

Down Under and All Over *

Behind The Headlines

By Bunn Nagara

Australia is still finding its place in the world, a work very much in progress.

TWO Sundays ago, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard released the White Paper “Australia in the Asian Century”. For many, it was a long-awaited document.

Australia’s history, polity and geography make for an odd mix. Anglophone settlers had to reconcile themselves with a strange terrain, unfamiliar Aboriginal people, isolation from mother country Britain, even conflict between allegiance to the British crown and incipient republicanism, and now a rising Asia.

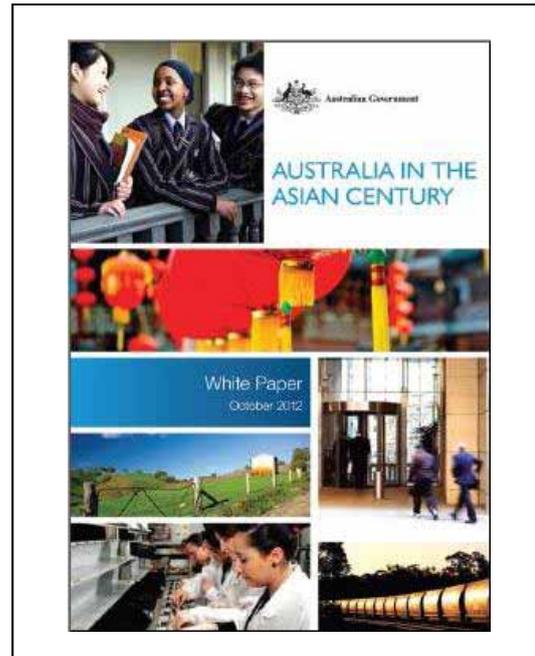
White settlers “tamed” the land and established thriving outposts around the edges of the vast island. Asian immigration followed, driven by push-pull factors of a relatively undeveloped East Asia and a more developed Australia.

As the 20th century began, a racist White Australia Policy restricted non-white immigration while encouraging European settlement. It lasted half a century and took another quarter of a century to dismantle.

Meanwhile, the indigenous peoples suffered disproportionately lower levels of life expectancy, education, employment and higher imprisonment rates.

Then later in the 20th century, East Asian economies surged. Trade links with East Asia multiplied in number and volume.

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The self-image of Australia, the largest country in Australasia, Oceania or the South Pacific, became more fraught. Its geography, history, politics and society were not characteristically Asian, yet it felt increasingly overwhelmed by a rising East Asia even as it experienced the prosperity.

When the Labour Party’s Paul Keating was prime minister in the 1990s, he “declared” Australia an Asian country. After he left office, he reversed that stand and admitted that Australia was not an Asian country.

John Howard of the conservative Liberal Party next became premier and distinctly identified Australia as a Western, US-led ally in the

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world. President George W. Bush affirmed that by saying Australia was not just Washington's "deputy sheriff" but its sheriff.

Labour's Kevin Rudd next became premier, and much was made of his fluency in Mandarin. This was to be an Asian Century of economic paramountcy, led by a rapidly rising China.

Interactions with Asia and Asians, particularly in economics, continued and grew. But Australia remained firmly rooted in the US-led Western sphere with its geopolitical concerns.

This added to Canberra's fuzzy regionalism and amorphous identity in relation to Asia. The more Asia grew in global stature and consideration, the more vexed Australia's strategic relationship with it became.

Amid these rising stakes, a White Paper as an official declaration of intent assumes considerable significance. But the heightened expectations produced general disappointment instead: most of the White Paper's 320 pages and nine chapters concerned Asia, but seen narrowly for Australia's own interests.

Reception to the document within Australia was reportedly supportive, but criticism from various quarters was also evident. There was more agreement over the need for the White Paper for an insular Australia than with the contents of this particular White Paper.

The parliamentary opposition criticised it for being long on rhetoric but short on detailed directions. The business community found it

redundant since it was already relating very much with Asia.

Evidently these business critics saw international relations only through the prism of their business deals. The social, cultural, strategic and other aspects of external relations typically escaped them.

The White Paper itself begins with a decent outline of an ascendant Asia, a vast continent with mounting prospects, growing middle classes and expanding markets combining to change Australia's priorities and "strategic environment". Where East Asia was once seen as the source of unwanted migrants, it is now regarded as the fount of fresh capital and trade orders.

Much of what follows is an Australia-centric diagnosis and prescription of what Australians should do to benefit from such an Asia.

That Australia itself is so moved by Asia's rise testifies to the cross-border nature of such fortunes, yet the White Paper remains centred on Australia's own concerns and interests, with scant consideration for Asia.

A commentary by the Australian-born veteran industrialist, technical consultant and academic Murray Hunter, who has spent a productive working life in Asia, is telling. Writing in Indonesia's *Jakarta Post* newspaper, he wondered aloud whether the White Paper actually depicted Australia finding its way in the Asian Century or just getting lost in Asia.

He said the document "reeked of Austro-centrism", one-way concerns to get what it wants from Asia, and "niggling China with its staunch loyalty to the US" even though "China saved Australia from a deep recession".

Action spoke louder than words, he said, and "Australia needs the region more than the

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region needs Australia”. He said the country had to overcome its deep-set belief that its own cultural values were somehow universally accepted across the region.

Murray said “the White Paper is still haunted by Australia’s past”, with Asia “seen only as a means for Australian incomes” to rise. He found the document failed to provide the “vital key” of “accommodation of Asia to what Australia really has to offer” as an independent country “willing to put its lot with Asia and not with the US”.

A recent high-level bilateral forum organised by ISIS Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur examined several aspects of the White Paper. “Chatham House Rules” meant that speakers could not be quoted or identified, but several comments remained pertinent.

The White Paper was seen to omit, among other things, measures for building relations with Asean countries and Asean itself. Some questions were also raised.

It was then explained that the “US military base” in Darwin was more of a facility than a base, since it would host only a rotation of US troops rather than a permanent emplacement. Australia was said to respect China’s right to modernise its military, while feeling equally entitled to nurture its security with the US.

It was further explained that Australia’s role was originally to find ways to engage the US in the region. It was “in Australia’s DNA” to seek security from US involvement in the region.

In a brief exchange later with visiting Australian Foreign Minister Senator Bob Carr, I asked him how the White Paper positioned Australia differently from the past in its relations with Asia.

He said Australia now better understood that its economic future was dependent on Asia, adding that Malaysia’s development was an example of what a growing middle class in the region signified.

On how Australia could better partner with East Asian countries for mutual benefit, he pointed to good governance, a record of economic reform and an exchange programme with young Malaysian Muslims for better understanding.

Carr said Australia should seek its security in Asia but not from Asia, while accepting Asean centrality.

He alluded to Australia’s role in the peace agreement in the southern Philippines brokered by Malaysia.

When asked about policy fluctuations between the Liberal and Labour parties, he said that although Australia is seen as a country with a security relationship with the US, there was more that could be said of that. He added that a country was entitled to look after its own security with its own foreign relations (Australia with the US).

Then when asked how Australia’s foreign policy was changing in respect of Asia, Carr said the fact that he was here in Malaysia while Gillard was in Vietnam, and both of them were heading to Bali (for an Asean-convened meeting), said it all.

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