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Southeast Asian Perceptions of Australia’s Foreign Policy

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This article argues that while the US alliance remains at the forefront of Australian security policy, the deepening of ties between the United States and Australia has the potential to complicate Australia’s relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours. Moreover, the manner in which the Howard government has attempted to manage this shift in policy has only exacerbated the problem. Australian pronouncements of support for the US policy of pre-emption, the perceived preference of the Australian Prime Minister to take on the role of “Deputy Sheriff”, and the unwieldy approach taken by the Australian government in policy announcements pertaining to maritime and security policy have caused unnecessary tension and mistrust between Australia and some Southeast Asian states.

Keywords: Australia–Southeast Asia relations, Howard government, “Deputy Sheriff”, Australian foreign policy, Australia-US alliance.

Australia’s Asia-Pacific regional security policy has traditionally seen a balancing between two competing policy approaches, one of seeking protection from threats in the region by “great and powerful friends” and the other of greater engagement with the region. Since coming to office in 1996, the Howard Coalition government has sought to redress what it saw as a dangerous swing towards the later approach by the previous Hawke-Keating Labor governments and sought to reinvigorate its relationship with the United States. This policy of closer ties with the United States began with a renewal of the Australia-US alliance in 1996 and strong diplomatic support for US actions vis-à-vis China over Taiwan in that year. Following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, Australia has even further intensified its positioning alongside
of the United States in global strategic affairs. Australia, for the first time, invoked the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty) in response to the attacks. It sent troops to Afghanistan as part of the “war on terror”. It sent into battle its largest military force since the Vietnam war as part of the coalition in the war in Iraq. In addition, it was an early and active participant in the Proliferation Security Initiative, hosting the second plenary meeting in Brisbane in July 2003 and hosting a major exercise in April 2006.

Alongside of this reinvigoration of the alliance with the United States, the Howard government has also shifted away from a more passive cooperative regional security policy towards a more aggressive globalist policy. In late November and early December 2002, in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in Bali, which killed 202 people including 88 Australians, the Australian government expressed its support for a policy of pre-emptive self-defence following the release of the US National Security Strategy (NSS). In addition, Australia began to advocate for a revision in the United Nations Charter that would weaken the norm of non-interference in the domestic affairs of states. On 1 December 2002, Howard was asked by Laurie Oakes on the Channel 9 Sunday news and current affairs TV programme, “you've been arguing for a new approach to pre-emptive defence … [d]oes that mean that … if you knew that … people in another neighbouring country were planning an attack on Australia that you would be prepared to act?” He replied

... it stands to reason that if you believed that somebody was going to launch an attack against your country, either of a conventional kind or of a terrorist kind, and you had a capacity to stop it and there was no alternative other than to use that capacity then of course you would have to use it. (Australia Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2002)

While Howard's answer to this question may sound reasonable in regard to self-defence when no other options are available, this statement caused a great deal of controversy among the Southeast Asian states as it was popularly cast as an Australian declaration of a pre-emptive strike doctrine. Many official statements and media commentaries from the region expressed their condemnation of the perceived Australian challenge to their sovereignty. Malaysia's then Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir (cited in Bhatia 2002), an ardent critic of the tendency of Australian and other Western states to
impose their views on the Malaysian government and society, stated that the policy demonstrates Howard’s “belligerence and recalcitrance and his anti-Asian hide”. Official spokesmen for Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines all criticized the policy as flouting international law (Burton 2002; Straits Times 2002; ABC Radio National 2005). Even Singapore, a traditional supporter of Australia’s role in the region, criticized the Australian statement. Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Tony Tan (cited in Baguioro 2002) stated that while self-defence is the right of all states, “the use of force must be subject to the principles of international law”. While this statement is by itself hardly a condemnation of the policy, the fact that the Singapore government felt compelled to respond at all reflects the extent of the negative impact this statement had on Australia’s relations with the region. In Southeast Asia, the problem is that the policy implies a threat to the sovereignty of many of the states in the region, especially those that have a large Islamic population and where increasingly the Western media portrays them as being hotbeds of Islamic terrorism.

While Australia has not moved to articulate a clear policy in support of the Prime Minister’s media comment, the government has announced changes in the strategic concept of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) moving it towards more offensive-minded capabilities. In the 2000 Defence White Paper, the 2003 Strategic Review, and again in the 2005 Strategic Review, the government announced a shift away from the decades-old policy of “Defence of Australia” to one where the ADF is structured to be better able to participate in coalition forces further a field from Australia’s immediate neighbourhood. This restructuring will also allow Australia to play a more active role within the region either in coalition with other states or independently as seen in the 2003 Australian led–Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and more recently in response to the breakdown of law and order in East Timor in May–June 2006.

While many policy-makers in the region are generally supportive of Australia’s role in the region and indeed look towards Australia for support in regional security issues such as diplomatic leadership, military training, and assistance against military and non-military threats to security, there exists some concern as to how Australia perceives its place in the region. Australia’s reliance on traditional alliance partnerships, especially with the United States, alongside of its perceived policy of pre-emption has had a significant impact on how the region relates to Australia.
Evolution of Australia’s Post–Cold War Regional Security Policy

Cooperative Security

In the late 1980s, even before the end of the Cold War, Australia, under the Hawke-Keating Labor governments, began a shift away from its traditional reliance on the protection of a “great and powerful friend” to explore multilateral approaches to security that sought security “with” Asia rather than security “from” Asia. In this period Australia stood at the forefront of the debates over the development of multilateral cooperative security structures for the Asia-Pacific region. Australia supported the establishment of multilateral cooperative security mechanisms, principally the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the “Second Track”, Council for Security and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP). While there was general support in Australian government circles for this multilateral cooperative security approach, especially the ARF, some doubts remained as to the effectiveness of such an approach to deliver regional peace and stability over the short to medium term. As a result, Australia retained its bilateral defence arrangements as a means of decreasing the likelihood of a military threat to Australia emerging from Asia. In the 1994 Defence White Paper it is clearly stated that the ANZUS alliance remained a key element of Australia’s defence policy.

Howard Doctrine and Its Discontents

Following its election in 1996, the new Howard Coalition government, distrustful of this approach, began to shift away from multilateralism and sought to deepen its ties with the United States. Australian critics of the government saw this as a return to a policy of “Forward Defence” where Australia sought to protect itself from hostile regional forces by closely aligning itself with the United States and actively engaging these threats before they could threaten Australian national interests.

With this shift, some in the region became concerned as to Australia’s threat perceptions and its emphasis on the Australia-US relationship. China in particular was concerned that Australia’s alliance with the United States was part of a broader American new “containment” strategy. Chinese commentators noted the increased level of military cooperation between the United States and Australia under the Coalition government. Shi Yongming (1997, pp. 32–33), an Associate Research Fellow at the Chinese Institute for International Studies, argued that the 1996 “Sydney Declaration” of renewed
Australian-US military cooperation and the resulting exercise “Tandem Thrust 97” implied that Australia provided the United States with a replacement training area for Asia-Pacific military exercises that it lost following the American withdrawal from the Philippines in 1992. China was also concerned that Australia had been the most vocal of the Asia-Pacific states in supporting American “gunboat diplomacy” in the region such as the dispatch of two US aircraft carrier battle groups to Taiwan during the 1996 Taiwan Straits crisis. Australia was also, according to Shi, one of the only states in the world to have supported the American cruise missile strikes into southern Iraq in September 1996. Moreover, many Chinese newspapers reported that Australia had failed to gain acceptance in Asia and, more specifically in 1996 a seat at the United Nations Security Council, because of the Coalition government’s renewal of Australia’s alliance with the United States. For example, “[s]uch parrot-like behaviour can only lead to unpopularity in the international community”, the China Daily reported (cited in Agence France-Presse 1996; see also Greenlees 1997).

Others in Asia were similarly concerned about the Howard government’s reinvigorating of the ANZUS alliance. Australian academic Des Ball (1997, p. 167) argued at the time that “there was inadequate consultation with Australia’s neighbours in South-East [sic] Asia, several of whom expressed bemusement at Australia’s efforts and especially at some of the particular moves, such as exercise Tandem Thrust”. He also argued that the Howard government politicized the relationship and that “the policy was poorly cast in terms of regional understanding”. This reliance on US security guarantees implied that Australia’s threat-perceptions focused more on traditional threats emanating from a hostile region.

The ability of Australia to engage effectively with both the United States and all of Asia was questioned well before the re-emphasis the Howard government put onto its relations with the United States. Joon Num Mak (1994, p. 58), a Malaysian defence commentator, in 1994 questioned whether Australia could effectively engage with all of the states in the region, or even nearer sub-region, without neglecting its traditional alliance partners. Alternatively, if Australia became selective in the extent of its cooperative relationships with regional powers, how would those states with minimal cooperation react to this, in effect, weakening of their relations with Australia? This is not a universally accepted view in the region and indeed many, both in Australia and in Southeast Asia, doubt the zero-sum nature implied in the “US v. Asia” debate. The point here is that
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given the finite resources available to any state in its foreign and defence relations, there has to be “winners” and “losers” in regard to the level of engagement it has with other states. Therefore, the resources that Australia “spends” in its relations with the United States are not available to be “spent” in Asia. Des Ball (1997, p. 169) makes a similar point in testimony to the Australian Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

the Australia-US security relationship is very complex and in the context of enhanced multilateralism in South-East [sic] Asia it involves sensitive judgments, hard choices and careful balances. At the most general level, there is a need for a careful balance between ... the US alliance and other bilateral and multilateral security arrangements in Australia’s national security policy.

The most powerful image that illustrates the danger, in the mind of the Southeast Asia states of the closeness of Australia’s relationship with the United States, however, was the claim of Australia as the American “Deputy Sheriff” reported in an interview in the Bulletin magazine in 1999. The report quotes Howard as saying “he saw Australia as a sort of ‘deputy’ to the American global sheriff” (Cook 1999; also cited in Murphy 2002). While the government was quick to clarify the report, accusing the journalist of putting the words into Mr Howard’s mouth, the title has stuck and as such constantly reinforces the closeness of the relationship between the two states — at least in the minds of those elements within Southeast Asian societies that are already predisposed to think poorly of the United States and Australia.

Australia’s close cultural ties with the United States have influenced how the rest of the world, especially the Southeast Asian states, view Australia. There are two areas where the close relationship with the United States hurts Australia, first, the impact of US culture on Southeast Asian societies and second, concern over the resurgence of US military adventurism. The United States is often seen as the primary agent of the challenges that many in Southeast Asia perceive they face, be it an attack on traditional languages and culture from US mass media, challenges to traditional values from Western liberalism, or challenges to their sovereignty from globalization (Dibb 1993, pp. 59–60). In many ways there is very little that Australia can do to disassociate itself from these types of attacks. While there are differences between Labor and Coalition governments over the emphasis placed on the relationship with the United States, there is
general bipartisan support for close cultural alignment with the United States. This has made it difficult for Australia to distinguish itself from the United State’s lead on global issues such as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, freedom of navigation, and regional intervention (Singh 2002).

This is not to imply that Australia’s close relationship with the United States is unwarranted or even that it is completely negative in terms of Australia’s relations with Southeast Asian states. Indeed most of the states in Southeast Asia support an ongoing US military and strategic role in the region and agree that Australia plays a valuable role in supporting and securing this commitment (Huisken 2001, p. 20). Many states in Southeast Asia value the US presence as a stabilizing element in the region and see Australia as an important link with the United States.

The ultimate judge of the value of any US role in the Asia-Pacific is the degree to which the Americans achieve the delicate balance between pursuing a policy of enhancing the stability of the region, while at the same time, not restraining the individual actors in regard to their own national objectives. During the Cold War the US presence in the region provided a bulwark against communist threats, either domestic or international. Today, however, following the election of George W. Bush and the rise of the neo-conservatives in Washington policy-making circles, there is an increasing perception of the United States as a potential threat to the status quo in the region (Xiang 2001). Owen Harries (2004, p. 85) cautions that as the global hegemon the United States will “create a world in its own image with institutions and rules determined by Washington” and that these may not coincide with the national interests of either Australia or the Southeast Asian states. Moreover, he argues that any moral suasion that Australia feels that it can exercise on the United States because of the credits it has accumulated through its participation in recent US-led wars is illusionary. Harries (2004, p. 87) argues that in regard to great powers, “expectations of gratitude rest on shaky foundations ... great powers are ‘cold monsters’ and gratitude is not one of their stronger motivators”.

Kumar Ramakrishna (2002) argues that the decision of the United States to respond to the 11 September 2001 attacks through what he describes as a “praetorian unilateralism” which emphasizes the role of force in achieving US policy objectives, only exacerbates anti-American sentiments among some Muslims in Southeast Asia. “While military victories may be achieved over the short term the failure to address the sources of Muslim anti-Americanism in the Middle East,
Southeast Asia, and elsewhere will only ensure that Al-Qaeda and its ideological bedfellows will remain an existential threat” (Ramakrishna 2002, p. 26). The danger for Australia is that it is closely associated with this US praetorian unilateralism through its participation in US-led coalitions and its prominent role in the Proliferation Security Initiative. In addition, its own leadership of interventions such as in East Timor in 1999 and the Solomon Islands in 2003, as well as the lack of clarification over its pre-emptive strike doctrine only increases the likelihood of an attack on Australia.

**Bungling Relations in Southeast Asia: The ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and Maritime Security Zone**

The Howard government further exacerbated the concern over the “Deputy Sheriff” statement and pre-emptive strike doctrine when it refused to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) at the 2004 ASEAN Summit in Laos and when in December 2004 it announced the establishment of a 1,000 nautical mile Maritime Information Zone. Many in Southeast Asia saw both acts as further evidence of Australia’s aggressive policy with regard to the region in particular. While the Summit was not all bad in that the two sides were able to agree to pursue a free-trade agreement between Australia and ASEAN, the failure of the Howard government to sign the TAC was seen as being linked with the policy of pre-emptive strikes (Allard 2004). Malaysia’s Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi (cited in Bernama Daily Malaysian News 2004) stated his disappointment with the Australian refusal to sign the TAC.

[S]o far there has been no [negative] impact but if it is prolonged and if Australia takes actions that cause adverse results, the relations would be affected because they consider themselves free to act since they have not signed the TAC.

Indonesia’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa (cited in Burrell 2004) stated that “the best way for Australia to dispel fears of its intentions about pre-emptive strikes was to sign the TAC”.

Australia had subsequently signed onto the TAC but only when the ASEAN leaders made it clear to the Howard government that Australia’s participation in the inaugural East Asia Summit (EAS) in Malaysia in December 2005 was conditional on signing the TAC. Australia announced its change in position on the signing the TAC in July 2005 and formally signed the treaty on the eve of the EAS in December 2005. As a precondition to signing, Australia emphasized four understandings, or conditions, between Australia and the
ASEAN states in regard to Australia’s involvement in the TAC. These understandings were that the TAC would not affect: first, Australia’s existing security relationships (that is, with the United States); second, Australia’s rights and responsibilities under the UN charter; third, its relationships with others outside of Southeast Asia; and finally that Australia retained a veto over ASEAN involvement in any dispute involving Australia (Kelly 2005; IISS 2005).

Australia caused further tension in its relations with its regional neighbours again in December 2004 when it announced a 1,000 nautical mile Maritime Information Zone. In this, Australia announced that upon entering the “zone” all ships intending to travel to Australia would need to provide information about its identity, crew, cargo, location, destination, and ports of call (Shanahan 2004). While, in effect, being very similar to the previous requirement of ships to provide its details when it was 48 hours away from entry into an Australian port, the regional response to this announcement was negative. The Malaysian Prime Minister stated “it is a move that is bound to cause unease as no country likes to be treated in such a manner” (cited in Chok 2004). Indonesia also rejected the plan. The Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa (cited in Moore 2004) stated “if Indonesia is asked for our view, it is a clear resounding and unequivitable no. It clearly contravenes international law, it contravenes Indonesia’s territorial sovereignty”.

Both of these issues are of relatively minor importance in regard to the overall positive nature of the relations between Australia and the ASEAN members. The TAC issue did not preclude the agreement on a free-trade deal at the 2004 ASEAN Summit or indeed Malaysia’s invitation for Australia and New Zealand to attend the ASEAN Summit in 2005. Likewise, the Maritime Information Zone is no more than a codifying of existing arrangements. That the Australian government allowed these to be blown out of all proportion and cause significant damage to Australia’s reputation in the region, however, is demonstrative of the manner in which it seeks to manage its relations with Southeast Asia. For example, Australia took considerably more flak from Southeast Asian policy and public opinion–makers in the lead-up to the ASEAN Summit than did New Zealand, which also refused to sign the TAC. Likewise, the reporting of the December 2004 announcement of the Maritime Information Zone by many influential regional news media as an Australian proclamation of a “security zone” only exacerbated relations between Australia and its neighbours. The impression that Australia was making some sort of territorial claim had to be clarified by Michael Wood (2004), the Acting Australian High Commissioner
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to Singapore, in a letter to the editor of the Singapore newspaper *Business Times*. Indeed, the announcement was as much of a surprise to officials of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as it was to the region. The Howard government acknowledged the mismanagement of the Maritime Information Zone by first seeking to change quietly the name of the policy from a “zone” to a “system”. Secondly, by formally announcing in July 2005 the restructuring of the Australian Maritime Information System to apply to ships only within 500 nautical miles of an Australian destination port.

*Changes to Australia’s Strategic Doctrine*

The significance of negative implications for Australia’s relations with the region is that in addition to all of this Australia has announced changes to the strategic concept of the ADF away from the defence of Australia doctrine to one that allows the ADF to operate far from Australia’s shores. The 2000 Defence White Paper first signalled these changes when it articulated a change to a more proactive military strategy that would allow Australia the ability to control its maritime approaches, attack “hostile forces as far from our shores as possible”, deploy preponderant force into Australia’s immediate neighbourhood, and make a substantial contribution to any coalition in Southeast Asia. The 2003 and 2005 Strategic Reviews announced further restructuring of the ADF. The goal is to create an ADF that is adaptable and versatile in meeting and sustaining the demands of diverse operations and coalitions be they in the immediate neighbourhood or further afield.

These changes signalled to Southeast Asian states an increasing propensity for Australia to project armed forces into the region. Although this would be welcomed by some regional players, Australia’s lack of a comprehensive regional engagement programme, coupled with Southeast Asia’s negative perception of many of the broad security initiatives of the United States leaves room for Australia’s proactive strategy to also be seen as a problematic (Bolton 2003; Woodman 2001, pp. 33–34).

*Implications for Relations between Australia and Southeast Asia*

*Significance of Australian Policy vis-à-vis Southeast Asia’s Strategic Cultures*

Although Southeast Asia is a diverse region in terms of politics, religion, and colonial experience and while there is no common
strategic culture among the states of the region, there are a number
of common security concerns derived from their strategic geography,
historical experience, and the challenges of economic development.
The first of these is the absolute priority accorded to the maintenance
of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Southeast Asia's history
of resisting and accommodating cultural and military challenges
from India and China, the Western colonial powers, and the various
Cold War protagonists has led to a heightened sensitivity to external
interference. The threat of major power intervention, complicated
and often-disputed borders, long-standing insurrections, and limited
conventional military capabilities, have all conspired to encourage
most of the armed forces of Southeast Asia to assume defensive
postures. Singapore stands out as the one exception, with its trade-
reliant economy giving it a vested interest in accommodating major
external powers, and its lack of strategic depth forcing it to adopt an
aggressive defence strategy backed by a well-equipped and trained
military force.

The second common aspect of security among many of the
Southeast Asian states is that they view security in comprehensive
terms. As developing states without strong political and economic
institutions, the Southeast Asian states must cater for not only
military threats but also political, economic, and socio-cultural threats.
Politically this has resulted in regime survival as being equated
with national security in authoritarian states such as Vietnam, Laos,
Cambodia, and Myanmar. Moreover, these states tend to see issues
such as globalization, refugee flows, and cultural change as threats
to their national sovereignty/regime survival more than do states in

Moreover, these non-military threats have also tended to come
from within the state as regimes face challenges from religious or
ethnic separatists, communist rebels, or Islamic extremists. These
insurrections have their roots in economic inequality and the
suppression of minority interests by nation-building elites and they
continue to threaten, in varying strength, the unity of many of the
Southeast Asian states, especially Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand,
Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. These internal threats further
enhance the structure of Southeast Asia’s armed forces and amplify
sensitivities to external interference in internal conflicts (Collins 2000,

Finally, although Southeast Asia has sought to build a range of
cooperative security mechanisms to guard against external threats,
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it continues to adopt a realist approach of investing in defence self-reliance within a balance of power framework. While the Southeast Asian states participate in a range of international organizations and cooperative security mechanisms (which liberal institutionalists argue states enter into in order to strengthen the norms that these institutions represent), the Southeast Asian support for multilateral institutions can be seen as an effective way for them to collectively amplify their limited political power (Bolton 2003; Emmers 2003). Because of these security concerns, the Southeast Asian states tend to approach their relations with Australia, a Western state on the edge of Southeast Asia, with caution and some scepticism.

Australia-Malaysia Relations

A long-term critic of not only Australia, but also the United Kingdom and the United States, Malaysia under its former Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir at varying times played the anti-Australian card in regard to Malaysia’s foreign policy. In the 1980s and early 1990s, that is, during the Hawke-Keating Labor governments, relations between Malaysia-Australia suffered over a number of crises. These included the 1986 capital punishment of convicted drug smugglers and Australian citizens Kevin Barlow and Brian Chambers, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s TV drama Embassy, the Australian-produced movie Turtle Beach and the 1993 “recalcitrant” jibe by Paul Keating. With the election of the Howard government in 1996, Australian-Malaysian relations continued to roller-coaster with Mahathir leading the anti-Australia protests over the “Howard Doctrine”, the manner in which Australia led the 1999 East Timor InterFET force and the “Deputy Sheriff” controversy (Broinowski 2003, p. 188). It is important to note, however, that despite these crises, defence and security relations between the two have always remained on a positive basis. The Malaysia-Australia Joint Defence Program (MAJDP) manages defence relations between the two and provides a structured framework for a broad range of bilateral defence interaction. Australia also maintains a presence at the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) Base Butterworth and is Malaysia’s major source of military training. Both are active members of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and in August 2002, Australia and Malaysia signed an agreement to cooperate in combating international terrorism (Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2004).
With the retirement of Mahathir and the election of Abdullah Badawi as Malaysia’s Prime Minister, Malaysian-Australian relations have been re-invigorated. While neither country puts it in such simplistic terms, the turning point of Australian-Malaysian relations is commonly accepted as occurring with the withdrawal of Mahathir from the international scene. The high water mark in these relations occurred in June 2004 when Australia joined with its FPDA partners to announce that they would cooperate in anti-piracy and anti-maritime terrorism training through the FPDA and in November with Malaysia inviting Australia and New Zealand to attend the 2005 ASEAN Summit. However, as discussed above, the negative aspects of the relationship that harken back to the bad old days have tempered the positive initiatives. Moreover, basing the strength of the bilateral relationship on the personal ties of the national leaders, rather than long-standing policy commitments, is dangerous.

**Australia-Indonesia Relations**

Relations with Indonesia which arguably reached a high point in 1995 with the signing of the Agreement on Maintaining Security was reduced to an all-time low in 1999 over the Australian-led UN InterFET mission to oversee East Timor’s independence and then the people-smuggling/boat-people crisis during the 2001 Australian Federal Election. While debate continues over the manner in which both the Indonesian and the Howard governments handled the crises, relations between the two countries deteriorated to such a point that in 2001 the Indonesian President Megawati Soekarnoputri would not take Howard’s call to discuss the people-smuggling issue (Broinowski 2003, pp. 177–86, 230). Australian-Indonesian relations have slowly improved from these low points, although the 2006 Papuan refugee crisis demonstrates how quickly relations between the two can sour. Relations between Australia and Indonesia started to improve following the 12 October 2002 Bali bombing when Australia and Indonesia police and intelligence forces cooperated effectively in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible. Similar cooperation is occurring in regard to the investigation over the 9 September 2004 bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta and the 1 October 2005 Bali Jimbaran and Kuta bombings. Australia also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on counter-terrorism with Indonesia in February 2002. In addition, relations between the two countries improved dramatically because of Australia’s quick and generous direct assistance in
response to the Boxing Day tsunami that devastated the Indonesian province of Aceh (Burrell 2005). Australia was also quick to offer aid and assistance to Indonesia following the 2006 earthquake in central Java. While this cooperation and assistance can serve as a basis for positive relations between the two states, it is worrying that improvements to the Australian-Indonesian relationship have come only after terrorist attacks that killed hundreds of innocent civilians and a natural disaster that killed hundreds of thousands of Indonesians alone.

Positive Relations between Australia and Southeast Asia

This is not to suggest that relations between Australia and its regional neighbours are all bad. Australia has sought to engage with the regional powers on a more independent basis on a number of diplomatic and economic issues. Moreover, many small and medium-sized Southeast Asian states look to Australia for support in many regional and global security and other diplomatic issues. Australia in the past had also taken a leadership role in other international fora. In 1989 Australia was instrumental in the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group and has worked closely with other APEC members to strengthen the rules and norms of that group. While the continued role of APEC is in doubt following the Asian financial crisis, Australia’s support in the principles behind APEC are positive for the region. Australia has also played a key role in spearheading the UN involvement in Cambodia where Australia took a leading position in the development of the UN plan to restore order to Cambodia, disarm the various factions, and undertake administrative control of the country for one year and to prepare for and monitor elections.

The Howard government’s preferred engagement strategy with the Asia-Pacific in general and Southeast Asia in particular is through direct bilateral relationships that focus on trade and good governance issues. Indeed, the government responds to its critics that claim it cannot engage with the region by pointing to the bilateral free-trade agreements it has signed with Thailand and Singapore and that it is in the process of completing scoping studies on free-trade agreements with China and Malaysia (Atkins 2004; Sutherland 2005). It is also pushing similar agreements with ASEAN as a whole and with Japan. Proponents of the Howard government also argue that it demonstrates its ability to work with regional governments in the security area. Australia since 1996 has instigated a
series of bilateral security dialogues with China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand, Russia, and India (Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2005). Finally, as mentioned above, it was able to develop close cooperation with Indonesian police and intelligence agencies in the aftermath of the Bali bombing and this has been extended to general cooperation between the two governments on a number of issues, including people smuggling.\(^8\)

The maintenance of all these initiatives is important but Australia needs to take care at the political/governmental level to manage effectively both the individual relationships but also Australia’s relations with Southeast Asia as a whole. Australia also needs to pay careful attention to the perception that its policies generate in the region and actively work to prevent any misperceptions arising and to prevent the exploitation, by anti-Australian elements that may exist within the region, of any of these misperceptions.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined those aspects of the Howard government’s (mis)management of regional and defence policy that tends to impede Australia’s efforts to build effective relationships with Southeast Asia. Australia’s unique position as a Western political and cultural state and close US ally on the edge of Southeast Asia has made it, from time to time, a convenient focus for Southeast Asian fears of Western and US economic, cultural, and military challenges to the sovereignty and aspirations of these states. Australia needs to build on the positive relations it has with the states in the region at both the political and military level to mitigate these concerns. The mismanagement of various security and defence policies by the Howard government in the past is a cause of concern. The Howard government, or indeed any possible successor government, needs to improve its record in this regard in order to more effectively build on the multitude of positive aspects of the relationships between Australia and the states of Southeast Asia.

**NOTES**

1 The Australian concept of pre-emptive self-defence differs from the pre-emption doctrine as articulated in the US National Security Strategy. For Australia pre-emption would only be in reaction to an identified imminent threat of an attack that the “host” state is either unable, or unwilling, to act against itself.
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2 This argument has been raised with the author by so many officials and commentators during my research that a list would run several pages and still probably miss people out.

3 At an average speed of 21 knots a ship will travel 1,008 nautical miles in 48 hours (Wood 2004).

4 Comments made to the author by several personnel of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade both at the time and in subsequent interviews.

5 On 21 February 2005 Andrew Metcalfe the Deputy Secretary to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in a speech to the 2005 National Security Australia Conference referred to the policy as a system rather than a zone. See Metcalfe (2005) and Bockmann (2005).

6 The author commonly heard this expressed during research trips to Malaysia in 2004 and 2006. Some Malaysian commentators, such as Dato Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, the then Deputy Director-General of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia in an interview with the author in July 2004, argued that Australia needed to remain cautious in its relations with Malaysia, as Abdullah would likely react in a similar way as that of Mahathir in similar circumstances as those identified above. See also Baker (2004).

7 In interviews in Indonesia in 2004 many of my interlocutors stressed the depth and strength of the Indonesian-Australian relationship at the individual, business, and even inter-governmental levels even during the height of the official crises between the two countries.

8 Evidence of this cooperation can be found in the speech by Ambassador Imron Cotan (2005).

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