Perspectives on Australian foreign policy
2000

MEG GURRY

The East Timor crisis of 1999 was always going to be a hard act to follow for the formulat... of the human rights of an oppressed people whose needs had been ignored by Australia and the world for 25 years. At the same time, it delivered them with a domestic political triumph, by outsmarting the Labor opposition in what former Labor leaders had appropriated as their own territory—Asia-Pacific diplomacy.

It was never as simple as this of course, and critics were quick to point out other interpretations. Far from giving Australia a new credibility in the region, as the Prime Minister liked to claim, others argued that Australia’s Timor response smacked of an arrogant triumphalism which had alienated Australia from its neighbours and damaged its reputation in Asia (Fitzgerald 1999). By refusing to reveal its intelligence information on Indonesian militia plans moreover, and by choosing not to urge a greater role for the United States and an increased United Nations presence after the ballot, it was argued that the Australian Government was guilty of ‘Machiavellian diplomacy’ which ultimately contributed to East Timorese deaths and appalling destruction in Dili and beyond (Kevin 2000).

The Howard Government dismissed the criticisms and talked up Australia’s leadership role, its capacity to do so undoubtedly enhanced by the impressive leadership of Major General Peter Cosgrove, who had led the INTERFET forces with undeniable distinction. The Prime Minister organised welcome home parades in April 2000 for the returning soldiers, drew on Australia’s ‘great military tradition’ in his thanks, and claimed it had been the ‘most moving … privilege’ to farewell the troops as they left. It was all good television and good politics (Howard 2000a).

In contrast, by early 2000 the foreign policy issues which followed—and grew out of—East Timor, proved more difficult to categorise, and certainly more difficult to celebrate. Indeed, the defining characteristic of the year in foreign policy was the complexity of the issues confronting the Government. There were no simple solutions to the foreign policy questions posed by a destabilised and hostile post-Timor Indonesia, turbulence in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, difficulties in Bougainville, increasing tension between China and the United States over Taiwan and trade, Australia’s exclusion from the new East Asian regionalism, and Aus-
tralia’s declining influence with ASEAN. Underpinning all these foreign policy political dilemmas were some important ideological issues: what policy position should be adopted on the US alliance and its mooted missile defence program; on the challenge to globalisation from the new social movements emerging after the collapse of the world trade talks at Seattle; and on the UN committees for their criticism of Australia’s human rights policy? It was not going to be an easy year.

**Indonesia, post-East Timor**

Perhaps the biggest foreign policy dilemma facing the Government was, and is, how to deal with Indonesia. Prime Minister Howard was to stress throughout the year that ‘it was going to take a while to rebuild the relationship’. At the same time he attempted to put a positive spin on a more optimistic future: ‘you are seeing built in Indonesia a more open and democratic society and the President deserves a lot of credit for that’ (Howard 2000b). Remaining somewhat vague on the overall state of the relationship, however, he was more forthright on certain aspects of it. No, he said, he would not visit Indonesia before President Wahid visited Australia. The relationship must be on ‘a basis of mutual respect … and I have visited Indonesia three times as Prime Minister [and] there has not been a presidential visit by an Indonesian leader since 1974’ (Howard 2000h). Domestic opposition to the visit within Indonesia ensured it did not take place in 2000 but the two leaders did meet three times: in Tokyo, New York and Brunei.

The Government has been even more forthright about the secessionist movements strengthening in Indonesia, particularly that of West Papua. Both John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer have unambiguously stated Australia’s commitment to Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua, much to the consternation of critics within Australian society who once raged against a similar stance taken by former governments over East Timor. The two are not comparable, argues the Prime Minister: ‘West Papua is an integral part of the Indonesian republic. We have never advocated anything to the contrary and we won’t because the circumstances … and the history [are] quite different from the history of East Timor’ (Howard 2000f).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the different histories, other parallels seem alarmingly similar and already the Government is attracting hostile criticism. Talk of a failure of moral courage is again in the air. Foreign policy academic Scott Burchill, for example, always a fierce critic of former Prime Minister Paul Keating’s prioritising of ‘stability’ in the archipelago over the human rights of those who lived within it, is now turning his attention to similar arguments being used by Downer and Howard to justify Australia’s support for West Papua remaining part of Indonesia. Just whose stability is being preserved, he asks, maintaining that the fear of the impact of a disintegrating Indonesia is overstated (Burchill 2001).

One of the reasons this is such a difficult issue for the Australian Government is the continuing political and economic uncertainty within Indonesia. The spate of bombings on Christmas Eve aimed at Christian churches in eight cities across the country came as calls for President Wahid’s resignation intensified. But that is just
one of a number of problems confronting the Indonesian leadership. The religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians in east Indonesia, the increasingly bloody secessionist battles in Aceh and West Papua, the sluggish Indonesian economy, and the problems relating to attempts to bring the Suharto family to justice, must make life very difficult for a weak executive government locked in a struggle for power with the legislature. Indeed, the growing instability across the archipelago is, in many ways, a reflection of the lack of authority of the Executive Government, as the country struggles to work out its new constitutional arrangements. Add to these the uneven handling of these crises by an apparently unwell President, continued hostility across Indonesia to Australia over its role in East Timor, and the unresolved problems of former East Timor militias and refugees in West Timor, and it is not difficult to see why clear policy formation on Indonesia is problematic for Australia’s foreign policy makers.

Regionalism in East Asia

ASEAN, ASEAN plus 3 and APEC

One of the greatest challenges for Australian foreign policy which emerged during the year was how best to respond to the development of the ASEAN plus 3 regional grouping. An Asians-only economic grouping—known initially under the acronym EAEC, East Asian Economic Caucus—was first mooted by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir during the Keating Prime Ministership, and dismissed thankfully as unworkable by Australian policy makers because of a lack of Japanese support. In 2000, however, under another name, it has assumed new attraction to its potential members. Galvanised by the Asian financial crisis, the 10 states of ASEAN since 1997 have held meetings with China, Japan and South Korea in what is known as the ASEAN plus 3 process. It is multi-layered, with meetings—some but not all institutionalised—held between leaders, finance ministers, foreign ministers, and central banks. In July 2000, a regional financing mechanism was approved. At a leaders’ meeting in Singapore in November, the 13 states agreed to investigate a regional trade area and a formal summit process (Alford 2000).

It was a patchy year for Australia’s relations with ASEAN. A meeting in Thailand’s Chiang Mai in October raised expectations of a positive outcome to the plan to create a joint free-trade zone between the emerging ASEAN free trade area (AFTA) and the Closer Economic Relations agreement that binds Australia and New Zealand (CER). But after 3 days of discussions, the ASEAN trade ministers said only that they would examine ways of closer agreement, and gave no commitment on tariffs. The problems it seems were more political than economic, with Indonesia and Malaysia joining forces to rebuff Australia and New Zealand and stymie any chance of an expansion of free trade.

One of the problems for Australia’s relations with Southeast Asia is that most of the member states now face a raft of difficulties. The once-persuasive rhetoric of
the advantages to Australia of engaging with stable states with prosperous and fast-growing economies no longer applies; indeed it now seems foolishly simplistic. Many countries are emerging only shakily from the Asian economic crisis, and states such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma, and Cambodia are facing deep political problems. Prime Minister Mahathir continues to berate Australia apparently at whim, claiming in May that John Howard was not welcome in Asia, accusing him of reversing Australia’s policy of Asian engagement and seeking to impose its will and ‘bully others’ (Sheridan 2000).

Singapore is a different story. John Howard and Singapore’s Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced at the November APEC meeting in Brunei the proposal to negotiate a comprehensive bilateral free trade agreement, to be signed at the 2001 APEC meeting. Singapore is hoping to create a network of bilateral agreements among APEC states, reflecting its concerns that the AFTA process is running out of steam. Australian interest in the idea followed its failure at Chiang Mai with the AFTA–CER proposal. It also suggests that Australian policy makers share Singapore’s frustration with the direction of multilateral trade negotiations.

The APEC meeting in Brunei arguably yielded greater dividends than the Chiang Mai meeting, although you have to look hard to find them. Malaysia led a coalition of developing countries to overturn the call for a new trade round to begin in 2001. Instead, the communiqué called for the agenda to be settled in 2001, and then to launch the round at the ‘earliest opportunity’. The Prime Minister talked up this outcome, claiming that despite the failure to nominate a date by which a new round of trade liberalisation under the WTO could begin, he sensed a ‘renewed purpose’ in APEC and was pleased to find a ‘greater unanimity of view’ on the benefits of globalisation than he expected. APEC, he said, is now ‘back on its real track’ (Howard 2000i). Another positive outcome perceived by Trade Minister Mark Vaile was the growing consensus that APEC’s world trade agenda should focus on manufactures, agriculture and services, not the environment and labour rights.

Conceptualising the region

At the same time, Dean of Asian Studies at the ANU, Anthony Milner, has pointed out that a drive for closer cultural regional links is providing an intellectual context for a pan-Asian identity from which Australia is clearly excluded. Driven in part by an anti-Western imperative, and based on the emerging sense of a common set of core values, the movement to link culturally the 13 states enjoys serious support across the region and, Milner argues, is not being taken seriously enough by Australia (Milner 2000). The chair of the University of New South Wales’ Asia–Australia Institute, Stephen Fitzgerald, another concerned observer of this process, notes that ‘concepts that previously were beyond the realm of discussion are now on the [Asian] agenda’ (Kelly 2000a). In this cultural climate, the June 2000 decision to sell the Darwin-based Cox Peninsula transmitter—until 1997 (when it was closed following government funding cuts) used successfully by Radio Australia to beam into neighbouring states—to the evangelistic and foreign-
owned broadcaster, Christian Vision, seems all the more like bad policy. The subsequent August announcement that the Government had decided to provide Radio Australia with $3 million for 3 years—‘to strengthen transmission arrangements in the region’—could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the folly of the earlier decision (Downer 2000f).

Downer’s initial response to the new regionalism came in a clumsy attempt to conceptualise ‘regionalism’ at an Asia Leaders’ Forum in Beijing in April 2000. There were, he said, two types of regionalism: cultural and practical. Cultural regionalism was a process ‘built on common ties of history, of mutual cultural identity, [on] emotional links’; practical regionalism he described as exemplified by APEC and ASEAN Regional Forum, a regionalism ‘where countries which are bound by geography find practical ways of working together to achieve their mutual objectives’. Australia, it was implied, engages with Asia in the second category and not the first (Downer 2000c).

But within a couple of months, the Foreign Minister was speaking somewhat differently and these ideas were never repeated. Acknowledging the importance of the ASEAN plus 3 forum, he expressed cautious interest in joining it ‘at some later stage if invited to do so’. The Australian’s international editor, Paul Kelly, saw a road to Damascus conversion and wrote glowingly of a ‘significant, delicate and essential repositioning by Australia’ (Kelly 2000b). A little overstated perhaps, but nevertheless how this ‘new’ regionalism pans out will be of central importance in 2001 and beyond.

Significantly, in 2000 the Prime Minister was far less concerned with defining Australia in relation to its region than in previous years. The East Timor crisis had given John Howard many opportunities to develop his thoughts on Australia’s place in the world. Since assuming office in 1996, he had liked to underline his differences with Labor by claiming that the Coalition Government had rebalanced Australian foreign policy away from an ‘Asia-only’ obsession to an ‘Asia-first’ policy, accusing previous Labor governments of demeaningly ‘knocking on the door of Asia trying to win admission’ (Howard 1999b). Howard had, at the end of 1999, repeatedly used the Asian economic crisis and the East Timor experience to argue that Australia now stood ‘taller and stronger’ in the world than ever before (Howard 1999a). But, as far as Australia’s regional identity was concerned, much of this triumphalist nationalism was toned down in 2000.

What does seem central to the government discussions on Australian nationalism and Australian foreign policy now is a focus on ‘values’. Celebrating ‘Australian values’ peppered Howard’s speeches throughout the year. A values-driven foreign policy had gained momentum during the East Timor crisis when the Prime Minister liked to attribute the decision to support East Timorese independence as a peculiarly Australian response, arguing that ‘we were ourselves in Asia. We were defending the values we hold as Australians’ (Brenchley 1999). During 2000, he developed this idea further, to argue that there is a distinctive ‘Australian way—different and so often better than that of other comparable societies’, underpinned by four ‘distinct and enduring values’: a commitment to self-reliance, a fair-go, pulling together, and ‘having a go’ (Howard 2000j). The difference with 1999 is that there
is less articulated concern with what this means for Australia–Asia relations, less intellectual interest in how it defines Australia in relation to its region. The current discussion is clearly aimed at a more inwardly-focused domestic audience.

Alexander Downer also seemed less concerned with establishing his government’s credibility as a legitimate player in the region than with getting on with the job. Only rarely did he revisit the now rather tired debate of which party ‘discovered’ Asia (Downer 2000g). However, he also drew on the values-based policy approach when discussing human rights, claiming that there is a distinctively Australian response to human rights: ‘Australians care about human rights because they believe strongly in a fair-go, they support the underdog and they take particular exception to abuses of power’ (Downer 2000j). Australians are likely to hear more of this as the 2001 election approaches.

The US Alliance, China and the Missile Defence System

Central to the development of Australia’s regional ties is the Australia–US relationship, which remained a primary focus of the Coalition Government in 2000. The Howard Government came to office in 1996 declaring that they would reinvigorate the alliance, which they argued the Labor Government had sidelined in its over-exuberance for engagement with Asia.

The Government remained true to its promise, and placed US–Australia relations at the centre of its understanding of Australia’s place in the world. Nowhere was this revealed more clearly than in the inaugural Hasluck Asia Oration delivered by Alexander Downer in August. Supposedly discussing the legacy of Australia’s engagement with Asia, in fact the speech overwhelmingly argued for closer Australia–US ties. Taking on the critics of ANZUS and the Labor Party’s concerns over the National Missile Defence System, Downer drew on realist interpretations of foreign policy to argue for a ‘clear-headed understanding of the power structures of the Asia–Pacific region’—by which he meant the ‘particularly important role’ played by the US ‘in balancing and containing potential rivalries’. According to Downer, ‘too few Australians’ understand this (Downer 2000g).

In December, the Prime Minister responded enthusiastically to the George W. Bush victory. He informed the President-elect that Australia–US relations ‘are as close as the relations between any two countries can get’—which suggests that Howard’s policy of distancing himself from what he describes as Keating-style ‘special relationships’ does not include the United States (Howard 2001). Strengthening this policy position were comments made by Secretary of State-designate Colin Powell, as he spoke before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee meeting in January 2001 to ratify his appointment. In tones unlikely to please Australia’s neighbours—with memories of the ‘deputy sheriff’ still fresh—Powell spoke of the ‘lead’ that ‘Australia, our firm ally’ takes in matters relating to Indonesia (Stewart 2001). Meanwhile, plans for an early US visit by the Prime Minister are under way, with expectations presumably, that a Republican President will grant an Australian conservative Prime Minister a meeting longer than the 20 minutes allocated to John Howard by President Clinton in 1999.
Two events of significance occurred in 2000 which highlighted the importance this Government places on Australia–US relations, and which may serve to refashion the nature of Australia’s regional relationships. First, a visit to Australia in July by US Defence Secretary William Cohen alerted Australians to American plans to develop a US$60 billion-plus program of missile defence for the US mainland—the so-called national missile defence system. But significantly he made a number of statements connecting Australia to the program: the Pine Gap facilities, he said, could ‘very much be involved’ in the proposed defence shield. Australia’s commitment to the project remained undefined but Alexander Downer stated that he had no problems with it, arguing that it is a benign system because it is defensive not offensive—and hence does not harm international disarmament efforts or breach the Anti-Ballistic Missile Defence Treaty (Davidson 2000).

Others were not so sanguine. Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser argued that Australia should refuse to be part of a program which could spell serious danger. A shield designed to protect the US from attack could lead Australia’s Pine Gap to become a ‘prime target’ (Fraser 2000a). North East Asia specialist Stuart Harris shares these concerns, but his worry is with regional reaction. The missile defence system would ‘increase US–China tension and reduce China’s cooperation where needed, as in proliferation and on the Korean peninsula’ (Harris 2000). China’s response supported Harris’ anxieties: Australia’s potential involvement, the state media argued, implied it was a ‘cat’s paw’ of the Americans; it will ‘hurt Australia and likely send global arms control out of control’ (Schauble 2000).

The second noteworthy event relates to trade. The election of Bush coincided with a campaign by the Howard Government to stimulate interest in a free trade agreement between the US and Australia. It was canvassed in a speech by Australian Ambassador Michael Thawley to the American Australian Association in December. Thawley spoke of mutual benefits to both countries of such a pact and rejected the notion that it would hurt Australia’s interests in Asia. Once again Malcolm Fraser entered the debate, arguing that the potential free trade agreement and the missile shield are all of a piece: the trade deal, he said, ‘would pull us too closely into the US orbit’ on strategic issues, such as Taiwan and China. This could only harm our image in Asia and endanger Australia’s security (Fraser 2000b).

Others in foreign policy circles agree. Economics professor and former ambassador to China, Ross Garnaut, says the proposal would increase ‘the potential for Australian trade discrimination in favour of the US and against East Asia [and] corrode the substantial support that still exists in East Asia for full Australian participation in the life of the region’ (Garnaut 2000). Stuart Harris argued that it ‘will only reinforce perceptions that Australia wants to get closer to the US [which is] part of the reason we aren’t invited into regional arrangements’ (Kelly 2000c).

But the Howard Government seems driven by notions that if it is being excluded from East Asian regional forums, and that years of attempting to engage Indonesia and Malaysia in a productive dialogue are currently counting for little, then it is better, as Paul Kelly argues, ‘to run a foreign policy that works, which means Australia can’t keep knocking on a closed East Asian door if the US door is swinging open’ (Kelly 2000c).
United Nations, Human Rights, and Globalisation

It was a difficult year for the Coalition Government to sustain its post-Timor claims that it is a strong defender of human rights. Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock came under strong criticism for his handling of the detention of illegal immigrants at a number of centres around Australia—particularly in relation to the conditions in these centres and the harsh regime to which the detainees are subjected—and John Howard was under attack for his failure to use Commonwealth powers to intervene and repeal mandatory sentencing for juveniles in the Northern Territory, legislation that was impacting particularly severely on young Aboriginal people (Tay 2000; Manne 2000; Wright 2000). Meanwhile, while there is no doubting Downer’s genuine distress about human rights abuses in Burma—or, it should be said, anywhere else—his chosen method of addressing human rights abuses there (to work for the creation of a national human rights institution by holding a series of human rights workshops for middle-ranking Burmese officials) attracted the criticism that he was endorsing an abusive and discredited regime.

On a more positive note, Downer was right to take pride in the imminent creation of the world’s first permanent International Criminal Court. Significantly, Australia had played a leading role in this process, chairing a 60-nation group that has worked hard to achieve a successful outcome to the negotiations. Of particular importance is the fact that on this issue Australia diverged strongly from the United States, who have until recently opposed the idea and whose support remains at best lukewarm (Charlesworth 2001). Downer has also been an enthusiastic supporter of the Sixth International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, to be held in Melbourne in October 2001, pledging both financial and program government assistance (Downer 2000k).

It was a year where difficulties between Australia and the United Nations committee system emerged. In March, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination examined Australia’s report card on indigenous issues and delivered a damning report. The Government responded with anger, accusing the Committee of a ‘polemical attack on the Government’s indigenous policies … based on an uncritical acceptance of the claims of domestic political lobbies’. So aggrieved were they by the report that they immediately announced a ‘whole-of-government review’ of the treaty committee system as it affects Australia (Downer 2000b). Then again in July, the United Nations Human Rights Committee criticised Australia’s treatment of its indigenous people, claiming that Australia had failed to protect Aboriginal rights, and questioned its handling of mandatory sentencing, native title and the stolen generations. As well it called for the Government to reconsider the detaining of illegal immigrants (Taylor 2000).

In response, the subsequent review concluded that the committees need to ‘understand the pitfalls of simply accepting without analysis the submissions put before them by non-government organisations’. In particular, the Government had been annoyed that democratic Australia was receiving criticism when other authoritarian regimes were not; it urged that more recognition should be given to democracies ‘which take their treaty commitments and reporting obligations seri-
ously’ (Downer 2000i). Announcing its intention to ‘take strong measures to improve the effectiveness’ of the treaty-making bodies which, it said, needed a ‘complete overhaul’, the Government’s press release announced that Australia would only agree to UN human rights investigators entering the country ‘where there is a compelling reason to do so’, that Australia would not sign or ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and that Australia will undertake a review of the 1951 Refugees Convention (Downer 2000h).

The Prime Minister told the United Nations in September that his Government’s cooperation with the treaty committees was ‘dependent on the extent to which effective reform occurs’ (Howard 2000d). These fighting words put on notice the Government’s intention to resist any constraints on its sovereign rights to determine its own human rights, immigration and indigenous policies. Melbourne cartoonist Ron Tandberg, with his characteristic sharp insight, picked the mood. He drew an angry John Howard pointing at a globe of the world demanding: ‘mind your own business’ (Tandberg 2000).

But the contrast in attitude to economics is profound. A recurring theme for the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister in 2000 was to extol the virtues of globalisation: ‘a desirable, irreversible trend’, said Downer, which offers ‘greater opportunities for low-income people and low-income countries’ (Downer 2000c). In a speech to the World Economic Forum in Melbourne, the Prime Minister declared globalisation to be a ‘ticket to prosperity’. Describing protesters as a ‘noisy minority’, he argued they were advancing ‘misguided and ill informed views’ (Howard 2000c). Dealing with the strengthening resistance to the loss of national sovereignty involved in economic globalisation is an ironic twist for a government so opposed to loss of sovereignty in the areas of human rights and indigenous politics. The complexities of this issue can only get bigger.

South Pacific: Fiji and the Solomon Islands

There were major issues for Australian diplomacy in the Pacific in 2000. In Fiji, on 19 May, a group claiming an agenda of indigenous Fijian rights, under coup leader George Speight, seized control of the parliament and took members of the Chaudry Government, including Mahendra Chaudry. Fiji’s first non-indigenous Prime Minister, hostage. Speight demanded the overthrow of the Government, the removal of the President, and the abrogation of the 1997 constitution. Negotiations between the military authorities and Speight lasted 8 weeks before the Muanikau Accord led to the release of the hostages. Speight and his advisers were arrested on 26 July and charged with treason.

The coup created a number of diplomatic problems for the Howard Government. Downer responded by acknowledging it ‘has taken us completely by surprise’ (Henderson 2000). Given the access Australia has to intelligence from the Pacific, this was somewhat alarming and suggests a failure of analysis. Howard in turn was criticised for a lack of interest in this immediate part of Australia’s neighbourhood when it was noted that he had not attended the last two meetings of the South
Pacific Forum. (Howard later attended the 2000 meeting in Kiribati in October.) Fiji was suspended from the Commonwealth on 6 June, and on 18 July, following what Alexander Downer described as an ‘unacceptable outcome to the coup’, a number of sanctions were imposed, including the suspension of the Australia–Fiji Trade and Economic Relations Agreement, downgrading of the aid relationship, and cutting certain defence and sporting ties (Downer 2000e).

Ethnic tensions flared in the Solomon Islands in June when the Malaita Eagle Force seized control of key installations and forced the resignation of Prime Minister Ulufa’alou. The subsequent peace process involved attempts by the Australian and New Zealand Governments, and the Solomons Islands Government, to bring the two militant groups together. Talks on Australian and New Zealand naval vessels took place from July to October, leading finally to the Peace Agreement in Townsville which provided a framework for consolidating peace.

As part of the Townsville agreement, Australia now leads an International Peace Monitoring Team of 35 Australians and 14 New Zealanders, but the situation is tense and the work will not be easy. Dealing with the South Pacific is arguably a no-win process for Australia: a too heavy-handed response leads to charges of ‘big brother’ bullying, but too timid a response leads to charges of neglect. Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ashton Calvert, picked up this theme of the ‘unrealistic expectations of what Australia can do to resolve problems’ in the South Pacific (Calvert 2000b). He pointed out that although ‘no country has done more than Australia to support the island countries’, this does not mean that Australia can determine the course of events there. Despite criticisms of Canberra’s lack of speed in its response to these crises—the charge being that quicker action could have prevented the escalation of violence between groups—the islands’ ‘futures must be for them to determine’ (Calvert 2000a).

**Defence White Paper**

Perhaps the biggest event of the year for the Government in Australian foreign policy formulation was the release of the Defence White Paper in December. Its release enabled the Government to end the year on a high note and inject some of the populist appeal—which had worked so well during the East Timor crisis—back into foreign policy promotion. The White Paper was heralded by the Government as ‘the most comprehensive reappraisal of Australian defence capability for decades’. Described as a ‘major increase in funding’, the Prime Minister told the House of Representatives, it ‘is a much more specific funding commitment than in any White Paper over the past 25 years’ (Howard 2000k).

The White Paper’s primary purpose was to deal with the funding crisis the Australian Defence Force was facing. Accordingly, the paper announced a $24 billion increase in defence spending over the next decade. In so doing, its most significant contribution was that it halted the decline in defence funding, maintaining it at its present percentage of around 1.9% of GDP. Conceptually, it managed to address both the ‘continental’ and ‘forward’ defence issues, by embracing a dual strategy of self-reliance, based on an upgraded high-technology capability, together
with increased funding for a boost in defence numbers from 51,000 to 54,000 in the next decade, aimed at ensuring that the army can create a more mobile force, better able to respond to emergencies. Specifically, the aim is to ensure that the army can sustain a brigade on operations, while maintaining a brigade available for deployment elsewhere. It was this capability that was severely stretched during the East Timor commitment in 1999 and early 2000.

There was considerable hardware upgrading, including four new airborne early warning and control aircraft, 100 new combat aircraft, an upgrading of the Collins Class submarines and ANZAC frigates, up to five new air-to-air refuelling aircraft, and up to 24 armed reconnaissance helicopters. Troops will receive new weapons and new technology. New spending on high-technology information warfare reaffirmed that ‘effective use of information is at the heart of Australia’s defence capability’. To that end, the paper envisaged ‘substantial enhancements to intelligence, surveillance and communications capabilities; and command, logistics and business systems’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2000).

Not surprisingly, the Paper reaffirmed the emphasis that the Government places on the ‘key alliance’ with the United States, the Prime Minister arguing that ‘continued US engagement in the Asia-Pacific will be the single most important factor in maintaining security in the region’ (Howard 2000k). But at the same time, defence self-reliance was stressed, the first principle of Australia’s military strategy being that ‘we must be able to defend Australia without relying on the combat forces of other countries’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2000:xi). Perhaps even more significantly, it was made clear that any troop deployment strategy would be limited to the immediate neighbourhood, not North Asia, the Prime Minister underlining this in his address to parliament by making clear that ‘we will not develop capabilities specifically to undertake operations beyond our immediate region’ (Howard 2000k).

The paper was well received. It won immediate backing from opposition leader Kim Beazley. Most commentators, although pointing out that the increases in spending were more modest than the Government claimed, expressed approval. Head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the ANU, Paul Dibb, described it as ‘cogent and well thought-through … arguably the best Defence White Paper Australia has produced’ (Dibb 2000). There were some dissenters, with former Defence Secretary Paul Barratt arguing that it had avoided the hard analytical issues confronting the region and did nothing to reverse the process of ‘managed decline’ which had beset the defence force for years (Barratt 2000). Defence analyst Michael O’Connor expressed scepticism about the likelihood of future governments honouring these commitments made on their behalf (O’Connor 2000).

Nevertheless, the White Paper was good politics. Its language was cautious and measured, as Tony Parkinson of the Age pointed out, ‘with no boastfulness or bravado [and] nothing to alarm or unnerve our neighbours’ (Parkinson 2000). Moreover, the program will be a boost for Australian industry, apparently with 40 per cent of the increased spending earmarked for local manufacturers. The document’s release followed a public consultative inquiry run by former Liberal leader Andrew Peacock—an unusual strategy aimed at garnering public support for
funding increases that many defence experts considered were well overdue. The Paper will serve the Government well in the build-up to the 2001 election, with its appeal to nationalism, boost for industry and defence establishments in regional Australia, and increased spending on cadets and the Army Reserve—all of which will appeal to Labor and One Nation voters in marginal seats.

Conclusion

There were other events of significance. Prime Minister Howard visited India in July, the first visit of an Australian Prime Minister since Bob Hawke in 1989. The usual Australia–India platitudes were expressed concerning the need to invest the relationship with more vigour. However, perhaps this time it had more salience than when former Prime Ministers uttered similar sentiments, because in 2000 the relationship had not yet recovered from the ruptures over Australia’s criticism of India’s nuclear testing in 1998. But following this visit it was announced that Australia’s defence attaché to India—withdrawn at the time of the testing—is to resume his duties in 2001; the restoration of defence ties reflects a commitment by government to ‘move on’ (Howard 2000c).

Howard visited India on his way home from a trip to the United Kingdom where he joined former Prime Ministers Hawke, Fraser, Whitlam and Gorton to mark Australia’s centenary of federation. In London, there was much celebration of common values and nostalgia for shared histories. Similar sentimentalism had marked John Howard’s April visit to Gallipoli on Anzac Day, where the Prime Minister had been inspired and moved by young Australians’ ‘uncluttered pride … [in] what had happened … in what it was to be an Australian’ (Howard 2000b). But, during the mid-year celebrations, British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s slip-of-the-tongue reference to American soldiers, when he meant Australian soldiers, should caution those who tend to overestimate just how important these shared values and close relations are in the fluid and complex world of the twenty-first century.

On a number of occasions during the year, Alexander Downer reflected that engaging with Asia is no longer as straightforward as it was when the region’s economies were strong, when ‘optimism was high and national stability taken for granted’ (Downer 2000d). It is an important point and underlines what emerged in the post-Timor world of Australian foreign policy in 2000. There are no simple answers and difficult policy choices lie ahead. Retreating to the comfort zone of a foreign policy driven by shared values, a nostalgia for easier times, and sentimental nationalism should not point the way.

References

Calvert, Ashton, 2000a. Speech to the National Press Club, Canberra, 3 August.


—— 2000c. Speech to Asia Leaders’ Forum, Beijing, 23 April.


—— 2000g. ‘Neither Isolated nor Isolationist: The Legacy of Australia’s Close Engagement with Asia’, Speech to the Murdoch University Asia Research Centre, Perth, 9 August.


—— 2000a. Address at the INTERFET Welcome Home Parade, Sydney, 19 April.


—— 2000c. Address to the India–Australia Council, New Delhi, 11 July.


—— 2000f. Doorstop interview, Kiribati, 29 October.

—— 2000g. Joint Press Conference with Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Brunei, 15 November.

—— 2000h. Press Conference, Brunei, 15 November.

—— 2000i. Press Conference, Brunei, 16 November.


—— 2000k. Presentation of White Paper on Defence Policy, Address to the House of Representatives, 6 December.


Speeches and media releases of the Prime Minister can be accessed from the News Room at the Prime Minister’s website: http://www.pm.gov.au/news/
Speeches and media releases of the Foreign Minister can be accessed from the DFAT website: http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/