Integrated Asia: Australia’s Dangerous New Strategic Geography

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The Centre of Gravity series

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Executive Summary
✧ Globalization and major power rivalry are creating a China-centric integrated Asian strategic system, drawing together the once-discrete theatres of Northeast, Southeast, South and Central Asia.
✧ China will sit at the heart of a strategic system which will have maritime and continental dimensions but it will not be able to dominate it or replicate US primacy. US influence in Asia will decline in relative terms and its ability to provide order will be constrained.
✧ Nationalist ambition among the region’s giants will make integrated Asia an unstable place where cooperation among the great powers will be much harder to achieve than in the past.
✧ Australia needs to reorient its strategic policy to reflect a more integrated Asian strategic system, one that is likely to be much less conducive to its interests than the international environment it has enjoyed over the past four decades or so.

Policy recommendation
✧ To advance its interests in integrated Asia Australia will need to have a greater strategic weight than in the past and this will need to be agile and have significant geographic reach.
✧ The institutional focus for Australian diplomacy should be on the mechanisms that reflect this larger integrated Asia, such as the East Asia Summit and the ADMM+ and not outdated bodies like APEC and the ARF. Australia should also engage with China-led mechanisms like CICA and the SCO.
✧ Particular emphasis should be put on developing a strong strategic relationship with India whose importance in integrated Asia will grow considerably. Common cause should be found with other countries that will become more marginal in integrated Asia, especially those on the continent’s periphery such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Japan.
Introduction

The Asian century has arrived. From its North Atlantic base of the past 300 years the centre of gravity in world affairs has returned home to Asia. While Asia is the geographic location of a number of very large and dynamic economies, does the term have any salience beyond a geographic short-hand for a vast and disconnected set of states and peoples? Does Asia actually make sense from a strategic and security point of view?

Historically, Asia was used by outsiders to refer to a vast area. The term comes from the West referring originally to the lands to the east of Greece. Initially, this was what we now refer to as the Middle East but as Europeans began to move eastwards it expanded from the Bosphorus to Japan. The label’s external origin implies that the region is a fiction or at least a cartographic convenience. There has been no common religion or culture, except perhaps rice as a staple food, and no common interests to create a meaningful strategic system. At best Asia has been constituted by a number of sub-regions that share a sufficient density of interactions, common interests and security concerns. ASEAN for all its shortcomings binds the countries of Southeast Asia. India lies at the heart of South Asia’s system, walled off from its giant neighbour by the Himalayas. Northeast Asia’s coherence is due to China’s importance and the twin Cold War challenges of Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula.

Does it still make sense to think of Asia as a catch all term to describe a number of discrete regions? The point of this paper is to put the case that, for the first time, Asia is becoming a coherent strategic system. Over the coming decade it will develop an integrated security complex that will be economically and strategically centered on China. But it will not be Sino-centric in the way East Asia was prior to the 19th century. It will have both maritime and continental dimensions and will be defined by a contest between major states over questions of power, as well as the rules and norms, and that contestation will shape the regional order.

Australian policy thinking has recently begun to articulate the country’s strategic geography in an Indo-Pacific context. This paper shows why Australia needs to broaden its horizon yet further. The Indo-Pacific is the maritime dimension of the integrated Asian strategic system. The emerging continental and maritime system is likely to be much less conducive to Australia’s interests than the international environment it has enjoyed over the past four decades or so, and needs to become the country’s principal strategic frame of reference.

For the first time, Asia is becoming a coherent strategic system.

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Asia: From Convenient Fiction to Strategic System

Before the turn of the millennium, Asia did not exist as a meaningful geopolitical or geoeconomic entity. It lacked the centripetal forces of shared interests, culture and basic interactions that create strategically coherent regions.

For many years after World War II, economically speaking, Asia’s countries had little to do with one another. They were engaged either in autarchic economic development programs and thus had few investment or trading ties with others in the region. Or, like Japan and latterly Thailand, Malaysia and Taiwan, they opted for export focused industrialisation. But even these more outward looking countries did not trade or invest much in one another, rather they competed for inward capital investment and outbound export markets.³

Similarly, Asian states and societies had no pan-regional sense of security challenges and risks. The various theatres of Northeast, Southeast and South Asia each had an intense interdependence of security threats, some of which exploded into high intensity warfare. But these did not cohere into a larger entity. There was no Asian strategic imagination.

Nor did the region have an institutional structure that reflected nascent linkages or fostered greater levels of integration. After 1967 Southeast Asia had ASEAN but until the late 1990s it did not reach out beyond its immediate locale. There was no pan-Asian architecture or effective regionalism.⁴

Yet despite its scale and lack of pan-regional connectivity in the first decades of the twenty-first century Asia has begun to cohere. And over the coming decades it will become the most important geostrategic theatre in world politics.

China’s turn from an autarchic and isolated country to the world’s largest economy (measured in PPP terms) is one of the great achievements in human history.⁵ Never before have so many people had their life chances improved so quickly. But little noticed has been the way in which China’s embrace of globalization has transformed not only its own economic prospects but has fundamentally changed the pattern of Asia’s economic relations and created a Sino-centric production system.
The transformation of global production processes was crucial to Chinese prosperity. In the years following World War II multinational firms began to produce goods outside their home countries to take advantage of locational benefits; reducing the costs of getting products to market or getting behind tariff walls. By the 1990s the production of goods became a process focused on the management of component suppliers who provided the constituent elements, such as microprocessors or gearboxes, of the final product such as a computer or a car. Those components were sourced from wherever in the world provided the best price-quality combination, assembled into finished goods and then sent on to final consumption markets. This allowed China to realize the potential of its huge cheap labour force in ways that would have been very difficult in the past. By only needing to assemble and not fully manufacture finished goods, the country could rapidly bring subsistence agricultural labour into urban production. Without breaking up the productive process in this way China would not have been able to achieve such rapid growth.

This process of disaggregated production driven by globalization turned Asia from a series of countries and sub-regions that largely competed with one another for inbound capital and outbound goods into an integrated economic entity bound together by trade and investment flows.

There was no Asian strategic imagination.

Asia is not only a large supply chain for goods consumed by North American and Europeans, it is increasingly a final consumption market as well. It is anticipated that Asia will account for nearly 40% of global consumption by 2035. Components and finished goods are moving between Asian states. An Asian economy including intra-industry trade, trade in finished goods, commodities and flows of capital is already here and it is centred on China. The density of these networks is going to increase steadily over the coming decades especially as outbound Chinese investment grows in value, sophistication and diversity of sector.

The second factor binding the region together is the behaviour and outlook of the region’s two great powers: China and India. Great powers are those large and powerful states whose interests and actions shape the international system much more than the system shapes them. Asia’s two giants now have pan-regional interests which they are increasingly seeking to advance. Crucially, they both think of themselves as having systemic weight and act in ways that are binding the states and societies of Asia together.
China is at the forefront of this effort due to its place at the centre of regional production networks as well as its wealth and ambition. Iron ore, oil, coal and gas from Africa, the Middle East, India and Australia traverse the Indian and Pacific Oceans literally fuelling the country’s development. Inputs into goods being processed in China, move across the Pacific littoral into the mega ports of Guangzhou, Ningbo, Tianjin and Dalian among others. Finished goods flow out across the globe. It is these trade routes, bringing energy and basic goods from the wider world and among the nodes of regional production chains, which are the maritime sinews of the new Asia.

China’s geography has long given it a central place in Asia. But when this political cartography is paired with economic vitality, strategic ambition and policy entrepreneurship, it has a gravitational effect on the strategic setting. China has led the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in an effort to drive infrastructure investment to advance its broader economic ambitions and shape the regional international economic environment. It is the key force in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and it is championing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as an initiative to foster trade links among ASEAN and its six partner countries – China, South Korea, Japan, Australia, India and New Zealand. It has also articulated a vision for a distinctly Asian conception of regional security architecture through the Conference on Integration and Confidence Building Measures in Asia process (CICA).

The most important of these is the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) the centrepiece of what some have come to describe as China’s pivot West.9 The BRI is intended to foster China’s economic links, build influence and soft-power, and underpin its geopolitical ambitions.10 It is a vast and nebulous initiative but one which speaks to the scale of China’s international ambition. The BRI is likely to be a very significant new force creating a China-centric Asian strategic system.

Equally, India has begun to link itself to the larger Asian region first through its ‘Look East’ and more recently its ‘Act East’ policies.11 It has joined the East Asia Summit, wants to participate in the APEC process and is increasingly present in the region’s international political calculus. India and Japan have developed a remarkably wide ranging security partnership reflecting shared concerns about China and a sense of vulnerability in the current period of strategic flux. India’s economic growth – it is the fastest growing large economy in the world – its demographic profile and the ambition of its leadership are turning this once insular

India has begun to link itself to the larger Asian region.
country into an Asian power of substance. India thinks of itself as a leading regional power whose future is tied to the commodity flows, production chains and security interdependencies of the region. These activities are now linking not only the maritime Indian Ocean region but also the continental aspects of the subcontinent to the larger Asian system. And as the country becomes more economically prosperous and bound into this larger system its influence and impact will grow.

Over the past two decades or so Asia has made up for its lack of institutional structures to promote cooperation and advance common interests. ASEAN not only expanded to include all ten Southeast Asian countries by the late 1990s, it developed an array of outward looking mechanisms, the ARF, the ADMM+, ASEM and the EAS. Each of these endeavours is shaped by the recognition that the most important forces shaping the grouping’s fate, both that of the institution and that of the individual states, come from outside Southeast Asia. The institutional structure of those mechanisms reflects the coming into being of the larger Asian strategic complex. In short, Asia now enjoys an institutional infrastructure that both reflects the forces bringing Asia together and helps further bind the states into a dynamic strategic system.

**Integrated Asia’s Strategic Landscape**

An Asia that is an increasingly coherent strategic system, forged by globalization, centred on China and drawing together the region’s major and minor powers is remaking the world and will transform Australia’s strategic environment.

A vital feature of this new Asian strategic geography is that it entails not only a maritime but also a continental dimension. For some time scholars and policy-makers have paid attention variously to Pacific Asia, the Asia-Pacific and, more recently, the Indo-Pacific. This was prompted by the growing importance of Asia’s Pacific littoral and its sea lanes of communication for both economic and strategic interest. But there are important continental facets of the region that deserve recognition and not only the long-running border disputes between China and India. China’s vast western borders have been thought of as a security challenge due to their porosity and the restive population in Xinjiang.
and Tibet. In the Belt and Road Initiative China seeks to turn this space to its advantage. By creating multiple ways in which energy, commodities and other goods can enter and leave the country it will also reduce its vulnerability to maritime insecurities, whether strategic or economic. This will in turn reduce the ability of the US to influence or contain China and provide the country with a platform to enhance its influence and strategic reach. It is also developing a pragmatic relationship with Russia driven by a desire to diversify its energy sources and advance its geopolitical interests where they align. By focusing only on the maritime aspects of Asia, however conceptualized, we risk overlooking the expansive nature of integrated Asia, its strategic depth and the advantages China’s wealth and position will allow it to achieve.

But it is not only due to its pivot West that China’s influence in Asia will continue to grow over the coming decades. With virtually all the countries of Asia China enjoys an asymmetric economic relationship. This ties the interests of the region more tightly to China’s and will consequently change the way many regional powers think about their international policy. Over time this advantage is likely to grow as not only will China benefit from trade imbalances and current account surpluses, its outbound investment as well as development projects, particularly in its southern and western peripheries will further strengthen its hand. And while China is unlikely to project power as the US did in the region -- it has neither the will nor capacity to forward project force or enter into extensive alliance commitments -- it is beginning to provide public goods from which many will benefit. If China achieves its aim of improving infrastructure in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean Region, drives greater Eurasian connectivity and overcomes its Malacca dilemma others will derive significant benefits.

While China does not always manage its public diplomacy adroitly these developments will provide direct material advantage and significantly enhance its political capital as well. Even under the more pessimistic assessments of the country’s likely economic trajectory, China’s share of global GDP will continue to grow. Its growing economic weight, its location at the geostrategic and geoeconomic heart of integrated Asia will give China the opportunity to realize its ambition to become the most important power in the region and one that shapes the terms of the regional order. The timeframe over which this will occur is hard to ascertain with great precision, however, 10 to 15 years is a plausible estimate given the economic growth trajectories of key regional powers.

America’s share of global GDP has been declining for several decades and will continue to do so. More importantly its capacity to shape integrated Asia, politically, economically and strategically will decline because for most in the region their economic and security interests will no longer align in a manner as

China is unlikely to project power as the US did.
supportive of American power as in the past. Equally, the US will have a weaker capacity to shape the region due to the dynamics of great power competition. It is not clear at all that the underlying values that it has sought to advance, and which have been at the heart of its international engagement since 1945, are especially prized in many parts of the region.

Most disconcertingly, the growing lack of confidence about the global applicability of US values and an unwillingness to spend the necessary money, energy and take risks to advance and protect those values is a long-term trend in the United States. Obama’s foreign policy was about managing decline. As far as we can tell Trump intends to finish the job. And those leaders that retain a commitment to the old exceptional vision of America’s role in the world are finding it increasingly difficult to convince Americans of the worth of that endeavour. As yet the Trump administration has given no indication that it will engage with Asia in the manner that will be necessary for the US to retain its influence let alone strengthen it in this new landscape.

Integrated Asia’s strategic environment will be shaped by the interplay of a small number of very large powers and a larger number of lesser powers. Due to the constraints of scale as well as their economic interdependence, none of Asia’s powers will be able to become hegemonic nor will they produce some new version of US primacy. This will create a situation not entirely dissimilar to Europe in the late 18th and 19th century, dominated by the interactions of a small number of dominant powers. As a result, the extent to which these great powers cooperate or compete with one another will be the most important feature of the strategic environment.

North and Southeast Asia have enjoyed four decades of peace and prosperity made possible by a stable balance of power and an acceptance of the underlying purpose of a regional international order organized around American primacy. There are a range of ways in which integrated Asia might find an equilibrium of that kind. It could entail 19th century-style spheres of influence, a region wide balance or even some kind of great power condominium. Even though contestation and rivalry is likely to be an important feature of integrated Asia’s geopolitics there is a reasonable chance that some kind of power balance could be established, particularly given the catalytic effect of nuclear weapons. What is much less clear is whether the necessary equilibrium of ideas can be achieved.
Stable international orders require a consensus around their functional purpose. That is a broad based agreement about the ends to which international order is put. The ability of Asia’s states to forge a consensus about the purpose of order is likely to be constrained. There is little appetite for an expansive liberal vision of order of the kind that the US and its allies have championed in the past. And it is not clear what other common ground might be achieved beyond a thinly functional purpose to promote commerce and reduce the prospects of conflict. That may be enough but there is equally a strong chance that differences of views about this purpose may lead to a much more unstable international environment.

A central reason for this is the ongoing salience of nationalism and nationalist ambition in integrated Asia. Notwithstanding the hopes of liberal cosmopolitans, Asia’s growing prosperity has not weakened the grip of this protean and powerful social force, indeed it has been strengthened by this new prosperity. Across Asia, and in particular in its major powers, Japan, India, China and the US, nationalism is on the rise. It is at its most visible in the legitimation strategies of the Communist Party of China but is crucial also to the success of Abe’s LDP and Modi’s BJP. In the US Donald Trump secured the White House on the basis of a populist American nationalism encapsulated in his ‘America First’ campaign slogan. The nationalist resurgence and broader civilizational ambitions of the region’s powerful states are likely to drive a more competitive and combustible pattern of relations in integrated Asia and make establishing a durable order much harder to achieve. As Asia’s major powers become tied to one another the political costs of being beholden to others rise ever higher. This will make finding the necessary compromises to manage order in integrated Asia politically very difficult.

The likelihood is that integrated Asia will be a region in which great power collaboration will be difficult to achieve. The combination of strengthening the rising powers’ hands while animating their nationalist ambition and in particular increasing China’s influence and strategic depth will make competition more likely than cooperation.
Implications for Australia

2017 marks the 75th anniversary of Australia becoming a properly sovereign power in international affairs. For much of that time, especially since the 1970s, the commonwealth has enjoyed a period of remarkable stability, but that broader environment is changing fundamentally. The creation of an Asian strategic region centred on but not dominated by China will usher in a much more challenging international environment for Australia to navigate.

A key purpose of Australian international policy is to ensure that the country benefits from a stable balance of power. US primacy and its acceptance by virtually all in the region meant that Australia has found this purpose relatively straightforward diplomatically and politically. In the coming decade things will become much more difficult. Integrated Asia will reduce US relative power, so hanging on American coat-tails may not be enough either to contribute to a stable balance or benefit from its circumstances.

Australia may well be required to act and do more to sustain the strategic status quo. We cannot be confident that the US will sustain the same level of will and commitment to the region over the longer run. As a result Australia needs to recognize the need to have a strategic weight that is significant, agile, and with considerable geographic reach so that it can navigate a more fluid strategic landscape. A world in which US influence declines and competition among multiple major powers increases is a very different place from the region we have known. Australia is going to have to learn to live with a greater degree of strategic uncertainty than it has in the past.

Australia has long supported multilateralism and has been a keen participant in regional institutions. This activism should continue but given scarce bureaucratic resources and the array of institutional efforts particular attention should be paid to institutions whose membership reflects integrated Asia. In particular, Australia should work with others in the region to further institutionalise the East Asia Summit, whose membership, remit and geographic expanse (as well as ASEAN centrality) make it the most appropriate institutional means to shape integrated Asia’s regional setting. Equally, the ADMM+, with its parallel membership to the EAS and its focus on concrete security collaboration among the 16 members should be a priority. Unless new resources can be brought to bear on multilateral engagement then this focus should come at the expense of APEC and the ARF whose membership, work and frameworks reflect a now outdated regional conceptualization. Equally, Australia should consider engaging more directly with the China-led regional institutions which will take on a more prominent role, such as CICA and the SCO. If the Belt and Road Initiative develops an institutional architecture Australia should rapidly engage it and not dither as it did in relation to the AIIB.
Australia needs to prepare for a contested regional order shaped by major power rivalry centred around a China that has a much higher level of influence and greater strategic depth than hitherto. As a means of coping with this more complex setting, Australia should begin to build effective coalitions with groups of states that are likely to become more peripheral in this new strategic setting.

The most obvious starting point are the liberally inclined countries on the continent’s peripheries, Indonesia, the Philippines and Japan. The aim should be to work collaboratively to advocate and contribute to forging an equilibrium of power and ideas in this new setting. Canberra will have added incentive to build stronger and more effective relations with India, Pakistan and the key Central Asian states with a particular emphasis on India. This is not just a call to make more out of our shared values, diaspora links and common interests. India will be a crucial power in integrated Asia, one of broadly liberal disposition with whom common cause can be made to help advance the country’s interests in a stable and favourable balance of power. As India becomes more influential, Australia’s relative importance to India will shrink further so it is imperative that efforts to advance those ties increase rapidly.

How a country thinks about its place in the world matters not only to the prosaic questions of its sense of identity and purpose but directly to the directions of its strategic policy, the allocation of its resources and questions of force acquisition, doctrine and collaboration. Over recent years Australian policy has increasingly put the Indo-Pacific construct at the heart of its strategic thinking. What follows from this paper is the need to increase that aperture yet further and to recognize that the Indo-Pacific is the maritime dimension of integrated Asia and to incorporate this larger strategic system into its thinking and planning.

Since setting out on the global stage after World War II, Australia has only known one world, the liberal international order established and maintained by the US. That order, which rests on US primacy, both economic and geopolitical, is coming to an end. This does not mean that China will by default become Asia’s new dominant power nor does it imply that war or some other systemic shock is inevitable. Rather that the decay of the old order, presaged by the coalescing of Asia’s geopolitical and geoeconomic system, will prompt contestation for the shape and function of a new order. It is unlikely that any country will have the wherewithal to become Asia’s new primary power. For Australia to thrive in this environment will require the country to adopt an entrepreneurial outlook and a clear-eyed sense of what kind of region it wants and what price it is prepared to pay to contribute to its realization.

Australia has faced many significant challenges since 1942: Korea, Vietnam and the many financial crises. But it is entering a much more complex world, entirely different from that which has come before. The first step is to recognize the broad reaching scope of the strategic geography Australia inhabits and how contested Integrated Asia will become.

This does not mean that China will become Asia’s new dominant power.
Policy recommendation

➢ To advance its interests in integrated Asia Australia will need to have a greater strategic weight than in the past and this will need to be agile and have significant geographic reach.

➢ The institutional focus for Australian diplomacy should be on the mechanisms that reflect this larger integrated Asia, such as the East Asia Summit and the ADMM+ and not outdated bodies like APEC and the ARF. Australia should also engage with China-led mechanisms like CICA and the SCO.

➢ Particular emphasis should be put on developing a strong strategic relationship with India whose importance in integrated Asia will grow considerably. Common cause should be found with other countries that will become more marginal in integrated Asia, especially those on the continent’s periphery such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Japan.

Endnotes

8 Nick Bisley, Great Powers and the Changing International Order (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 2012).
9 Originally dubbed the ‘One Belt One Road’ program, Beijing and observers have taken to refer to this program as the Belt and Road Initiative, sometimes shortened to the BRI. OBOR evidently sounded a touch too imperialistic and lack flexibility.
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