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Time to accept our place in Asian region

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Workers at a Foxconn plant in Shenzhen . . . China has almost tripled its share of the global economy. **Photo: Bloomberg**

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'By the logic of geography, the continent of Australia should have been populated with Asians. Instead, by an accident of history, Australia has been predominantly populated with Westerners.'

This is how I began a paper for the Australian National University in August, which concluded that as Australia's Western destiny was coming to an end, it had to start preparing for its Asian destiny.

Sadly, no major Australian newspaper or pundit commented. This made me aware that Australian's intelligentsia is still reluctant to face head on Australia's painful new geopolitical realities.

Against this backdrop, the release of the Asian Century white paper is timely. It should provide a sharp wake-up call to the Australian population that Australia's destiny is now firmly tied to Asia. Julia Gillard is absolutely right in saying: "The transformation of the Asian region into the economic powerhouse of the world is not only unstoppable, it is gathering pace."

One truly impressive part of the paper is the data it provides on Asia's rise. It notes, for example, that "in the past 20 years, China and India have almost tripled their share of the global economy and increased their absolute economic size almost six times over. By 2025, the region as a whole will account for almost half the world's output."

The paper could have helpfully added that from the year 1 to 1820, China and India always had the world's two largest economies. Hence, the past 200 years of Western economic domination was a major historical aberration.

This would have been an important point to make because for the past 200 years, Western power has essentially provided Australia a valuable buffer from Asian geopolitical realities. In this Asian century, as Western power recedes steadily, Australia will be left "beached" alone as the solitary Western country (together with New Zealand) in Asia. Twenty-two million Australians will have to learn to deal with 3.5 billion Asians with great care and sensitivity.

Ignorance about Asia could prove to be fatal for Australia's long-term future. This is why the report is right in highlighting Australian misperceptions about Asia. "For example, a Lowy Institute poll in 2011 found that many believe that 'Indonesia is essentially controlled by the military, despite Indonesia's democratic system of

government'."

Sadly, this kind of abysmal ignorance may be a result of deeply rooted flaws in Australian education. This is one alarming revelation of the report: "Only a small proportion of Year 12 students study anything about Asia in the subjects of history, literature, geography, economics, politics and the arts under existing state-based curriculums." Worse, only 5 per cent of each Australian cohort study any kind of Asian language.

Hence, when I addressed the annual convention of the Australian Primary Principals Association in Melbourne in September, I said that the kindest thing Australian society could do to its five-year-old children was to teach them an Asian language, be it Mandarin or Hindi, Bahasa Indonesia or Japanese.

Learning Asian languages would also open windows to Asian cultural and political sensitivities.

An early test of Australian political sensitivities will come when Australia joins the UN Security Council. Its Asian neighbours will be watching to see if it votes more in line with its fellow Western or fellow Asian members in the council. The painful geopolitical choices that Australia will have to make as Western power recedes and Asian power rises are clearly something that no official white paper can address. The paper delicately touches on "China, the United States and Australia" without pointing out some of the painful choices Australia will have to make from time to time.

The one surprising omission in the paper is ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations). The paper fails to acknowledge that ASEAN has provided Australia with a valuable geopolitical buffer in recent decades. The failure to understand this has led to some of Australia's most unwise foreign policy decisions, including efforts to bypass ASEAN sometimes.

Despite this, all Asians should welcome the bold decision of the Australian government to release this white paper. The time for Australians to think deeply about their Asian destiny has arrived. The sooner Australia adjusts to its new Asian destiny, the less painful the adjustment will prove to be.

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