



**Dunlop Medal Response**  
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Thank you for this medal. It awakens old memories.

A generation ago, I attended a ceremony in Thailand at which some of Weary Dunlop's ashes were floated down the River Kwai.

The ceremony recalled the courage of servicemen during the Pacific War.

It also reminded us how that war brought home to Australians that our destiny lay in the region.

And it symbolized our post war embrace of the region.

Remember Australia started late as a serious regional actor.

Until after the fall of Singapore, Britain was constitutionally responsible for our foreign and defence policy. And during the early post war decades many -in what was predominantly a European Australia -remained fearful of the North.

We had only the rudiments of a foreign service. When my cohort joined it in the late sixties, our bosses included people who had been present at its creation.

Moreover, unlike most comparable western democracies we and New Zealand had to engage neighbours, most of whom were in the birth throes of independence and with political, ethnic and cultural backgrounds totally different to our own.

But we adapted.

Our involvement in conflict in Asia was sometimes -as with Vietnam -mistaken. But the tragic intensity of war engendered an understanding of how our allies and enemies thought and worked.

When Britain moved its economic focus from its erstwhile empire to Europe, we developed new markets in Asia- notably Japan.

Through the Colombo Plan, we contributed to the development of our neighbours.

We became more Asia literate. Our main universities were centres of excellence on Asia. We learnt to speak Asian languages.



And crucially we dismantled the White Australia policy-opening the door to the multicultural country of today.

Those of us involved in dealing with Asia-whatever our discipline -were caught up in the zest of Australia's navigation of the currents of a complex region.

All generations lack enthusiasm for the perspectives of their predecessors. So indulge me when I suggest that over this century we have lost momentum on Asia.

We have major assets and have done some things well.

Our economic relations with North-East Asia (our recent difficulties with China aside) have been good.

Our security relationships with big countries such as Japan and India have become significant.

We have educated people from the region and beyond. The latest international student survey by IDP shows that Australia remains one of the top preferences for higher education.

More Australians than ever live and work in Asia or in Asia dependent businesses.

The size of the Indian and Chinese diasporas in particular highlights the extent of our multiculturalism -which has bolstered our understanding of and links with our neighbours.

The Apology to Indigenous Australians was welcomed in the region as another sign that the old parochial Australia had moved on.

But that earlier sense that Australia's destiny is in Asia has dissipated.

This has been in part because around the turn of the century some in our leadership feared that our geography had been allowed to overshadow our history,

-in part because in the post 9/11 paradigm we allowed our security priorities to be shaped towards the Middle East,

-and in part because our growing apprehension about China has channelled our political energy more into alliance structures- including offshoots such as the AUKUS and Five Eyes groupings-than into the patient nurturing of our regional relationships.

And our economic clout relative to that of our neighbours has declined.

The impact of the rise of China and India is self-evident.



Bear in mind also that a generation ago our GDP was slightly ahead of that of the whole of ASEAN. It is now less than half in market exchange rate terms and about a sixth in PPP terms.

Asia is leaving us behind.

If we are to keep up, business needs to do more by way of investment and executive capability,

- our schools and universities need to reinvigorate Asian studies, and
- our governments - Federal and State - must push for greater engagement. A start might be for Federal Government and Opposition to work on a bi-partisan consensus on the main pillars of foreign policy.

A final comment.

The shadow of historical attitudes on race -both on immigration policy and treatment of indigenous Australians-still hovers over us.

Particularly when you have form, episodes such as the One Nation saga or the Indian Student Crisis reverberate abroad. The colonial experience of most of our neighbours has left them neuralgic on questions of race.

Most recently, perceptions of the Voice debate and outcome are awakening old doubts about the sort of society we are. Perhaps unfair -but there you are. And while international relationships are indeed based principally on interests, empathy also counts.

We will always be a nation which will have to deal with a neighbourhood comprising cultures and systems different to our own.

In my lifetime we have come a long way. We have much to offer our neighbours. But our Asian challenge is now more pressing than for the Weary Dunlop generation.

If we are to meet this challenge, we must do better -in educating ourselves, in economic engagement and the patient work of diplomacy. We will have to run to keep up. And we must be sure that our own house is in order.

We have work to do.