

Australia's Asian Relations

Russell Trood & Deborah McNamara (eds), The Asia-Australia Survey 1994, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1994

Reviewed by Jenelle Bonnor

This volume, compiled by Griffith University's Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, is the first of a projected annual series surveying Australia's relations with Asian countries. The selection of contributors illustrates the depth of Asian studies in Australian universities (the ANU and Griffith University predominate in this edition). It is particularly valuable in that it deals with Australia's bilateral relationships. Too often in Australia, Asia is seen in the context of broader multilateral initiatives such as APEC. It is important that Australia develop sound relations with each regional neighbour, recognising the distinctiveness of each and the need for differing strategies to maximise each relationship.

The first four chapters provide a comprehensive overview of Australia's regional activities, highlighting especially the weight given by the government to economic diplomacy during 1993. They include a lot of detail, providing the reader with a good reference source on Australia's priorities and problem areas in its regional diplomacy. The succeeding chapters deal with Australia's bilateral relations, covering political, economic, security, education, scientific and cultural aspects, as well as immigration. They highlight that Australia is devoting considerable effort to education and cultural relations with Asian countries, in addition to economic priorities.

The volume's individual analyses of Australia's bilateral security relations with Asian countries generally need strengthening. However, Russell Trood's overview chapter on Australia's regional diplomacy is comprehensive and highlights the effort Australia has devoted to encouraging regional security dialogue. For example, in his chapter on Vietnam, James Coughlan concludes that Vietnam has been of 'minor' security concern to Australia in the past decade. This neglects significant Australian concerns over Vietnam's role in Cambodia, its relations with China, and its claims to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

The quality of the chapters is on average high, but varied. Some surveys of particular bilateral relationships can only be described as uncritical. In these cases, a more thorough analysis of the strengths and weaknesses in Australia's bilateral relations, or suggestions for strategies to address outstanding problems, would be welcome. The chapters on Australia's relations with Japan and India in particular are overly descriptive, offering little in the way of interpretation or analytical judgment. More could have been made of Australia's continuing neglect of its relations with India, for instance.

In contrast to this is Colin Brown's insightful chapter on Australia and Indonesia. Brown makes a significant point about the gap in Australia between the gov-

ernment's belief that Indonesia is important and the public's indifference. In fact, so much attention has Canberra paid to Indonesia that Brown concludes that 'in many respects Keating's much trumpeted push into Asia looked like a push into Indonesia' (p.150).

Brown highlights the important role that State governments are playing in developing Australia's economic relationship with Indonesia. This point is examined in detail by Deborah McNamara, who looks at State government activity throughout Asia. This chapter usefully makes available information that is hard to obtain. It highlights the potential for State governments in developing their own relations with the region, and the varied effort they have put into doing so.

Frank Frost's chapter on Australia-Cambodia relations conveys the flavour of the often lively domestic political debate on Cambodia that took place in Australia in 1993. Colin Mackerras's chapter on China highlights the somewhat erratic relationship Australia has had with that country over recent years. Harold Crouch, in turn, shows how fragile the political relationship between Australia and Malaysia remains. There were significant bilateral difficulties in 1993, although economic relations and defence cooperation were relatively unaffected. Crouch forthrightly concludes that the problem is Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir and that, under a different leader, relations should improve. However, the often insensitive approach the Australian government has taken to its dealings with Malaysia has also had an impact on relations.

Two countries are surprisingly excluded from this volume. The editors say that Brunei was not included because of a lack of useful and reliable data. But as part of ASEAN, AFTA, APEC and ARF — all the focus of significant Australian effort — Brunei should be examined for the sake of completeness and because of the role it plays in the region. The other exclusion is New Zealand, which is presumably not defined as part of Asia. Yet India and Papua New Guinea are included because of their 'obvious importance' to Australia. Surely this criterion should also apply to New Zealand, Australia's partner in Closer Economic Relations and Closer Defence Relations? As Australia and New Zealand have many common interests in the wider region, a chapter on New Zealand would add a helpful comparative focus.

Much useful information is conveniently located within this single volume making it a valuable reference work. Each chapter contains factual, statistical and descriptive material, backed up by a comprehensive reference section. The latter section lists details of Asian representation in Australia and vice versa, and contains an indicative list of business and government centres, as well as academic and research centres in Australia that focus on Asia. Tables are included that provide data on Australia's trade and economic relationship with Asia, as well as on aid, Asian students in Australia and immigration statistics. But as it is the sort of book that one would like to have on one's desk, it is a pity that it is not being printed in soft covers at a more affordable price.

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