

EXCLUDED FROM THE CLUB:

Why Australia is not yet a Part of East Asia

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GARETH EVANS, THE AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN MINISTER during Paul Keating's administration, once lamented that Australia was "the odd man out." He was referring to East Asia's exclusion of Australia from the regional make up. Determined to convince his East Asian counterparts that Australia deserves to be "in," Evans even showed a map revealing the geographical proximity of Australia to the region. Although Evan's sales pitch was somewhat high-brow and forced, it underscored the point that Australia was serious about being a part of East Asia. Given that neither the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) nor the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)—two entities that have the promise of knitting the East Asian region closer together—have ever spoken openly of the prospect of including Australia, Evan's concern was justified. Australia was losing out.

A GOOD NEIGHBOR

From an objective standpoint, however, there is no reason why Australia ought to remain excluded from the regional community. In fact, closer scrutiny reveals that Australia

is indeed more intimately linked to East Asia than what had otherwise been suggested by those opposed to Australia's inclusion. The flight from Singapore to Perth, for example, is no more than four hours long; shorter than the flight from Singapore to Tokyo. Australia is an economic powerhouse with extensive trade links with almost every country in East Asia except Myanmar. At the height of the Vietnam War in 1964-1967, Australia was the only nation, other than Canada, to volunteer its troops to assist the American war efforts in Indo-China to contain the spread of communism. Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) also came about because of former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke's sug-

gestion in 1989. More importantly, Australia remains an important member of the Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA) that also consists of Malaysia, Singapore, Britain and New Zealand. The Cambodian conflict that festered from 1979 until 1992 was also resolved with the help of Australian diplomacy. And, when East Timor was literally wallowing in a state of complete anarchy in 1998, it was the Australian-led contingent that stabilized the situation first.

On a more prosaic level, many Asian students continue to study science, medicine, law and commerce in Australia's tertiary institutions. Many affluent Asians have Australian permanent residency and even citizenship. Having jettisoned the "whites-only" immigration policy practiced in the 1960s, Australian society has also come a long way to being a part of the East Asian region.

FOREIGN POLICY OPPORTUNISM

Given a long list of notable regional accomplishments, why then the seeming hostility

against Australia being referred to as a member of East Asia? More precisely, why the continued stress that Australia is a part of Oceania, whatever that moniker may mean?

One of the reasons for the derision which Australia often encounters from Malaysia and Indonesia, is Canberra's inability to articulate a true "Asian vision." Like an adolescent struggling with an identity-problem, Australia does not quite know where to place its bets. When Asia was on the ascendant, Australia wanted "in"—as demonstrated by Gareth Evans' statement. On the flip-side, since America is currently growing at phenomenal rates, one sees Australia latching onto Washington DC like a school-

TOKYO HAS NEVER BEEN SO BOLD AS TO CLAIM THAT IT WAS SERVING AS THE "DEPUTY SHERIFF" OF THE REGION. YET, THIS IS EXACTLY THE *FAUX PAS* MADE BY PRIME MINISTER JOHN HOWARD IN SEPTEMBER 1999.

boy holding the coattail of his headmaster. Such foreign policy flip-flops, while understandable in view of the change from Paul Keating's Labor to John Howard's Liberal government, still do not speak well of Australia's grand strategy in Asia.

Nor, for that matter, does it project Australia as a reliable member within the "family" of Asian nations. If anything, for a region whose Confucian, Islamic, Catholic and Buddhist value system have each emphasized the importance of filial piety and allegiance, Australian "opportunism" can easily strike its neighbors as peculiar, if not distasteful. And as is always the case in international relations, these gut perceptions matter. In this context, Australia has been perceived as having an inconsistent Asian policy.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

To be sure, there is no "learning curve" that Australia can learn from, or abide by to be considered an "in" member of East Asia. Indeed, East Asia, comprising 13 nation-states now forming Northeast and Southeast Asia, is the result of continued political construction. Just as India has gradually orientated itself into becoming a member of East Asia—by joining, for example, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), of which Australia is also a member—Australia can attempt to do the same. Yet, Australia's membership in ARF has not brought about a discernible change in East Asia's perception.

Indeed, to be considered a member of the East Asian region, Australia has to play by the rules set by the house, be they rules originating from the ARF or even rules originating from an expanded ASEAN. And in most cases, the principles are clear: There shall be no apparent effort on the part of member nations to intervene in the affairs of other member nations without thorough consultation first. And in all cases, every attempt must be made to try to

reach consensus. These are the basic norms subscribed to by countries in East Asia.

In this sense, Japan has achieved more than Australia towards the goal of becoming an accepted member of the East Asian community. Despite Japan's power and wealth, for instance, Japan has never tried to impose its will on the region since the end of World War II. In fact, even given its military alliance with the United States, Tokyo has never been so bold as to claim that it was serving as the "deputy sheriff" of the region. Yet, this is exactly the *faux pas* made

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by Prime Minister John Howard in September 1999.

In the wake of Australian troops landing in East Timor, Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced a new strategic doctrine for Australia. Dubbed the "Howard Doctrine," the new strategy included two core elements. First, Australia would assume a more active role in Asian security matters, including further interventions as needed. Second, Australia would undertake this role as "deputy" to the United States. Although Howard has since denied that there was anything verging on a "doctrine" tagged to his name, nor did he ever use the word "deputy sheriff" to describe Australia's impending role in East Asia, latest events have since confirmed the plan initiated by the Howard administration.

In a joint press conference with

Australian Defense Minister John Moore in Sydney on July 17th, for example, America's Defense Secretary William Cohen said that the "alliance between Australia and the United States is, in fact, the anchor to our policy in the Pacific region." In response to a question on potential US intervention in the conflict-wracked Indonesian Maluku province, Cohen further added that Washington "will look for some leadership on the part of Australia in terms of formulating [its] own policies in the region."

To be sure, no one is saying that Canberra does not have the prerogative to seek a closer alliance with Washington D.C. In fact, given Australia's reliance on secure sea-lanes in the Straits of Malacca and the Indonesian waters, it is imperative that they do. But for Australia to latch on the United States without first seeking "internal" solutions through such bodies as ARF or ASEAN also imply an unwillingness to source for remedies within the region. In this regard, Australia is once again guilty of foreign policy opportunism. While, the move will not be fatal, Australia will nevertheless lose vital support in claiming itself as a part of the East Asian region. ■

CORRECTION:

IN THE WINTER 2000 ISSUE, MILLENNIAL VISIONS, JOHN TSANG'S NAME WAS SPELLED INCORRECTLY.

WE APOLOGIZE SINCERELY FOR THE MISTAKE AND REGRET ANY CONFUSION OUR MISTAKE MAY HAVE CAUSED.