no political or economic logic to the East Asian Summit, only a cultural logic. There is no political or security interest for the Summit to defend. President Estrada of the Philippines forecast that the Summit could be the foundation for an Asian Economic Community and an Asian currency. The prospect for that is small while the major trading partners, the US in particular, for most members of the group lie outside the East Asian hemisphere. There is cultural affinity among the East Asian nations but history tells us cultural affinity does not obviate political differences or stop wars. If the purpose of the Summit is to affirm "Asianness" there is certainly no place there for Australia.

It is time to be clearheaded about Asia. It is very important to Australia, but it does not dictate Australia's global interest. Ideas do not alter geography. Australia might abut Asia in the north and the west, but Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart do not and can never be construed as a part of Asia. Russia abuts Asia but does not agonise about not being part of it. Our aim should be to be a partner with Asia, not a part of Asia.

We seem to worry more about what Asians think of us than anyone else. What about Americans, Europeans or New Zealanders? Are we still on a white Australia guilt trip? That bogey was put to rest once we removed anti-Asian bias from our immigration policy and confirmed to ourselves that we were not a racist community when we stared down Hansonism.

The twenty-first century will be the Pacific Century, not the Asian Century. Global events will be shaped by the confluence of US leadership of the global information economy with the continuing economic rise of Asia. As a westernised nation keyed into Asia and plugged into the information economy our natural place is to be part of that, not part of Asia.

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