

AUSTRALIA AND INDO-CHINA:

A CASE STUDY IN THE EVOLUTION OF AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The 1989 Beanland Lecture, delivered by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, at the Footscray Institute of Technology, Melbourne, 24 August 1989.

The story of Australia's relations with Indo-China over the post-War period is also, in many important ways, the story of Australian foreign policy. We can see in the evolution of our Indo-China policy nearly all the themes, mistakes, aspirations and shifts which characterise the broader narrative of Australia's still-evolving sense of our place in the international scheme of things.

The Indo-China story makes an excellent case study in the evolution of Australian foreign policy as a whole in that it focuses sharply on the really central elements of our foreign policy: concerns about threats to the Australian continent; the place of Asia in our national consciousness; and our continuing efforts to reconcile history and tradition with geography and security. Moreover, it is a case study which is squarely relevant to current concerns: holding lessons not just about the past, but also about the way in which we now conduct our foreign policy, our capacity for independent judgments, and the rigour with which we need to go about the task of identifying our foreign policy interests and how they can best be advanced (not least in the context of those Indo-China policy questions - in particular Cambodia - which have not yet been finally resolved).

Since becoming Foreign Minister I have sought to spell out, in two substantial speeches now consolidated in a new Fabian Pamphlet, what I have described as the dynamics of foreign policy decision making (the identification of national interests, and the assessment of available opportunities for pursuing them), and how those dynamics operate in the real world when it comes to setting Australian foreign policy priorities. Tonight - to round out those earlier papers - I want to show in some detail how the concepts I have previously developed apply to one specific, vitally important foreign policy area. A conceptual framework is not much use to anyone, after all, unless it helps to elucidate the past, clarify problems of the present and future, or (preferably) do both.

It is particularly appropriate that my focus tonight should be on Indo-China, because the Footscray Institute of Technology has over the years taken a close interest in that region. Not only is FIT located in an area where many Vietnamese Australians have made their home, and has more than 400 such students on its campus, but I understand that it was the

first tertiary institution outside Indo-China itself to offer courses on Vietnamese language and culture.

It is useful to look at Australian policy towards Indo-China as constituting three distinct phases.

First, there was the period before the Vietnam War, during which Indo-China hardly impinged on Australian foreign policy thinking. Secondly, there was the period of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, when Indo-China did impinge on our thinking for what clearly, in retrospect, were all the wrong reasons. Thirdly, there has been the period since the end of the Vietnam War, which has itself embraced a whole continuum of activity: the ground breaking policy of the Whitlam Government; the essential continuity of that policy under Fraser; the imaginative exploratory forays of the early years of the Hawke Government; and the perhaps more measured but nonetheless still intensely involved present policy approach which we have built on that earlier groundwork.

In discussing all three phases, I think it is particularly helpful to focus on how Australian Governments at the time have in fact perceived our national interests, and to look in each case at how those perceptions (or misperceptions) were in turn translated, for better or worse, into action or inaction, behaviour or misbehaviour.

Before the Vietnam War

This might be called the period of blissful ignorance. Of all the South East Asian nations that came to independence after the Second World War, the three countries of Indo-China - Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos - have been the least understood by Australia.

With the other South East Asian nations, Australia at least had links of some sort, whether born of proximity, common security, commerce or an imperial connection. Malaysia, Singapore and Burma shared a British imperial background with Australia. In the case of Singapore and Malaysia, Australia continued to have defence links. Australia had a security link with two other South East Asian nations - the Philippines and Thailand - through SEATO. Indonesia was, of course, the South East Asian country which most exercised Australian foreign policy thinking in this period. There undoubtedly were - and still are - gaps in our understanding of Indonesia, but from the end of the second World War, Indonesia was a major issue in Australian politics and in the fore-front of Australia's foreign policy concerns.

Even by the standards of the decade or so after the end of the War when Australia still saw itself as a European outsider in an Asian region, our understanding of Indo-China was, by contrast, very limited. No doubt this was partly because Indo-China had been colonised by

the French. French colonisation created a cultural and institutional gap, as well as political distance. It put Indo-China outside the British orbit, and since - unlike New Caledonia in the South Pacific - its location did not make it of primary security interest, there was no pressing reason for Australia to pay Indo-China much attention. Things may have been different if a commercial opportunity had been perceived but, if Australian Governments thought at all about this aspect, they obviously concluded that the prospects were limited.

It was also the case that Indo-China did not much impinge on Australia's consciousness because North Vietnam was a communist state, and therefore automatically viewed with suspicion. North Vietnam was the only South East Asian country in which power was handed over, however tempestuously, by the departing colonial authorities to a communist government after a military defeat. In all other cases, power was handed over to the non-communist nationalists (Sukarno, Lee Kuan Yew, Tunku Abdul Rahman) and the communists had to try and seize power from them.

By the mid 1950s, the plummeting temperature of the Cold War had brought Indo-China closer to the centre of Australian security thinking, even if its history and culture remained on the periphery of our thoughts. Australia was not a direct participant in the Geneva Conference of 1954 which divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. But equally, Australia did not question the division, which was a strategic expedient, crafted by Eden and others, defying both history and nationalism. According to the politics of anti-colonial nationalism, Vietnam was one nation. According to history, it was three not two: Vietnam under French administration was divided into Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina, this trilateral division corresponding with slight linguistic differences and political regionalisms which had emerged as Vietnamese settlement gradually moved southward over several centuries.

Of the period before the Vietnam War it can be said, then, that Australia did not really have an Indo-China policy, did not really understand what was happening on the ground in Indo-China, and did not see Australian interests directly or independently engaged in that part of the world. In one sense this last assessment excused the absence of a policy: why have a policy or seek to gain a proper understanding of an area where national interests were not directly engaged? It might be said that Australia did have interests, which were ignored, but the practical point remains the same: interests that are not perceived to be interests do not - and in this case did not - get into the policy-making process.

When Australia did move to the assessment that Indo-China was of direct strategic concern - which in fact we did some time before Australian combat troops were despatched to Vietnam in 1965 - it was an assessment made without an adequate understanding of Vietnamese history. Indeed it was an assessment which in many important respects defied Vietnamese history. The assumption, for instance, that North Vietnam was a puppet of China and serving Chinese interests ignored the long history of

Vietnam's resentment of Chinese political hegemony. It ignored the fact that Chinese domination of Vietnam had been a vital ingredient in the complex amalgam of forces which nourished Vietnamese nationalism.

Australia's relative ignorance of Indo-China in the period before the Vietnam War made it almost certain that we would simply be incapable of unravelling the nationalist thread from the communist thread in our assessment of the dynamics of the conflict in Vietnam. The combination of imperfect knowledge and the great simplifications which were a feature of the Cold War was a recipe for bad policy decisions. It meant that we underestimated the nationalist impulses behind Ho Chi Minh's policy and political philosophy.

A better understanding of Vietnam and its history would have led us to the view that, while undoubtedly a man deeply committed to the cause of international communism, Ho was not a Chinese puppet playing out some scripted drama for the extension of Chinese communism through all of South East Asia and beyond. Had we known more of Vietnam we might have seen more grey and less red. It was a costly ignorance.

The Vietnam War

From the early 1950s onwards, Australia's view of Vietnam gradually changed from one of neglect to a belief that Vietnam was what lay between Australia and the "downward thrust" of an expansionist communist China. The reasons lay not so much with what was happening on the ground in Vietnam - internal developments were almost incidental to the policy positions adopted by Australia. They lay with the politics of the Cold War, Australia's changing views of regional security, and the long search by Australia for reassurance that a great and powerful friend could be relied on to protect Australia should it ever face invasion. To this list could be added another factor: the demands and dynamics of Australian domestic politics of the period, one when the politics of anti-communism were also the politics of electoral victory.

By the 1950s, Australian defence planners were already regarding Indo-China as important to Australian security. The 1952 Strategic Basis paper noted that Indo-China was the "key to the defence of South East Asia". "While Indo-China is held", the paper argued, "defence in depth is provided for the Australia-New Zealand main support area". It is easy enough to see in this analysis the basis of the forward defence policy on which Australian involvement in the Vietnam War was later to be justified. But it is also worth noting that, notwithstanding the views of defence planners in the early 1950s, there was little enthusiasm on the part of the Australian Government of the day to see Western intervention in Vietnam. In 1954, at a time when the US administration was considering what needed to be done to contain communism in South East Asia, Foreign Minister Casey advised the Australian Cabinet that Australia should use its influence to restrain the

United States from entering upon active military intervention in Indo-China without adequate thought of its military and political aims.

By the 1960s, however, Casey's caution had given way to the crusading view that Vietnam was the place where the West, and most particularly the United States, should take a stand against expansionist Chinese communism. President Eisenhower was the one who had originally painted Vietnam as the first of a series of precariously poised dominoes. It was an image, and an analysis, which the Australian Government enthusiastically embraced. As Prime Minister Menzies put it in April 1965 when announcing to Parliament the sending of Australian troops to Vietnam:

The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

(I would note in passing here that while Menzies's rhetoric was certainly full blown, it was not well grounded. As Peter Edwards, who is working on the official history of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, has noted, Menzies's statement to Parliament, drafted in the Department of External Affairs, would appear to contradict the 1964 Strategic Basis paper which expected China to act cautiously for the next 10 years.)

It is sometimes said that Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War flowed, not from any considered assessment of Australian national interests, but from a mindless following of the United States. I would not, however, put it this way. The failure of Australian policy on the Vietnam War was not, primarily, a failure to consider Australia's interests. Australian interests were considered, but on the basis of assumptions which were inherently flawed. It was in the end not a failure of national self-assertion, but a failure of analysis.

There were three essential justifications for Australia's involvement, though not all of them were stated with equal frankness at the time. First, as Menzies had told Parliament, it was to stop the advance of expansionist Chinese communism before it reached Australia. In its essentials this justification was a combination of the domino theory and the strategy of forward defence. If South Vietnam, the first domino, fell, it would only be a matter of time before the other dominoes in South East Asia collapsed, thereby precipitating the fall of the ultimate domino - Australia. Australia could not afford to wait until it was directly threatened. Its security interests demanded that the battle against communism be fought several dominoes away, and preferably as far away as possible from the Australian mainland.

Against the background of the Korean War, Chinese support for various insurgency groups in South East Asia, the experience of Confrontation and the challenge of the

insurgency in Malaya, concern about the intentions of China had a certain surface plausibility when measured against the fears of the time. This was a period when many feared that communism was on the march in South East Asia, and that Thailand, in particular, faced a critical domestic challenge from communist insurgents. It should be recalled that the US and Australian involvement in Vietnam had the support - in some instances active, in others tacit - of most of the South East Asian governments of the day. These governments saw the war as a means of keeping communism in North Vietnam in check, thereby creating a breathing space during which they could tackle their own problems of underdevelopment and internal communist insurgencies. But even allowing for all of this, and leaving to one side the Australian domestic audience that the Menzies Government undoubtedly had in mind, it is a reasonable judgment that Menzies's enthusiasm for Australian involvement had more to do with keeping the United States engaged in South East Asia than with keeping China out.

The second essential reason for Australian involvement in the war was the calculation that if Australia showed beyond reasonable doubt that it was willing to share the US burden in South East Asia, then such good deeds would not be forgotten by the United States in the event that Australia faced a threat: in the event, that is, that Menzies's imaginary threats ever came to pass. Involvement in Vietnam, especially at a time when other US allies were reluctant to contribute, was seen as a means of locking in US support for the defence of Australia. As the Australian Embassy in Washington at the time put it in a cable to Canberra:

Our objective should be to achieve such an habitual closeness of relations with the US and sense of mutual alliance that in our time of need, after we have shown all reasonable restraint and good sense, the US would have little option but to respond as we would want.

The third justification was closely linked to the second. It was to help keep the US actively engaged in the security of South East Asia. By lending support to the US effort in Vietnam Australia was helping to ensure the presence of US forces in the region, thereby reinforcing the region's defences against communism. Battalions on the ground were considered much more reassuring than untested commitments, however sincere.

None of these assessments of national interest, either separately or together, stand up to scrutiny. The downward thrust of China misread Vietnamese nationalism, not to mention the Sino-Soviet split. Forward defence was a flawed policy which was both tested and defeated by the Vietnam War. It was directed at the defence of Australia, but its burden could not be borne by Australia. It depended ultimately on the presence of US forces on the ground to act as a shield for Australian forces.

The idea that Australia could somehow buy a US security guarantee for itself by providing modest military support for the US effort in Vietnam was naive. One does not need the

brutal realism of a Metternich to see that it is folly actually to believe that Australia could manoeuvre the United States into a position where it would have no alternative but to respond "as we would want". The Australian desire to see the US actively engaged in the security of South East Asia was more understandable. Here the problem lay not in the objective but in a failure to appreciate that the US strategy in Vietnam would not succeed. Australia failed to see what even Anthony Eden perceived as far back as the early 1950s: that Vietnam was "the wrong war against the wrong man in the wrong place."

After the Vietnam War

The election of the Whitlam Government in 1972 in effect broke the mould of Australia's policy towards Vietnam, although it should also be acknowledged that by the time Whitlam entered Government, not least as a result of the ALP's forceful campaigning on the issue from 1966 on, Australian domestic opinion, like US public opinion, had become deeply sceptical about the outcome of the military campaign in Vietnam.

Whitlam was able to start with a relatively clean slate. More than any of its predecessors, the Whitlam Government sought to look at Australia's relations with Indo-China in terms of what sort of relationship Australia should seek to develop with these nations. The regional security dimension of Indo-China policy was not ignored, but military dominance of it was corrected. An attempt was made to upgrade bilateral relations and also to think about where Indo-China should fit into a post-colonial South East Asia. It was a reorientation consistent with the driving instincts of Whitlam's foreign policy: a wish to project a more independent image of Australia, a sharper appreciation of national interest, a deep commitment to international co-operation and multilateral processes, a sympathy for the developing nations, and a determination to intensify Australia's regional foreign policy focus.

The Whitlam Government really only had time to launch this process, leaving it to subsequent governments, Labor and conservative, to add flesh to the bones. Like so much of the Whitlam Government's achievement in foreign policy, its contribution lay more in providing a new beginning than in formulating detailed policies. But what Whitlam was unable to do in his short period in office, he more than made up for in giving expression to national aspirations. In this sense his policies on Indo-China, as on so many other international issues, established an enduring foundation for both the style and substance of current Australian foreign policy.

The proof that Whitlam's new beginning did reshape the basic mould of Australian foreign policy in the region is suggested by the extent to which the Fraser Government maintained the Whitlam Government's approach to Indo-China. The Fraser period saw a continuation of the emphasis on developing bilateral relations, and in viewing relations with the states of Indo-China as part of the broader framework of Australia's regional relations. There

were, of course, limits to how far the Fraser Government was able or willing to go in developing relations with Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Within the Government's South East Asia policy, Indo-China understandably took a back seat to relations with the ASEAN states. Initially a modest bilateral aid program to Vietnam was maintained but overall Indo-China was not a high priority of Fraser's foreign policy.

When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, ostensibly to save the Cambodian people from the genocidal regime of Pol Pot, but in manifest breach of the most fundamental of all international relations principles, that of non-intervention, it became politically impossible for any Australian Government to pursue a normal, let alone an expanding, relationship with Vietnam. In January 1979, with the support of the then Labor Opposition, the Fraser Government cancelled Australia's aid program to Vietnam and bilateral relations were essentially put on ice.

Another inhibiting factor in the development of Australia's relations with Indo-China at this time was the fact that the United States was in its post-Vietnam trauma and wanted nothing to do with the reconstruction of Vietnam. The invasion of Cambodia only confirmed the United States in its view that Vietnam ought to be isolated. The United States took its place in the queue of those countries which thought Vietnam should be taught a lesson.

After the invasion of Cambodia, Australia's basic position on the political and strategic issues raised by that aggression was essentially to be supportive of ASEAN policy. The one significant exception occurred in 1980 when, after two years of growing domestic pressure, the Fraser Government decided to break ranks with ASEAN and "de-recognise" the ousted Khmer Rouge, or DK, Government, whose cause ASEAN had been sponsoring in the UN. This decision, while it generated quite a strong negative reaction from ASEAN at the time (especially from Singapore), did not reflect any assessment by Australia that on this issue our national interest differed from those of the ASEAN states. Rather it reflected the very strong domestic opinion in the Australian community that it was immoral for Australia formally to recognise the legal successor to the odious Pol Pot regime.

The Hawke Government's Policy - the Early Years

The Hawke Government came to power in 1983 with a commitment - born of the very strong views in the Labor Party on Australia's role in the Vietnam War - to play both a more independent and a more active role in a Cambodian settlement, and to develop the bilateral relationship with Vietnam, including the restoration of Australian aid to Vietnam.

The Labor Party's platform on aid soon ran up against the firm opposition of both the United States and ASEAN, who saw it as running counter to their strategy of isolating Vietnam over its invasion of Cambodia. It quickly became evident to the Australian

Government that, if Australian aid to Vietnam were to be resumed, it would have to be within the context of, and not in advance of, a comprehensive Cambodian settlement. This added impetus to Australia's efforts on Cambodia and was a significant factor in the priority and effort that Bill Hayden put into the Cambodia issue.

The early years of the Hawke Government's Indo-China policy consisted of exploring various options for a Cambodian settlement. This involved the commencement of a serious, evolving process of trying to determine a suitable Australian role, one that matched our national interests with a realistic appreciation of our capacity to influence the outcome. The long term concerns of Australian foreign policy remained, but these were pursued with a fresh set of perceptions and attitudes. These included a stronger assertion of Australia's regional interests and our right to present and pursue our own distinctive policies there and elsewhere. Other assumptions behind the Indo-China policy of the Hawke Government were that a military solution to the Cambodia problem was neither possible nor desirable: that failure to resolve the problem held the potential for increasing regional instability, particularly in the context of superpower confrontation, regional polarisation, and even a regional arms race.

The ASEAN reaction to this more independent Australian approach was very critical. The first significant manifestation of the new approach was the Australian decision to withdraw from co-sponsorship, in favour merely of support, of the annual ASEAN Cambodia resolution in the UNGA, on the basis, among other things, that that resolution was too one-sidedly critical of Vietnam, and did not sufficiently acknowledge the enormity of the human rights desecration that had occurred in Cambodia under Pol Pot. ASEAN feared that Australia's actions, coming as they did on top of the earlier decision not to recognise the DK's (and its coalition successor the CGDK's) entitlement to the Cambodian UN seat, would disrupt the fairly solid phalanx of Western support for ASEAN and lead to an unacceptable erosion of such support.

In some ASEAN circles, there was probably also a feeling that Australia was being used by Vietnam in ways which could work to ASEAN's long term disadvantage. Certainly the call by Mr Hayden in 1986 for Pol Pot and his senior associates to be tried for war crimes before an international tribunal (a call which has continued to rank us very highly in the affections of Vietnam, Laos and the PRK ever since), was not greeted with equal enthusiasm by ASEAN. It took some time - probably not until Australia resumed its co-sponsorship of the ASEAN resolution in 1988 - before ASEAN accepted that Australia did not seek to erode the ASEAN position on Cambodia, that our involvement was legitimate, and that we were acting on assessments independently arrived at.

The achievement of the Hayden years, notwithstanding the problems it provoked with ASEAN, was to have Australia accepted by the international community, including ASEAN, as a responsible and knowledgeable voice on the issue of a Cambodian settlement. Our views at this time were not necessarily welcomed by all the parties, but

they were given weight and taken into account. Australia had shown that good relations with ASEAN can survive differences of views on an important issue. Australia did not, at the end of the day, achieve any major breakthrough or substantive shift in the position of the majors. This was hardly surprising given that Australia is not, and cannot be in this context, a central player. But during the early years of the Hawke Government Australia did make a very real contribution to the quality and level of debate on Cambodia, and to imparting a sense of urgency to the effort to find a solution.

Current Government Policy

The early Hawke Government policy on Indo-China flowed from an implicit understanding of the importance to Australia of Indo-China and South East Asia generally. There was no pressing need to make this understanding explicit, because the prevailing conditions at the time - namely, stalemate on a settlement - did not require us to think through, in any systematic way, the scope of Australian interests involved, our capacity to pursue these interests, or the nature of the constraints on the exercise of Australian influence.

Today, the scene looks quite different. The pace of movement toward a settlement has appreciably quickened. Vietnam, its economy in acute disrepair, is looking for a way out of Cambodia and into Western aid, trade and investment. There has been the rapprochement between the Soviet Union and China, with both now willing to press for, or at least accommodate, a settlement. ASEAN is no longer pre-occupied with a holding operation, and at least some of its members have begun to focus on what type of relationship they wish to develop with Indo-China in the long term. Ideas of wider South-East Asian co-operation - involving Indo-China and possibly Burma as well as the ASEAN countries - have been revived. Indonesia has worked assiduously to bring all the Cambodian factional players to the conference table with its Jakarta Informal Meeting initiative. And the long awaited International Conference - bringing together all the major players, internal, regional and external - is now underway in Paris.

There has been a corresponding need for Australian policy to evolve to reflect these changing circumstances. Our policy has gone through a process of elaboration and refinement. The starting point in all of this has been - as it always must be in foreign policy making - an assessment of the Australian national interests at stake in Indo-China, and what it is realistically possible for us to do in pursuing them.

Before looking at the nature of Australian interests in Indo-China, as we currently perceive them, it is important to emphasise that the current Australian policy toward Indo-China cannot be seen in isolation. It is very much part of the Hawke Government's wider regional agenda; the priority we have accorded to our relations with South East Asia and the South Pacific, and our efforts to broaden those relations across the full spectrum of

security, commercial, aid, and humanitarian interests. Our Indo-China policy involves only one set of squares in the chequer-board of Australia's regional foreign policy.

It is a chequer-board in which the squares are not only contiguous but linked. Our policy on Indo-China cannot be pursued independently from our relations with ASEAN. This is not to say that ASEAN has some sort of veto over how we develop our Indo-China relations; it simply reflects the fact that the ASEAN squares are a very important part of the overall chequer-board. We seek to maintain a close and constructive relationship with ASEAN and, as evidenced by the way in which we have been pursuing our regional economic co-operation initiative, ASEAN views on regional issues are given very close consideration by us.

I have referred to aspects of Australia's past policy on Indo-China with which ASEAN has disagreed - such as the de-recognition of the DK Government in 1980, and our decision in 1983 not to co-sponsor the annual ASEAN resolution on Cambodia at the UN. I think it is fair to say that these disagreements are now behind us. Not only did we resume co-sponsorship of the resolution last year - when language was incorporated in it for the first time acknowledging the "universally condemned policies and practices" of the Khmer Rouge - but Australia's position on a Cambodian settlement is now both well understood and generally well received in ASEAN. Those ASEAN members who have tended to take a more hard-line position on Cambodia may still have differences with us (and indeed with some of their fellow ASEAN partners) on particular points of emphasis, but Australia is today seen to be working very much towards the same objectives as ASEAN, and in a way that does not undercut ASEAN efforts.

An explicitly common position, involving commitment to a comprehensive settlement of both the external and internal aspects of the Cambodian problem, was forged at the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference at Brunei in early July, and nearly all the participating Ministers in the first round of the Paris Conference at the end of July - certainly those from ASEAN as well as Australia - articulated essentially the same package of elements necessary for that comprehensive settlement, namely:

- . the ultimate achievement of a sovereign, independent, neutral and non-aligned Cambodia, backed by international guarantees;
- . the establishment of an interim administration to manage the transition to a fully elected government of Cambodia;
- . exclusion from the interim administration of Pol Pot and his close associates, but with the Khmer Rouge rank and file given a chance to lay down their arms and to become productive members of the Cambodian polity;

- . the permanent withdrawal from Cambodia of Vietnamese troops, and the end to outside intervention of all kinds in the affairs of Cambodia;
- . the establishment of an international control mechanism (ICM) preferably under United Nations authority, to monitor the settlement, and in particular supervise the conduct of elections;
- . the resettlement of displaced persons; and
- . international co-ordination of reconstruction assistance.

What are the Australian interests which have led us to define the desirable outcome of the Cambodian conflict in these terms? Here, as elsewhere, they are a familiar mix of geo-political or strategic interests, economic and trade interests, and what I like to describe as the national interest in being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen.

A clear and comprehensive elaboration of Australia's strategic interests is set out in the 1987 Defence White Paper which, as I have remarked on several occasions, constituted a watershed not only in defence policy but also in Australian foreign policy. The White Paper noted that the unresolved question of the political future of Cambodia was a cause of uncertainty in the region, and that major changes in regional relationships, or internal instability in individual countries in South East Asia, could introduce or expand uncertainties in Australia's strategic prospects, even though developments may not be directly threatening to Australia. In short, it made it clear that it was in Australia's security interest to see a comprehensive settlement in Cambodia.

National security is, of course, ultimately best served not just through formal defence preparedness, both internally and through appropriate alliances, but by achieving a stable and attractive political and economic environment: a harmonious set of individual relationships in a harmonious larger regional context. From this geo-political perspective, healing the long running sore that Cambodia has represented will be an important contributor to the achievement of ongoing harmony in Australia's relationships with all its regional neighbours.

As to our economic and trade interests, it is the case that Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are not presently major partners of Australia. But, particularly in Vietnam, there are commercial opportunities for Australia which a Cambodian settlement would facilitate. The Vietnamese economy faces enormous difficulties in virtually all major sectors, and Vietnam is acutely well aware that without large scale Western trade, aid and investment, its prospects of reconstruction and rehabilitation are bleak, and that this in turn will simply not happen unless the Cambodia issue is resolved.

An expanding, reforming Vietnamese economy is good for Australian business. Turning the Indo-Chinese battlefield into a market place is as good for the Australian economy as it is for Thailand's, whose Prime Minister coined the phrase. I do not wish to exaggerate the potential of the Vietnamese market, nor to understate the keen competition which Australia would face in trying to break into it. But at this moment in our history, when our economic future depends so largely on becoming an outward-looking, internationally competitive export economy, Australia would be negligent to turn its back on the commercial opportunities presented by Vietnam and (albeit to a much lesser extent) by Laos and Cambodia.

As to good international citizenship, we do have a direct humanitarian interest in seeing peace in Cambodia and a more open, democratic and tolerant system in Vietnam. We do so primarily because that is what the people of Cambodia and Vietnam want and deserve. But as a country with a major program for the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees, we also have a special interest in helping to address the problems that have been at the core of the outflow from Indo-China.

Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, Australia has accepted nearly 120,000 Indo-Chinese refugees - on a per capita basis the highest ratio of all resettlement countries. Australia has also accepted another 13,600 persons direct from Vietnam under our bilateral Vietnam Migration Program. We have offered resettlement to so many because we believe we have a moral and a humanitarian responsibility to help those fleeing persecution and in need of assistance. These new settlers in Australia have already made - and will continue to make - a major economic and social contribution to Australia, but their arrival has not been cost free. We estimated recently that the cost to the Australian community over the years since 1975 has in fact been some \$700 million (measured in present day terms) for initial transport and settlement expenses alone, quite apart from the additional food and cash aid contributions we have made to Indo-Chinese refugee programs.

Peace in Cambodia, and the opening up of the Vietnamese economy, are the only enduring means of ending the flow of refugees from Indo-China. We owe it to these innocent victims of war and conflict - to the many displaced Cambodians who are virtually held captive in camps which use them as cannon fodder, to a generation of children who have known no peace in their time - and to ourselves, to find a lasting solution in Cambodia.

Defining the Australian interests which would be served by a Cambodian settlement is one thing. Influencing an outcome which advances these interests is here, as always, quite another. To be realistic we must concede that our influence is limited and that Australia is not one of the major players on Cambodia. This, however, does not mean that Australia can aspire to be nothing more than an interested bystander. In multilateral efforts of the sort involved in a Cambodian settlement there is a role for Australia. We are respected for our general knowledge of the region, the active attempts we have made in the past to

break the log jam in Cambodia (or at least move it a little further downstream), for the constructive and thoughtful role we have played through our aid program, and above all for the disproportionately large burden we have already shouldered in relation to Indo-Chinese refugees.

All this has been accepted by the leading players, as evidenced by the invitation to Australia to participate in the 18-nation Paris Conference, and in particular by our invitation to co-chair, with Japan, one of the four working committees established by that Conference, that dealing with reconstruction and resettlement.

Australia stands ready to do its fair share in making a comprehensive settlement work. We have been participating in the recent short-term UN reconnaissance mission to determine just what is logistically necessary to constitute an International Control Mechanism, to monitor the Vietnamese withdrawal and to perform a number of settlement-related supervisory functions. We have made it clear that Australia is very willing to consider, if asked to do so, participation in such an ICM on the basis that its structure and functions are clearly and carefully defined in the context of a comprehensive and credible settlement to which all relevant parties are committed. No more than anyone else will we send our troops into a shooting war, or a situation that is inherently fragile without any of the internal dynamics that might give a settlement a hope of durability. If Australian troops are sent to Cambodia under the auspices of an ICM it will be to observe a negotiated peace, not to settle a war. Two decades ago the role we played in Indo-China was a less than happy, destructive one; this time round we want any contribution we might make to be wholly peaceful and constructive.

The Lessons of Vietnam

Having surveyed the history of Australian policy towards Indo-China in the post-War period, and having charted the changing perceptions of national interest reflected in those policies, it is appropriate to step back and ask what are the lessons to be learned. Not surprisingly, most of the lessons relate to the period of our involvement in the Vietnam War and come under the category of learning from our mistakes. My intention here is not to use the wisdom of hindsight to attach blame in any partisan way. I acknowledge as a matter of historical methodology that, as one historian has put it:

History is lived forwards but is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only.

Before discussing the specific foreign policy lessons of Vietnam, there is an important general point to be made. The history of Australia's involvement in Indo-China underlines the fact that, contrary to some views on international relations, national interests do not exist a priori. The different elements that make up the national interest, and our capacity to

advance it, are not necessarily self-evident at all. They require definition, elaboration and thinking through.

The first lesson of Vietnam is the importance of rigorous analysis in the definition of national interests and in the formulation of strategies to advance those interests. This analysis must not only be based on judgments independently arrived at, but must also reflect a proper understanding of the various influences at work. If we had understood better the well-springs of Vietnamese nationalism; if we had been more honest in our assessment of a monolithic Chinese inspired communist movement heading for Australia; and if we had paid more attention to what was happening on the ground in South Vietnam in terms of popular support for successive ineffective governments there, our approach to the war in Vietnam should have been quite different. As one of the historians of Australian involvement put it:

The Australian army combat force which entered the [Vietnam] conflict from 1965 did not simply face in South Vietnam an external aggressor without an internal base of support. Rather, it faced a political movement directed from the north but conducting a struggle in South Vietnam, the origins of which extended back to the anti-colonial struggle against the French and the impetus of which, to a large extent, derived from the errors of the RVN and from social inequalities in South Vietnam.

If the Australian system of foreign policy formulation had been working effectively, it would have addressed such crucial issues.

The second lesson of Vietnam relates to the way in which we view the South East Asian region (using that expression in its widest sense, to include Indo-China). Australian involvement in the Vietnam War bears witness to that pungent observation of MacMahon Ball that, historically, fear has been the tap-root of Australia's interest in Asia. It was an expression of that psychology of exile, that sense of vulnerability of a European outpost isolated by the tyranny of distance from its cultural roots, inhabiting a rich but sparsely populated continent on the edge of a pressing Asian land mass. What subsequent Australian Governments learnt from the war was that Australia has no alternative but to come to grips with its neighbouring region, and to try and define a positive relationship with it. It must be a relationship based on an acceptance of South East Asia, not as a buffer zone between us and invasion, but as an area where Australia must be constructively engaged and which presents opportunities of many kinds for Australians. South East Asia is an area most certainly of security significance to Australia, but one in which Australia must develop relationships of many facets: political, cultural, commercial, social and individual.

Thirdly, and relatedly, it teaches us something about the relationship between foreign policy and defence policy and the way in which we define national security. It highlights

the crucial link between economic security and strategic security. A link which post-War Australian governments understood, as shown in the motivation of the Colombo Plan and Australian development assistance programs in South East Asia, but which was not given sufficient weight in our assessments of whether to become involved in the Vietnam War.

Our engagement in Vietnam represented a subordination of foreign policy to defence. Foreign policy was driven by a presumed sense of defence vulnerability which was perhaps mistaken in a strategic sense, but also was pursued without due regard for the type of long-term relationship we wished to build up with the nations of South East Asia. It was a case of over-valuing the role that great and powerful friends, no matter how valuable and powerful, can play in protecting and promoting Australian interests. It was a case, too, of seeking purely military solutions - and quick ones - to problems which required long-term political management.

There are, to be sure, moments of real threat when defence considerations properly loom large. But short of this - and since the Second World War we have always been short of it, and look like remaining so - there are dangers in adopting a narrow view of national security and in having foreign policy determined by defence requirements. The war in Vietnam teaches us that an effective national policy requires both a credible defence policy and a constructive foreign policy. It teaches us that a sound external policy is one based on an integrated approach to security: an approach which recognises the value of diplomacy in helping to advance national security, which involves a prudent mix of defence preparedness and diplomatic reassurance, and which also understands that economic security is the bed-rock of national stability.

Finally, the experience of Vietnam holds a lesson in the value of bipartisanship in foreign policy. The end of the Vietnam War was the beginning of a new bipartisanship in Australian foreign policy which had its ups and downs but still survives. A foreign policy without debate or differences of view is ultimately a sterile policy, but there is also a real sense in which bipartisanship is a measure of an effective foreign policy. Unreality is a great spur to partisanship. Realism tends to encourage bipartisanship. We can take some comfort in the fact that since Vietnam there has been broad agreement in Australia on many of the fundamentals of foreign policy, and especially on the priority Australia should attach to relations within our neighbouring regions. The reality of our place in the region has become a commonplace for us all.

For a large part of our history, foreign policy was not seen as crucial to the welfare of Australians. Today, that has changed. It has never been more important to the future of our nation and the prosperity of our community that we have in place an effective and adaptable foreign policy: a policy understood by and supported by the community, and a policy grounded in a realism which knows our limitations but which is also uplifted by a vision capable of grasping real opportunities for peace and prosperity. Learning the lessons of Vietnam has been an essential task in the progress towards that goal.

* * * *