

Second Submission

To: Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond

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Over many decades Australia's habitual reaction to its Asia neighbours have been to turn away from them while clinging to fragile alliances with 'great and powerful [white] friends.' The rationale for this reactionary geopolitical response has been that such alliances will counter threats from what are imagined, in the popular mind, to be potentially hostile alien states within the region. The result, as historian David Walker points out, is that from the earliest days of European settlement on the continent, Australia has developed a collective mentality as an 'anxious nation.' He explains: 'Australians were regularly reminded that the Asia on their doorstep harboured clever, unscrupulous and resourceful opponents.'¹ Before and during the Pacific War the Japanese were the primary focus of the fear of Asia.² After the communist revolution in China in 1949, the Chinese became (and remain) the biggest imagined threat.³ As policy analyst Allan Behm notes, this adds up to 'a profound insecurity at the heart of the Australian character.'⁴ This insecurity is often accompanied by widespread nostalgia that harkens back to a golden age of imagined closeness to great power allies led by Britain (until 1942 with the fall of Singapore to the Japanese) and the United States of America (since the signing of the ANZUS treaty in 1951).

¹ David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939*. Queensland UP, 1999: p. 7.

² Henri Frey, Henri. *Japan's Southward Advance and Australia: From the Sixteenth Century to World War II*. Melbourne UP, 1991.

³ David Brophy, David. *China: Australia's Alternative to Paranoia and Pandering*. Melbourne: La Trobe UP, 2021.

⁴ Allan Behm, *No Friends No Enemies: Restoring Australia's Global Relevance*. Perth: Upswell, 2022: p. 21. See also Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World Since 1942*. Melbourne: La Trobe UP and Black Inc, 2017.

In a speech to the federal parliament in 1948, Percy Spender, a Liberal MP who would later become External Affairs Minister in the newly minted Menzies government, articulated the toxic combination of insecurity and nostalgia that proved to be the foundation of Australia's foreign and defence policies for the following decades. He declared: 'We are a handful of white people in a coloured sea and all the nations of the East [...] are coming more and more under the domination of the communist ideology.'⁵ This fear, encapsulated in the political warnings about fictions such as the 'yellow peril' and 'red menace' threatening the Australian continent, has persisted ever since, often resulting in Australia estrangement from its regional neighbours.⁶

That estrangement has been consistently compounded by widespread ignorance in Australia about the country's regional neighbours, their histories, religio-philosophical cultures, and their languages, emboldening former leaders like John Howard to insist that while Australia is geographically '*in Asia*' it is not '*of Asia*,' ignoring the fact that 'Asia' is largely a Western construct suggestive of a monochrome culture rather than the vast and complex socio-cultural, economic and political pluralism of the region.⁷ In a similar vein, Tony Abbott insisted that Australia is integral to what he described as the 'Anglosphere,' a nostalgically imagined entity with Britain at its core and which embraces the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and other former white settler colonial societies, all English speaking. Proposals for Australia's 'enmeshing' or 'engaging' with its region (the terms come from former prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating respectively) have been met with little sympathy, much less any real understanding, among higher education policy makers and senior university managers, nor policy makers and mainstream commentators as well.

⁵ The Hon Spender, MP, 'Speech in the House of Representatives, 2 September 1948. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives*: p. 58.

⁶ Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1992. See also Michael Wesley, *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the Rise of Asia*, Sydney: NewSouth, 2011, ch. 5.

⁷ Amitai Acharya, 'The Idea of Asia.' *Asia Policy*, 9 (2010): pp. 33-39.

The persistent turning away from Asia that has characterised Australia's (mis)understandings of its region are now a major threat to the country's security and prosperity. The reliance on 'great and powerful [white] friends' has always been a highly questionable policy, based on the tenuous assumption that Australia is respected as a 'middle power,' regionally and globally.⁸ The Trump administration's growing isolation throws that assumption into even greater doubt.

Australia's education systems are lagging far behind regional and global developments that impinge on the country's national interest. As the United States retreats from (and threatens) friends and foes alike, especially in the Asia Pacific region, and as China re-emerges as a great power in the region (and globally), this country urgently needs highly educated citizens who are 'Asia literate' that is who can speak the languages of the region fluently and who are familiar with the cultures, histories and economies of the region. These people will be essential if Australia is going to negotiate successfully in what is rapidly becoming a 'polyaligned world' threatened by a 'New Cold War.'⁹ Australia's immediate future in in Asia. It must now educate its people into the region. This will require comprehensive reforms to primary, secondary and tertiary curricula right across the country. To delay these reforms imperils the country's security and prosperity.

⁸ Malcolm Fraser, *Dangerous Allies*, Melbourne UP, 2014. See also Allan Patience, *Australian Foreign Policy in Asia: Middle Power or Awkward Partner?* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

⁹ Trissia Wijaya and Lee Jones, 'Indonesia, Nickel, and the Political Economy of Polyalignment in the Second Cold War,' *Third World Quarterly*, Jan 2025:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2025.2465514>