Ending Ambivalence: Australian Perspectives on Stability in Asia[1]

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A growing body of literature analysing Asia-Pacific security in the twenty first century regards the ascendancy of regional powers a threat to the stability of the current regional security environment. However, a shift toward multipolarity in the region need not necessarily be viewed as a threat. The view that a relative decline of US primacy threatens regional stability is based on an assumption that maintaining stability is the same as maintaining the status quo. This assumption mistakes the process of US security assurance for the objective of stability in the region. Alternatively, Asian ascendancy may be viewed as an opportunity to create a regional security community. A concept of regional stability that emphasises adaptation to Asia's new political and security realities will be used frame regional engagement as an opportunity rather than a threat. This paper will then substantiate the importance of a regional stability concept by examining the elements of Asian emergence that are construed as threats to regional stability and discussing how rising regional powers might be engaged as partners instead of potential rivals. Perceptions of threat and partnership within the Asia-Pacific may have a significant bearing on regional engagement, cooperation and stability in the future.

Australia sends mixed messages to Asia in its defence and foreign policies. The track record of Australian-Asian engagement shows that, although Australia has managed to maintain working relationships, it has conceived of and portrayed itself an outsider in the Southeast Asian region.[2] The conference theme of crisis and opportunity illuminates two

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[2] Martin Griffiths and Michael Wesley, "Taking Asia seriously," Australian Journal of Political Science 45(1) 2010: 20-3.

important strategic questions for Australia's foreign relations with Asia in the twenty first century: why does Australia treat Asia with apprehension and ambivalence? And how can Australia consolidate its engagement with Asia to minimise ambivalence? Australia has a unique realist outlook that informs its perceptions of Asia and fosters a concept of regional stability is linked to experiences of alliance with external powers. By associating regional stability with the late twentieth century security order that was underwritten by unchallenged US primacy, Australia perceives the possible rise of a multipolar Asia as a threat.

This argument unfolds in three parts. Firstly, Australia has a pessimistic regional and global outlook. This outlook fosters concern about projections that Asia will soon outpace Australia in terms of economic growth, population size and military power.[3] Australia's experiences of great power alignment lead it to prefer a hegemonic security environment to an uncertain balance of power.[4] Secondly, Australian ambivalence is underpinned by the way in which security and stability are conceptualised. The construction of a rising Asia as a security crisis, particularly in the late 1990s, has caused Australian defence and foreign policymakers to hedge against Asia in ways that contradict diplomatic initiatives to embrace the region.[5] Thirdly, an Asian security order in transition does not need to be a threat to Australian regional interests. The closing of the huge strategic gap between America and Asia may introduce an unfamiliar hierarchical order in place of the hegemony to which the region has become accustomed, but multipolarity may also present an opportunity for more consistent engagement with Asia.

Australia's Regional Outlook

Australia's relationships with the rest of the world have been decidedly realist in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Michael Wesley describes Australia's realist outlook as experiential, pessimistic and pragmatic.[6] A sense of vulnerability stemming from perceived

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[3] Mark Thomson. The human tide: an Australian perspective on demographics and security. Strategy Report, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 2009

[4] Stephen Smith Asia and international Security: an Australian perspective speech presented to Casa Asia, Madrid, 15 February, 2010 http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2010/100215_madrid.html; see also Paul Dibb, "Key strategic issues for Asia and Australia," Australia's maritime bridge into Asia, eds. Sam Bateman and Dick Sherwood (Sydney: Allen and Unwin in association with the Royal Australian Navy, 1995) 17.

[5] Craig Snyder, "Australia's Pursuit of Regional Security in the 21st Century," Journal of Strategic Studies 21(4) 1998: 11-4.

[6] Michael Wesley, "The rich tradition of Australian realism," Australian Journal of Politics and History 55(3) 2009: 326.

isolation, a low population coupled with a large economy relative to Southeast Asia, and a culture divergence with most neighbouring states has caused Australia to focus more intently on international standing than other middle powers. Despite the relatively benign regional security environment of the late twentieth century, Australia has continued to view Southeast Asia with pessimism.[7] The paradox of Australia's strategic outlook is further evidenced by the Defence of Australia doctrine, which concedes that regional geographic and geopolitical circumstances afford Australia a significant defence advantage.[8] David Bolton argues that Australia's pessimistic military posture is unpopular amongst Asian states because it is perceived to be aggressive and disproportionate; because it conjures images of Australia as America's deputy sheriff; and because it stokes fears of interference in domestic matters.[9] The pragmatism of Australian realism is evidenced by the early tradition of affiliation between academics and practitioners and by Australia's conservative and utilitarian political culture.[10]

Australian realism has led to a pessimistic interpretation of economic, demographic and military trends in Asia. Asia is projected to become a locus of economic growth, global production and international trade in the twenty first century. The region contains many key lines of communication, merchant shipping routes and choke points for global trade, all of which are increasingly important to international markets and domestic economies.[11] China and India are expected to overtake the US and EU around the middle of the century. Smaller regional economies such as Indonesia will likely outpace Australia in about the same time frame. While underutilised populations will continue to fuel growth in Asia's rising economies, ageing Western populations, Australia's included, will impede growth due to shrinking workforces and increased social costs.[12] Economic growth and a concomitant rise in military expenditure in Asia has been a cause for concern for Australia. Such concern was evidenced by the 2009 Defence white paper, in which the government commented on China's

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[7] Dennis Rumley, The geopolitics of Australia's regional relations (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999) 166-7.

[8] Paul Dibb, Review of Australia's defence capabilities: report for the Minister for Defence (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1986).

[9] David Bolton. The tyranny of difference: perceptions of Australian defence policy in Southeast Asia. Working Paper Nᵒ 384, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, December 2003, 3-7

[10] Hugh Collins, "Political ideology in Australia: the distinctiveness of a Benthamite society," Daedalus 114(1) 1985; see also Clive Bean, "Conservative cynicism: political culture in Australia," International Journal of Public Opinion Research 5(1) 1993.

[11] Richard Bitzinger and Barry Desker, "Why East Asian war is unlikely," Survival 50(6) 2008: 105.

[12] Thomson. The human tide: an Australian perspective on demographics and security.

growing strategic weight.[13] The modernisation of military capabilities in Asia will likely increase the cost of maintaining Australia's technological lead.[14] Given Australia's interpretations of these regional trends, engagement with Asia contains an undertone of apprehension and ambivalence.

Australia's ambivalence toward engaging Asia is the product of the desire to integrate economically into the world's most dynamic region and the desire to maintain a security order underpinned by US hegemony. Australia has historically looked to powerful allies to maintain the regional security order and has felt threatened when an incumbent hierarchical security order has been disturbed. For example, in the late 1960s Australia believes that the impending British military withdrawal from Southeast Asia jeopardised Australia's defence strategy and left a power vacuum in the region.[15] Australia has also felt threatened in the past when existing hegemonic systems were contested: by Russia and Germany's challenge to Britain prior to World War one; by Japan's challenge to Britain in Word War Two and by China's challenge to the US during the Cold War. In each instance, Australia sought to maintain stability by supporting an ally in the struggle for regional preponderance, often through the deployment of troops far abroad where Australia's own direct strategic interests where not at risk.[16] The established pattern for Australian strategic thought is to preserve the status quo of the existent hegemonic security order. Even current speculation of the emergence of a 'G-2' between China and the US is somewhat familiar territory for Australia. However, Australia's experience of regional stability has not yet faced a transition from hegemony to multipolarity – the looming possibility that precipitates alarm in Australia's pessimistic regional outlook.

Regional Security and Stability

A key determinant of Australia's regional engagement is the way in which regional security and stability are conceptualised. In the Australian outlook, stability in the region is linked to the continuity of a hegemonic order that prevents strategic competition through

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[13] Department of Defence. <u>Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific century: Force 2030</u>. defence white paper, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009

[14] Hugh White, "Australian defence policy and the possibility of war," <u>Australian Journal of International Affairs</u> 56(2) 2002: 255-6.

[15] Andrea Benvenuti, "The British Military Withdrawal from Southeast Asia and its Impact on Australia's Cold War Strategic Interests," <u>Cold War History</u> 5(2) 2005: 199-201.

[16] Mark Beeson, "The declining theoretical and practical utility of 'bandwagoning': American hegemony in the age of terror," <u>British Journal of Politics and International Relations</u> 9(4) 2007: 626.

American primacy. Robert Ayson has made the first attempts to conceptualise regional stability in the Asia-Pacific region.[17] Ayson's model of stability is based on Morton Kaplan's notion of equilibrium in political systems[18] and focuses on preventing major war and preserving institutions, regional norms and the integrity of sovereign states as the basis of stability. This draws on Kaplan's concern that a political system's capacity to regulate itself is an essential indicator of its fortitude and utility. In this formulation, when regulatory costs become prohibitive the system dissolves. Using Ayson's concept of stability, the Asia-Pacific region meets the theoretical condition of stable so long as the regulatory costs of equilibrium offer a reasonable return. This concept reflects Australia's experiential realism as maintaining the status quo has been a rewarding endeavour in the past.

In the context of regional political systems, the utility of Kaplan's equilibrium concept as a basis for stability is questionable. An alternate approach is explored by the sciences of sustainability, which conceptualise a continuum across which stability is achieved. In this sustainability spectrum,[19] separate stability functions are conceived as static, steady-state and dynamic. Actions taken to preserve the current system state are static, actions performed to preserve systemic function are steady-state and actions that renew the system in response to disruption are dynamic. In the case of regional stability, preserving the current security order is a static function, the renegotiation of political relationships and norms is a steady-state function and the adoption of a new security order is a dynamic function. Ayson's conceptual understating of stability leans towards the static end of the sustainability spectrum. Australian strategic thinking about Asia also leans toward securing stability in the static sense, with little thought about the steady-state and dynamic alternatives. In the long time horizons appropriate to strategic thinking, a stable region will likely be one that is able to adapt to changing circumstances, find new system states and overcome destabilising forces.

This is not to argue that the sciences of sustainability have direct correlates in the field of international politics. The scientific approach to conceptualising stability in systems does

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[17] Robert Ayson, "Regional stability in the Asia-Pacific: Towards a conceptual understanding," Asian Security 1(2) 2005: 190-213.

[18] Morton A. Kaplan, System and process in international politics (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1957).

[19] Thomas P. Seager, "The sustainability spectrum and the sciences of sustainability," Business Strategy and the Environment 17(7) 2008: 445-6.

not necessarily offer specific insight into the security dilemmas of the state. Rather, it illuminates a way of thinking about stability that appreciates the maintenance functions often undertaken by governments as well as the need for resilience in response to strategic shocks,[20] often considered only as latent contingencies. It also offers a solution to the dilemma of the equilibrium approach, which classifies any challenge to the existent security status quo as a threat. This is important for Australia in the early twenty first century, as looking back to a golden age of a regional security order underwritten by American supremacy may be counterproductive in an era of multipolarity. The potential gains of conceptualising regional stability in terms of sustainability outweigh the costs of recalibrating an ageing regional outlook. In the case of the possible emergence of an Asian century, a balance of power may actually emancipate Australian strategic thinking from the orthodoxy of ambivalence.

Regional Engagement in Transition

In the post-cold war era it has been accepted that Australia should seek to keep the US military engaged in the Asia-Pacific for as long as possible in order to maintain stability.[21] Consequently, Australia has not had to seriously reconsider the basis of its engagement with the region during this period because the answer has seemed obvious. But if US hegemony erodes and the Asia-Pacific security order becomes more contested, the means through which Australia should pursue its regional relationships will be much less clear. Looking forward to the twenty first century, Australia will face an acute tension between its economic relationship with Asia and its strategic relationship with America.[22] Experience suggests that ambivalence as a method of hedging is congruent with Australian realist pragmatism. However, the lessons of the past may add little value to meeting the challenges of a changed regional system. Trying to reconcile economic and strategic interests that are founded on fundamentally different approaches to engaging the region is not likely to be a viable option in the long term.

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[20] Nathan Freier. <u>Known Unknowns: Unconventional "Strategic Shocks" in Defense Strategy Development</u>. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, November 2008

[21] Dibb, "Key strategic issues for Asia and Australia."

[22] Hugh White, "Power shift: Australia's future between Washington and Beijing," <u>Quarterly Essay</u> 39 2010: 6-7.

History indicates that the current unipolar moment probably has a shelf-life, as no other great power has managed to sustain unipolarity in the international system.[23] Yet, an unwavering belief in the centrality of the US alliance as a means to realising security and stability in Asia[24] has been a main cause of ambivalence in Australia's relationship with Asia, despite bipartisan support for closer engagement.[25] The crux of the problem is Australia's conviction that Asian ascendancy poses a challenge to the preferential hegemonic order that it has enjoyed for several decades and that any event that challenges the existing system represents a crisis. However, a shift toward multipolarity in the region does not necessarily represent a threat to Australia's regional interests. The widely held view that a decline of US primacy threatens Australia's security[26] is based on an assumption that the equilibrium concept of stability is the most valid way to determine security interests. This simplification of Australia's strategic engagement with the region mistakes the process of US security assurance for the objective of stability in the region. The emergence of the twenty first century as the Asian century offers the possibility to consider Australia's interests in Asia without relying on the preponderance of a friendly hegemon.

To shift Australia's perceptions of Asia away from ambivalence regarding threat and opportunity, a break from tradition will be necessary. Experiences of alliance reliance coupled with pessimism and apprehension toward Asian ascendance infuses Australian strategic policy with a predilection for maintaining the status quo and a preference for American primacy. Alternatively, stability in the region could be viewed as a mix of robustness, aimed at preserving equilibrium, and resilience, aimed at preserving function and adapting to change. In this view, Asian ascendancy may be an opportunity to participate more comprehensively in a functional regional security complex.[27] Some evidence of functional security partnership in Southeast Asia already exists and multilateral cooperation on non-traditional security issues such as disaster relief, maritime security, state-building

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[23] Christopher Chase-Dunn and E.N. Anderson, "The rise and fall of great powers," The historical evolution of world-systems, eds. Christopher Chase-Dunn and E.N. Anderson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 1-6.

[24] See Dibb, "Key strategic issues for Asia and Australia," 17.; see also Smith Asia and international Security: an Australian perspective

[25] Paulo Gorjao, "Australia's dilemma between geography and history: how consolidated is engagement with Asia?," International Relations of the Asia Pacific 3(2) 2003: 180.

[26] Malcolm Cook, Raoul Heinrichs, Rory Medcalf and Andrew Shearer. Power and choice: Asian security futures. Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 1 June 2010, 15

[27] Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, Regions and powers: the structure of international security (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

interventions and terrorism demonstrates potential for further intraregional cooperation in the future.[28] Meanwhile, further emergence of Asia as a locus of global logistics, communication and trade[29] has the potential to unshackle Australia from its narrow conception of stability and security in the region. The main obstacle is the alienation from Asia that Australia perpetuates through ambivalence and apprehension.[30]

Conclusions

This paper began with the proposition that Asian ascendency is perceived in Australia to be a threat to ongoing prosperity, to realising Australia's regional and global political potential and to national security. This impression, tempered by Australia's pessimism and experiences, is a major impediment to engaging Asia. Instead of viewing Asia as a threat to Australia's interests, Australia could cast Asian countries as partners in shaping the region. Any form of security partnership in the future Asian security environment will most probably occur in a balance of power system, with major powers in the region offsetting external great power intervention to a greater degree than today. Australia needs to think carefully about how committed it is to ensuring the longevity of the American-based security order. When the time comes, adaptation and resilience might trump assertions that what has worked in the past will necessarily remain useful in the future. The fixation of Australia's current strategic outlook on the US alliance may be dulled by the realities of an emergent Asia-Pacific region and the rise of regional powers at Australia's doorstep.

When thinking more broadly about the type of security futures that Asia faces, it is apparent that the strategic landscape is unlikely to change overnight. The exact pace of transition is impossible to forecast, but it is more likely to resemble decades than months. Nevertheless, Australia can take steps now to prepare itself for the reality which it has been fervently denying for decades – that US primacy in Asia will probably not last forever. In order to prepare for a peaceful transition toward a less familiar security environment, Australia could begin investing in a more consistent and cohesive approach to engagement with Asia. Ending ambivalence toward Asia will require Australia to address its sense of

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[28] Ryo Sahasi. <u>Conceptualising the three-tier approach to analyse the security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific</u>. Working Paper N° 415, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, December 2009, 13-7

[29] Bitzinger and Desker, "Why East Asian war is unlikely," 105.

[30] Carol Johnson, Pal Ahluwalia and Greg McCarthy, "Australia's ambivalent re-imagining of Asia," <u>Australian Journal of Political Science</u> 45(1) 2010: 70-1.; see also Anthony Milner, "What is left of engagement with Asia?," <u>Australian Journal of International Affairs</u> 54(2) 2000: 178-9.

vulnerability, distrust, experiential biases and political and cultural baggage – which is no easy task. But the dividend may be critical in the long term, as perceptions of threat and partnership within Asia and the Pacific may have a significant bearing on regional engagement, cooperation and stability in the future.

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