

Australia as a Middle Power

A Colloquium on 'Australia as a Middle-Ranking Power' proposed by Bruce Grant, leading writer on international affairs, and hosted in Canberra by Manning Clark House in conjunction with the Australian Institute of International Affairs

Colloquium report prepared by rapporteurs Melissa Conley Tyler and Geoff Miller AO



Participants in the Manning Clark House Colloquium, September 2007

Manning Clark House

Australian Institute of International Affairs



Background to the Colloquium

In September 2007, a group of foreign-policy specialists gathered for a Colloquium at Manning Clark House, Canberra, to explore ideas that might help to guide Australia's international role over the next twenty years.

The summary record reflects the range of ideas expressed at the Colloquium. However, it should not be assumed that all the themes were endorsed by each of the participants. Comments have not been attributed to individual participants. We circulate the record in the hope that it may be useful to a wider audience of thinkers and policy-makers.

Moderator

Virginia Haussegger is a news presenter for ABC TV in Canberra, journalist, author and media commentator. She has had over twenty years experience in broadcast journalism, covering national and international events for some of Australia's leading news and current affairs programs.

Commentators

Allan Behm is a director of three advising groups. The Departments in which he has worked included DFAT (Kuala Lumpur and Geneva), PM&C (Senior Defence Adviser), Defence (Head, Asia Branch, Strategic Policy Branch, International Policy Division, Strategic Policy Division) and Attorney-General's (Head, PSCC, Security Division, Federal Justice Office and General Manager, AGS).

Bruce Grant is one of Australia's leading writers on international affairs. He was Australian High Commissioner to India. With former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans he wrote one of the standard works on the conduct and content of Australian foreign policy. He was the originator of the Colloquium. Bruce Grant is a member of the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) Research Committee and the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* Editorial Board.

Geoff Miller AO is the National Vice-President of AIIA. He is a former senior Australian diplomat (including Ambassador to Japan and Korea and High Commissioner to New Zealand) and was Director-General of the Office of National Assessments and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and a Commonwealth public servant.

Ronald A. Walker is a Senior Special Fellow of UNITAR and Visiting Fellow at the Asia Pacific College of Diplomacy, Australian National University (ANU). He was an Australian diplomat for 38 years with eight postings overseas. He was Australia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva and later Vienna.

Participants

Melissa Conley Tyler is National Executive Director of the Australian Institute of International Affairs. She is a graduate of the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy and has worked in conflict resolution in the US, South Africa and Australia.

James Cotton is Professor of Politics in the University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy campus, Canberra. He is also Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Asian Studies, ANU. He has taught at the University of Western Australia, the Newcastle University (UK), the National University of Singapore, the ANU and the University of Tasmania. From 1997 to 2003 he was a member of the Foreign Affairs Council convened by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Peter Edwards is a Visiting Professor of the University of NSW at the Australian Defence Force Academy. He is the official historian of Australia's involvement in South East Asian conflicts 1948-75 (Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam). Dr Edwards' most recent books are *Arthur Tange: Last of the Mandarins* (2006) and *Permanent Friends? Historical Reflections on the Australian-American Alliance* (2005).

Jeremy Farrall is a Research Fellow at the ANU Centre for International Governance and Justice. He worked for the UN from 2001 to 2006, serving as a political officer for the UN Security Council at UNHQ in New York (2001-04), on the UN mediation team facilitating peace talks in Cyprus (2004), and as a policy adviser for the UN's peacekeeping mission in Liberia (2004-06).

Andrew Farran is a company director, international lawyer and wool producer. He was a member of the Australian Diplomatic Service 1962-70; the Department of Defence; the Faculty of Law (Monash University) 1972-86; and Chatham House, the International Institute for Strategic Studies and AIIA.

Stuart Harris was for many years a Professor of Economics at ANU, and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Trade, and Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, which became DFAT. As Secretary of Foreign Affairs, he conducted a major review of Australia's overseas representation. He is currently Professor, Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, ANU.

Tony Kevin joined the then External Affairs Department in 1968 and worked as a Commonwealth public servant for the next thirty years, in DFAT and in the Prime Minister's Department. He has written extensively on Australian foreign, national security, and refugee policies.

John Langmore is a Professorial Fellow in the Political Science Department at the University of Melbourne. He was Director of the UN Division for Social Policy and Development in New York for five years, from 1997, and then Representative of the International Labour Organisation to the UN for two years. He is the national president of the UN Association of Australia.

John Ravenhill returned to Australia in 2004 to a Chair in International Relations at ANU, after holding the Chair of Politics at the University of Edinburgh. He has been a Visiting Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and at the International University of Japan. With James Cotton, he has edited the last three volumes of the AIIA's *Australia in World Affairs* series.

Kim Rubenstein is Professor and Director of the Centre for International and Public Law (CIPL) in the ANU College of Law. Her public law work spans constitutional and administrative law, and citizenship law. Her book, *Australian Citizenship Law in Context*, looks at the disjuncture between the exclusive legal notion and the more inclusive understanding of citizenship.

Lieutenant General John Sanderson AC served in the Australian Army from 1958 to 1998. He commanded at all levels, including as Chief of Army 1995-98, and held senior Army and Joint policy staff positions in the areas of strategy and force development. He was Commander of the international military component of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). He was Governor of West Australia 2000-05, and is now AUSTCARE Ambassador for Cambodia and Special Adviser to the Government of Western Australia on Indigenous affairs.

Greg Wood is a former senior diplomat and international trade negotiator. He was High Commissioner to Canada and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Garry Woodard is a former senior government official and diplomat. He was Ambassador to China and Burma, and High Commissioner to Malaysia. He is adjunct professor in global studies, RMIT University; senior fellow in political science, University of Melbourne; formerly Department of Foreign Affairs, and national president of the AIIA.

Organisers and support

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1. Defining a 'Middle Power'

The concept of a 'middle power' is well established in international relations. However, it has recently become a contested concept in Australia, with former Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer preferring alternative formulations such as 'pivotal power'.

The group discussed whether the concept of a 'middle power' is useful.

Concerns were raised that 'middle power' suggests a military frame of mind and does not give a sense of the ways in which Australia best pursues its foreign policy objectives. It was also noted to be an artificial construct: there is no internationally recognised league table in which Australia is ranked as a middle power. Some participants believed Australia could develop into a continental power, but that this would require a change of mindset to occupy the continent, not just as an expeditionary force, but as custodians of the land.

The main function of the phrase 'middle power' was seen as reminding a country simultaneously of its weakness and its strength.

No country is omnipotent. Characterising itself as a 'middle power' shields a country from the temptation of claiming the spoils of international relations on no other basis than perceived power: 'my name is lion' in Aesop's fable. It promotes a salutary modesty of expectations.

At the same time, every government has some power. In the South Pacific, Australia is the 'great power'. In other regions Australia counts for less; but even there, using its agility and imagination, its activism and creativity, Australia has the capacity to act as a foreign policy entrepreneur in areas of concern to it.

Viewing 'middle power' as a descriptive term, there was broad agreement that Australia would meet this definition.

However, normatively, one of the key characteristics often ascribed to 'middle powers' is their commitment to multilateral institutions, the rule of law and norms constraining the use of power. In this sense it is a reaction against 'realism' and evokes the creative diplomacy of Canada and the Scandinavian countries from the 1960s. It is also a reaction to the alternative of seeking overly close alignment with a major power, arguably at the cost of independence and dignity.

Participants variously defined 'middle power' diplomacy as:

- » 'deployment of the power of many nations for our objectives';
- » 'cooperative rather than combative, intuitive rather than assertive'; and
- » 'the ability to define objectives and propositions that others will agree to because they see advantage in it.'

2. National interest

Australia's foreign policy should be based on its national interest.

Former Minister for Foreign Affairs Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant formulated Australia's national interest in three parts: security, prosperity and 'being a good international citizen'. Of these, the third was less apparent during Alexander Downer's term, at least in his rhetoric.

While Australia's national interest in security and prosperity may be clear, the fluidity of the international environment means that achieving these goals may be difficult. The international system is in a time of turbulent transition. Post-Cold War, nothing has yet gelled as a disposition of power that can be relied on to remain stable. US hegemony has not firmly established itself. Instead we have an uneasy system made up of post-modern states, modern states, modernising states and weak or failed states with stark power differentials within and between states. The nation-state continues to evolve into a new form with a striking amount of power wielded outside states, including the fragmenting influence of dual nationality citizens. To ensure Australia's security and prosperity, its foreign policy will need to be robust and prepare for the possibility of continued fluidity and even a more unfriendly world.

There is support for a revival of 'being a good international citizen' as a key part of Australia's national interest, based on the benefits of improving the international environment in which we live in terms of peace, stability, sustainable development and open international trade. Australia depends very much on workable international institutions, norms and rule of law for our security and prosperity. Most of these institutions also extend their benefits to the rest of the world, which is also in Australia's interests as preventing conflict and minimising physical threats to Australia. The overriding social goal of the international system is to provide goods such as life and trust that are universally valued.

It was suggested that Australia should determine what sort of world it wants in the future and use its ability to try to bring this about. While some implicit values can be found in any foreign policy, it was agreed that attempts to identify 'Australian values' would always be contested and could easily lean towards a romantic or sentimental approach. Ideally, good international citizenship should be based on universal values, but these are also subject to debate.

One interesting trend is for younger people in particular to have a focus on humanity before patriotism; this potentially challenges 'strategic' approaches to issues like climate change. When polled, the general populace will overwhelmingly want foreign policy based on values rather than interests. The increasing proportion of citizens with dual nationality or an immigrant background also potentially has an impact on the public's view of what Australia should be doing in its foreign policy. It was noted that there is a positive self-esteem effect when Australia is seen to achieve internationally, whether this relates to peace in Cambodia, the Cairns Group promoting fairer international trade or regulation of Antarctica.

3. Multilateralism

The group discussed the future of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the effect of global issues on these institutions. Concerns were raised that the time of multilateralism has run its course.

There has been a massive shift in economic balance and the number of countries that are integrated into world markets: the rising powers may not be comfortable with multilateral institutions that have been established and are being run by the West.

At the same time, there has been a shift away from multilateralism by the US, leading to an increased focus on bilateral fora. There is a concern that this is leading to a real decay in multilateralism and a move to bilateral alliances. This is particularly apparent in the current jeopardy of the international trade framework. Another change has been a focus on regional multilateralism; for example through the East Asia Summit and ASEAN + 3 processes.

However, the argument was made that multilateralism is still needed for exactly the reason that it flourished as a result of two World Wars. From the first use of the atomic bomb, it became apparent that absolute war was no longer an option; it created a driving imperative to avoid total war between nuclear-armed states that has not changed. There was broad agreement among the group on the importance of multilateral processes to contain conflict that could become wider conflict. However, it was noted that institutions such as the UN Security Council represent an agreement by the powerful that may be challenged in a period of great flux.

In addition, it was argued that while current multilateral institutions may be under strain, the compelling nature of environmental issues will demand coordinated global responses. Old institutions may be in jeopardy, but the need for international cooperation is not. This suggests the need to reengage and reinvigorate institutions such as the UN.

Often, multilateral institutions have been forged from great conflict, and it may be that new international institutions will not evolve through peaceful processes but from the next great breakdown in order. Global warming may be this convulsive event that must by its nature be handled multilaterally: the nation-state cannot handle it and it makes apparent that human beings are not yet organised politically to act globally. Global warming could be the catalyst for a new commitment to multilateralism, but international cooperation may be limited to only this area.

The pragmatic approach towards multilateralism would be to take care not to undermine current multilateral institutions, but not to rely on them too much, and to embrace with enthusiasm any compelling new multilateral processes that emerge to deal with global issues such as health, population, energy and climate change.

4. Bilateral issues

Inevitably, Australia will have vital bilateral relations, concurrent with whatever it does multilaterally. All states make use of both multilateral and bilateral modes.

The US alliance will remain of great importance to Australia. However, a confident relationship is most valuable to both parties: Australian sycophancy is not of deep value to the US. Experience suggests that Australia can take an independent role in multilateral discussions without offending the US; in fact, its explorations of the policy landscape can be useful for the far from monolithic US foreign policy establishment. It is important not to surrender important attributes of sovereignty in alliance management and to be rigorous in our analysis of the US, including challenging its emphasis on the military in foreign policy. One view is that the US is traditionally unilateralist and is not driving multilateralism as it did after World War II. This means on many issues there is no 'leader' to look to, even if this was seen as a useful concept.

A commitment to multilateralism suggests a commitment to formal equality of states and the importance of internationally binding rules. One responsibility that follows from this is the need to act to prevent state failure, given that nation-states remain the basis of the international system. Another is to resist actions that undermine international order and introduce dysfunction into the international rules-based system.

Discussion focused on the need, in the last few decades of Western dominance, to accustom rising powers such as India and China to the idea of international law and order. Participants discussed the end of the European global hegemony as demographics, economics and political power move towards non-Western countries.

A key question is how China and India are likely to respond to the multilateral system. Some saw China as more supportive of the international system than the US, with a clear understanding of the benefits of a stable international political system. Others thought that China may have a different concept of law (rendered in Chinese as 'the will of the ruler').

India may decide not to be a status quo power. The large and largely-disenfranchised Islamic world may demand a collective voice. The potential rise of Africa to the influence suggested by its natural resources and population would also change dynamics, as will the huge change in prosperity, with almost two-thirds of the world's population now moving towards escaping poverty.

The question will be whether the non and newly powerful can use the current international system to meet their needs. Australia has an interest in protecting against future powers becoming lawless. It was suggested that compliance with law and general promotion of norms should be a guiding principle of Australia's foreign policy in an uncertain world.

Discussion anticipated that the current time of transition could be messy with continuing 'roller-coaster rides' and no guarantee of reaching a stable equilibrium soon.

5. Capacities and resources

The ability to pursue Australia's national interests in security, prosperity and being a good international citizen is predicated on a range of capacities and resources. The aim of being an intellectual entrepreneur in foreign policy requires even greater capacities.

Australia may be seen to have a vocation for middle-power diplomacy, due to some particular attributes. While most countries focus on a threatening neighbour and/or distant superpower, Australia's interests give it a wide focus: cultural, economic and military links tie Australia variously to Europe, North Asia and the US, while its immediate neighbours are South East Asia and the Pacific. The multitude and variety of its external links enable Australia to see the world from several perspectives, including across the north/south divide.

Arguably Australia's cultural equipment is also useful: Australians are future-oriented, hopeful but skeptical, imaginative rather than dogmatic, competent and increasingly skilful. We are short on deference, not easily daunted and usually lack a sense of superiority. Australia has a global network of relationships and representation.

Two barriers may hamper Australia fulfilling a middle-power role. One issue is the need to rebuild Australia's credibility following a period of being perceived as overly enmeshed with the US; it may take some time to project Australia as a believable middle power.

Another issue is the need to increase capacity in a number of areas, including policy formation, diplomacy, process and education. A number of specific suggestions were made on building institutional capacity, both in regard to the resources directly available to support and prosecute active foreign and trade policies, and in regard to the national infrastructure - in terms of an informed, interested and engaged public - needed to sustain them.

Policy formation

The government should support the work of universities, NGOs, community organisations and specialised institutions in promoting public awareness and knowledge of international issues of importance to Australia.

Diplomacy

In this era of ever-increasing international business, the government should:

- » maintain and increase the capacity of the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade
- » increase Australia's ability to engage in public diplomacy
- » develop Australia's capacity for 'soft power' and influence in the region

Process

A perception developed under the previous government that important decisions affecting Australia's foreign policy, including participation in the invasion of Iraq, were taken in a less than open, fully considered and accountable way. Accordingly, the government should:

- » proceed according to proper and accountable process
- » involve the public service in the construction and development of public policy and record departmental advice, including unsolicited advice
- » require a high standard of accountability for decisions to commit troops abroad, such as Parliamentary approval
- » promote free interchange and contestability of advice, including from outside government, from academia, relevant institutes and NGOs, for example
- » guard against the politicisation of the public service
- » clearly delineate the roles and responsibilities of Ministerial staff.

Education

The government should stress the importance of being able to come to terms with other cultures through:

- » support for Australia's traditions of openness and inclusiveness
- » promotion of the study of the Asia Pacific region and its languages
- » measures to reverse the decline of the teaching of languages.

Other

- » Guard against using the media in ways that corrode public trust
- » Develop ways to engage with Australians based or travelling overseas as an 'unofficial diplomatic corps'
- » Practise 'good international citizenship' at home; for example in refugee policy and adopting a Bill of Rights

In summary, Australia has significant capacities to bring about results in specific areas of concern, partly assisted by its current economic prosperity. Its effectiveness would be enhanced by building institutional capacity and investing resources in a number of areas.

6. Issues and opportunities

To end the session, participants were asked to provide suggestions and advice to the Prime Minister. The following issues and opportunities were identified:

- » Reengaging with the United Nations, including seeking to engage the US further with the UN
- » Dealing with the problem of failed and failing states
- » Promoting trade liberalisation
- » Promoting China/US strategic arms reduction
- » Asian regional architecture, and Australia's place in it
- » South Pacific issues, including guest workers and issues in Papua New Guinea
- » Climate change
- » Non-traditional security threats, including terrorism
- » Globalisation
- » A realistic defence posture
- » Poverty reduction, especially in Africa.

Selection of the areas for engagement should rely on the careful identification of the opportunity for effective action, institutional capacity and political leadership.

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