
Facing North is the first genuinely academic history of the century of Australian engagement with Asia since Federation. It has also been officially authorized by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, though there is no evidence to suggest that this has compromised the integrity of its scholarship. Both of these features place Facing North in a unique category among works on Asian engagement. While commentary on the subject of Australia’s relationship with its region has proliferated in the past three decades, much of this has been decidedly contemporary in focus, offering an explicit policy advice and assessments of the trajectory of engagement as it then appeared. Journalists have been especially prominent in this set of accounts, with Australian Foreign Editor Greg Sheridan being particularly outspoken on the question of Asian engagement. Former diplomatic personnel, such as Alison Broinowski and Richard Woolcott, have also figured heavily in the debate on engagement, though they typically adopt a polemical mode, and scholarly practice inconsistent with the writing of specialist history.

This work is, by contrast, very sophisticated and conscientiously balanced in its appraisal of policy developments in the previous century. The avoidance of the partisanship that characterizes many of the works on Asian engagement is perhaps in part due to the solid academic background of its contributors, and in part due to the diversity of their contributions, which are, with one or two exceptions, focused on a very narrow chronological or thematic range. The text has been edited by David Goldsworthy (Volume 1 and 2) and Peter Edwards (Volume 2). Goldsworthy also makes several contributions within the text, including a very good précis account of the events in East Timor in 1998-1999. In his introduction to the first volume, he elaborates the historical method adopted for the contributions, which is essentially a strict empiricism, one which makes for generally persuasive and compelling chapters, all very densely referenced to archival materials.

This scrupulous approach to evidence and argumentation is one of the best features of Facing North. Almost every substantive contention presented is supported by an array of references, very often with a telling quote to illustrate the point. An exhaustive set of appendices, including diplomatic postings, timelines of major events, trade and immigration statistics further enhance this aspect of the work, and render it extremely useful as a reference source for basic factual information.

Another major strength of Facing North is the recognition by all contributors of the complexity of the engagement process. There is no
sense of an inexorable shift ever closer to Asia, but instead an acknowledgment that the engagement process was comprised of a vast set of contingent decisions, some advancing relationships with the region, others diminishing them. The engagement process might have progressed in one area while simultaneously receding in the other. There is never any sense that some of the milestones in Australia’s policy toward its neighbours were inevitable. Roderic Pitty, in his chapter on the postwar increase in trade with the region, is very careful to acknowledge that the 1957 Commerce Agreement which paved the way for expanded trade with Japan was only reached under the most precarious circumstances, and might easily have turned out quite differently altogether. On the other hand, the David Lee and Moreen Dee briefly raise possible inclusion of Australia as a founding member of ASEAN, a prospect that never was, but remains an intriguing suggestion.

Most contributions also recognize the limits of foreign policy, and it is apparent in many of the chapters how significant global trends and extrinsic factors were in shaping Australia’s regional relationship. Those events which were most transformative on the international system tended to have similarly dramatic effects on Australia’s relationship with Asia, far exceeding those that could be wrought by any minister’s design or planning. The Great Depression, for instance, saw an increase in trade within the region, despite the Lyons government’s promotion of imperial trade. More significantly, the experience of the war in the Pacific, and the perceived threat of Japanese invasion, did more to focus attentions on Asia than any amount of activist government policy. The failure of imperial defence only accelerated the transition from Empire to region. Decolonization in the immediate post-war period had a truly revolutionary impact on the political structure of the region, and was basically complete over the course of the following decade. The nature of regional engagement was determined by these sorts of changes, with government initiatives reactive and modest by comparison.

That is not to diminish the importance of policy, which can effectively exploit new circumstances and opportunities. This is well illustrated in David Lee’s examination of the Australian response toward Indonesian independence. It analyzes a set of genuinely brave and influential foreign policy initiatives pursued in the late 1940s. Australia’s support for the nascent Indonesian Republic sped its transition to independence, and as Lee persuasively argues, constituted “one of the boldest and most successful initiatives in the history of Australia’s engagement with Asia.” The accuracy of Lee’s phrase is apparent over the course of later contributions, with the decision standing out as the most courageous made in the first half-century of regional engagement.

By contrast, David Dutton’s chapter on human rights diplomacy reveals a much more cautious and conservative strategy being adopted by both Labor and Coalition governments. In terms of the policy tools deployed, there was a heavy emphasis on ‘quiet diplomacy’, as opposed to public pressure and activism. There was also a deep aversion to risking other components, such as trade, in the pursuit of human rights. Such tendencies are not unique, being relatively common among Western
democracies. Nor are policies of constructive engagement and quiet diplomacy necessarily poor choices for many situations.

They become cause for concern when they appear to be part of a more cynical bureaucratic culture, one which does as little as possible for human rights concerns, moving only enough to appease domestic public pressure. Dutton’s study reveals considerable sympathy among the diplomatic elite for the “trade-off” theory of the pre-eminence of material welfare at the expense of political freedom, with additional cultural relativist overtones. An official report on relations with the Third World cautions that “to the millions of people who spend their day scavenging for a crust, our view of basic human rights would be quite frivolous”. It went on to warn that “we have to be careful not to thrust the rights we champion down the throats of people who may well want other, different things – things they have decided are more urgently needed”. Owen Harries, who chaired the committee that prepared the report, argued that there was a convincing case that “strong government” and even “frankly authoritarian rule” might be needed in some countries, which would disintegrate if civil and political rights were observed.

Alongside these arguments are the cultural relativist dismissals of human rights that became so common during the ‘Asian Values’ debates of the 1990s. Woolcott, for example, was Ambassador to the Philippines during the 1980s, and appears to have pursued a delicate course of quiet diplomacy in his human rights advocacy. Given Woolcott’s professed skepticism for a universalist conception of human rights, the degree of commitment with which he pursued these diplomatic overtures seems open to question. His essentialist characterizations of Asian peoples are similarly disconcerting from a human rights point of view. In a 1979 memo he observed that outsiders “invariably under-estimate patience, resilience and the respect for authority which are deeply ingrained characteristics of most of the peoples of South East Asia.” The association of the easier policy option of quiet diplomacy with a cultural relativist outlook leaves the selection of the tactic itself open to question.

Despite the high overall standard of scholarship in the book, there are some areas which seem to have been unreasonably neglected. The most obvious is the quite limited treatment of cultural linkages, particularly in comparison to the comprehensive accounts given to strategic, economic and political aspects. While the section included is of a high standard, and extremely thorough for the period it covers, that period only commences in 1970. Earlier processes of social and cultural engagement are given piecemeal treatment in some of the other, more generalist chapters in the first volume. A thematic analysis of inter-cultural engagement for the first seven decades would have been a useful additional chapter.

The division of the text into two volumes also seems to be curiously asymmetrical. Volume one covers The Great Depression, World War II, Decolonization, The Cold War, Vietnam and Cambodian conflicts. This leaves the second volume decidedly threadbare by comparison, and it appears a repartitioning of events between the two might have lent the work a more satisfying balance on the whole. While the judgment to
adopt this distribution is explained by editors as being driven by the “greater complexity and broader activism of Australia’s relations with Asia” the immensity of the events covered in volume one, and their consequences for engagement, arguably warrant at least as much detail as those of the following period. Christopher Waters provides a superb chapter on the course of the war in the Pacific and decolonization, but doing justice to these momentous events in a single chapter is exceedingly difficult.

*Facing North* is the first comprehensive academic history of Australian engagement with Asia, and as such it warrants significant attention from all specialist historians interested in this area. The standard of its scholarship is generally excellent, with several superb sections over both volumes. For a more generalist audience, it remains a compelling contribution to contemporary discourse about Australia’s place in the region. By grounding such discussions in a much deeper historical perspective, and tracing the evolution of the current state of regional engagement, it facilitates much more informed debate. It is highly recommended to anyone with even a modest interest in the either the past or present trajectory of Australia’s policies toward Asia.

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**Surau: Pendidikan Islam Traditional dalam Transisi dan Modernisasi (Surau; Traditional Islamic Educational Institution in Transition and Modernization), by Azyumardi Azra, Jakarta: Logos Wacana Ilmu Press, 2003.**

The question of how Islam penetrated into Minangkabau of Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, is understudied, despite the existence of a large body of literature on this society. It seems that most of literature tends to focus on socio-cultural and political aspects of Minangkabau, the fourth largest of about 140 ethnic groups in Indonesia. Because of that, a positive aspect of Azyumardi Azra’s book is its attempt to fill the gap and minimise the marginalisation of Islam as a powerful centrifugal force in Minangkabau, a society with contradictory values.

‘How can a matrilineal society be strongly Islamic?’ is a fascinating and puzzling question for which the Minangkabau, the world’s largest matrilineal society, provides a unique study. As a result of applying matrilineal principles (descent and inheritance through maternal line) Minangkabau women have a privileged status in their community. But Minangkabau are equally well known for a strong adherence to Islam, which is more patriarchal in values. An effort to understand or solve this uniqueness, broadly known as the ‘Minangkabau puzzle’, may be the main reason why the study of Minangkabau has attracted many researchers. ‘Adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah”