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MISREADING MENZIES AND WHITLAM

REASSESSING THE IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

DAVID MARTIN JONES & MIKE LAWRENCE SMITH

Conventional understandings of Australian foreign policy hold that a decisive break with the past in external relations occurred only after 1972 and the arrival of Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister. Whitlam, it is claimed, began the process of severing out-dated imperial attachments to Britain, thus setting Australia on an independent course in world affairs based on a more mature assessment of the national interest that defined Australia as part of a wider Asia region. In contrast, the period between 1949 and 1972—an era dominated by the premiership of Sir Robert Menzies—is seen as a time of docile subservience to great power protectors, which sustained a conservative and reactionary monoculture at home while alienating Australia's Asian neighbours abroad. This study contends that this understanding of the beginning of the 'modern' era in Australian foreign policy does not accord with the historical evidence. It is, instead, an image that has been ideologically constructed to legitimize Whitlam's self-proclaimed revolution in foreign affairs and to validate the abortive attempt to integrate Australia into Asia during the 1980s and 1990s. The ruling foreign policy orthodoxy, however, is one that is widely accepted, and little questioned, in Australian academic and journalistic circles. Yet it rests on a profound, and often intentional, misreading of Australian foreign policy during the Menzies era. In effect, the pillars that have supported Australian foreign policy for over two decades since 1972 are myths manufactured in hindsight.

Dr David Martin Jones is Senior Lecturer in the School of Government at the University of Tasmania. Between 1990 and 1995 he was Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the National University of Singapore. He is co-author of *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (Macmillan, London, 1995) and author of *Political Development in Pacific Asia* (Polity, Cambridge, 1998). His forthcoming book is entitled *China in Western Political Thought* (Macmillan). Dr Mike Lawrence Smith is Lecturer in the Department of War Studies, King's College London. He is also the Principal Consultant to the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Between 1992 and 1993 he was Lecturer in the Department of History, National University of Singapore. He has previously held positions at the European Parliament in Luxembourg, the Royal Naval College, Greenwich and the Joint Services Command and Staff College.

All too often the Australian debate on international relations is characterised by selective amnesia and selective animosities. (E. G. Whitlam, 1997)¹

... the hackneyed allegation that Menzies 'grovelled' to the British and to the monarchy is shallow and anachronistic in the extreme. He had a reasoned understanding of what he and the majority of an almost exclusively Anglo-Celtic community instinctively felt: that they were British (A. W. Martin, 1993)²

WHY, FOR OVER 20 YEARS, DID AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY exhibit a preoccupation with trying to integrate a culturally European state into a geographically Asian region? Former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, termed this policy 'new regionalism'.³ Huge efforts were expended debating the most suitable constitutional and diplomatic arrangements in which to accommodate this revised understanding of Australia's place in the world. In the course of the 1980s policy makers concluded that a traditional identity and rôle in international diplomacy no longer suited the requirements of the emerging order in the Asia-Pacific. In particular, the end of the Cold War gave 'new regionalism' added emphasis, providing the impetus to re-think conceptions of Australian identity and to consider the enhanced rôle that Australia could play as a middle power within an economically dynamic Asia-Pacific region.⁴ Why, we might wonder, did a Canberra policy elite presuppose that globalization necessarily created a distinct East Asian region, which in turn demanded the reconstruction of Australia's national identity to accord with an apparently inescapable regional reality? It is profitable to examine the evolution of Australian foreign policy in this regard, especially in light of the financial meltdown of the Asian economies between 1997 and 1998.

This study contends that in the policy, journalistic and academic circles which came to dominate public discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, the image of 'the "modern" era of Australian politics' became historically foreshortened, dating effectively from the early 1970s.⁵ The basis of this contemporary imagining of Australia's recent past significantly coincided with the arrival of Australian Labor Party (ALP) Prime Minister, Edward Gough Whitlam in 1972, after 23 years of unbroken Liberal-Country Party rule. Only then, it is held, did Australia embark on a truly independent course in world affairs. In foreign policy, trade and defence, Whitlam's 'watershed' sundered traditional ties with the United Kingdom and the United States of America and set the nation on an independent path of self-discovery, maturity and national destiny.

Further, this ruling orthodoxy contrasts the Whitlam era and its consequences with an otiose Australian political self-understanding that preceded it and which deserved, if not euthanasia, then at least radical surgery. Prior to 1972 the prevailing international image of Australia, it was maintained, was of a 'brash' yet 'anxious' Anglo-Celtic people casually off-loaded onto an isolated continent by an indifferent British Empire.⁶ Alienated by distance from their cultural roots in Europe, Australians relied on external guarantors throughout their short history. First Britain and then, as Empire declined, the US, protected the immature Australian infant from external threats.

In effect, Australia had neither an authentic foreign policy nor a national interest, and to the extent it had an identity at all, it was a mixture of Anglo-Celtic inferiority and bitterness. Poets like A. D. Hope lamented ‘... a vast parasite robber state/where second hand Europeans pullulate/timidly on the edge of alien shores.’⁷ Social commentators like A. A. Phillips identified a cultural cringe towards things English that haunted the Australian intelligentsia like a ‘minatory ghost’.⁸ Even conservative commentators like Geoffrey Blainey assumed by the 1960s that the ‘tyranny of distance’ separating Australia from the United Kingdom left ‘the Antipodes ... drifting, though where they were drifting no one knew.’⁹ More worryingly still ‘pioneering Republicans’¹⁰ like Donald Horne considered Australia a weak and increasingly exposed ‘orphan of the Pacific’.¹¹

To build the requisite sense of maturity appropriate to regional engagement an established, but redundant, identity had to be replaced by one ideologically tailored to what Whitlam and his adherents in academe and the ALP conceived to be the requirements of an independent, regionally engaged Australia. In order to pursue this felt need the recent Australian past, particularly the period dominated by the premiership of Sir Robert Menzies and his Liberal successors between 1949 and 1972, had to be re-described as a servile and dependent monoculture. This re-description, we shall argue, rests on both a misreading of Australian foreign policy during the Menzies era and a questionable acceptance of Whitlam’s self-proclaimed revolution in foreign affairs after 1972.

Pre-modern Australia

Less than 40 years ago there was no question that the core values of Australian self-belief extended from the intimate connection with Britain and the imperial tradition. ‘The British tie’, according to a 1960 edition of *The Round Table*, ‘was and is very precious to Australians. They are loyal to the throne; they are conscious of the British origins of their parliamentary and legal systems ... they share in the cultural traditions of the British Isles’.¹² Links with Britain had loosened since the end of the Second World War, and the United States, through the 1951 ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States) Treaty, became its most important ally. In essence, though, Australia represented a committed and optimistic member of an Anglo-Saxon liberal world.¹³

This sense of place and purpose was reflected in Australia’s foreign and defence policies, which were robustly Anglocentric and anti-communist; a veritable ‘guardian of Western ideals in South East Asia’.¹⁴ In this context, Australia’s external policy was broad-ranging and global in perspective. As Minister for Defence, Shane Paltridge, declared in 1965, ‘Australian defence policy must be world wide because our security is threatened by any blow at the United Kingdom, the United States or any other of the countries in the defensive alliances that have been formed in the free world’.¹⁵ By supporting American and British attempts to stabilize Asia and fend off communist challenges in the region Australia enhanced her own security. This rationale led Australia to contribute directly to the military effort in Korea and to assist Britain in the Malayan Emergency and the ‘Confrontation’ with Indonesia.

Australian membership of ANZUS, the South East Asia Treaty Organization

(SEATO) (1954) and the Five Power Defence Agreement with Britain, Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand (1971) constituted the practical manifestation of this policy. The ANZUS Treaty in particular recognized that 'an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety'.¹⁶ Largely in order to secure American interest in the region, Australia committed advisers and subsequently troops to South Vietnam after 1965. However, by 1970 with America's withdrawal from Vietnam underway and the end of its attempt 'to contain by military means communist-nationalist forces in South-east Asia',¹⁷ led some to question the precise benefits that Australia derived from its policy of forward defence in general and its Indo-chinese adventure in particular. Critics wondered whether 'adherence to some of the more rigid or militant aspects of American foreign policy' was really in Australia's wider interests.¹⁸

Retro-Australia: a land dependent

The growing concern over the wisdom of Australia's involvement in Indochina eventually expanded into a revisionist critique of Australian external relations. Inevitably, the focus for criticism centred on the legacy of Sir Robert Menzies, whose long tenure as Prime Minister from 1949 to 1966 dominated the Australian political landscape. After 1968 the ALP opposition maintained that the determined anti-communist stance taken by Menzies and his Liberal successors had prohibited the articulation of a coherent and distinctive national interest. The dénouement in Vietnam afforded the opportunity for an increasingly vocal group of academics, journalists and foreign policy analysts, generally linked to the left of the ALP, to chart a radical alternative for Australia in world affairs. These intellectuals challenged the traditional 'creed', which demanded an external protector 'strong enough and willing to save us'.¹⁹ As early as 1964, radical critics such as Donald Horne considered Menzies the chief architect of this obsequiousness in foreign affairs. Thus, in *The Lucky Country* (1964) Horne contended that Menzies had used power to little purpose, merely locking Australia into 'obsolete and irrelevant ideologies and values'.²⁰ It was felt that the Menzies era had created a land that was backward looking and reluctant to change.²¹ Menzies's heirs as leaders of the Liberal-Country coalition, Harold Holt, John Gorton and William McMahon, though considered less in thrall to imperial nostalgia,²² nevertheless, retained Menzies's policies, which continued to lend Australia the 'period-piece aroma of his own now-bygone regime'.²³

This anachronistic, conservative society engendered by successive Liberal-Country governments imbued the Australian psyche with a 'cultural cringe'.²⁴ On the world stage misplaced loyalty to the protector, it was argued, placed Australia on the losing side of nearly every external engagement from the Suez crisis to Vietnam.²⁵ In the minds of critics, the post-war legacy was an impoverished national self-image stemming from a society that was politically and morally retarded.²⁶

Moreover, the failure to attain 'cultural identity' inhibited the development of a mature rôle in international affairs because 'we do not know what our national interests are'.²⁷ The problem, according to Chiddick and Teichmann, was 'that

we do not really feel ourself {sic} a nation, nor do we possess a distinct culture. Even our history might be regarded as a derivation or a continuation, in a foreign place, of someone else's history'.²⁸ The revisionist mission, therefore, was to end this outmoded adherence to a failing cultural legacy that had engendered a false national consciousness and prevented the emergence of a modern nation.

Shifting identity

The solution to the problem of an underdeveloped national identity was for Australia to 'acquire some kind of organic separateness'²⁹ from its English speaking allies. Australia in the 1970s had to effect an 'identity shift' transforming the way Australians thought about themselves. This, in turn, would lead to the natural re-ordering of foreign and defence policies. Australia had to abandon its reliance on external powers thus liberating the people from their unconscious subservience while simultaneously freeing foreign policy 'to take a more initiating and creative rôle in defending and promoting the national interest'.³⁰

The currently received truth of Australian international relations textbooks holds that after 23 years of insipid conservatism, the 'Whitlam period provided a watershed'.³¹ 'It divided the prolonged obeisance of Menzies to the idea of Imperial unity ... from the emergence of the kind of Australian foreign policy that we now take for granted.'³² Whitlam severed cultural and constitutional links with Britain. This involved abolishing the honours system for federal government representatives, reducing the right of appeal to the House of Lords and changing the national anthem from 'God Save the Queen' to 'Advance Australia Fair'.³³ The government ended automatic rights of entry for British subjects and eased immigration and naturalization controls to permit a broader settler intake from non-European countries.³⁴ This, it was argued, represented the 'final destruction of White Australia',³⁵ and removed the stain of 'racial discrimination from immigration procedures'.³⁶ After a year in office, Whitlam's own judgement on Australia's new direction in foreign policy was clear:

We are no longer a cipher or a satellite in world affairs. We are no longer stamped with a taint of racism. We are no longer a colonial power. We are no longer out of step with the world's progressive, and enlightened movements towards freedom, disarmament or cooperation. We are no longer enthralled to bogies and obsessions with our relations with China or the great powers.³⁷

Towards the new regionalism

Whitlam's self-assessment was in the course of the 1980s translated into official orthodoxy. Whitlam was seen to be single-handedly responsible for shifting the focus of Australian foreign policy away from its 'hitherto strict ideological-military orientation'³⁸ to 'one based on more enduring ties such as trade, aid programmes, regional cooperation, and the development of a network of

cultural contacts and agreements'.³⁹ Thus, James Walter, in his largely uncritical political biography, *The Leader* (1980), claimed that Whitlam had 'prompted recognition that our traditional ties back to Western Hemisphere countries no longer could be regarded as more important than relations with the countries around us'.⁴⁰ It was the successive ALP governments, which held office between 1983 and 1996, together with their academic dependents in university research schools and Whitlam inspired scholar-diplomats who carried forth his vision of regional interdependence.

As early as 1979, Alan Renouf, Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs, declared that Whitlam had been 'a good advertisement for Australia' because he had recognized that 'Australia should not have sought so diligently to tie herself in political and defence terms, so tightly and so unquestionably to the United States'.⁴¹ Consequently, the most important aspect of the foreign policy transformation outlined in the Whitlam era was that it justified Australia repositioning itself for a larger rôle in the affairs of the Asia-Pacific region. It was only after 1983, however, that the new Labour government led by Bob Hawke explicitly cultivated a distinctive regional focus in security and trade policies. Hawke articulated a doctrine of 'enmeshment' in the Asia-Pacific. In practical terms this meant support for disarmament proposals such as the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) initiative.⁴²

Economic imperatives conditioned Australia's turn towards Asia. Australian exports to its ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) neighbours grew by 24 per cent between 1977 and 1988, whilst exports to the United Kingdom and Europe were in decline long before the UK entered the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1972.⁴³ Moreover, Australia's sluggish growth, coupled with recession in the early 1990s, contrasted unfavourably with the per annum 6–8 per cent GDP growth and seemingly full-employment of some ASEAN economies.⁴⁴ In the view of some commentators such 'global and regional trends' were likely to provoke a 'compelling reassessment of Australia's political, cultural, economic and strategic approach to South-east Asia'.⁴⁵

Accordingly, the orthodoxy maintained that only in the course of the 1980s did a mature sense of national identity begin to inform a sophisticated foreign diplomacy properly attuned to regional affairs. The path mapped out by Whitlam and developed by his successors ensured that Australia attained a post-British identity, which, in the words of a former Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 'accepts more completely its Asia-Pacific destiny'.⁴⁶

A false starting point

Those who reproached Menzies for reducing Australia to dependency on external guarantors began from the assumption that national interests exist in a vacuum free from all extraneous factors and thus capable of objective definition. The concept of the national interest is, though, a complex amalgam of influences moulded by time and circumstances. It is therefore erroneous to assume that Australian foreign policy in the Menzies era lacked an appreciation

of the national interest. The premises that defined Australian foreign policy objectives after 1945 were Cold War imperatives, which saw communism as a threat to the political stability of Southeast Asia. This formed a coherent national calculus, identifying the priorities from which foreign policy subsequently flowed.⁴⁷

These priorities recognized that there was little Australia could do on its own to protect Southeast Asia. Defence planning and alliance politics were, as a result, geared to engaging and supporting stronger states—Britain and the USA—in their attempts to stabilize the region. Hence, the creation of the ANZUS alliance was described in 1951 by Minister for External Affairs, R. G. Casey, as the attainment of ‘a major objective of Australian foreign policy’.⁴⁸ Menzies emphasized that: ‘the free countries of South East Asia should not fall one by one to communist aggression. Security in the area must therefore be a collective concept ... We cannot stand alone.’⁴⁹ The ultimate expression of this policy was achieved when, from April 1965, Australia contributed military forces in support of American military intervention in South Vietnam.⁵⁰ Involvement in Vietnam, it was maintained, would ensure the US commitment to the region, demonstrating that Australia was a ‘willing ally, one that stood up to be counted and thus deserved to be stood up *for*’.⁵¹ These remained consistent themes in Australian foreign relations for well over two decades, as Prime Minister Holt stated in 1966:

We cannot be isolationist or neutralist, placed as we are geographically and occupying, as we do, with limited national strength, this vast continent. We cannot leave it solely to our allies—and their national servicemen—to defend in the region, the rights of countries to their independence and the peaceful pursuit of their national way of life.⁵²

The criticism that Australia had no refined concept of the national interest during this era is a false starting point for any critique of Australian foreign policy. What the revisionist critics meant was not that Australia had no national interests but that they disagreed with the assumptions upon which calculations of the national interest were made. For example, throughout the 1960s opposition politicians attacked government policy for its alleged insensitivity to Asian nations. Whitlam declared in 1960 that Australia ‘has for ten years missed the opportunity to interpret the new nations to the old world and the old world to the new nations’.⁵³

The revisionist rebuke of Menzies’s missed opportunities and his failure to adopt a ‘non-aligned’ approach to foreign policy intensified as the years went by.⁵⁴ It was Asia that was the primary focus of concern. According to former Labor Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, Asia was ‘the region from which we sought to in the past to protect ourselves’.⁵⁵ Suspicion and condescension were seen as the guiding principles of Menzies’s attitudes towards Asia. This repudiated the national interest because it prevented an accommodation with countries in the region by which ‘Australia could shrug off some of its old attitudes of dependence and find a unique place for itself in a region which it had always before considered alien and even hostile’.⁵⁶ Summating what became official ALP, media and academic orthodoxy during his Prime Ministership, Paul Keating maintained that Gough Whitlam ‘had given new hope and international

standing to Australian foreign policy. His intelligence and energy contrasted with ... Holt and the national torpor induced by Billy McMahon and Menzies before him'.⁵⁷

The wrong side of history

The revisionists saw 'forward defence' as the most pernicious aspect of the national torpor. For Whitlam the Cold War stance adopted by Menzies concealed overt racism. The foundation of forward defence, Whitlam complained, 'was fear of foreigners; its focus was fear of communism; and because these fears in turn focused so sharply on China and the Chinese version of communism, they were rooted in racism. Racism was the common denominator of a whole range of foreign policies of the Menzies era'.⁵⁸ From such tainted well-springs, foreign policy failure resulted, permitting those like Bruce Grant to pronounce that the damaging 'commitment to Vietnam has been the most dramatic example of how we were drawn into a situation precisely defined by our policy of "forward defence"'.⁵⁹ The indictment was that the Vietnamese entanglement put Australia on the wrong side of history and incurred the animosity of Asian peoples.⁶⁰

The central claim in the revisionist thesis that foreign policy in the Menzies era excluded Australia from Asian 'enmeshment' is misleading. In fact, from the start of the Cold War the Menzies government developed an explicit policy of good neighbourly relations with Southeast Asia.⁶¹ As early as 1951 Menzies had recognized that Australia had to 'cultivate our personal contact with those great new Asiatic powers whose history and culture are by no means identical with our own, but who are bound to have great significance in the world of the future and who deserve our sympathetic interest and study'.⁶² Likewise, External Affairs Minister Casey stated in 1956 that: 'We are striving to develop the strength of the area to which we belong'.⁶³ To this end, the government supported moves towards self-government in the region, including Malayan independence, and was a prime mover in setting up the Colombo Plan to provide technical and educational aid to countries across Asia.⁶⁴

Casey and Holt were especially keen Asianists. Both travelled the region extensively in order to develop relations and understand Asian concerns and problems.⁶⁵ Casey, in particular, was keenly aware of regional sensitivities.⁶⁶ As one commentator observed in 1967: 'Where Australians *are* concerned, internationally, they are concerned about Asia'.⁶⁷ This concern was expressed both in declaratory terms and in practice. In 1965, Defence Minister Paltridge avowed that 'by virtue {of Australia's} location on the periphery of Asia, {we} can make a unique contribution to the policies aimed at the security and stability of South-East Asia'.⁶⁸ Realistically assessing Australia's Cold War rôle in the mid-1960s the External Affairs Minister Paul Hasluck shrewdly noted that 'the fate of small and middle powers, such as Australia, would be determined predominantly by the balance struck between the great powers such as the United States, the Soviet Union and China'.⁶⁹ Consequently, Australia's foreign policy had to be 'shaped, not by undue ambition or naïve idealism, but by a prudent concern to protect its interests' in a world dominated by power politics.⁷⁰ It was on this judicious calculation of the national interest that the

Menzies government was able to enhance Australia's regional standing to the extent that, according to his most recent biographer, it had more 'responsibilities in Southeast Asia than any other country'. Far from contributing to a general lassitude in international affairs Menzies had 'increased Australia's stature on the world stage beyond recognition'.⁷¹

Cold War realities

Equally inaccurate is the contention that Australian attitudes and policies in the Menzies era alienated Asian states. In fact the non-communist countries in Southeast Asia encouraged Australia's forward defence posture. Most of these vulnerable young states were fearful for their own security and welcomed Australian military engagement. The threat of communist insurrection was neither a Cold War nor a 'racist' illusion. The influence of China in particular was seen to be at work behind violent subversion in Indonesia and Malaya. Australian intervention in South Vietnam was welcomed as a vital exercise in holding the ring against the forces of instability. As T. B. Millar observed at the time: 'However academic and unreal the "domino theory" may appear to some Australians, or however exaggerated the fears of Chinese expansion, people living in South-east Asia have very unacademic apprehensions of what would happen if the Western forces were to pull-out.'⁷²

The Malayan Government in the 1950s was particularly anxious to ensure the continued presence of Australian forces. Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, with whom Menzies enjoyed a particularly good relationship,⁷³ argued that 'with the geographical and strategical position of this country, Malaya offers herself as an easy target and will always be open to aggression if she is not properly guarded'.⁷⁴ Later in the 1960s the Menzies government was unhesitating in its support, both diplomatic and military, of Malaysia during the Emergency (1948-60) and during the Confrontation with Indonesia (1963-66).⁷⁵ The integral part Australian forces played in supporting the governments of Southeast Asia supplied the region with practical help and vital reassurance. The significance of Australia's rôle was recognized in the 1960s when Australia agreed to retain forces in the area after 'strong requests' from Tunku Abdul Rahman and Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister of Singapore.⁷⁶

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the Australian government perceived regional responsibility in terms of seeking 'the support of at least the United States and the United Kingdom for promoting cooperative arrangements with South-East Asian countries for collective security purposes in this area and for the defence and security of Australia'.⁷⁷ In this respect, the commitment of Australian forces to South Korea between 1950 and 1953, during the Malayan Emergency and the Confrontation established a solid record of achievement for the concept of forward defence that contributed significantly to the stabilization of the Pacific region as a whole. Australian intervention in South Vietnam, applauded by all the non-communist states of Asia, stands as the only significant failure in a policy based on a careful and realistic assessment of the national interest. From this entirely plausible perspective the region to the north of Australia was one of diverse and relatively weak states. The evolution of these states in the interstices of the Cold War required a policy of drawing non-

communist regimes like Singapore and Malaysia into a balance that protected the region against the instability of Indonesia and the irredentism of China. To maintain stability the key to balance was an evolving relationship both with the non-communist regimes in the region and with the United States.

After 1972 the considerable achievements of forward defence could only be reviled on the grounds that to oppose communism in East Asia was, in itself, misguided. An often unstated revisionist assumption was that Asia constituted a cohesive whole (at least in prospect) and that to provoke one state in the region indicated foreign policy failure. That Australia incurred the displeasure of China and North Vietnam as a result of its forward defence posture, according to Whitlam, condemned the strategy as 'racist'. If one accepts this premonitory snuffing of a politically correct foreign policy the the preservation of good relations with every country in Asia was the paramount objective of Australian diplomacy. Ultimately this was an argument for not intervening anywhere⁷⁸ and, which with a certain amount of tergiversation, rejected the basis of Australian foreign policy formulation since the beginning of the 20th century.

The intellectual provenance of this advocacy of a non-aligned Australian foreign policy resided in the idealism propounded by ALP leader Herbert 'Doc' Evatt. As External Affairs Minister (1942–49) Evatt was seen as developing a less pro-British foreign policy. Subsequently, as leader of the opposition (1951–60) Evatt's nationalism, it is claimed, was to find visibility in Whitlam's 'even-handed' and supposedly 'bipartisan' approach to international relations.⁷⁹ But as one observer noted in the early 1970s, the neutralist option was 'an arguable point of view, though not one which is acceptable to the great majority of Australians'.⁸⁰ Australian neutralism in regional affairs was untenable precisely because it was divorced from its historical, cultural and, indeed, democratic context. In the years of the Cold War, this was naturally going to express itself. J. D. B. Miller maintained, in 'a basic official belief in Australia that non-communist regimes in Asia should be sustained wherever possible'.⁸¹

It was Menzies's point that Australia's core value system conferred responsibilities, as a mature actor in world affairs, to make hard choices and take action to support allies, and thereby uphold the national interest. This was Cold War reality. States were compelled to take sides. Non-alignment for Australia was never a credible option. As Menzies stated with reference to the commitment of Australian forces to Vietnam: 'If it is wrong for Australia to take an active part in the defence of South Vietnam against aggression, I wonder how it can be right for us to take an active part in the defence of Malaysia against aggression.'⁸² To infer from such statements that foreign and defence policy in the Menzies era constituted a 'national conceit'⁸³ that needlessly antagonized Asian countries is specious. Such a view underestimates Cold War imperatives by negating the communist threat to Southeast Asia; it discounts those non-communist states in Asia that welcomed Australia's military commitments to the region; and it selectively focuses on the abortive Vietnam venture to suggest the failure of forward defence by disregarding the overall success rate of the strategy.

The myths surrounding Whitlam's uncertain grandeur

There is no doubting that Australian military support for the Americans in South Vietnam was a foreign policy setback. In retrospect it is easy to see the flaws in containment thinking with its monolithic view of communism. But it is also easy to use the example of Vietnam to portray Menzies and his successors as out-of-step with the times, and advance a tendentious view of that era. It was in the context of this consistent distortion of Cold War realities, that the post-Whitlam foreign policy orthodoxy defined itself. The Whitlam watershed was re-described in positive terms to justify a regionalist policy that was flexible, moral 'even handed' and enlightened. In Whitlam's view it terminated the 'xenophobic' policy of forward defence.⁸⁴ The growing complexity of regional geopolitics following Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and the disillusion that followed the American withdrawal from Vietnam facilitated both Whitlam's denunciation of forward defence, the identification of an 'independent' policy stance and the promotion of an ambivalent internationalism.

The much vaunted Whitlam revolution, however, bequeathed Australia a curious political legacy that requires closer attention. Firstly, the metaphor of a 'watershed', deliberately underestimates the extent to which Australian foreign policy was already undergoing change well before 1972 and the supposed dawn of an Australian national enlightenment. By the late 1960s it was already apparent that economic links to Britain were no longer central to Australian growth.⁸⁵ The prospective loss of trading preferences due to Britain's entry into the EEC helped widen Australia's economic horizons, raising awareness for export diversification and improved efficiency.⁸⁶ In particular, Menzies recognized the growing importance of Northeast Asian markets for Australia's economic development.⁸⁷ By the late 1950s, Japan had already become Australia's second largest trading partner, a fact given explicit recognition by the Japan–Australia Trade Agreement of 1957.⁸⁸ Indeed, by 1971 Britain's prospective membership of the EEC put at risk 'a small proportion—at most only 7.5 per cent—of Australia's export trade'.⁸⁹

The need to adapt to new economic realities were already reflected in domestic politics, most notably with regard to immigration policy. Nearly all of the main discriminatory elements in Australian immigration procedures had been whittled away well before Whitlam came to power. In this respect, Menzies was quite knowingly diluting 'Anglo' Australia. As early as 1956 naturalization had been eased for non-Europeans. In 1958 the Migration Act abolished the Dictation Test, often regarded as the most discriminatory aspect of immigration policy.⁹⁰ This was followed in the 1960s by further liberalization that dismantled legislation denying non-Europeans pension rights and access to social services. Between 1969 and 1971, the number of skilled and educated non-Europeans permitted to settle rose to 10 000 a year.⁹¹

More significantly, well before the end of the 1960s, the Liberal government saw that Australia would have to re-evaluate its foreign policy in the light of changing British and American commitments to Southeast Asia.⁹² Hasluck acknowledged in August 1967 that: 'Up to date our own foreign policy has been based on certain assumptions regarding British foreign policy. To the extent to which British foreign policy changes, so we will have to change the

assumptions on which our own policy rests.’⁹³ This position was given emphasis in the publication of the 1972 Australian Defence Review White Paper, which explicitly announced a move towards greater defence self-reliance.⁹⁴

Further, in contrast to the widely advertised view that the Whitlam administration ended Australian military involvement in South Vietnam, the withdrawal of forces had actually begun on 22 April 1970 and was largely completed by 15 December 1972. All that remained for Whitlam to do on assuming office was to pull out the handful of advisors that remained,⁹⁵ a step that would have been undertaken regardless of who was in government.⁹⁶ Finally, while Whitlam formally recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the previous government had systematically moderated its position towards the PRC, making gradual moves towards official recognition.⁹⁷ In this context, as Hedley Bull observed in 1975, Whitlam’s government had ‘accelerated these changes and dramatized them’ thereby giving the appearance of making a radical break with the past simply because it had been out of office for two decades and was ‘less encumbered by its own past policies’.⁹⁸

The myth of the watershed

Whitlam’s foreign policy, according to Bull, tended to mistake ‘posture to the neglect of substance’.⁹⁹ Whitlam was preoccupied with a ‘progressive’ image of Australia rather than fashioning policies that were ‘prudent and morally sound’.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, when the rhetoric of the watershed is stripped away and policies examined, the Whitlam administration reveals a record of failure and under achievement in foreign relations. Whitlam’s ‘independent’ stance masked an erratic foreign policy that was inconsistent and ultimately damaging to Australian interests. For instance, Whitlam and his cabinet denounced the resumption of the US bombing of North Vietnam and publicly downgraded ANZUS. However, the value and popularity of the ANZUS alliance was belatedly recognized by Whitlam, who devoted months of intensive diplomacy to assuage American displeasure.¹⁰¹

Analogous contradictions appeared in the Whitlam government’s anti-nuclear stance. Australia ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty in January 1973 and took a strong line against French nuclear testing in the Pacific. Australia promoted schemes for regional demilitarization and protested at the Anglo-American plan to build an air base on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia. Yet, at the same time as excoriating French atomic testing, the government largely ignored Chinese atmospheric nuclear tests in June 1973, whilst simultaneously allowing the use of American installations on Australian territory, which included communications with the nuclear armed submarines of the US Navy.¹⁰²

Far from re-orientating Australia towards Asia, Whitlam’s policies betrayed a naiveté that repelled many Asian countries. Despite proclaiming Australia’s ‘vital interest in Japanese policies and the way in which Japan conducts its foreign affairs’,¹⁰³ Whitlam proceeded to treat Japan, by now Australia’s biggest trading partner, with indifference and suspicion. An increasingly corporatist domestic economic policy mistrustful of multinational companies, a large proportion of which were Japanese, further compounded the situation. As a result, Japanese businessmen were continuously obstructed in their attempts to

gain greater residency rights and in their efforts to develop Australian industries.¹⁰⁴ The main effect of this was to limit foreign investment and damage economic growth.¹⁰⁵

Inconsistency also characterized Whitlam's dealings with Southeast Asia. While asserting that the region should be treated with 'patience, tact and diplomacy',¹⁰⁶ Whitlam nevertheless managed to irritate most countries in Southeast Asia, in particular, embroiling himself in a long-running, and very public, feud with Lee Kuan Yew over the long-term security outlook for the region.¹⁰⁷ As a long-term admirer of Mao's 'scholarly refinement',¹⁰⁸ Whitlam's evident enthusiasm for China alarmed Australia's near neighbours. Whitlam's proposal for a regional cooperative bloc excluding the United States and the Soviet Union was given short shrift by Southeast Asian states, being welcomed only by the Chinese whose influence was bound to predominate in such a forum.¹⁰⁹

In practice, the notion of a new foreign policy in step with the 'world's progressive, and enlightened movements' involved the appeasement of the more totalitarian members of the international community. In August 1974, Australia recognized the *de jure* incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union, the only democratic state ever to do so.¹¹⁰ It also entailed, in the course of 1975, tolerating Indonesia's invasion of East Timor and professing understanding of North Vietnam's invasion of the South. More evidence of this 'enlightened' foreign policy came in Whitlam's reaction to the crisis of the 'boat people' in April 1975. Whitlam refused to direct help to the boat people let it offend the regime in Hanoi. Only after criticism at home did Whitlam grudgingly admit a few hundred refugees.¹¹¹ Other episodes like the Ermolenko affair of 1974 when a Russian musician who attempted to defect in Perth was surreptitiously handed back to the Soviet authorities¹¹² further discredited Whitlam's foreign policy.¹¹³

In practice, a seemingly 'progressive' and internationalist ideology concealed a policy of easy rhetoric and accommodation with regard to the Communist world and 'Third World'. One startling inconsistency, as Hedley Bull noted, was 'that we have expressed our disapproval of the anti-Leftist military government of Chile, whose enmity towards us can do us no harm, while we have failed to express disapproval of the anti-Leftist military government of Indonesia, whose enmity, we believe, we cannot afford to incur'.¹¹⁴ This incoherence in the supposedly independent approach to foreign policy was to mark consecutive ALP administrations in their engagements with Asia in the course of the 1980s and 1990s.

A further paradoxical feature of Whitlamism, which also became ingrained in post-Whitlamite practice, was a propensity to be both internationalist and crudely nationalist at the same time. Britain's membership of the EEC in 1972 and the seeming rejection of Australia enabled Whitlam and successive Labor governments to engender a mood of increasingly self-absorbed nationalism. This was most consistently expressed after 1983 in vehement assaults on the monarchy and all aspects of England, along with perennial onslaughts on France for its 'imperialistic' inclination to test atomic bombs in the Pacific. Indirectly, and more damaging for the national well-being, this chauvinism promoted the increasingly corporatism of Australian industry together with opposition to foreign direct investment.

Interestingly, despite Whitlam's foreign policy rhetoric, the basic character of Australia's external relations remained largely intact: the American alliance remained at the heart of Australian security policies; Australia's main trading partners continued to be Japan, the United States and Western Europe; and Australia was still very much regarded as part of the Western world by its neighbours in Southeast Asia.¹¹⁵ Whitlam's rhetoric was in fact counter-productive for it not only failed to promote a clear Australian way in foreign policy, it also alienated many allies, particularly in Asia.

All this stands in direct contrast to the official media and academic orthodoxy propounded in the course of the 1980s, which extols Whitlam's revolutionary impact on the conduct of external and internal affairs.¹¹⁶ Indeed, Whitlam's significance in foreign policy terms has little to do with his foreign policy per se, but in how he was removed from office in 1975 and how that event has been represented. Having lost control of the upper house, the Senate, to the Liberal-Country opposition, Whitlam was unable to pass the budget into law. When Whitlam refused to hold a general election, the Governor General dismissed him from office.¹¹⁷ His removal defined the fault line in Australian politics that permitted the image of Whitlam's rule as a mould breaking era to flourish. The idea of Whitlam changing the direction of Australian foreign policy is a myth manufactured in hindsight by all those with an interest in portraying his political demise as a constitutional crisis fought between Whitlam, the enlightened progressive, and the antediluvian forces of the past intent on holding back the modernization of Australia.

A legacy of vacuous multilateralism

In retrospect, the virtue of the Whitlam revolution lay not in its actual achievement, but in its intimation of a new regional and international identity. Whitlam replaced the conservative emphasis on maintaining a regional balance with the possibility, as yet unrealized, of forging multilateral Asian bonds. As Bull presciently observed in 1975, 'Australia's security is conditional above all upon a balance of power among ... the major powers in the Asian and Pacific region. ... Yet the concept of a balance of power is one which Mr Whitlam ... failed to analyse or mention'.¹¹⁸ Instead, a new multilateralism couched in a curious language of Asia friendly political correctness adumbrated by the economic incentive of engagement with a variety of autocratic regimes in the region became Australian foreign policy orthodoxy after 1983. This understanding achieved its apotheosis during the Prime Ministership of Paul Keating (1991–96). It possessed, in Keating's assessment, three key ingredients: first, the uncritical promotion of a zone of Asia-Pacific economic cooperation premised on the non-binding spirit of Asian consensualism manifest in the Bogor Declaration of 1994. Second, it was held that this approach would draw the less savoury regimes of the region, notably China, into rational discourse through the economic benefits of trade.¹¹⁹ Finally, close ties and an eventual security pact with Suharto's despotic New Order regime in Indonesia would secure 'a warm and deep' relationship with Australia's 'nearest, largest neighbour'.¹²⁰ This strange collocation of an ethically relativist attachment to Asian values, political cynicism and vapid regionalism earned Keating

Whitlam's approval as 'the only Prime Minister other than I to have shown a consistent and constructive attitude' to Asia in general and Indonesia in particular.¹²¹

The regional financial crisis and the subsequent implosion of Indonesia has, however, severely dented the regional architecture and brought into question the wisdom of what Whitlam termed regional bipartisanship and Keating calls multilateral engagement. The meltdown revealed both the tensions and the shallowness of this policy. Australia escaped the worst effects of the crisis precisely because it managed to avoid the corruption, cronyism and nepotism of the Asian developmental model so much admired by Keating and his academic and media cronies in the Indonesian lobby.¹²² Liberal institutionalism meant that Australian business was not mired in a regional trading system premised upon export oriented growth. This was in part because the Australian business community had the foresight to ignore the government's exhortations. In actuality, Australian direct investment in the East Asian region never rose beyond 6 per cent of the accumulated stock of overseas investment. Even in 1996, at the height of the Pacific Century euphoria, Britain, the USA, Japan and Germany remained the major foreign investors in Australia.¹²³

More tellingly, the fallout from the Asian financial crisis exposed the delusions that informed Australian foreign policy between 1972 and 1996. The fallacy in the revisionist orthodoxy was that it sought to build its version on a non sequitur, namely, that a nation cannot 'possess a distinct culture' if it is 'regarded as a derivation'.¹²⁴ All nations are a derivative of something. The problem was that in seeking to construct a new sense of national identity suitable for regional engagement, its architects wilfully misrepresented recent Australian political history and placed uncritical faith in what was conceived as an inevitable regional destiny. In their eagerness to transcend an apparently irrelevant Anglo-centric identity the leading exponents of 'new regionalism' contrived an incoherent ideology appropriate for what they erroneously assumed would be the new multilateral international system of the 'Pacific Century'.¹²⁵

The collapse of the Suharto regime in Indonesia and the Balkanization of the archipelago after 1998, culminating in Australia leading a United Nations peacekeeping mission to the former Indonesian colony of East Timor in September 1999, exposed the ultimate folly of 'seeking defence' within a supposedly monolithic Asia.¹²⁶ It also exposed the incongruity between the rhetoric of multilateralism and the conciliation of regional dictatorships in China and Indonesia. Indeed, a key feature of post-World War II ALP thinking from Evatt through Whitlam to Evans and Keating was a peculiar inability to discern Australia's rôle in a complex and evolving balance of power, especially in Southeast Asia. This failure in perception reflected a desire to appease Indonesia, and to a lesser extent China, merely on the grounds of size and proximity. It also inaccurately presumed that the rest of Northeast and Southeast Asia necessarily accepted the posturing of these two countries, the most unstable powers in the region.

The power of the Indonesian lobby in Canberra, in academe and in the media, illustrated by the highly favourable reviews of Keating's self-exculpatory memoir, notably in the daily newspaper, *The Australian*¹²⁷—which some wags

have recently suggested should change its name to *The Indonesian*—reflects the manner in which Whitlamism has insinuated itself into every orifice of the body politic to the detriment of informed debate. This lacuna has hindered a clear appreciation of the actual differences in interests and perceptions both within Southeast Asia in particular and across the region generally that Australia could explore in order to restore a credible regional balance. The abandonment of balance and the pursuit of a vacuous multilateralism in foreign policy represents Whitlam's legacy to the definition of the national interest. Ironically, in the more open society that constituted 'pre-modern' Australia during the Menzies era the delusions of internationalism could be intelligently questioned and resisted.

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