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# **A Case for Pragmatism and Self-reflection in Australia's Asia Thinking and Engagement**

*A Submission to the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*

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A better understanding of Asia no doubt entails bringing together experts and scholars, funding more Asia-related research, encouraging more Australians to learn Asian cultures and languages, and promoting dialogue and exchange with our Asian neighbours. This is all well and good, but it is not enough. A better understanding of Asia should also involve critically and pragmatically reflecting upon and adjusting Australia's own mentality and fundamental attitudes towards both the region and itself.

It is often said that we do not see things as they are; we see things *as we are*. In other words, if we do not reflect on what we are, however differently and innovatively we might try to see things, we may end up with very familiar themes time and again. The often-repeated terms 'challenge' and 'opportunity' come to mind here. Such themes, while no doubt capturing some truth about Asia's implications for Australia, are of limited value in guiding us through the 'Asian century'.

This is because terms such as these are dogmatic, or at least they stem from some dogmatic ways in which we look at ourselves. In fact, these two themes bear the hallmark of ethnocentrism: they reflect the 'what's in it for us?' mentality. But it is worth asking: What is 'us'?

The answer is very much taken for granted – so much so that the question itself is not often asked. But in time of profound transformation around us, a pragmatic nation needs to ask such questions and ponder whether who we think we are is wrong, too static, or too narrow. For example, if deep in our sense of national identity is still a White Australia fundamentally different from Asia, we would continue to view our region with a sense of fear and trepidation, no matter how much the region has evolved and how deep our engagement is. If Asia is no longer the Yellow Peril, then it becomes the challenge of the Asian century. Different terms, to be sure, but the underlying emotion and attitude remains.

Even when we manage to temporarily overcome this Asia anxiety, we then may over-emphasise the Asian opportunity for *us*. Such a view is again ethnocentric, not pragmatic. An ethnocentric reading of the Asian opportunity is likely to conceive Asia in narrow, expedient, and non-reciprocal terms, which does not serve as a solid foundation for sustained mutual engagement. One example is that Australian mining companies are too happy, for example, to jack up iron ore prices in their China sales, without realising that the inflationary effect can

come home to rooster (eg, prior to the Global Financial Crisis), or that the Chinese may (and indeed have begun to) look elsewhere for supply.

By contrast, a pragmatic nation would assess risks and opportunities not on the basis of race, culture, ideology, and identity. For such categories themselves are not static, and are subject to pragmatic construction and reformulation as time wears on. Rather, to use a Chinese phrase, it is better to cross the river by feeling for the stone (摸着石头过河). That is, explore options with an open mind and without predetermined roadmaps. Translate this into Australia's strategy towards Asia, it means engaging with Asia first, then sorting out the differences, issues, and challenges as they arise.

This hardly sounds like a promising strategy. Our customary quest for certain knowledge would demand a clearer picture of us and them, threat and opportunity, preferably beforehand. But the problem is that no such clear knowledge can ever be gained outside of practice and engagement. Even in practice, and precisely because of the complexity of the practical world, we have to see challenges as opportunities and vice versa. We will see both challenges and opportunities from within Australia too, not just from Asia.

Hence the need for self-reflection and self-reform in Australia in dealing with a complex and dynamic Asia. We will need both to redefine who we are and to change ourselves accordingly, as we have been undergoing change for centuries. Only through such self-reflection and self-reform can Australia better take advantage of its Asian century and help shape it. If the rise of Asia has changed the dynamics of the world, that is because Asia itself has been at the centre of dramatic change over the last few decades, if not longer. Similarly, it is often said that for the past century or so, China has changed the world primarily by changing itself. Were it not for its self-reform, we would probably not be able to witness the rise of China as we know it today.

Self-reform is not easy and takes time. Above all it requires a pragmatic, flexible view of self and the outside world. In the Australian context, such a view may immediately run counter to some of the deep-seated ideas and principles, including the central role of the Australia-US alliance. But this alliance itself was derived in part from a pragmatic review of Australia's security need during and after World War II, and there is no reason to believe why it cannot be subject to the scrutiny of pragmatism today, a pragmatism which should both relinquish the lingering myth of the American century and reject a dogmatic view of the twenty-first century as the Asian/Chinese century. Only on this ground can we find a proper way of understanding and engaging our ever-changing neighbourhood.

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