

Recognising the Asian Century at last

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There's something extraordinary about the government's new Australia in the Asian Century white paper, released on Sunday.

It is not so much the fact that the report contains some bold and ambitious aspirations for changing Australia to cope with the challenges and reap the opportunities of a vibrant and prosperous Asia.

Rather what is extraordinary is the fact that it has taken this long for an Australian government even to attempt a comprehensive and publicly-articulated plan for charting the nation's future in the world's most powerful, wealthy and dynamic region.

After all, there has been an on-again, off-again national conversation about Australia's future in Asia since at least the late 1980s. And as for the Asian century, it is 12 years old and counting.

The paper properly urges Australia to get its own house in order as a first step towards flourishing in the Asian era, including through a competitive and diversified economy, education, innovation, social cohesion, infrastructure, environmental management, security and diplomacy.

The bad news is that there is little evidence so far of a serious or sustained government commitment to funding some these principal goals. Australia's aggregate diplomatic footprint and funding have been in retreat for years, failing to find proven and sustained champions in any Prime Minister or Foreign Minister since Paul Keating and Gareth Evans in the early 1990s.

The new white paper deploys terms like 'when circumstances allow' and that most awful bureaucratic tautology 'over time' (as if some things do not occur over time) to caveat its timid undertakings on opening new diplomatic posts and reversing the nation's foreign affairs funding decline.

Moreover, parts of the white paper have been worded in such a way as to diminish the prospects of active bipartisan endorsement – even though this should be an essential ingredient to any enduring national strategy. For instance, the text identifies Australia's successful Asian engagement overwhelmingly with many of the values and domestic policies of the Labor party. The implication is that if one is sceptical about particular domestic policies, one is somehow against the universal good of engagement with Asia.

The other chief problem with the white paper is about realism and balance. The document says much about how to seize the economic opportunities of Asia. But it ventures less about how to manage what could become great strategic uncertainty, with the risk of things all going horribly wrong if Asia's rising mega-states China and India experience domestic instability or armed confrontation with others.

Some of its strategic assessments are sound and well put. It acknowledges that Asia faces many alternative futures and not solely a rosy vision of the growing wealth, satisfaction, consumption, fulfillment and political stability of the largest middle class populations in human history.

Yet at times its strategic assessments pull their punches beyond what diplomatic tact might warrant. For instance, its description of tensions in the South China Sea implies that these are more a continuation of what has gone before than a worsening situation which could lead to new kinds of major-power confrontation.

And of course massive and fast-emerging middle classes can be incubators for nationalism, resource-grasping rivalries and destabilising phases of political transition as well as for peace, goodwill and rationality.

Still, the report is to be commended for its many sensible aspirations and what it terms 'pathways' to getting there.

It rightly emphasises China, India, Japan, Indonesia and South Korea as Australia's constellation of key Asian partners. The continued indispensable role of the United States as a force for stability in Indo-Pacific Asia is noted, though perhaps less starkly than it could have been. All the same, with this white paper an Australian Government has confirmed that it does not see the Asian century as solely China's century.

The paper is right to point to the goal of ensuring that all Australian schools offer Asian languages. The fine print, however, is that this outcome will need to be negotiated with the state governments. And critics are already noting the fact that government support for Asian languages has been declining for years.

An intriguing idea promoted by the new paper is to set standards and quotas for Australia's business leaders and senior bureaucrats to become Asia-literate. It would have been nice to see something similar required of parliamentarians – for instance, requiring them to focus their taxpayer-funded travel on Asia.

The white paper rightly says that adapting Australia to the Asian century – economically, strategically and at the level of society – will be the work of a generation. The problem is, the clock has been ticking for years.

The Howard, Rudd and Gillard governments – and their oppositions – all share blame for the country's too-often delayed, uncoordinated and underfunded responses to a changing Asia, even while each can claim credit for elements of the new paper's strategy.

There is little acknowledgement that Australia simply will not be able to hold its own in a fast-changing Asia without greater investment in less fashionable instruments of policy like its diplomatic network and defence force. The nation's military faces currently relative decline in its budget, to the lowest proportion of GDP since the 1930s.

To have an overwhelmingly positive impact, the Asian century white paper needs to serve as a rallying point for Australians who care about the nation's engagement with its region. But for their part those constituencies need to be forthright in their responses, and to use the document's stated goals as a set of benchmarks for holding this government – and subsequent governments – to account.

So the real test begins now. Whether we applauded or dreaded its vision of a strong Australian military, the Rudd Government's 2009 Defence White Paper turned out to be a troubling example of a government speaking loudly but, in the end, carrying a small stick – the very opposite of Teddy Roosevelt's celebrated definition of what makes for effective diplomacy. The nation's credibility in Asia will not benefit from another big-talking government report if in a few years it turns out to have been a substitute for action.

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