

Australia, and ASEAN at Fifty

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Abstract

In its early documents related to Asianist orientation, Australia looked at engaging its immediate neighbourhood through institution such as ASEAN. ASEAN which was created to bring about synergies within the region and also engage important stakeholders as dialogue partners. Australia has been involved in Vietnam as part of its alliance obligations with US in 1970s and subsequently also. Australia has looked into ASEAN as a vehicle for cooperation, development and building better relations with Indonesia. The author argues that while Australia has aligned itself with the concept of the ASEAN way, there has not been any tectonic shift in the way Australia conducts its foreign policy. Even though Australia was one of the earliest dialogue partner in ASEAN, it has calibrated its policy depending on the national government priorities and the international interests of the country. The article also outlines the narrative from Australian perspective and situates ASEAN in the larger foreign policy discourse in Australia.

Keywords-Australian foreign policy, ASEAN way, dialogue partner, Bangkok Declaration, Labour Party, Liberal-National Coalition, Australia-ASEAN trade, APEC, East Asia Economic Caucus

The hard facts of geography compel Canberra to engage closely with members of the Association of South East Asian Nations, or ASEAN as it is more commonly known. Given ASEAN turned 50 in August 2017, it is an opportune time to consider the course and nature of Australia-ASEAN relations to date, and to also contemplate briefly where such relation might be headed in the short- to medium-term future.

The central argument advanced in this article is that Australia has been ‘partially socialised’ by the so-called ‘ASEAN Way’. This term is shorthand for a distinctively informal, non-legalised, thinly-institutionalised diplomatic style which relies on consensus decision-making – and therefore

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strong respect for states' sovereignty – which also features a strong tendency to avoid rather than 'tackle head on', and so definitely solve, contentious regional issues.³² ASEAN member states typically conform to the ASEAN Way in their dealings with one another and, to the extent possible, they have tried to cajole other regional states – including Australia but especially the region's great powers (the United States, China and Japan primarily) – to also adopt this *modus operandi*, at least vis-à-vis those states' policies towards the region.³³

This thesis is not stated strongly. Instead, the argument is that Canberra has been only very 'shallowly' or 'minimally' socialised; because Australian society remains essentially Western and the Australian state has not altered its diplomatic style profoundly to conform with the 'ASEAN Way'. Specifically, the author argues that when Australia grapples with policy responses to relatively unimportant (from Canberra's perspective) issues in South East Asia, it now largely conforms with the ASEAN Way. One such instance is the manner in which Australia responded to the 2017 Rohingya crisis. This adjustment in Australia's diplomatic style occurred because Canberra learned hard lessons about ASEAN states' sensitivities to outsiders like itself intervening in their internal affairs or suggesting that strong regional institutions with binding, legalistic characters should be created in Asia. But Australia's 'ordinary' diplomatic style has actually changed little; Canberra continues to engage with the rest of the world in its preferred mode (i.e. directly, formally, legalistically) and it is strongly suspected that if and when Australia's core regional interests are directly challenged it will readily revert to type and ignore ASEAN states' protests. It is therefore argued in this article that interacting with ASEAN states has affected the way Canberra makes foreign policy; but only very marginally.

Note that the following discussion focuses more on Australian policies and attitudes towards ASEAN than the reverse.³⁴ The author also focuses on Australia's relations with ASEAN *states*, and rarely with the ASEAN organisation itself on the basis that the latter is not, and was never intended to be, a 'supranational' actor like the EU; instead, it is an 'intergovernmental' forum.³⁵ Finally, the author first reviews the history of

³² Acharya, Amitav. 2009. *Whose Ideas Matter? Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p. 79.

³³ Narine, Shaun. 2009. 'ASEAN in the Twenty-first Century: A Sceptical Review', *Cambridge Review of International Studies*, 22(3), pp. 380-383.

³⁴ Mainly for pragmatic reasons, namely, to explore a single state's policies and attitudes is simpler than considering all 10 ASEAN states' positions.

³⁵ Tripathi, Maneesha. 2015. 'European Union and ASEAN: A Comparison'. *International Journal of Research* 2(1), 377-379.

Australia-ASEAN relations in two sections which proceed chronologically before the third explores the always-present (but rarely-prominent) debate about whether Australia should join ASEAN, which will enable author to canvass a few broader themes about the nature of the Australia-ASEAN relationship.

AUSTRALIA-ASEAN RELATIONS (1967-1998)

One of Australia's premier diplomatic historians, David Goldsworthy, found evidence that Malaysian officials informally raised the possibility that Australia may want to join ASEAN in 1966. But he found 'no indications that the Australian government sought membership'.³⁶ Accordingly, when the Bangkok Declaration was signed in August 1967, creating ASEAN, it was left to the Opposition Labour Party to move a motion in the Australian parliament recognising the event; the conservative Liberal-National Coalition government assented, but Cabinet was far more focussed on – 'distressed by', even – the implications of Britain's recent decision to withdraw strategically from Asia by 1971.³⁷

Yet Australia was soon engaging more deliberately with ASEAN. The broader explanation for this change in policy is that in the 1970s Australia's instinctive understanding of the 'nature of' the region to its north was beginning to shift from one which reflexively assumed South East Asia was a source of strategic *threats*³⁸ towards an appreciation that Asia more broadly, including South East Asia, offered 'opportunities', especially in the economic policy realm.³⁹ The narrower explanation rests on an appreciation that Australia's Prime Minister from 1972 to 1975, Labour's Gough Whitlam, was determined to substantially alter the trajectory of Australian foreign policy. The centrepiece of his policy was the move to recognise the Communist regime in Beijing as the rightful government of China,⁴⁰ but he also sought to improve ties with the then-five ASEAN members (Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore). Even at this early stage strong indications emerged that Australia (and New Zealand) would not be considered for membership; Malaysia's view on the matter, in particular, had changed substantially since 1966 (it indicated in

³⁶ Goldsworthy, David. 2001. *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia, Volume 1: 1901 to the 1970s*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 280.

³⁷ Cablegram, 'Johnston to London', 1 June 1967, *National Archives of Australia* (NAA), PREM13/726, PRO; Goldsworthy, David. 2012. *Losing the Blanket: Australia and the End of Britain's Empire*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 112.

³⁸ Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, 259.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 329-338.

1972 that neither would be suitable for even Observer status).⁴¹ Nevertheless, Whitlam's government continued to engage ASEAN, and it was rewarded with the status of 'Dialogue Partner' in 1974; indeed, this category of association with ASEAN was created for Australia and has subsequently been granted to only six other states.⁴²

Yet despite this seemingly promising start the relationship remained dogged by diplomatic misunderstandings. For example, several ASEAN states misread Canberra's overtures towards China as abandonment of Australia's staunchly anti-communist, traditional strategic allies Singapore and Malaysia (and the Western-aligned Philippines and Thailand too). ASEAN members also looked askance at Whitlam's somewhat vague but still, from ASEAN's perspective, too-ambitious proposal for the creation of a new Asia-wide regional organisation.⁴³ This latter issue arose – and caused tension – in Australia-ASEAN relations several times more, most notably when Bob Hawke's Labour government was lobbying to create the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) in the late 1980s (which succeeded) and when Kevin Rudd's Labour government proposed an Asia-Pacific Community in 2008 (which failed). These will be discussed later in the article, however, for the moment it is worth noting that Labour has for decades shown a clear preference for positioning Australia as a 'middle power' by pursuing grand multilateral initiatives⁴⁴. Moreover, ASEAN has always been determined to remain 'in the driving seat' of Asian regionalist initiatives.⁴⁵

When the Liberal-National Coalition returned to power between 1975 and 1983 Australian-ASEAN relations became smoother; Canberra's pretensions as a regional institution-builder evaporated, and no-one could accuse Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser of being soft on communism, a fact that ASEAN states welcomed given the turbulence caused by the violent fallings-out between most of the Asian communist regimes after North Vietnam annexed South Vietnam in 1975. The fact Australia had finally removed all legal vestiges of the offensively-racist White Australia Policy in the early 1970s, followed by a visible commitment to erasing it in practice by graciously accepting about 170,000 Vietnamese refugees in the late

⁴¹ Memorandum, 'Australian Membership of ASEAN, Anderson to Bowen (Minister for Foreign Affairs)', 21 July 1972, N44, A1838, 3000/13/21/3, Part 1.

⁴² New Zealand, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and Turkey.

⁴³ Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, 345-346.

⁴⁴ Ungerer, Carl. 2007. 'The Middle Power Concept in Australian Foreign Policy'. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 53(4), 538-551.

⁴⁵ Narine, 'ASEAN', 380.

1970s, also helped overcome the tensions in the Australia-ASEAN relationship noted above.⁴⁶

Regarding trade, Australia-ASEAN trade had increased steadily across the 1970s, by an average rate of 18 per cent per annum. But the balance of trade was heavily in Australia's favour; it became somewhat more balanced – from 3.5:1 in 1970/71 to 2:1 in 1976/77 – yet it remained stuck around this latter ratio for another decade given Canberra's reluctance to make major changes to its tariff policies.⁴⁷ It took bold steps from the Hawke Labour government, which won office in 1983 and embarked on an ambitious economic reform agenda in 1985, to change the dynamic of trade relations. The single-most-important reform in the context of this discussion was the decision to unilaterally reduce tariff barriers significantly. This occurred in 1989 and spurred a steady and ultimately very significant uptick in trade between Australia and Asia generally, especially with China, which is now Australia's premier trading partner, but also with the ASEAN states which, collectively, were Australia's third largest trading partner in 2015/16 (AUD \$93 billion traded, with a AUD \$17 billion surplus in their favour).⁴⁸

Labour's Bob Hawke, through his energetic Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, also assiduously pursued multilateral trade deals. Evans did so on the global stage by forming and then supporting the Cairns Group of agricultural exporters, and on the regional stage by lobbying for what became APEC. Several ASEAN states – especially Malaysia – strongly opposed APEC and instead preferred an ASEAN-centred organisation provisionally called the East Asia Economic Caucus on the basis that non-Asian states like Australia and the United States should be excluded. But Japan refused to join the latter (proposed) organisation and instead Tokyo, joined by Washington, exerted significant pressure on ASEAN states to join APEC instead. Ministerial-level APEC meetings were duly held from 1989 to 1992, and the organisation was upgraded to a leaders' summit in 1993 after strong lobbying from Hawke's Labour Party successor, Prime Minister Paul Keating.⁴⁹ Considerable debate continues concerning APEC's effect on trade; a study in 2000 found that by then it had produced

⁴⁶ Ravenhill, John. 1998. 'Adjusting to the ASEAN Way: Thirty Years of Australia's Relations with ASEAN', *Pacific Review* 11(2), 277.

⁴⁷ Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, 348.

⁴⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia). 2016. *Composition of Trade, Australia, 2015-16*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

⁴⁹ Pitty, Roderick. 2001. 'Regional Economic Co-operation', in Peter Edwards and David Goldsworthy (eds.), *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagements with Asia, Volume 2: 1970s to 2000*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 13-47.

‘moderately large’ benefits for its members, although its authors also warned that it was very hard to isolate its effects from the numerous other factors which affect international trade flows.⁵⁰ But this assessment is significantly more positive than the typical assessments of the results yielded by ASEAN’s own internal trade-liberalisation initiatives.

It is also notable that the Australia-Malaysia dispute over APEC morphed into a bitter personal dispute between the two states’ prime ministers, Keating and Mohamed Mahathir, in the first half of the 1990s. In most respects this is an historical footnote; the two states never broke off trade or security ties and, indeed, these improved somewhat during the 1990s. But it is still revealing in the sense that Mahathir’s strident criticisms – he alleged Australia ‘talks down to Asia – it tells the Asians how to behave themselves’⁵¹ – no doubt reflects the attitudes some, perhaps even *many* (although probably not ‘most’) South East Asians held towards Australia then, and which arguably bubble away below the serene surface of public diplomacy today. For his part, Keating called Mahathir ‘recalcitrant’, a blunt, dismissive put-down of the sort Australians – but typically not South East Asians – are not to make towards those with whom they do not get along.

Finally, in the security realm, significant forward strides were made during the 1990s. In particular, Australia became deeply involved in the multilateral UN-led effort to reconstitute war-torn Cambodia. Labour’s then-Foreign Minister, Bill Hayden, had offered to drive an effort to resolve the long-running civil war there as early as 1983,⁵² but the end of the Cold War provided the sort of circuit-breaker for another effort to be made by Hayden’s successor, the energetically ‘internationalist’⁵³ Gareth Evans. This peace- and state-building effort succeeded and paved the way for Cambodia to join ASEAN in 1997, and it also generated significant goodwill towards Canberra in ASEAN diplomatic circles.⁵⁴ Simultaneously Evans showed he understood the basics of the ASEAN Way by lobbying for the creation of a new Asia-wide forum in which to discuss – and hopefully resolve – security issues and/or crises. But an internal Cabinet

⁵⁰ Scollay, Robert, and John Gilbert. 2000. ‘Measuring the Gains from APEC Trade Liberalisation: An Overview of CGE Assessments’. *World Economy*, 23(2), 175-200.

⁵¹ Shenon, Philip, ‘Malaysian Premier Demands Apology’, *New York Times*, 9 December 1993.

⁵² Dee, Moreen, and Frank Frost. 2001. ‘Indochina’, in Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, Vol. 2, 197.

⁵³ Wesley, Michael, and Tony Warren. 2000. ‘Wild Colonial Ploys? Currents of Thought in Australian Foreign Policy’, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 35(1), 17-20; Evans, Gareth, and Bruce Grant. 1991. *Australia’s Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.

⁵⁴ Moreen and Frost, ‘Indochina’, 196-207.

memo reveals that before he had even begun diplomatic lobbying he stressed to his Prime Minister (still Bob Hawke in late 1990⁵⁵) that he would avoid portraying this as an Australian initiative to create 'a new international structure', that he would adopt a gradualist 'step by step' approach and, most importantly, that Canberra's position should be that ASEAN was 'the most appropriate mechanism that currently exists for discussion of regional security issues'.⁵⁶ The result, in 1994, was the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum with the strong support of ASEAN states. As an aside, several similar forums have since been created including: ASEAN-only forums (ASEAN Summits, the ASEAN Political-Security Community and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meetings), ASEAN+3 in 1996 (i.e. ASEAN with China, Japan and South Korea), the Shangri-La Dialogue (from 2002) and the East Asian Summit (from 2011). It has been claimed that the proliferation of institutions – and the fact that they all essentially operate in accordance with the ASEAN Way – has created an 'alphabet soup problem' in the sense that no-one knows exactly what each forum does, and none can make decisions in the absence of consensus.⁵⁷

Thus, by the end of the 1990s, arguably Australia-ASEAN relations were on an upward trajectory. But the next section canvasses the policies – primarily pursued by Canberra – which partially derailed relations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The seemingly ever-troubled Australia-Indonesia relationship is also discussed.

AUSTRALIA-ASEAN RELATIONS, 1999-2018

John Howard, the leader of the Liberal Party, became Prime Minister in 1996. As Opposition Leader he had regularly criticised the Keating Labour government for being too-focused on engaging Asia at the expense of relations with Australia's traditional Western allies, especially the United States. Keating fired back, suggesting that Howard was uncomfortable with cultural and ethnic diversity – indeed, that he may be a closet racist – and claimed Asian leaders 'will speak to [Howard] but will not deal with him'.⁵⁸ John Howard's government (which lasted until 2007) did prioritise improving Canberra's ties to Washington and sought to end what he called

⁵⁵ Keating challenged Hawke in an internal party-room ballot and won 56 to 51 on 19 December 1991 to become Prime Minister.

⁵⁶ 'Memo', Evans to Hawke, 24 September 1990, *NAA*, A9737,92/050455 part 2.

⁵⁷ Ravenhill, John. 2009. 'East Asian Regionalism: Much Ado About Nothing?', *Review of International Studies* 35(1), 215-235; Bisley, Nick. 2009. *Building Asia's Security*. Oxon: Routledge.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Wesley, Michael. 2007. *The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia 1996-2006*. Sydney: ABC Books, 8.

the ‘perpetual seminar on Australian identity’.⁵⁹ Yet Michael Wesley claims Howard, despite leading a government which was ‘rhetorically uncompromising in its relations with its neighbours’ and ‘openly dismissive of Asian regionalism’, actually succeeded in improving Australia’s relations with Asia by the end of his term in office (Wesley dubbed this ‘the Howard Paradox’).⁶⁰

Nevertheless, Australia-ASEAN tensions surfaced regularly during Howard’s tenure. First, Australian domestic politics caused ‘echo effects’ in the region. In response to Labour’s 13-year-long effort to improve Canberra’s regional ties and to promote multiculturalism at home – which some critics alleged amounted to a project to ‘Asianise’ Australia – a populist, ‘nativist’ movement emerged in the late 1990s centred on Pauline Hanson. In 1996 Hanson was criticised by the Liberal Party for allegedly racist comments about Aboriginal people. But she ran anyway as an independent, won a seat in parliament – a rarity in Australian politics – and in her maiden speech to parliament she warned:

*I and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and ... multiculturalism abolished.... [W]e are in danger of being swamped by Asians.... They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos, and do not assimilate.*⁶¹

Howard had a problem. Australia’s preferential voting system means that major parties cannot entirely alienate those who vote for smaller, more-extreme parties on the same side of the political spectrum because the large parties need those voters second (or, rarely, their third) preference votes to win tight races against their main opponent (i.e. in Howard’s case, the Labour Party). Howard therefore first refused to criticise Hanson and when he later did so under intense media pressure he offered carefully qualified critiques. This caused several prominent Asian political figures – like Indonesia’s and the Philippines’ foreign ministers, plus Japan’s Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto – to say Hanson, and by extension Howard, had damaged Australia’s regional relations. Some public opinion polls in ASEAN states suggested they were right.⁶²

Nevertheless, arguably ASEAN member states had to be careful to practice what they preached; it would be hypocritical of them to ‘interfere’ too

⁵⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶¹ Deutchman, Iver, and Anne Ellison. 1999. ‘A Star is Born: The Rollercoaster Ride of Pauline Hanson in the News’. *Media, Culture and Society* 22(1), 36-37.

⁶² Wesley, *Howard Paradox*, 157-159.

strongly in another nation's internal politics given their own commitment to the ASEAN Way. But Howard soon began upsetting them more directly by interventionist actions which seemed to demonstrate that Australian policy-makers (with the seeming exception of Gareth Evans) had certainly not internalised the basic premises of the ASEAN Way.

The first, and undoubtedly the most provocative act, came when Australia supported – indeed, effectively orchestrated – an international intervention in Indonesia in 1999. Indonesia's authoritarian regime, led by General Suharto, was fatally destabilised by the Asian Economic Crisis which erupted in 1997 and unrest spread across the archipelago. Consequently, in East Timor, which had been violently annexed by Jakarta in 1975, calls grew for independence. Canberra was at first cautious and only advised that more autonomy be granted,⁶³ but after taking advice from Timorese exiles and under pressure at home Howard and his foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, wrote to Indonesia's new President Habibie advising him to hold a referendum on independence.⁶⁴ The advice was accepted (somewhat surprisingly) but when almost 80 per cent voted for independence on 30 August 1999, pro-Indonesian militias (who had been 'covertly' armed by Indonesian security forces) launched an orgy of violence. Extreme public pressure back home led Howard to begin frantic negotiations to secure Indonesia's acquiescence to an international 'stabilisation force'; the crucial breakthrough came when US President Bill Clinton dramatically intervened on 9 September, at Howard's urging, by threatening to vote against the much-needed economic aid package for Jakarta the IMF was considering. A week later Habibie caved in to pressure on the sidelines of a fortuitously-timed APEC meeting being held in Auckland.⁶⁵ In an effort to put the best gloss on the matter Habibie asked Thailand to organise an ASEAN-flagged security force but the ASEAN states dithered, and ultimately chose to refer the matter to the Security Council who authorised an Australian-led, UN-Flagged force to occupy East Timor, eventually leading to its independence.

This incident obviously severely damaged Australia's relations with ASEAN's largest member; but this will be discussed later. It also damaged relations with the other ASEAN states in two senses. First, Canberra's actions were obviously not at all consistent with the ASEAN Way. Several

⁶³ Cablegram, Downer to Jakarta (Australian Embassy), 23 June 1998, N44, A9737, CS: 92/051651, PART 17.

⁶⁴ Greenlees, Don, and Robert Garran. 2002. *Deliverance: The Inside Story of East Timor's Fight for Freedom*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 85–6.

⁶⁵ David Goldsworthy, 'East Timor', in Edwards and Goldsworthy, *Facing North*, Vol. 2, 248–50.

members of ASEAN – notably Singapore and Thailand – actually praised Australia but Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir suggested Canberra had concocted a ‘Western plot to break up Indonesia’ and what had occurred was just another example of Australia’s penchant for ‘pressuring or condemning [its] neighbours’. Press commentary in Thailand and the Philippines speculated in similar ways about whether Canberra had really been motivated by humanitarian concerns.⁶⁶ Western readers of this article should never underestimate the depth of resentment and anger many formerly-colonised peoples continue to hold towards those states which they consider to have had an ‘Imperialist past’.⁶⁷

Second, and perhaps more damagingly, Australia’s actions had clearly demonstrated, as James Cotton put it, ‘ASEAN’s failure as a regional security institution either to detect the growing East Timor crisis or to act to remedy the problem’. Indeed, Cotton went on to say that John Howard had developed a novel understanding of Australia’s regional role. This was implicit in the prime minister’s claim that Australia was both a western and a regional country, and thus occupied a special status, being able to bring Western as well as global forces [i.e. the United States] to bear on regional problems.⁶⁸

This image of Australia as a sort of ‘stalking horse’ for Western imperialism in South East Asia was further reinforced by the so-called ‘deputy sheriff’ or ‘Howard Doctrine’ controversy. The deputy sheriff phrase was actually first used in late September 1999 when a journalist asked Howard if Australia played such a role in Asia given what had just occurred in East Timor.⁶⁹ Howard initially failed to contest the notion, but later backtracked and tried to distance himself from it when he became aware of the negative diplomatic fall out the journalist’s article was generating. Then after 88 Australians were killed by Islamist terrorists in Bali in October 2002, Howard said he would consider launching unilateral pre-emptive strikes against terrorists if an attack on Australia was imminent, without the consent of any ASEAN states concerned. ASEAN states – especially

⁶⁶ Milner, Anthony. 1999. ‘The East Timor Crisis: Implications and Lessons’. Speech to Australian Institute of International Affairs, 26 November.

⁶⁷ Chatterjee-Miller, Manjari. 2013. *Wronged by Empire: Post-Imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. While Australia was colonised by Britain, the colonisers came to represent a strong majority of its citizens (i.e. Australian aboriginals make up only about 2.5% of Australia’s population). Thus, unlike many other colonised peoples who regard themselves as ‘victims of empire’, Australians historically regarded themselves as ‘junior partners in Empire’.

⁶⁸ Cotton, James. 2004. *East Timor, Australia and Regional Order: Intervention and its Aftermath in Southeast Asia*. Oxon: Routledge, 149.

⁶⁹ Fred Benchley, ‘The Howard Defence Doctrine,’ *The Bulletin*, 28 September 1999.

Muslim-majority states like Indonesia and Malaysia – expressed strong protests.⁷⁰

The controversy flared up again in 2003: US President George W. Bush, when responding to a question about how he viewed Australia, said (somewhat unhelpfully from Howard's perspective) 'no, we don't see it as a deputy sheriff. We see it as a sheriff [laughter]'.⁷¹ Mahathir (again, unsurprisingly) responded by accusing Australia of 'unmitigated arrogance' and went on to say 'when Australians claim to be Asian they see only themselves lording it over [Asia]'.⁷² Then, after the diplomatic dust had largely settled, Howard stirred the whole scandal up again, as the 2004 Federal Election approached, by repeating his belief that it would be reasonable for Australia to launch pre-emptive strikes in the region. A chorus of condemnation in Asia followed each one of these enunciations of what was becoming known as the so-called Howard Doctrine, leading many ASEAN states to criticise Australia's refusal to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which had been signed by most countries in the region, including New Zealand, China and Japan.⁷³ The furore was serious enough for Malaysia and Thailand to threaten cancelling some bilateral strategic ties (such as officer-exchange programmes) with Australia.

Given Howard's repeated provocations of ASEAN states it is difficult to understand how he was able to leave office in 2007 having *improved* Australia's relations with Asia, as Wesley claims. Of course, Wesley was not referring to South East Asia only – he noted that Howard was able to improve Australia-China relations substantially too – but he canvasses a number of potential explanations offered by Australian commentators and political figures⁷⁴ before concluding

Howard's conservative pragmatism, the government's preference for bilateralism over multilateralism, and the dogged insistence on the importance of interests, not identity, proved appropriate as the countries of Asia entered a difficult period of transition.... Countries facing

⁷⁰ Steve Lewis, 'Howard Runs the Gauntlet of Asia,' *The Australian*, 2 December 2002.

⁷¹ Quoted in Kim Richard Nossal, 'Looking Enviously Down Under? The Australian Experience and Canadian Foreign Policy,' in Andrew F. Cooper and Dane Rowlands, eds., *Canada Among Nations 2005: Split Images* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

⁷² Quoted in Alison Broinowski, *About Face: Asian Accounts of Australia* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2003), 122.

⁷³ Greg Sheridan, 'PM Finds New Way to Lose Friends in Asia,' *The Australian*, 7 December 2002; Tom Allard, 'Malaysia hits back at PM's Pre-Emptive Strike,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 2004.

⁷⁴ Wesley, *Howard Paradox*, 24-29.

instability, surging ethnic tensions, the demands of international financial institutions and the manifest failures of regional institutions [note: earlier Wesley had heavily critiqued ASEAN's response to the Asian Economic Crisis] are likely to have been more irritated than inspired by a stream of internationalist urgings from Canberra [i.e. of the sort Labour favoured before it lost office in 1996].⁷⁵

Arguably, therefore, Labour's Kevin Rudd inherited a reasonably good relationship with ASEAN after he defeated Howard at the 2007 election. He quickly announced he would, consistent with Labour's traditions, work hard to improve the relationship further because doing so was both 'a matter of historical recognition of the requirements of geographical proximity and it was only logical that Canberra 'engag[e] with a region of global significance in its own right'. But, as noted earlier, in June 2008 he offered his signature policy – the creation of a new Asian regional body, to be called the Asia-Pacific Community (APC) – which, as Baogang, he has put it, was needed to meet four challenges: enhancing a sense of security community; developing a capacity to deal with terrorism, natural disasters and disease; enhancing non-discriminatory and open trading regimes across the region; and providing long-term energy, resource, and food security.... [F]or Rudd, none of the existing regional mechanisms [were] capable of dealing with the above challenges.⁷⁶

In particular, Rudd explicitly mentioned the European Union, saying that while it was not an 'identikit model' to be followed in Asia, Europe's successful experiment suggested the next step in Asian regionalism should be taken with a sense of grand purpose and an eye on the long-term future.⁷⁷ But Rudd's proposal did not go down well in the region: after quoting a number of critical and politely-non-committal – and no positive – regional responses to Rudd's thought bubble, He summarises why the APC foundered so spectacularly, and so rapidly, by saying

The failure of the APC is largely due to the process itself whereby Rudd failed to consult with Asian leaders before his announcement of the APC. The ASEAN way is characterized as talk quietly, consultation first or seeking consensus first. Rudd's unilateral announcement of the APC seems to violate this norm.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 216-217.

⁷⁶ He, Baogang. 2011. 'The Awkwardness of Australian Engagement with Asia: The Dilemmas of Australian Ideas of Regionalism'. *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12(2), 60.

⁷⁷ Frost, Frank. 2016. *Engaging the Neighbours: Australia and ASEAN since 1974*. Canberra: ANU Press, 151.

It is not worth dwelling on this matter any further other than to note that by mid-2010 Rudd told Singapore's foreign minister that he was 'quite happy to leave ASEAN to discuss how the regional configuration should evolve'.⁷⁸

Rudd's successor as Labour's leader – and so as Prime Minister too – Julia Gillard, enthusiastically supported US President Barack Obama's so-called 'pivot to Asia' grand strategic policy from 2011, most notably by inking a deal whereby US Marines would be based in Darwin on a semi-permanent basis. Indonesia complained that it would have preferred to have been consulted prior to the announcement,⁷⁹ but the move was otherwise generally received well by ASEAN states, many of whom feel somewhat concerned about China's increasingly assertive foreign policy stance. I have argued elsewhere that, in effect, since about 2009 Australia has moved a little closer to the 'balancing end' of the venerable balancing-against/band wagoning-with spectrum of grand strategic behaviour in response to China's rise; but not far enough to jeopardise its lucrative trading relationship with Beijing.⁸⁰ It is my impression that most of the ASEAN states who are not already essentially Chinese clients (see below) follow a broadly similar policy in response to China's rise. Australia was also invited to join several new ASEAN-sponsored ministerial-level dialogues,⁸¹ and an ASEAN communique graciously – but pointedly, given Rudd's failed APC venture – expressed ASEAN's appreciation of Australia's 'steadfast friendship' since 1974 and affirmed that 'ASEAN Leaders appreciated Australia's continued support for ASEAN's institutional strengthening' and also for ASEAN's 'central role in the regional architecture'.⁸²

Australia has also tried to tread a cautious line on the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN's consensus decision-making practices enable China to induce its economically-dependent clients in ASEAN (Cambodia primarily, but Laos and to some extent Myanmar too) to effectively veto any attempt by the organisation to present a united front against China's provocations; the first overt example occurred at the 2012 ASEAN leaders Summit in Phnom Penh, and subsequent summits have featured similar dynamics.⁸³ Australia continually refuses to express its opinions about the validity of

⁷⁸ He, 'The Awkwardness', 62.

⁷⁹ Allard, Tom. 2011. 'Indonesia Wary of Strengthened Australia-US Defence Ties in Darwin', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 November.

⁸⁰ Bloomfield, Alan. 2016. 'To Balance or to Bandwagon? Adjusting to China's Rise During Australia's Rudd-Gillard Era'. *Pacific Review* 29(2), 259-282.

⁸¹ Frost, *Engaging*, 162-165.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 163.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 169.

particular claims to sovereignty made by the various claimants, but Canberra also repeatedly confirms that it supports international law, which effectively pits it against China. For example, the need to uphold the ‘rules based order’ in the Indo-Pacific (Australia’s new favoured regional definition) was the overriding theme of the 2016 Defence White Paper.⁸⁴ But while Canberra continues to rebuke China quite bluntly (and regularly), and key policy-makers refuse to be cowed by Beijing’s angry retorts,⁸⁵ Cabinet has not yet acceded to Washington’s – or, indeed, to Jakarta’s⁸⁶ – requests to conduct joint freedom of navigation patrols within 12 nautical miles of China’s recently-created ‘islands’.

Finally, with regard to Indonesia, the following metaphor helps to understand the long sweep of Australian-Indonesian relations: ‘Two steps forward, 1.5 steps back’. The two nations actually fought one another during the *Konfrontasi* campaign in the early 1960s, and they almost came to blows again over East Timor in 1999. This latter incident highlights the significant normative differences between the two close neighbours; the Australian public essentially demanded, in street protests larger than any since the anti-Vietnam War movement in the early 1970s, that their government intervene on humanitarian grounds. But Indonesia – a nation of about 17,000 islands in which the largest ethnic group, the Javanese, make up nearly 40% of the population – is understandably concerned, even paranoid about, the spectre of separatism.

Space constraints have constrained from detailing the ups and downs of this fractious relationship,⁸⁷ but just in the past few years contentious issues which have disturbed the relationship include: Australia’s current hard-line on illegal immigration upsets Jakarta because refugees’ boats are towed back into its waters by the Royal Australian Navy; Canberra banned live-cattle exports in 2011, following video footage of allegedly ‘barbaric’ slaughtering practices in abattoirs, prompting Indonesia to impose a tit-for-tat ban; two convicted Australian drug smugglers were executed in Bali despite concerted protests by Canberra and Australian civil society; the conviction of Jakarta’s Christian Governor, popularly known as ‘Ahok’, for blasphemy was very controversial in Australia; and free trade agreement negotiations have dragged on since 2010 without progress given Jakarta’s

⁸⁴ Department of Defence (Australia). 2016. *Defence White Paper 2016*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

⁸⁵ Murdoch, Scott. 2013. ‘Angry China Rebukes Julie Bishop Over East China Sea Dispute’. *The Australian*, 7 December.

⁸⁶ Parameswaran, Prashanth. 2017. ‘The Truth About Joint Indonesia-Australia South China Sea Patrols’. *The Diplomat*, 25 February.

⁸⁷ See: Ward, Ken. 2015. *Condemned to Crisis?*. Melbourne, Lowy Institute Paper.

refusal to open its protected market. These issues, and others, continue to dog relations and I, for one, do not see how they can be easily avoided or definitely resolved given the vast cultural gulf between the two societies on questions of justice, human rights, self-determination, international trade and the regional security order.⁸⁸

The issue which needs to be pondered upon in the subsequent section in the wake of Timor Leste's request for joining ASEAN is whether Australia would also join ASEAN as a full member.

WILL AUSTRALIA EVER JOIN ASEAN?

It has been noted earlier that this question is 'always-present (but rarely-prominent)'. It has been phrased in this way because the question continues to 'pop up' from time to time in Australian public discourse. For example, former-Prime Minister Keating called for Australia to join ASEAN because it 'is the natural place for Australia to belong'.⁸⁹ Then, in 2016, he claimed China has 'leap-frogged' the United States and was now the dominant power in Asia, and in response Australia should join ASEAN (he hinted that Australia's additional economic and strategic weight would enable ASEAN to 'manage' – or perhaps balance against? – China more effectively).⁹⁰

But as it has been discussed earlier in the article and reiterated that the debate is not very prominent because every time anyone suggests that Australia joins ASEAN it tends to get dismissed in a perfunctory manner. Then-Foreign Minister Bob Carr's response to Keating's 2012 speech is exemplary of the sort of reasons the Department of Foreign Affairs has trundled out repeatedly over the past few decades each time this matter has arisen:

Australia has no plans to seek or even consider membership even in the long term and [it believes] that doing so is not necessary to pursuing closer engagement with the region.... [M]embership of ASEAN would subordinate aspects of Australian foreign policy to ASEAN. It would require Australia to refrain from any real criticism of ASEAN governments (e.g. on human-rights issues) and from putting forward alternatives to ASEAN positions. It would require

⁸⁸ Phillips, Andrew and Eric Hiariej. 2016. 'Beyond the "Bandung Divide" Assessing the Scope and Limits of Australia-Indonesia Security Cooperation'. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 70(4), 422-440.

⁸⁹ Keating, Paul. 2012. 'The Keith Murdoch Oration: Asia in the New Order, Australia's Diminishing Sphere of Influence'. Speech, State library of Victoria, 14 November.

⁹⁰ Australia-China Relations Institute. 2016. 'Keating and China', panel discussion, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), 3 August.

*Australia to accept other ASEAN countries, notably the ASEAN Chair, representing Australia in discussions with external parties such as the United States, China and international organisations.... [M]embership of ASEAN would involve with it Australia having to set up an ASEAN National Secretariat to implement ASEAN decisions at the national level and that ... would cramp Australian independence.... ASEAN countries would [also] be strongly opposed to Australia joining.*⁹¹

The basic logic of this position is that Australian norms and values are too different to the norms and values which prevail amongst the members of ASEAN for joining to be a realistic possibility. This in turn requires us to explore in more detail a matter which has been raised previously in this article, namely, whether Australia is a Western or Asian society.

The concerted push by the Hawke and Keating governments to engage more with Asia and promote multiculturalism led opponents – like Pauline Hanson – to claim the government was trying to ‘Asianise’ Australia. The debate was prominent enough in the late-1980s and early 1990s for an Australian and a Canadian scholar to characterise Australia as having a ‘liminal’ identity in the late 1990s; that is, Australia was in a ‘transitional phase’, and essentially ‘stuck ... between “two worlds”’ (obviously, the West and Asia).⁹² Samuel Huntington had around the same time noted something similar, calling Australia a ‘torn’ state – caught between two of his civilisations – that seemed to be in the process of ‘defecting’ from the West.⁹³

But Gareth Evans, the single-most prominent advocate of Labour’s campaign, presented a more-subtle argument. He rejected the accusation that the government was trying to Asianise Australia and he instead argued that in the post-Cold War world (of the 1990s) democracy and liberal rights were advancing in Asia, along with steady economic growth, which enabled nascent civil societies to emerge, meaning *Asia was actually becoming more like Australia*. He did concede that Australians would have to change in some ways – they would have to categorically reject the racist assumptions which came naturally to previous generations, for example – but he also argued consistently that this would not ‘involve any sacrifice or subordination of

⁹¹ Quoted in Dobell, Graeme. 2015. ‘Canberra Questions why Australia Should Join ASEAN’. The Strategist, 12 October. At <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/canberra-questions-why-australia-should-join-asean/>. (Accessed 12.10.2017)

⁹² Higgott, Richard, and Kim Richard Nossal. 1997. ‘The International Politics of Liminality: Relocating Australia in the Asia Pacific’, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 32(2), 170.

⁹³ Huntington, Samuel. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. London: Simon & Schuster, 151-154.

our own distinctively Australian national characteristics... [Nor would it] thwart our national values and culture, or deny our history to be a generally successful one'.⁹⁴

Whatever one thinks about what Labour governments were really trying to achieve, the backlash from the late 1990s onwards was a strong one, and it is uncontroversial to assert that contemporary Australia remains essentially Western in both broader culture and in its preferred diplomatic orientation.⁹⁵ Thus, and given the momentum towards liberal-democracy in Asia, Evans had noted and relied upon to inform his arguments in the mid-1990s had dissipated, and perhaps even reversed, twenty years later, it is now difficult to imagine Australia joining ASEAN. Remember, this is an organisation which does not require its members to be democratic, which says little when a member descends into military dictatorship, as Thailand did in 2014, or which stands by while opposition figures are arrested on spurious charges, as happened in Cambodia in 2017. Australians would also likely feel very uncomfortable seeing their leaders expressing solidarity at ASEAN summits with leaders who practice deliberate, mass human rights violations against their citizens, as is currently occurring in Myanmar toward the Rohingyas people. But the last matter does require some elaboration given what was said earlier about this being exemplary of how Australia has been partially (but only minimally) socialised by ASEAN.

In the 1990s Australia sided firmly with its traditional Western allies against the military junta in Myanmar, and Canberra imposed a range of sanctions. But in 2009, after cyclone Nargis had devastated the Irrawaddy delta, the junta refused to allow international humanitarian aid efforts and some Western states began to talk ominously of a military intervention in accordance with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine.⁹⁶ ASEAN, however, resisted the calls and Australia, despite being a strong supporter of the emerging R2P norm, deliberately chose to adopt a low-profile and said little about the matter. Ultimately ASEAN was able to convince Myanmar to accept aid from other ASEAN members and, in 2010, these states' long-standing but quiet and non-coercive lobbying – consistent with the ASEAN Way – finally resulted in Myanmar announcing that it would begin a transition to democracy. Canberra seems to have been impressed by ASEAN's achievement: it dropped most of its own sanctions in July

⁹⁴ Evans and Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations*, 351.

⁹⁵ He, 'The Awkwardness', 68-71; Beeson, Mark, and Hidetaka Yoshimatsu. 2007. 'Asia's odd men out: Australia, Japan, and the Politics of Regionalism'. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7, 227-250.

⁹⁶ Badescu, Christina, and Thomas Weiss. 2010. 'Misrepresenting R2P and Advancing Norms: An Alternative Spiral?'. *International Studies Perspectives* 11, 362-363.

2012 and became the primary advocate for other Western states to relax their own sanctions, although Bob Carr also noted that the Rohingyas people continued to suffer discrimination and violent repression.⁹⁷

Thus, when a flow-blown ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingyas erupted in mid-2017, Canberra was caught in a dilemma. It was clear that ASEAN itself was not going to do or even say anything; the failure of ASEAN states to even address the issue at their November 2017 summit was labelled a 'travesty'.⁹⁸ And Canberra was largely silent too. While Foreign Minister Julie Bishop 'emphasised the need for humanitarian support to get through and also that the Rohingyas must be able to return home',⁹⁹ not a hint of R2P-like rhetoric was heard; indeed, reports emerged that Canberra 'insisted on softening a United Nations resolution' which condemned Myanmar's government.¹⁰⁰

Canberra's position on this matter must be partially related to the wider backlash against the R2P norm itself – and the resultant lack of enthusiasm for promoting it on the part of many or even most of the Western states that had previously been such staunch advocates – which has developed since R2P was deployed to justify NATO's bombing campaign against Libya and the (related) abject failure to deploy R2P in the context of mass, ongoing atrocities in Syria.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, in my opinion the single-best explanation for Canberra's awkward semi-silence on the Rohingyas issue is that Australia had learned that openly criticising ASEAN yields little on the issue at hand and undermines the relationships in South East Asia more generally, potentially imperilling Australia's interests in other issue-areas. Having said this, I think Canberra would discard this somewhat unfamiliar and no doubt uncomfortable position if Australia's core interests and values were imperilled. For example, there is a doubt that contemporary Australia would react in a similar manner to the sort of humanitarian crisis that erupted in East Timor – a close neighbour, it must be noted – in 1999. In other words, the veneer of Australian compliance with the ASEAN Way is, at best, a very thin one.

⁹⁷ Frost, Engaging, 171.

⁹⁸ Gotinga, JC. 2017. 'ASEAN Summit Silence on Rohingya 'an Absolute Travesty'. *Al-Jazeera*, 15 November.

⁹⁹ Doherty, Ben, and Oliver Holmes. 2017. 'Julie Bishop says Rohingya Must be Protected Despite "Cash for Return" Policy'. *The Guardian*, 19 September.

¹⁰⁰ Murdoch, Lindsay. 2017. 'Australia Softens Rohingya UN Resolution to Accusations of "whitewashing"'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 September.

¹⁰¹ Bloomfield, Alan. 2016. *India and the Responsibility to Protect*. Farnham: Ashgate, chapters 5 and 6.

CONCLUSION: 'INEFFECTIVE ASEAN' AN UNATTRACTIVE PROSPECT

The last matter discussed raises one further issue which will close with: Australia is also generally not interested in joining ASEAN because ASEAN is widely perceived in Australia as an ineffective talk-fest which, as Jones and Smith scathingly put it a decade ago, 'makes process, not progress'.¹⁰² One cannot exactly remember what a senior foreign service official told the author at an academic conference over lunch several years ago but to paraphrase his response to the questions about how he and his colleagues regard ASEAN to the best of my ability, he told that they believe that ASEAN has little more than symbolic value. He went on to say that Australian policy-makers typically understand that ASEAN's members value it, so there was no point in antagonising them by criticising or ignoring ASEAN. Accordingly, Canberra routinely sends observers and/or participants to the numerous ASEAN summits and meetings it is invited to attend. But junior diplomats were usually sent, with the tacit understanding that not much would get done and they may as well treat the trip like a sort of working holiday. But the official said 'when Canberra really cares, when it really wants to get something done, it engages with ASEAN states bilaterally'.¹⁰³

The debate about ASEAN's effectiveness is a long and complex one; those interested in exploring it should begin with the special edition of a journal devoted entirely to it which appeared in 2009.¹⁰⁴ At the risk of oversimplifying the contributions of eight eminent International Relations scholars spread over 176 pages, one can take the following from this collection.

On the one hand, if one applies the ordinary criteria to assess effectiveness – that a regional organisation is able to solve collective problems – ASEAN is not very effective. From its failure to respond quickly and adequately to the Asian Economic Crisis, to its inability to realise the aspirations to create a free-trade zone – which were stated in the opening clauses of its founding document, the 1967 Bangkok Declaration no less – after 50 years,¹⁰⁵ to the way its members seem frozen like a kangaroo in the headlights (as this

¹⁰² Jones, David, and Michael Smith. 2007. 'Making Process, Not Progress: ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order'. *International Security* 32(1), 148-184.

¹⁰³ Personal conversation, Australian Political Science Association Conference, Sydney, 26-28 September 2016.

¹⁰⁴ *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22(3), 2009, 333-499.

¹⁰⁵ To be fair, ASEAN only really set its hand to this task in 1992; but the results so far have been very uninspiring.

Australian prefers to put it) in the face of China's challenge in the South China Sea, to the inability of members to regulate the pollution caused by the slash-and-burn agricultural methods employed across much of the region, ASEAN's record of solving regional problems is, overall, poor. This is primarily because ASEAN's members deliberately enshrined – and have zealously guarded ever since – consensus and not majoritarian decision-making principles at the organisation's core. In short, ASEAN struggles to change its members' behaviour, but this was intentional because, as Emmers and Tan have put it, ASEAN was 'built to fail'.¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, if one assesses effectiveness with reference to the original purpose a regional organisation was created to fulfil, arguably ASEAN has done quite well. A collection of weak, post-colonial states which in the mid-1960s was being buffeted by great power strategic competition, mired in seemingly intractable conflicts between each other, and afflicted by the sorts of internal stability problems which often plague multi-ethnic societies, has been transformed into a group of states which have experienced strong economic growth and stable external and (for the most part) internal security relations for several decades now.

But while Australia is no doubt pleased that the fractious, unstable region it saw when it gazed northwards in the mid-1960s is much more peaceful and prosperous now, Canberra remains primarily interested in solving collective regional problems. Joining ASEAN as it is at present would therefore yield few benefits – few prospects that pressing regional issues will actually be solved, given ASEAN's poor track record – but joining would also come with significant costs, namely, having to conform to the ASEAN Way, meaning Canberra would be essentially consenting to having its own hands tied when it confronts collective problems in the region. Thus, while I have little doubt that Australia will continue to seek closer ties with ASEAN or, more accurately, with its member states bilaterally, in the future, one can see little prospect of Canberra seriously entertaining joining. Or at least it won't seriously consider doing so until ASEAN is able to transform itself – or at least begins a credible effort to transform itself – into an institution which operates according to majoritarian (and perhaps even weighted-majoritarian) decision-making processes which offer the prospect of something better than the lowest-common-denominator (or outright avoidance of issues) that currently characterises ASEAN states' collective policy-making efforts.

¹⁰⁶ Emmers, Ralph, and See Seng Tan. 2011. 'The ASEAN Regional Forum and Preventive Diplomacy: Built to Fail?'. *Asian Security* 7(1), 44-60.