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Recommended Citation

"Australian foreign policy in the twentieth century: the problem of having special friends", APSNet Policy Forum, May 25, 2006, https://nautilus.org/apsnet/0616a-jones-html/

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David Martin Jones *

Contents

Introduction

"For the first time in its history Australia is in an interesting place at an interesting time" argues Dr. David Martin Jones of the School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland. Dr Jones notes that the current "ideology driving US foreign policy comes into conflict with developing Chinese reality", which is "projecting its soft, but essentially illiberal power into the wider region". This, he argues, has profound strategic consequences for the US, Australia and South East Asia, especially as "the traditions and myths that shape Australian foreign policy ... are not designed to address such a dilemma."

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Essay - Australian foreign policy in the twentieth century: the problem of having special friends

Since the end of the Cold War Australians have often pondered their place in an increasingly interconnected but by no means integrated global order. Separated from their closest ideological and cultural cousins by the tyranny of distance, policy makers traditionally felt isolated in their own region. Meanwhile, despite earnest diplomatic effort over several decades, Australia's attempts to engage with regional groupings like the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) often met with a mixture of either amusement or ill-disguised contempt.

All this has utterly changed. Close ties with Australia are now the height of diplomatic fashion. From being the perennial wallflower at the regional party, Australia has discovered an international street cred, fuelled by rising commodity prices, that is not easily dissed. And so from out of a clear blue sky, great and not so great international figures descended upon Canberra to meet and greet John Howard, a prime minister once dismissed by his critics for reducing Australia's international status to that of both a regional pariah and US lickspittle.

Pariahdom was far from apparent in March 2006. First, Condoleezza Rice the US Secretary of State wafted, belatedly and fragrantly, into Sydney to launch a new trilateral security dialogue between Australia, Japan and the US, assuring all and sundry that the US had a very special relationship with John Howard's Government, subsequently confirmed by Howard's much feted visit to Washington in May. Later the same month, Tony Blair, wondering, not for the first time, where he was, both politically and geographically, dropped into Canberra to assure Australians of the esteem in which the UK held its own special relationship with Australia and call for annual bilateral talks on issues of mutual concern. Barely had Blair departed, when a far more propitious visitor arrived, in the shape of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, to discuss a free trade agreement with Australia and cement China-Australia cooperation in uranium. In an interview in The Australian, Wen even suggested that this too could blossom into a special friendship and a model for peaceful co-existence between states with different cultures but complementary interests.

All this popularity would suggest that Australia is indeed the lucky diplomatic country, sustaining excellent relations with both the global hegemon and the rising regional one. Is this, indeed, the case and can such good fortune be sustained? The answer is far from clear cut.

For the first time in its history, Australia is in an interesting place at an interesting time. As Condoleezza Rice observed the region is in 'a condition of tremendous flux and change because of the rise of China'. Moreover, the latest emanation of US grand strategy, does not seek to contain China, but instead create circumstances 'amenable to China's growth and reemergence in the region'. More precisely, as the Pentagon's Quadrennial Review explains, US power, both hard and soft, will henceforth be focused on 'shaping the choices of countries at strategic crossroads'. In China's case this means encouraging the PRC's fourth generation leadership to 'choose a path of peaceful economic growth and political liberalisation'. Here the ideology driving US foreign policy comes into conflict with developing Chinese reality. Current US thinking assumes that as China develops economically an emerging middle class will induce pressure for a more open society leading inexorably to the democratization of the single party state. A powerful, but liberal democratic, China could over time evolve into a good regional citizen and a partner in the international order that the global hegemon currently sustains.

This view, despite its superficial appeal to those still enamoured by the prospect of a liberal democratic end of history, is, however, flawed. For the economic success of China's capitalism with authoritarian characteristics, has actually increased the political authority of the Chinese Communist Party and enhanced its legitimacy. Its developmental inspiration, moreover, is not Anglo-Saxon but Singaporean (on a massive scale). In other words, China is not going to liberalize soon and it is projecting its soft, but essentially illiberal, power into the wider region.

This has profound strategic consequences for the United States, Australia and Southeast Asia. In order to shape China's and the region's path the US has heavily discounted regional multilateral arrangements like the Association of South East Asian Nations' (ASEAN). Under American eyes, the ineffective attempts of this putative security community to address what Colin Powell, Rice's predecessor, termed 'the second front in the war on terror' in Southeast Asia together with its various nonbinding, consensus driven, regional dialogue processes, like the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) summits with China, Japan and South Korea, has left Washington cold. Powell continued to attend ASEAN's dialogue partners' meeting and contributed to their karaoke sessions most enthusiastically as a Village Person singing 'YMCA' in Jakarta 2004. Although Powell liked to hang out with the Asian boys, Condoleezza declined. Indeed, the Secretary of State studiously ignored the 2005 ASEAN meeting in Kuala Lumpur which also witnessed the launch of a new East Asian Community grouping. The snub was not lost on ASEAN scholar bureaucrats like Singapore's former US ambassador, Kishore Mahbubani, who claimed that the US was 'digging a deep ditch to separate itself from Asia'. [1]

The current US disdain for ASEAN and its norms is not without irony. ASEAN was essentially a Nixonian creation in the aftermath of Vietnam, to maintain a semi detached US presence in the region after 1975. This worked tolerably well into the mid 90s. However, when ASEAN, in a fit of hubris, at the end of the Cold War, tried to extend its somewhat limited dialogue processes into Northeast Asia, it began to engage China in a way that unintentionally alienated both the US and, to a lesser extent, Japan. Even more surprisingly, China, which initially viewed ASEAN's Regional Forum as a containment mechanism, and preferred to pursue a hard line on disputes like its historic claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea, became increasingly comfortable with the organization. This shift in the regional order occurred, it would seem, in a fit of US absent mindedness, and China grasped the opportunity with both hands.

Connoisseurs of international diplomacy might well consider how China extended its influence in Southeast Asia at the expense of the US after 1997. For, it was in response to the perceived humiliation by global financial markets and western institutions like the International Monetary Fund that the South East Asian states that formed the ten members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), together with Japanese and Chinese politicians and think tanks began to consider ways in which they could establish regional structures to minimize the impact of future financial shocks. Much rhetoric and some financial effort went into this felt need for constructing a more integrated and economically resilient East Asian region.

The key actor in this emerging Asian economic drama was China. For, unlike its Northeast Asian neighbour and regional rival, Japan, China played the economic crisis well by not devaluing its currency, whilst Japanese investment deserted Southeast Asia after 1997. Moreover, the momentum of Chinese growth and its continuing attractiveness to foreign direct investment both during and since the financial crisis, revived the stagnant hi tech economies of Northeast Asia and, to a lesser extent, the resource based economies of South East Asia.

The political form that reflected the substance of Asia's current economic dynamism was ASEAN Plus Three that emerged as a regional process after 1997. Superficially, it would appear that the economically and politically weaker ASEAN states guided regional integration. The wider region, it

seemed, meekly adopted ASEAN's culture of consensus and mechanisms of conflict avoidance and conflict management. This distinctively ASEAN way, rather than the legalistic forms and rule based institutions of a western provenance, determined the norms governing the nascent East Asian grouping. Indeed, signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation became the admission price to its forums.

This caused a notable diplomatic difficulty for the Australian government which wished to attend the enlarged East Asian Community gathering in Kuala Lumpur in 2006, but sought to avoid a treaty that, for Howard, represented an outdated mindset. The treaty itself is an unremarkable doctrine requiring all members to 'respect the independence sovereignty equality territorial integrity of all nations, the settlement of disputes by peaceful means and non-interference in the internal affairs of one another'. Yet, premised as it is upon internal resilience rather than external security, it has done little to build an economic, political or security community in Southeast Asia. Moreover, its promotion of non-interference, in Howard's view, was inappropriate in an era of transnational terror and global interconnection.

However, this self-denying ordinance not only suits the more autocratic members of ASEAN like Myanmar, and the less democratic states of the region like Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, as well as, to a lesser extent Singapore and Malaysia, but it also suits China. And it is China's understanding of what the region should become that really drives the evolving East Asian Community. This too is not without irony. For China has long been suspicious of multilateral forms, together with the system of treaties and laws that shape international society. In China's view, both now and since 1842, the unfair western treaty system of the nineteenth century had been responsible for a century of shame and humiliation. China only 'stood up' when the Communist Party of China under the revolutionary leadership of Mao Zedong reasserted China's independence and opted for global realpolitik to reassert its national interest, first in alliance with USSR and then by effectively balancing Soviet and US geopolitical ambitions.

Consequently at the end of the Cold War, China preferred a bilateral approach to regional issues like the various claims to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea that first brought the ASEAN designed Regional Forum (ARF) to China's attention. After the Asian financial crisis, however, China considered its regional interests better served by a softer regional line. In this pursuit China, unlike the US, has found the ASEAN way of non-binding consensus peculiarly congenial. From the perspective of China's leadership, the ASEAN way's emphasis on non interference and internal resilience dovetails nicely with China's five principles of peaceful coexistence first articulated by Zhou Enlai which also emphasized respect for territorial integrity.

Via the East Asian summit mechanism, moreover, China can envisage the region reverting to the preordained order rudely interrupted by a century and a half of western colonialism, capitalism and barbarism. This order requires China as the moral, and economic hub of a web of civilizational relations extending across its precolonial tributaries in Southeast Asia. In its reinvented contemporary version this would comprise the contemporary Southeast Asian states of Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia which already possess large populations of Chinese 'sojourners' and possibly Australia, whose trading relationship with China has blossomed in the last decade. It also embraces the less developed Southeast Asian states like Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar whose deferential relationship with China affords them international status and protection.

However, before this post-modernized version of the Confucian peace can establish itself a few outstanding issues have to be resolved. Japan, which even more than the barbarian west, abused the Chinese civilizational order between 1895- 1945, must be brought to heel. Finally, the rebellious province of Taiwan must be reintegrated into a unified China. Taiwan, peaceful coexistence notwithstanding, is a Chinese internal matter. This Chinese view, revamped into Mr Wen's good

neighbourly project, ultimately envisages the recognition of China's historic and moral authority in the region. Consequently whilst there exists an aspiration to a broader East Asian community, if the Chinese view prevails, it will not be a particularly egalitarian or democratic arrangement.

Moreover, as China has become attracted to an enhanced ASEAN as a basis of regional order, Japan, the current Taiwan leadership and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia have become increasingly concerned. Japan, in particular, has lost out badly in terms of soft power influence in the region post 1997, and has largely chased events since. Meanwhile the ASEAN states despite their proposed extension into an ATP are much weaker economically and politically divided than they were in 1997 and despite their official consensus, are drawn increasingly into competing Chinese and Japanese spheres of influence.

Distracted by events elsewhere, only recently has the US become aware of the manner in which the ASEAN plus China process has evolved in the interests of China's regional hegemony. This is evidently a path that US grand strategy wants to see less traveled. To this end, Bush has made encouraging sounds about reinvigorating APEC as an alternative rule governed, rather than consensus driven, multilateral forum for regional affairs. The US has also established closer ties with India and convened the trilateral security dialogue. Significantly, the only stop Rice made in Southeast Asia en route to Sydney was Jakarta. This once again is not without symbolic import, a democratized and stable Indonesia is more important to the status quo in Southeast Asia the US requires than the sinuous courtesies of the ASEAN way.

As US policy seeks to shape a mixed bag of Asian nations at a variety of crossroads, to serve the broader purposes of the American global project, and China sedulously pursues a regional community with Chinese characteristics, Australia, for a long time 'an odd man in' as Gareth Evans put it, in the region has emerged as a potentially significant player. However, because both Australian Liberal and Labor parties tend to view Asia as a monolith, DFAT's thinking has not moved very far from the Keating era strategy of engagement with a singular Asian monolith. Although Howard, in the wake of Bali made some acerbic noises concerning the prevailing regional architecture, he was nevertheless prevailed upon to sign ASEAN's foundational Treaty of Amity and Cooperation as the price of gaining Australian admission to an inaugural but largely inconsequential East Asian Community gathering in December 2005.

At a time when the region is in tremendous flux Australia therefore remains in thrall to the view promoted, for very different reasons, by ASEAN elites and a fashionable intellectual orthodoxy that assumes that nations, merely by talking unto nations, will transform themselves into harmoniously integrated supranational regions. By contrast recent developments in both Chinese and US strategic thinking illustrate that they think of the region in very different terms.

Currently, Australia has been fortunate that it has not been forced to choose between its old and its new special friend, but circumstances, like the weather, change. The tradition and myths that shape Australian foreign policy moreover are not designed to address such a dilemma. Australian foreign policy has traditionally been externally focused and shaped by the myth of a special relationship between Australia and a great and powerful, but culturally and ideologically, similar friend. This stance and the myth that shaped it worked tolerably well in the Cold and post Cold War regional environment.

The position and the myth, however, will become increasingly stretched when the demands of a culturally dissimilar regional friend conflict with that of a long standing, but sometimes negligent, global buddy. Inevitably, different friends will make contradictory demands on friendship. China will deem it propitious for Australia to help maintain the status quo in Southeast Asia. But it will not welcome Australian involvement in Northeast Asian flashpoints or in China's dealing with rival

claimants to the Spratly Islands. By contrast the United States sees Australia as a fidus achates. As the angel in the whirlwind of US foreign policy shifts increasingly away from Europe towards Pacific Asia as the centre of its gravity, Australia, it assumes, will take the lead in issues relating to South East Asia, whilst following the dominant partner's lead in North East Asia. At some point in the decade the conflicting demands of special friendship will clash. When this occurs Australia would be misguided if it conceived its role to be one of building a bridge between its regional and its global friend. Bridges have an uncomfortable habit of being walked over. Rather Australian foreign policy has to be both clear eyed and flexible, adopting a relatively low regional profile whilst promoting the status quo in Southeast Asia, and not overly exercising itself in Northeast Asian adventures or in a putative East Asian community.

Information about the author

Dr David Martin Jones is on the editorial board of Studies in Conflict and Terrorism. He has held a Ford Foundation/IDSS grant to examine non traditional security (1999) in the Asia Pacific and consultancies with the former Protective Security and Coordination Centre of the Attorney General's Office (2001) and Roar Film in conjunction with Film Australia (2004). Email: d.jones2@uq.edu.au

Dr David Martin Jones' most recent book, co-authored with M. Smith, is: ASEAN and East Asian International Relations: Regional Delusion, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham UK, 2006.

Endnotes

[1] Kishore Mahbubani 'The Asian Challenge', Financial Review 3 March 2006; and Alan Dupont We need to tell Condi some blunt truths', The Australian March 15 2006.

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org