
REVIEWS

Asian Relations

Rawdon Dalrymple ***Continental Drift: Australia's Search for a Regional Identity***, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, UK, 2003

Review by Anthony Milner

This is a substantial, reflective volume by one of Australia's foremost diplomats. Dalrymple focuses on 'Australia's search for a sustaining and sustainable identity and place in the world, and particularly in the region of the world where it is located' (p. 1). The chapters reach back to nineteenth-century approaches to the region, and examine Australia's role in the two world wars, before considering Australian relations with Asia in the second half of the twentieth-century. The coverage reflects Dalrymple's particular diplomatic experience — he was Ambassador in both Indonesia and Japan — as well as his insider knowledge of Australian policy debate. But it is also a book of considerable academic depth — carefully researched, and often responding to scholarly debate — rather than a diplomatic memoir. It is an attraction of the book that Dalrymple writes as Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney — his present position — and not merely as a retired, distinguished practitioner.

The book is not diplomatic regarding the current Coalition government's performance in the Asian region. It concludes with the observation that Australia is 'drifting rather aimlessly with only a firm commitment to the United States Alliance and leadership as the main determinant of policy' (p. 232). Current government approaches to the region, he comments, 'do nothing to promote Australian understanding of the region' and 'nothing to enhance Australia's chance of eventually being accepted into an East Asian club' (p. 226). Although he admits the government is doing much 'to develop links with the East Asian countries', he asks what is being done 'to build the awareness of the Australian people that these are the countries which will largely determine Australia's future and which therefore need to be studied and understood' (p. 223). Since the departure of former Trade Minister Tim Fischer from the Coalition government, he adds, no-one in office has shared the 'enthusiasm that inspired many Australian scholars and diplomats to build relationships with East Asia and especially Southeast Asia' (p. 222). The Labor Party is also subjected to criticism. As Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans's 'hypersensitivity, precipitant judgements and over-confidence' are described as 'warnings of the pitfalls in Australia's dealings with its neighbours, and especially with Indonesia' (p. 178). The idea that Australia is a 'part of Asia' — an idea not denied by Foreign Minister Evans (p. 99) — Dalrymple considers 'factually wrong, contrary to the sentiments of

most Australians, politically servile and unnecessary for the engagement policy' (p. 99).

Tough judgements are characteristic of the book. Following Australia's Timor intervention 'there is no prospect that Australia will enter on another period of something like the neighbourly comradeship which was developing up to the mid 1990s' (p. 208). With experience as Australia's Ambassador to Washington, he comments that if our capacities with respect to Asian engagement are 'allowed to wither', the United States' relationship with Australia may 'seem less valuable to Administrations in Washington' (p. 226).

With respect to Australian security, Dalrymple gives a confronting analysis of Australian past military performance that will surprise many readers. He concludes that contrary to public attitudes in Australia, the country put up an 'uneven performance' (p. 229) in the Second World War. After examining the navy, air force and army in the War, he concludes that this performance should 'serve as a warning to Australians, never again to be lulled into a sense of superiority and complacency' (p. 229). Australians, suggests Dalrymple, should take a hard look at their war record — and he proceeds to propose that Australia 'would be less vulnerable and safer' inside an East Asian regional institutional framework (p. 229–30). One problem, however, is that most Australians reading this tough assessment would be more likely to see an even closer relationship with the United States as the obvious solution to such an enhanced security anxiety. Presumably, the real issue is how to get closer involvement in such regional arrangements while maintaining the reassurance of the United States Alliance — and, if possible, to use one type of engagement to enhance the other.

Having drawn attention in a dramatic way to Australia's security predicaments, it is surprising that Dalrymple does not devote more attention to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), the Track II Organisation that complements the purely government security processes. Australia is already a participant in these organisations, and those involved are driven by aspirations that Dalrymple seems to respect.

A strength of the book is the historical perspective — a determination to examine current issues and policies in the context of past Australian engagement with the Asian region, even to establish continuities going back to the period of government of Sir Henry Parkes in late nineteenth-century New South Wales. Like Parkes, Australia's war Prime Minister John Curtin seemed to be sure that 'Australia's place in the world was determined mainly by its British character and its membership of the British Empire' (p. 56). At times, however, Dalrymple's stress on continuities risks obscuring fundamental shifts. Take the important case of government policy in the 1980s and 1990s. In 'terms of intensity and commitment' the government effort, he says, was 'essentially rooted' in the history of the 1950s Liberal government (p. 111). But the contrasts between the two periods may be more important to examine, especially in light of the approach to cultural 'difference' that is a theme of Dalrymple's book.

Such 1950s Foreign Ministers as Casey and Spender were certainly committed to a vigorous Asian engagement, but Casey's 1950s book, *Friends and Neighbours* — which is a key text in Dalrymple's analysis of Australian approaches to Asia — spells out the basic policy assumption that 'we are a European community living alongside and working with Asia' (p. 25). If we turn to the 1980s and 1990s it is 'convergence' not 'difference' that is the dominant assumption. Gareth Evans, like Governor Patten of Hong Kong and the American analyst, Francis Fukuyama, saw political change as being linked to economic change, and anticipated the triumph of liberal values across the Asian region. Asian countries were becoming more and more 'like us'. The task of enmeshing with Asia, in these circumstances, would have to have seemed less demanding.

Over the last six or seven years, the East Asian economic crisis and the rise of terrorist groups in Muslim communities — together with the appearance of the conservative Hanson populism within Australia — have helped to undermine the convergence approach.

Dalrymple could have made more of the convergence/difference theme, and not just as a way of structuring an overview of twentieth-century continuities and changes in government policy. He certainly acknowledges the contribution of 'convergence' to recent Asian engagement, particularly that of Evans himself. But his book is also a valuable reminder that those who acknowledge 'difference' in values and outlook have not necessarily resisted closer engagement with Asian societies. Dalrymple himself — certainly a strong proponent of Asian engagement — suggests that 'in terms of Australia's diplomacy in the region it is probably better not to seek to pretend [differences in value priorities] do not exist' (p. 120), and he agrees with Huntington's 'Civilisations' analysis (Huntington, 1997) to the extent that 'shared and perceived cultural and civilisational roots will be powerful factors' in global power relations (p. 126). The Menzies government, of course, explicitly acknowledged cultural (and racial) difference and yet laid the foundations for later, more comprehensive engagement (p. 61). Dalrymple includes the Colombo Plan, extended diplomatic representation, government visits to the region, the development of Asian Studies at the Australian National University, and early recognition of Indonesia as aspects of these foundations. It is surprising to many today to read a Singapore comment on the Menzies government in 1955 to the effect that 'never before has an Australian government shown such acute consciousness of its geographical and strategic relations with Asia'. The government, it was observed, was following its own dictum that 'no nation can escape its geography' (Levi, 1958:172).

With respect to the present government — which certainly assumes differences in Asian and Australian value systems and cultures (p. 155) — Dalrymple notes that for the 'first year or two' (presumably before the Asian economic crisis) 'the commitment to engagement with Asia and in particular the cultivation of the relationship with Indonesia was continued' (p. 125). It is a critical question as to whether the notion (in Prime Minister John Howard's words) that Australia does not need to 'choose between its history and its geography' must necessarily discourage a vigorous Asian engagement, including

an engagement of ideas. The 1997 Coalition White Paper on Foreign and Trade Policy certainly insisted that 'closer engagement with Asia' can be achieved without 'reinventing Australian identity' or abandoning the ideas that define us as a society. Dalrymple himself, as I have noted, combines a stress on cultural difference with support for an intensive commitment to the region.

The task we now face, assuming the Howard government has correctly identified the domestic political priorities within which foreign policy must be formulated, is how to chart a future Asian engagement that acknowledges the potency of Australian values, on the one hand, and the public commitment to the United States Alliance on the other. The painstakingly careful negotiation of bilateral trade agreements with specific Asian countries continues to be promising. Security imperatives also offer specific opportunities for regional engagement, and there is a growing realisation of the potential of Track II processes.

What a stress on cultural and value difference certainly demands — unlike a convergence view point (which implies the irrelevance of specific cultural perspectives) — is the development of Asia knowledge in the Australian community. Given their recognition of the importance of understanding the differences between Asian societies (and between Australia and Asian societies), logically the Coalition government should be now planning a more extensive educational program in the Australian tertiary and school system than was developed in the previous Labor period. Such a new program has not yet appeared.

Dalrymple's book makes clear that we have no choice but to achieve a closer engagement with the Asian region, and it is the type of serious scholarly reflection that will be an outstanding resource for those who have the task of formulating new strategies.

References

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Anthony Milner is Basham Professor of Asian History and Dean of Asian Studies at The Australian National University