
REVIEWS

Engagement with Asia

Daniel Oakman, *Facing Asia: A History of the Colombo Plan*, Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2004

Reviewed by Nicholas Farrelly

As Australia is repeatedly nudged by regional economic and political events the country's history of Asia policies and programs has begun to inspire thorough re-examination. Much of today's Asia scholarship, educational policy, and regional development support is grounded in the priorities, policies and culture defined in the years after World War II. Reflecting on the Australian experience of regional engagement is an important task: this history cannot be ignored. In *Facing Asia*, Daniel Oakman provides an invigorating consideration of the ways in which Australian policies towards the region evolved. Anchored in the history of the Colombo Plan, this is an exhaustively researched and sensibly argued account of a key Australian program in Asia. *Facing Asia* offers an important stimulus for historians and a crucial tutorial for Australian scholars and policy-makers interested in better connecting with the region.

Oakman's contribution forms part of a reflective and self-perceptive track in recent Australian writing on Asia that puts politics and economics at the heart of studies of the region. Like recent contributions such as Edwards and Goldsworthy (2003) and Dalrymple (2003), *Facing Asia* has an eye for the historical development of policy and for the nuances and practical considerations that underpin it. Oakman begins his discussion of the Colombo Plan, which was established in 1950, by noting that it was Australia's 'most ambitious attempt — outside of war — to engage with Asia' (p. 1). His key contribution is to our understanding of the specific ways in which Australian 'assistance' to Asia defined many cultural and political interactions in the region. *Facing Asia* gets into the nitty-gritty of these relationships and tries to 'illuminate the complex mix of self-interest, condescension and humanitarianism that characterised Australia's early ventures in Asia' (p. 4).

In the popular psyche, the Colombo Plan is most directly associated with the mass arrival of foreign students in Australia. These students were a 'striking and conspicuous manifestation...of Australia's foreign policy and the most tangible aspect of Australia's program of international aid' (p. 178). Between 1951 and 1965, nearly 5,500 students and other trainees studied in Australia. This was '16 per cent of the 33,000 places offered by all donor nations contributing to the Colombo Plan' (p. 179). These students were not always welcomed — some were even tarred as 'potential spies' or 'left-wing activists' (p. 185) — and their

experiences in Australia were, as one would expect, 'private and deeply personal, and evade easy generalisation' (p. 187).

According to Oakman there are 'few Australians [who] are aware that the Colombo Plan extended far beyond the giving of scholarships' (p. 2). The training of police and other government officials, agricultural and rural development assistance, and a focus on capital accumulation, all helped define a much broader policy ambition. With its 'quasi-imperial intent' (p. 278), the Colombo Plan had 'breathtakingly ambitious goals' (p. 69) as a multilateral initiative trying to influence the path of de-colonisation in Asia. The then Australian Minister for External Affairs, Percy Spender, was 'the man who pushed the idea of an aid program for the region through to reality' (p. 3). However, 'humanitarian duty to poor Asians was a relatively minor feature of Spender's effort to garner support for the Colombo Plan' (p. 74). He focussed on defining conservative foreign policy objectives that sought to defend Australia in a troubled neighbourhood. For this reason, Oakman argues that 'to some extent, the Colombo Plan was a façade, a device intended to lure independent Asia into an alliance with the Western bloc' (p. 67).

As other bilateral and multilateral aid efforts emerged, and as the geo-political situation evolved, the Colombo Plan was gradually superseded. However it retains a small secretariat, a website with descriptions of current activities (www.colombo-plan.org) and the bland motto, 'for cooperative economic and social development in Asia and the Pacific'. Its program has little of the influence or public recognition associated with the Colombo Plan's immediate post-World War II establishment. Australia remains a member of the Plan, but Oakman does not dwell on any current activities. Oakman's contribution is instead a much needed historical discussion of Australian aid and development policy.

In Chapters 1 and 2 he charts the development of ideas about Australia's place in the region. With copious and well-chosen quotations he describes how Australians have viewed their geography. Beginning with the battlements set against 'a hostile world' (p. 5), he goes on to describe how 'bureaucrats embarked on the onerous task of challenging Australia's history of regional passivity' (p. 19). The effectiveness of Oakman's narrative is a result of the quantity of material that it successfully synthesises. This is no easy task, and demonstrates an uncommon flair for using diverse textual sources and placing them in their specific historical contexts. This effective use of sources continues throughout the book and helps to illuminate the Cold War antagonism that defined international relations during the period. Oakman documents many instances where Australia's contribution to the Colombo Plan was used for political purposes. For example, External Affairs Minister Richard Casey 'met with Charles Spry, Director General of ASIO, and asked him to train a small group of English-speaking Thai police in anti-subversive techniques — training that would ostensibly be financed under the Colombo Plan budget' (p.140-141). This training hints at the underlying agenda for Australia's contribution to regional development. While implementing such programs to train Thai and other police and intelligence officers, 'Spry ... raised

concerns about the ‘language problem’ and the embarrassing ignominy of providing training to potentially hostile countries’ (p. 141).

Later, in Chapter 7, there is a particularly useful summary of criticisms levelled at the Colombo Plan, starting with Peter Russo’s delightful image of ‘a toothpick to prop up a swaying skyscraper’ (p.219). Oakman goes on to describe a ‘cavalier attitude towards Australian aid to Asia’ (p.219), and documents the way that ‘early projects, in particular, suffered from a combination of inadequate supervision, poor coordination, hasty execution and ‘unbusinesslike’ procedures’ (p. 221). Oakman points out that ‘Australian policy-makers placed considerable stock in the Colombo Plan’s ability to generate benefits incommensurate with the limited funds channelled through the program’ (p.229). This ‘goodwill’ quotient — unquantifiable and impossible to incorporate into any conventional budget — continues to motivate some of Australia’s regional interactions. The desired but ‘elusive store’ (p. 233) of fraternal amity was predicated on an Australian expectation of gratitude and acceptance.

The Australian experience of the Colombo Plan suggests that being ‘a good neighbour’ requires tangible involvement that cannot be tied to an assumption of immediate appreciation or thanks. Since the early days of Australian aid in the 1950s, Australia has amassed considerable experience and expertise in aid delivery and management. However, commitments in the region have failed to dent the ‘pervasive uncertainty about Australia’s regional presence’ (p. 263), which remains strong in many sections of the Australian community. We are now faced with the on-going tensions and ambiguities that come with ‘reconceptualising ... regional identity outside the boundaries of a defensive and insular nationalism’ (p. 278).

In terms of economic development, the aid provided by the Colombo Plan had ‘little measurable impact on capital formation’ (p. 244). Oakman’s nuanced descriptions of the relationship between aid and trade hint at on-going inconsistencies and problems. He chronicles the ‘double bind’ created by Australian policy-makers, who gave aid with one hand, yet denied access to Australian markets with the other. According to Oakman, ‘the decision to bolster the Colombo Plan and multilateral aid agencies instead of negotiating trade concessions emerged as the path of least resistance’ (p. 246). Along that path, Australia’s involvement in the Colombo Plan also served as a symbolic ‘bridge between disparate and divergent political and economic systems’ (p. 275). That bridge between Asia and Australia is now a well-trodden part of the regional landscape. Oakman’s description of the linkages that evolved between Australia and the region deserve to be read by all those involved in Australia’s continuing efforts to better understand and engage with its neighbours.

Australia’s involvement in the Colombo Plan — which was framed by the government’s anti-communist ideology — must be understood by new generations of Australia’s Asia scholars and specialists. In the context of continuing tension and uncertainty in Australia’s immediate neighbourhood, greater historical perspective is needed. At a time when wars on terror, poverty, tyranny and drugs tend to *ill*-define much regional interaction, Australian involvement in Asia

requires a deep understanding of old plans and their successes and failures. In this vein, Oakman warns that while the specific context has now changed, ‘the nexus between international aid and national economic, social and cultural imperatives is as intricate as it was 50 years ago’ (p. 284). His account of that intricacy suggests that there are lessons from Australia’s historical engagements with Asia that could be integrated into current Australian thinking on the region. Some of those lessons concern the practicalities of running aid programs. Others are more relevant to the murky political and ideological frontlines of a region where old ideas about weakness, fraternity and influence probably need to be revisited. Putting fair trade, education and shared ambition at the heart of Asian engagement is one way to start, even if it means a significant re-imagining of Australia’s place in the world. At a time when much of the Asian region (and many Colombo Plan partner countries) have experienced a succession of disturbances — of which the December 2004 tsunami disaster is only the latest — Australia needs to define a sustainable plan for material and cultural support.

Facing Asia offers a further lesson for future Australian scholars and policy-makers. It reminds us that geography only makes up one part of the Australian place in the world. Australia’s place is also defined by a history — shaped by war — that was transformed on the ideological battleground of the last century. Through Oakman’s book some of the voices of that history have had their say. Their counsel and experience should be revisited to guide future Australian deliberation and policy.

References

Edwards, P. and D. Goldsworthy (2003), *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South.

Dalrymple, R. (2003), *Continental Drift: Australia’s Search for a Regional Identity*, Ashgate, Hampshire, England.

Authors’ Note: Both of these books were recently reviewed in Agenda — see Volume 10, No. 4 and Volume 11, No. 3.

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