



---

# Finding Australia's New Asia Narrative

**MICHAEL WESLEY**



# Biography

## MICHAEL WESLEY



Michael Wesley is Deputy Vice Chancellor International and Professor of Politics at the University of Melbourne.

Previously he was Dean of the College of Asia and the Pacific at the ANU, Executive Director of the Lowy Institute, Director of the Griffith Asia Institute, and Assistant Director-General at the Office of National Assessments. His 2011 book, *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the Rise of Asia*, won the John Button Prize for best writing on Australian public policy.



# Contents

<b>Finding Australia's New Asia Narrative</b>	<b>4</b>
The Power of Narratives	4
Australia's Need for Narratives	4
Asia as Australia's Muse	5
The Asia Pacific Grand Narrative	6
The Storyline Frays	8
The New – Fragmented – Reality	10
The Dangers of Dissonance	13
Towards New Narratives	14
Conclusion	17
About us	18
About the Asialink Leaders Program	18
<b>Get in touch with us</b>	<b>20</b>

# Finding Australia's New Asia Narrative

## THE POWER OF NARRATIVES

“Narrative” is a word teetering on the brink of overuse these days, tending to evoke either eye-rolling or air quotes. A *Washington Post* opinion piece summed it up in 2016: “A Plea to Pundits: Stop Saying ‘Narrative’”. And yet, as with many overused words, narrative conveys a core truth about politics and policy. In the words of psychologist Jonathan Haidt, “human beings are not logic processors. We are story processors.” The tendency to understand reality through story frameworks is a deep and universal human tendency.

At an individual level, narrative plays a central role in cognition, by organising our perceptions of reality into a coherent and meaningful pattern. An inner narrative helps a person find her or his place in the world between past, present and future. At a collective level, narratives are crucial for social cohesion, collective meaning, and collective action. Again and again political leaders have found that discovering a narrative that connects their own aspirations with those of broader society is the surest and most durable route to political power. In policy terms, government programs that gel with public narratives have a much greater chance of success than those that are sold in rational interest or narrowly partisan terms. Powerful public narratives tend to be self-fulfilling, because they inspire large numbers of people and institutions to act in the way the narrative prescribes.

## AUSTRALIA'S NEED FOR NARRATIVES

Nations are particularly reliant on narratives, which speak to the core purposes and values of the national community, and help to locate them in the world among other nations. International events that affect the nation and national initiatives are woven into the national narrative. As a predominantly transplanted multicultural society, with scant historical or cultural points of connection or continuity to surrounding societies, Australia has relied heavily on national narratives since the arrival of European settlers. Early and powerful narratives portrayed Australia as a new and vigorous outgrowth of the ascendant Anglo-Saxon race, and a plucky determined society prevailing over a harsh and dangerous frontier.

Australia's national narratives had several necessary elements. Most basically, they drew on broad cultural values and stereotypes: egalitarianism, racial hierarchy, character and determination in the face of overwhelming odds. They also identified dangers to be avoided, values to be rejected, and possibilities to be striven for. The animating element in our national narratives was the tension between being and becoming – a tension which provided the call to arms that promoted national solidarity, political authority and steadiness of purpose. Colonial Australia benefited from several tensions between being and becoming: the need to differentiate itself from the class-ridden society of Britain, while continuing to identify as solidly Anglo-Saxon; the desire to remain racially pure while avoiding non-white immigration and miscegenation; the urge to subdue the wild frontier of the continent it found itself in possession of. With each tension, animating possibility paired with dreaded danger.



---

## ASIA AS AUSTRALIA'S MUSE

Even before federation, the Australian narrative increasingly took its bearings from Asia: a region of both fascination and repulsion. Australians looked at Asia's teeming populations as the antithesis of what they were building: a wealthy, white, Christian society with high standards of living and a guaranteed minimum wage. Unfettered immigration would condemn Australia to a future as a society of coolies unworthy of a place among the leading dominions of the British Empire. As they compared themselves to their Asian neighbours, Australians could not believe that if they had their way, Asians would not seek to try to come and take Australia's vast, bounteous lands away from its few white inhabitants. The newly federated dominion saw imperial power as the best way of maintaining order in Asia, protecting Australia from its presumably avaricious neighbours, and preserving Australia's position in the global racial hierarchy.

*The Second World War challenged Australia's national narrative in profound ways while confirming it in others.*

The rapid Japanese advance through Asia and into the Pacific showed the stark limits of European imperial power and the folly of assumptions of racial hierarchy and capabilities. At the same time it confirmed a sense of Australian vulnerability, Asian avarice, and the need to rely on a culturally-similar protector. Participating in the American-led defeat of Imperial Japan restored some sense of racial hierarchy, but the imperial narrative that had sustained white Australians for a century and a half had received a shock from which it would never recover its all-motivating power. Even still, as evidence of the collapse of British power mounted during the 1950s and 1960s, Australia clung to its imperial narrative, urging London not to turn away from Asia towards Europe.

The aftermath of the War brought the rapid decolonisation of Asian societies and a period of competing narratives. The militant nationalism and communism of many post-colonial states in Asia confirmed the stark polarity between Asian peril and western salvation in the Australian imagination. The ANZUS Treaty was signed, the White Australia Policy reaffirmed and troops committed to fight in Malaya and Vietnam. But a separate storyline also started to develop: one of solidarity with the new states to Australia's north. The Colombo Plan brought many Australians into personal contact with Asian elites for the first time, while Canberra's expanding External Affairs footprint provided Australian diplomats with intimate access to the challenges and deliberations of newly independent governments in Asia. As Australia embarked on its own intensive program of nation-building in the War's aftermath, many in its elite came to identify their country's fortunes with the ability of Asian states to consolidate postcolonial rule and promote economic development.

*For the first time the question of Australia's acceptance by the newly-independent states of its region came into play, and made the incompatibilities between the two narratives increasingly acute. For how long would a country with a racially-exclusionary immigration policy continue to be accepted by a region of independent and fiercely anti-colonialist non-white societies?*

How much of a liability was Australia's close alliance with the United States as it sought close relations in a region increasingly espousing non-alignment? Most bedevilling of all was the evolution of Australia's trade. As Britain sought entry to the European Economic Community, Australia's trade continued to gravitate towards Asia's rising industrial economies: Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China. With each passing year the narrative of danger from the region and the imperative of separation from Asia became less compelling.

---

## THE ASIA PACIFIC GRAND NARRATIVE

*From the crucible of social, political and economic change in the 1970s arose a new Australian narrative, with Asia once again as its muse – but a changeable muse.*

It was a radical shift from previous national stories, although it did rely on common cultural reference points. The prolonged economic slump of the 1970s shifted perceptions of Australia's economic trajectory: the developmental optimism of colonial, federation and postwar Australia was replaced by a fear of economic stagnation. The tension between being and becoming centred on avoiding the slide into economic dysfunction. This animating anxiety was brought into stark relief by the fact that it was Australia's northern neighbours that continued to grow strongly while Australia, North America and Europe stagnated. The developmental and moral polarities of Australia and Asia had switched: the teeming, hard-scrabble societies of Asia were now growth dynamos, while Australia risked becoming, in a memorable phrase from that era, "the poor white trash of Asia". The spectre of Australians becoming coolies remained, but the causality had shifted. Unless it could learn from and integrate with Asia, Australia would slide into self-improvement.

The reform era in Australia that began in 1983 was driven by a narrative of national rejuvenation at home in order to benefit from Asia's economic dynamism. Part of the reform project was economic liberalisation – the dismantling of Australia's federation framework of protectionism and regulation in favour of a stance of pro-business flexibility and openness. But there was a complementary foreign and defence policy reimagining also, away from cleaving to imperial stances and policies towards greater initiative and manoeuvrability. A defence policy of "self-reliance within the alliance" supported and enabled a new foreign policy framework prioritising the Asia Pacific and promoting multi-stranded integration with the region. The ground had been prepared a decade earlier, in 1973 with the final repudiation of the racially-restrictive immigration policy, and by the late 1980s the number of Australians of Asian ancestry was growing quickly, particularly in the largest cities.

Driving each of these strands was a powerful fresh nationalism that asserted a distinctive, independent Australian identity. As James Curran and Stuart Ward have documented, this was a post-imperial identity necessitated by Britain's turn towards Europe and the youth revolt of the 1960s which was critical of older forms of national identity. The Australian renaissance was marked by a new currency and national anthem and periodic agitation for a new flag and a republic. The ANZAC tradition was resurrected from almost having petered out. The fortunes of national sporting teams in contests against imperial cousins – the Ashes, the America's Cup, the Bledisloe Cup – took on an almost sacred significance.

---

Australia's sense of being reached back to colonial and post-Federation cultural markers through movies – *Gallipoli*, *The Man From Snowy River*, *Breaker Morant* – and television series such as *Bodyline*, all of which foregrounded Australian courage and perseverance often in tension with British perfidy. But the bush myth didn't long capture the public imagination following the collapse of the Empire narrative. By the 1990s Australian leaders were looking for more contemporary inspiration of becoming. Prime Minister Paul Keating drew explicitly on a rejection of the imperial narrative in sketching the grand themes of a republic, reconciliation with Australia's indigenous peoples – and integration with Asia. Three landmark reports had appeared in the late 1980s, respectively authored by Ross Garnaut, Stephen Fitzgerald and John Ingleson, each of which imagined a new and more natural integration between Australia and its northern neighbours.

*Their common theme was that Australian society would need to evolve to find enduring security and prosperity “not from Asia, but in Asia”.*

Underpinning the new Asia narrative was the prevailing ethos that gained ascendancy with the end of the Cold War.

*The new era would be marked by the absence of ideological or geopolitical rivalries; the imperative now was to lower all barriers to trade, financial flows and human interaction.*

The result would be neoliberal peace and prosperity. Technology and globalisation would increase wealth and living standards, growing economic integration would dismantle national rivalries, and travel and entertainment would erase cultural barriers and misunderstandings. Australia's future lay with increasing integration into Asia.

In hindsight, it is remarkable how quickly and completely Australia's Asia narrative switched from one of danger and separateness to one of opportunity and integration. There were small pockets of resistance – historian Geoffrey Blainey, Opposition leader John Howard, and maverick backbencher Pauline Hanson each spoke of the dangers of Asian integration to Australia's national identity – but each was swiftly and roundly repudiated by a broad range of opinion. Attempts to make Australia's Asia policy a partisan issue, such as Prime Minister Keating's claim in the 1996 election that Asian leaders wouldn't deal with Opposition Leader Howard, failed to gain traction. While the major parties adopted distinctive approaches to Asian integration, the imperative was indistinguishable between them.

It was a narrative that resonated strongly with broad elements of Australian society. Merchandise trade boomed, reaching two-thirds of Australia's trade flowing to and from Asia. Australian schools added the teaching of Japanese, Mandarin, Korean and Indonesian to their traditional language curricula of French, German and Latin. Australians' tastes for Asian food expanded past Chinese to Thai, Indian, Vietnamese and Korean, and their appetites for Asian holidays expanded.



---

The Australian Research Council specified a greater understanding of Australia's region as one of a handful of national research priorities. Sporting codes and cultural institutions began to look to Asia as a new frontier and regional context. Universities and research institutions, traditionally focused on North America and Europe, started forging new partnerships in Asia. Australia's higher education and tourism sectors were reshaped by booming demand from Asian students and travellers. A significant sector that failed to respond to the narrative was investment, which remained anaemic towards Asia and heavily concentrated on North America and Europe. Still, annual Asia Pacific and East Asia leaders summits, which saw the Australian Prime Minister don garish national costumes alongside Asia's leaders, reinforced a profound sense that Australia's natural place was in a booming, stable Asia Pacific.

### THE STORYLINE FRAYS

Narratives rarely retain their power to compel attention and action for long periods. Sometimes the context changes. At other times the audience evolves, no longer able to identify as closely with the old storyline of being and becoming. Most often it's a combination of evolving attitudes, sensibilities and context that makes the narrative feel hackneyed. For this reason it's hard to pinpoint when Australia's Asia Pacific grand narrative began to lose sway. Rather there were cumulative developments that plucked at strands of the storyline. On becoming Prime Minister in 1996, John Howard dialled down the urgency of the becoming element in the Asia Pacific grand narrative, by emphatically rejecting the claim that Australians had to change to succeed in Asia.

*By the end of the 1990s Australia had lost the urgency to its Asian odyssey.*

The economy had started growing strongly. Our main ally appeared globally dominant. The 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis punctured beliefs in Asia's economic ascendancy and Australia's lagging performance. By that stage, Australia was like the dog that catches the car: prosperous, integrated, accepted in Asia, with a feeling that there was little left to strive or reinvent for. Having spearheaded a successful intervention into East Timor, Australia felt wealthy and self-confident. There was also disillusion with what we had achieved in Asia. The regional institutions that Australia so enthusiastically championed appeared incapable of delivering significant outcomes, either in integration or conflict resolution. A third strand of discordance was Australia's economic complementarity with China, which started to drown out attention to other relationships in Asia and create some uncertainty in Washington about Australia's complete commitment to the alliance with the United States.

*The need to strive for integration and acceptance regionally lost its power to compel as Australia racked up three decades' worth of economic growth. China's accelerating economic development, urbanisation, infrastructure construction and manufacturing ascendancy ignited a resources super-cycle after 2000 that delivered the largest and longest terms-of-trade boom in Australian history.*

A buoyant exchange rate saw manufacturing shrink and commodities and services come to dominate the economy. As Australians became used to good economic news their attention turned inwards towards a pernicious politics of how the gains would be distributed. The zeal for economic reform became a casualty of the politics of who-gains-who-loses. Australians lost their appetite for Asian languages as it became apparent that integration with a booming Chinese economy delivered effortless prosperity.



---

Other elements of the grand narrative also lost their lustre. The reassuring neoliberal logic, that globalisation and integration would deliver a reinforcing cycle of prosperity, stability and security began to be questioned. As Chinese investment, students, tourists and migrants arrived in greater numbers, popular anxieties began to rise, for example, about escalating property prices and pressures on infrastructure in Australia's major cities. A significant debate erupted in late 2015 over the decision to allow a Chinese company to buy a 99-year lease for the Port of Darwin. The controversy surfaced concerns that had been growing about allowing Chinese investors to acquire "critical infrastructure" that presumably could be leveraged during a dispute to coerce Australia into acting against its interests. It was a logic that saw the Australian government ban Chinese telecommunications companies from constructing Australia's 4G and 5G mobile telephony infrastructure. The neoliberal logic had been reversed: economic integration with China was not an unalloyed benefit to be exploited but increasingly a vulnerability to be managed.

The COVID pandemic has further shredded the neoliberal case for economic integration. The virus stands as a warning against unrestricted movement of people, while the sudden shortages of protective equipment and the scramble for vaccines has been taken as a warning against becoming too reliant on free trade and relative advantage.

*The rhetoric of economic openness and integration has been displaced by talk of building "sovereign capabilities" in sectors of critical importance. Whereas neoliberalism gave precedence to economic imperatives, believing them to both supersede and eventually eclipse security imperatives, now security concerns are dominant, and trump economic interests whenever necessary.*

The final fracturing of the Asia Pacific grand narrative came when Australia's relationship with China flipped from general comity to cold hostility. Socialising China into a development-focused, status quo-committed state had been a major part of Australia's Asia Pacific grand narrative. In championing China's admission into APEC, the ARF and the WTO, Australian governments believed that China would come to value development and stability over its communist ideals, learning to behave responsibly internationally while liberalising domestically. There was a confidence that Australia's economic complementarity with China gave it special influence in Beijing, and that in the phrase of the time, Australia "did not have to choose" between its alliance with the United States and its economic relationship with China. Australia could have the best of both worlds.

And yet there were cracks of discord slowly widening in the Sino-Australian relationship. Canberra became increasingly alarmed at Beijing's assertiveness in the South China Sea, particularly when China began building artificial islands on the features it claimed.

*The appearance of military facilities on these islands, despite Chinese President Xi's promise that China would not militarise the South China Sea, deflated Australia's hopes that China's engagement in international trade and institutions would socialise it into supporting the status quo.*



---

It became much more clear that China was embarked on a bid to displace US maritime power from the western Pacific, and the South China Sea bases put the Australian mainland within range of a direct air attack by a potentially hostile power for the first time since 1942.

Canberra's increasingly vocal opposition to China's activities in the South China Sea had little effect, showing how misplaced the assumption it had special influence in Beijing had been. Instead exchanges between Australian and Chinese officials became increasingly acrimonious. Australian officials found themselves unable to gain access in Beijing, and Ministers' calls went unanswered. Regular dialogues were deferred indefinitely. When the Australian Foreign Minister called for an international inquiry into the origins of the COVID pandemic in April 2020, Beijing brought a halt to a range of Australian imports: coal, barley, wine, lobsters. Australian fears about the potential vulnerabilities created by economic complementarity with China were confirmed.

## THE NEW – FRAGMENTED – REALITY

*The final fracturing of Australia's Asia Pacific grand narrative has gone largely unnoticed because it coincided with a period of national introspection. The COVID pandemic saw Australia among the first countries to shut its borders to international travel, and a new narrative dominate newspapers, airwaves and social media.*

It was a story of a persistent, invisible foe able to cause terrible death, of the anxious wait for numbers – infections, deaths, weeks in lockdown – and then of the coverage of vaccines which promise to bring the whole nightmare to an end. Rare glimpses of the outside world intruded occasionally – Trump's defeat and the storming of the Capitol, an offensive tweet from China's wolf warrior-in-chief diplomat, the fall of Kabul – but in general there has been even less national interest in the outside world while we battled the pandemic at home.

While COVID's effects will persist for years, it is unlikely to remain the all-absorbing challenge it has been in 2020 and 2021. Australians' attention will begin to re-engage with the world beyond their shores, especially as the travel restrictions start to ease. When that visibility increases, it will be a world that Australians will find it harder to fit their own national aspirations and sense of location into. Where once they had a single national narrative about being and becoming at home and in the region, what looms now is a series of dissonances – of aspirations that lead to bad outcomes, disconnects between different national interests, pressures that pull the nation in different directions.





Running through the centre of our new regional dissonance is a giant fracture, which refracts almost every other relationship and interest Australia has.

*The antagonism between Australia and China is almost certainly the new normal in the relationship between Australia and its largest trading partner.*

The dynamics of the relationship's fracturing means that neither side is able to resile from positions and actions deemed hostile by the other. Beijing's antipathy towards Australia is likely to be deeper and more sustained than towards any other regional jurisdiction other than Taiwan. And the dynamics of opinion and politics in Australia mean that Australian policy will remain determined to demonstrate to others the dangerous and bullying nature of Chinese statecraft. Meanwhile, government and opposition seem to be preparing to insulate Australia as much as possible from the pressures and costs of enduring Chinese hostility.

The Sino-Australian rupture sends ripples out across Australia's other interests in its region. Its inevitable effect is to pull Canberra closer to China's other problematic relationships in the region: the United States, Japan and India, through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. It is hard to see the significant direct benefits of this grouping – but what will become more obvious is the turbulence it will create for Australia's access and influence. The "Quad" aligns Australia with Asia's other outsiders – each country seen as having limited influence and trust within the region's focal point, Southeast Asia. The Quad is also seen by influential voices in Southeast Asia as drawing attention and initiative away from ASEAN, hitherto regarded as central to institutional development and regional solidarity.

Australia's periodic denunciations of China's behaviour and intentions – however justified – isolates it from most of Southeast Asia, rather than drawing the region closer.

While Southeast Asian states are concerned about China's intentions and behaviour, none are prepared to join Australia in denouncing and opposing China's behaviour. Their response has been to cultivate China, along with the United States, Japan and India as a way of balancing China and maximising their own freedom of action. Any attempts to polarise the region, for or against China, are seen as unhelpful turbulence in an increasingly uncertain regional outlook. Neither are any Southeast Asian states interested in the democratic-versus-authoritarian framing that Australia, the US, Japan, India and many European states are using to admonish China.

Within Australia, China's antagonism has seen attitudes flip from "security in Asia" back to the older narrative of security from Asia (or at least its biggest country). The government and broad sectors of the economy have adopted the mantra of diversification away from reliance on China. This will have two profound implications for Australia.

*First, it represents the end of the country's complete acceptance of the neoliberal doctrine of free trade and investment towards a regime of managed trade and investment as determined by Australia's perceived security interests.*



Senator the Hon Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs

---

Second, it will impact on our future prosperity because there is no single or combination of trading partners that will replace China's complementarity or scale of demand for what Australia produces.

*Unlike during the Asia Pacific grand narrative years, when prosperity interests and security interests were believed to be mutually reinforcing, in the new era, security and prosperity will become increasingly antagonistic.*

There are other worrying signs that older attitudes are returning also. Xenophobic attitudes towards people of East Asian ethnicity are on the rise in Australia, as are the feelings of being unwelcome among those communities. The space for public discussion and debate of Australia's foreign policy has shrunk also, with those brave enough to argue for greater balance in Australia's relationship with China quickly accused of disloyalty or grubby financial motivation. A new piece of federal legislation passed quickly in December 2020 allows the Foreign Minister to alter or cancel, without explanation, any arrangement between an Australian jurisdiction or university and a foreign entity that she deems to be inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy or national interest. Fears of foreign interference are rising constantly, fanned by dark warnings from security chiefs, and met by a growing phalanx of regulations and inquiries.

Meanwhile, centrifugal tendencies are on the rise in the region itself. Southeast Asia will emerge significantly weakened from the COVID crisis. The impact of the pandemic on the most dynamic sectors of the region's economies will be profound. With the exception of Singapore, poor pandemic management has damaged the credibility of all of the region's governments. The coup in Myanmar has simultaneously foregrounded ASEAN's weaknesses. Where the last great regional crisis – the Asian Financial Crisis – galvanised the region into institution-building and greater ambitions for solidarity, COVID will likely see the region left exhausted and demoralised, with social fissures worsening, commitment to solidarity weakened, and possibly more ripe for authoritarian populism.

The region's great powers will also emerge diminished from the COVID crisis. The Trump presidency, the mishandling of the pandemic, and the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan will cast doubts on US resolve, judgement and credibility for at least a decade, if not enduringly. China's aggression towards various regional countries will create lingering wariness in the region that no amount of vaccine or infrastructure diplomacy will resolve. The impact of the pandemic on India's economy and psyche are likely to be significant. Meanwhile the rising rivalry between the US and China, and the profound technological decoupling between their economies is exerting more insistent polarising pressures on the region's other countries.



---

## THE DANGERS OF DISSONANCE

Australia's challenge beyond COVID will be to find a new narrative that aligns its national imperatives with a vision for how it relates to its region. The dangers of not finding a new narrative are several. First, there is an already apparent danger that the different elements of Australia's international relations will contradict each other in damaging ways. Trade interests are already complicating Australia's security imperatives, while development assistance is swinging disconcertingly between regions and imperatives, conferring little apparent benefit in securing Australia's enduring interests.

*Second, the absence of a unifying narrative will magnify the conflict within Australian society. Antipathies between economically-focused and security-focused sectors will increase, while the impacts of ambivalence about Australia's place in its region will continue to negatively affect the large numbers of Australians of Asian heritage.*

Third, and perhaps most worrying, the inability to develop a new Asia narrative will see Australia become more insular, less prosperous, and less influential in its region.

The dangers of dissonance within Australia are only magnified by the fracturing of Asia's own sense of solidarity. The animating purpose for our northern neighbours since the end of the Cold War has been that political, economic and strategic interests were all working towards a prosperous, stable and integrated region. There may have been disagreements about the boundaries and membership of the region, but all agreed in the belief in a single, harmonious, identifiable regionalism that would eclipse rivalries, ideological differences and economic insularity.

The teleology of development and solidarity has been sapped by cycles of political dysfunction, unresolved territorial disputes, uneven economic integration, anaemic regional institutions, and increasing ideological divisions. There is no longer a regional "project" with which Australia can integrate – instead it faces multiple discordant national agendas.

China's bid for regional leadership has been a major cause of the centrifugal forces affecting Asia. Beijing's South China Sea proposition – accede to China's hegemony and we will show you how benign it can be – has fallen flat. Southeast Asia's claimant states have neither accepted or rejected China's gambit. None agree to China's claim but none is willing to consistently oppose it either. Similarly, China's Belt and Road Initiative has failed to achieve what its enthusiasts and critics originally envisaged. For all of the billions Beijing has spent building infrastructure across Asia, it has collected precious few strong diplomatic supporters. After nearly a decade, Xi Jinping's approach to building China's influence has left it simultaneously economically pivotal and diplomatically isolated.



Neither is the faith in neoliberal development an integrating factor. Trump's America and Xi's China have demonstrated a readiness to use trade and investment for political and strategic purposes, raising real concerns about trusting the logic of the market. Free trade is yielding to managed trade, supply chain security and national interest decision making. Meanwhile the "fourth industrial revolution" is less the cause for optimism than anxiety. The United States and China have embarked on an intense technology rivalry, and will occupy mutually-exclusive technology universes in the years to come. The pressure on third countries to choose one or the other is growing, and these choices will have enduring effects on economic development and linkages into the future.



Bob Hawke AC, Former Prime Minister of Australia.

## TOWARDS NEW NARRATIVES

Finding a new narrative is more urgent than developing a new foreign policy approach to manage the major complexities in our regional environment.

*Australia's international relations have long been much more extensive than the foreign policy plied by government agencies. Our significance and impact as a society in the broader world are as much a function of our trade and investment, cultural productions, research partnerships, sporting endeavours and the achievements of the Australian diaspora as the efforts of our diplomats and soldiers.*

In short, Australia's international relations will be more impactful if they are a whole-of-nation effort. Our diplomats and soldiers are more influential when the rest of society is aspiring and achieving along parallel tracks. And a national narrative of being and becoming in the world is crucial for a whole-of-nation alignment.

Perhaps at this stage it is wise to doubt that we will find a single narrative of being and becoming in Asia – because a single "Asian" project is no longer in prospect. Understanding the "shape" of the new and diverse Asias evolving on our northern doorstep will be a crucial step, as will understanding the new imperatives of becoming within our own society and economy. Different countries and combinations of countries to our north will be relevant and important for different reasons and objectives. Engaging with multiple combinations for diverse purposes will demand powerful and distinct narratives.



---

The Australian economy will need to be reoriented after the impacts of the long China boom and the COVID lockdowns have been assessed. As China reduces its dependence on non-trusted suppliers under Xi Jinping's "twin circulation" policy and Australia seeks a diversification of its trade relationships, a new source of sustainable economic prosperity will need to be identified.

*Our reliance on exports of commodities will have to be tempered by the development of other areas of comparative advantage linking to more trusted and stable markets.*

At the same time a new formula for protecting our security, internally from foreign interference and externally from coercion will be important. Perhaps the most crucial step will be finding a framework that establishes a sense of proportion about the risks from interference and coercion—the alternative is to slide increasingly towards paranoia and insularity.

Finding a way of integrating our diplomatic and security framing with the predominant approaches of Southeast Asian states – fostering a balance among several powers rather than backing the ascendancy of one – will be crucial for Australia's ongoing influence and access into the broader region.

*Beyond our shores, Australia needs to be a vital part of seeking a new vision for comity, prosperity and stability in Asia.*

This vision cannot rely on the old logic of neoliberal regional integration: the tensions are too pronounced—the bifurcation economic and security logics are too insistent. Asia will need a narrative of a set of common preoccupations that brings its states together that are more important than the mistrust and rivalries that currently divide them.



---

*Finding new narratives also needs to acknowledge that Australia itself has changed. Our sense of being has shifted, and this will have a major impact on our urges towards becoming. Australia today is a much more culturally diverse society than ever before, and this has major implications for how it responds to the outside world.*

Our policies in response to terrorism, and now in response to China, have major implications for large numbers of Australian citizens of particular beliefs and ethnicities. At the same time, globalisation has changed the way Australians engage internationally: we are more globally mobile, aware, employed and committed. Australians also are more prosperous, educated and unequal than ever before. And arguably, the pattern of our politics has taken us away from a concern with collective welfare towards greater concern with individual or family welfare, and sensitivity to others gaining more than us.

We have shifted in our cultural referents also. The focus of our cultural productions seem to have moved from the bush to the suburbs—while their tone seems to have shifted from myth-making to a self-critical irreverence. Australian society has also lost its urgency around its former debates over national identity: multiculturalism, the republic, the flag, and reconciliation are now much further from the forefront of national discussion than at any time in the last 30 years. However if we look at what we as a society seem to value there is more continuity. Our way of life, our standard of living, is as paramount today as it was 120 years ago, if we consider the fears Australians have of unrestricted asylum seeker arrivals. Where we are evolving seems to be in our growing anxiety about the impact of development on the environment. All of these factors complicate our sense of becoming—finding a common and binding set of aspirations for society will need to resonate with these changes and continuities in our society.



---

## CONCLUSION

From where do national narratives arise? To whom or what should we look to find our new Asia narratives? The lessons of past narratives are that they do not come from a particular place. Australia, like other societies, is a community of story-tellers, searching among our traditional cultural values, emerging intellectual trends, prevailing national and international moods, and cultural innovations for stories that locate us and give us a sense of direction. The new element in our contemporary narrative landscape is new technologies of communication, which have given rise to narrowcast networks of opinion and meaning, reducing the reach and influence of traditional broadcast forms of communication.

On the other hand, Australia today has a larger and more diverse range of “narrative entrepreneurs” than in the past. The growth of universities and think tanks, consultancy firms and blogs has increased the number of voices telling stories about Australia, its region, and its national destiny.

*We all have an interest in fostering a rich, vibrant national conversation about what is important, what we should change, and how we should relate to our immediate neighbourhood.*

We also have an interest that our leaders – not just political but business, university, civil society and media leaders – are listening closely and contributing to this conversation. And that by some alchemy, as it has in the past, some animating narrative or narratives will emerge to guide Australia towards the next phase of its regional destiny. Our regional future depends on the power of our stories.



# About us

Asialink is Australia's leading centre for creative engagement with Asia. We develop insights, capabilities and connections through our programs in the Arts, Business, Diplomacy and Education.

Uniquely Australian, Asialink works with diverse communities in Australia and Asia to build a strong, shared future for all.

Established in 1990 as a joint initiative of the Australian Government's Commission for the Future and the Myer Foundation, Asialink is hosted by the University of Melbourne.

## ABOUT THE ASIALINK LEADERS PROGRAM

Finding Australia's new Asia Narrative was launched exclusively at the Asialink Leaders Summit.

With over 26 years of history, the Asialink Leaders Program is Australia's premier program for the Asia capable leaders of today and tomorrow, empowering over 950 alumni globally.

The program offers a transformational experience that will equip you with the latest insights, capabilities, and connections to position you for success with the region. Lead with impact, by navigating opportunities and risks and make better decisions for your organisation in the fast-changing Asia landscape.

For more see: <https://asialinkbusiness.com.au/training-programs/asialink-leaders-program-2022>







GET IN TOUCH WITH US

T: +61 3 8344 4800

[asialink.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:asialink.unimelb.edu.au)