

# Time for Australia to emerge from its foreign-policy adolescence

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Is culture destiny? Or is geography destiny? These are the existential questions Australians have to grapple with as they ponder their future in the Asian century. As they think over these questions, they would do well to plunge into Peter Hartcher's new Lowy Institute Paper *The Adolescent Country*.



Hartcher does not address these existential questions directly. But they form the sub-text of much of what he talks about on Australia's future. Like many other leading Australian public intellectuals, he worries about the impact of any rivalry between China and US on Australia. In theory, as a staunch American ally, Australia should stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the US. In practice, Australian economic interests would be badly damaged if it gets into any confrontation with China.

Australians will soon calculate, as many Asians already have done, that while America may be around for another hundred years, China will be around for the next thousand.

This creates the 'predicament of proximity', Michael Fullilove's phrase which Hartcher adopts in *The Adolescent Country*. He is right in saying that Australia has credibility with both Washington and Beijing. To maintain this credibility, Hartcher has wisely advised his fellow Australians to get out of the 'followership' of America and exercise 'independent judgement'.

Sadly, the Australian Government has not heeded Hartcher's advice. Indeed it is doing the opposite.

Recently, when China announced its initiative for an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Washington DC responded by campaigning ferociously against it. It would clearly serve Australia's national interests to see the AIIB succeed, as regional cooperation in Asia would create a more stable geopolitical environment in its 'proximity'. In addition, the massive infrastructure projects funded by the AIIB would enhance Australian exports. Instead of exercising wise independent judgement as suggested by Hartcher, Australia crouched into its usual position of 'followership' and succumbed to American pressure.

This traditional Australian supplicant position towards Washington is not the only handicap Australia faces in its foreign policy. As Hartcher documents fully, Australia is also handicapped by a 'provincial reflex' which contributes to a 'pathology of parochialism'. Hartcher is right in pointing out that this has contributed to Australia's failure to develop deep and mature relations with its Asian neighbours, particularly Indonesia.

Clearly it is unwise for a scarcely populated country of 24 million Westerners to alienate a country of 250 million Indonesians, most of whom are Muslim. The US can afford to alienate the Islamic world because it is 'over there'. Australia cannot afford to do so because it is 'over here'. Yet despite the obvious need to develop deep and meaningful ties with Indonesia, Australia keeps shooting itself in the foot. As Hartcher relates, Abbott's insensitive comments and actions on refugee boats and his remarks on Snowden and SBY give Australia a particularly bad record in its handling of relations with Indonesia.

There is one big item missing in Hartcher's book – some 'big ideas' on how to overcome this 'pathology of parochialism'. Let me suggest one.

In his book, Hartcher quotes Ambassador Chan Heng Chee from Singapore on Australia's role in APEC. Ambassador Chan is right in saying that APEC came into being only because it was proposed by Australia, whereas other similar ventures had been rejected by ASEAN in the past when proposed by powers like the USSR and Japan. Ambassador Chan also argued that Singapore is a similar country to Australia – one that can produce practical ideas that can win broad support.

Ambassador Chan is providing a valuable insight that Australians should reflect on. There are Asian countries that share Australia's global outlook. Hence, the best way for Australia to start preparing for its role in the Asian century is to look for Asian countries with whom it can develop deep and meaningful relationships. The obvious candidate is Singapore. It is true that Australia has good relations with Singapore. But they are not deep and meaningful because Australia as a 'middle power' is not able to treat Singapore, a small state, as its political equal. This 'middle power' complex is another handicap that Australia has to overcome.

The big message of Hartcher's book is one that Australia cannot afford to ignore. As American power gradually recedes from the Asia Pacific, Australia can no longer rely on a strong 'parent' to protect its interests. The time has come for Australia to grow out of its adolescence and become a mature and responsible player. Hartcher is doing his fellow Australians a big favour by producing this timely book. Many Asians hope that his message will be heeded by Australian leaders and public intellectuals.

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