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Australia and the Asia-Pacific

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According to surveys at the end of the 2008 Federal Parliament elections, a former diplomat who reads and speaks fluent Mandarin could become the next Australian Prime Minister. Kevin Rudd, leader of the Opposition, has admittedly quite an unusual profile among Australian politicians, but the strong interest of this Labour Party leader in Asia is evident in the recent changes of the country.

Australia's involvement in Asia was originally linked to strategic issues. The growing importance of Asian countries as export markets, the opening up of Australia to Asian immigration and non-Europeans in general¹ thus led to a stronger integration into Asia-Pacific countries. The Australian society is becoming multicultural, with most of the Asian immigrants adopting "Australian values", savouring the joys of surfing and barbecues. It is, however, quite a slow process. British and New Zealand nationals are still the two most popular immigrants to arrive in Australia. New Zealanders are the only ones to be able to enter without a visa. For other immigrants, the criteria for obtaining an entry visa have practically become the same for all and an English test is generally required for non-native English-speakers.

The opening up to Asia is also illustrated by officials in high-level administration posts and big companies speaking an Asian language, usually Japanese, Chinese or Indonesian, or those having lived in Asia. Around a million Australians, often young and highly qualified, live abroad: mostly in the United Kingdom, the United States or Canada, but also a large number of them live in Asia. This opening up is also due to the fact that there are many Asian students, with higher education in Australia becoming the fourth export sector. Australian universities attract Asian researchers (as well as Europeans and Americans) both on a permanent job

1. The "White Australia Policy" was gradually abandoned between 1973 and 1978.

basis and on visiting researchers' positions for sabbatical leave. Over the last few decades, Australia has become one of the world's main research centres on Asia, in economics, political science, history and sociology. The Australian National University (ANU), Kevin Rudd's former university, plays a significant role in this domain, owing to its geographical proximity to the Federal Government, the government's headquarters being situated in Canberra, similar to the ANU, the "capital of the bush".

While in most Western countries Asian studies developed at the end of the 19th century under Oriental Studies, Asian Studies became increasingly popular in Australia after 1945, nurtured by the close collaboration among academics in anthropology, history, sociology, political sciences and economics, and the leaders of military and economic intelligence. Australia was too close to Asia, thus it was, and remains to this day, impossible to ignore the strategic aspect of research on Asia.

Until 1941, despite the geographical proximity and the flow of migration from Asia, which strongly declined after adopting the "White Australia Policy" in 1901, Australians considered themselves to be closer to the United Kingdom, their mother country and main business partner, than to Asia. From the beginning of British colonisation, however, close economic ties were established with Asia. Chinese tea and Javan sugar were cheaper in Australia than in Europe, which gave British immigrants the impression that it was a land flowing with milk and honey. Tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants also arrived on boats coming from China looking for gold and took part in the Gold Rush in the 1850s to 1860s. They represented 3% of the Australian population in 1861, but the majority of them returned to their own country before the end of the 19th century.

The understanding of the geographical proximity of Asia came as a brutal shock in 1942, when Churchill informed the Australian government, after the fall of Singapore, that the priority of the United Kingdom was to defend Burma and India. Australia had to count on its own strengths. The Japanese air force thus struck Darwin (and other cities of the north of the country) and the Imperial Navy's submarines attacked the port of Sydney. The American military intervention quickly put an end to these threats, but the events left behind a sentiment of extreme vulnerability. Strategic analysis thus played a fundamental role in drawing up Australia's Asian policy after 1945, with full support from the United States, highlighted by the deploying of Australian troops during the Korean and Vietnam wars and more recently in Iraq.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Japan gradually lost its status of the former hated enemy. In the 1970s, it became an important economic partner for Australia, replacing the United Kingdom as the main importer of raw materials and supplier of manufactured products. In the following decades,

economic relations with other countries were also strengthened. The determination to integrate into the Asian economic area is evident as illustrated by the on-going negotiations that should result in successful free trade agreements with ASEAN, China, South Korea and Japan. The strengthening of commercial exchange is likely to yield large profits on trade. At the same time, this exposes Australia to a new form of vulnerability as proved by the recent decision to put a bilateral military partnership with Japan into effect, to ensure the security of sea links, which has provoked negative reactions from China. The inter-dependence of the Asia-Pacific countries is becoming stronger, but it does not, however, eliminate the asymmetries that arise from the differences in demographic and economic weight.

Contrary to the predictions of Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Australians have not become “poor white trash in Asia”. Their country is still predominantly “white”, but it is richer than most Asian countries. Asian countries import excessive quantities of minerals. The quality of life is high (ranked 3rd in the world by the Human Development Index) and Asian immigrants are well off, including many Singaporeans, who were attracted by the large spaces (20 million inhabitants in a country as vast as Europe) and probably, also by the more relaxed atmosphere there than in their own country.

On 28th March, while receiving the title of doctor *honoris causa*, from the Chancellor of ANU, Lee Kwan Yew realised that he had made a mistake. Claiming that his words were perhaps justified in the 1980s in spite of everything, he observed that Australia had changed. At the same time as when Asian politicians, who wanted to exclude Australia and New Zealand from regional economic agreements, changed their minds, Australian leaders adopted a form of “Asian” pragmatism, as shown by the decision to honour the former leader of Singapore by awarding him the title of Doctor of Law.