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Australia's Communications Role In The Asia-Pacific

By

Anthony Stevenson
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Australia's communications role in the Asia-Pacific*

Tony Stevenson**

This paper describes the role of Australia in economic cooperation and telecommunications in Asia-Pacific, particularly Asia. Australia's economic imperative focusses on Northeast Asia while lining up markets for telecommunications in the poorer nations of Southeast Asia. A new role is advocated for Australia to take the APEC forum it instigated beyond the purpose of economic cooperation directly into the cultural and human realm. Australia is challenged to use the new communications technologies to facilitate an active, shared learning process to move Asia-Pacific into a new global order. A case is put for research on the use and impacts of the new telecommunications technologies in the service of humankind.

In the remainder of the decade leading to the 21st century Australia has some hard decisions to make about its internal and external affairs. Whatever it does, there is a new recognition in Australia that its future is intimately bound to that of Asia.

Australia is now in the painful process of deciding how to restructure the Australian economy to make it less dependent on the primary and extractive industries, and more competitive in all industry sectors. It is also considering how best to downgrade its traditional western orientation in favour of establishing new relationships with its Asian neighbours.

Within this framework, the Australian Government is currently in the midst of a political debate over how to restructure its transport and communications industries. At risk, according to certain parties, is the opportunity for Australia to claim a position in the growing market for telecommunications services.

The Australian Minister for Transport and Communications, Kim Beazley, has put to his Government a submission to make the Australian telecommunications industry more competitive both domestically and internationally.

He has made it clear that Australia must stake out a serious position in the growing international market for telecommunications services. He has said the Asian market alone is estimated to be worth some 40 million US dollars over the next four years¹.


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Australia's interests in Asia

Australia's official interest in Asia has been facilitated by the publication last year of a report commissioned by the Prime Minister to look at Australia's relationship with Asia. Ross Garnaut of the Australian National University studied the implications for Australia in the economic and political ascendancy of East Asia, particularly the Northeast: Japan, China (with Taiwan and Hong Kong) and Korea.

Garnaut concluded that it was now a time of great opportunity for Australia, with a chance to grasp the prosperity, self-confidence and self-reliance available in an interdependent world. From its federation in 1901 till the 1970s, Australia had built walls of protection against the challenges of the outside world to find it had protected itself against the recognition and use of the opportunities which lay outside. Although the tide turned in the 1980s, he said Australia still carries the dead weight of its protectionist path.

The Northeast Asian economies, Garnaut concluded, are more closely complementary to Australia in their resource endowments and the composition of their trade than any other economies on earth. In terms of Asian relations, Australia's nearness, complementarity, migration and investment places it in more intimate contact with people from Northeast Asia than any other country with European origins and traditions. As a result, Australians need to understand Northeast Asian social, economic and political institutions and languages.

Garnaut advocated that Australia, as a 'middle power', use its substantial but limited weight to develop its relationship with Northeast Asia. He also advocated non-discriminatory immigration, accelerating the abolition of trade restrictions and continued liberal, non-discriminatory policies for investment in Australia.

In virtual agreement with Garnaut, Peter Drysdale has concluded that, despite the revolution in the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union, there is little doubt that Australia's own economic success is dependent on using opportunities associated with economic growth in East Asia. Relations with East Asia are more important to Australia than with any other region.

This year, Australia's relationship with its biggest trading partner, Japan, was enhanced with an agreement between the two countries to build in Australia a city of the future, called a multifunction polis, in a joint venture intended to involve the public and private sectors of both countries.

Economic cooperation

Even before the Garnaut report, Australia had set in train a process for economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. In January 1989, Australia's Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, proposed that a meeting of high-level decision makers, preferably at ministerial level, be convened to consider a range of economic issues facing Asia-Pacific. A conference in Canberra in November
1989 was chaired by Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Gareth Evans, and attended by 28 ministers representing 12 economies. Participants agreed on the value of future policy-oriented consultations within the framework of Australia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and agreed to basic principles which are summarised in the following:

- Sustaining the region's growth and development;
- Strengthening an open multilateral trading system directed towards forming a regional trading block;
- Recognising the region's diversity during non-formal consultations where dialogue and consensus have equal respect for all views;
- Focusing on economic matters rather than politics or security to advance common interests and foster constructive interdependence by encouraging the flow of goods, services, capital and technology;
- Complementing and drawing on existing regional organisations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (PECC); and
- Assessing participation on the basis of economic linkages with the region, extending participation by consensus.

APEC is seen as an Asia-Pacific equivalent to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) without the same bureaucratic structure.

APEC has established a working group on telecommunications. Its first meeting in Singapore in July this year agreed to compile information on telecommunications development activities underway in APEC countries and develop training in telecommunications organisations. It will explore ways of facilitating data flows among APEC countries and the establishment of teleports to serve the regional community. Involvement has been recommended in future activities by private sector interests.

As well as APEC, Australia maintains liaison programs with other forums in Asia-Pacific through its Department of Transport and Communications, headed by Beazley. Australia is a founding member of the Asia-Pacific Telecommunity (APT), a member of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the ASEAN-Australia forum at which telecommunications was included on the agenda last year for the first time. Australia and New Zealand almost entirely fund the Forum Telecommunications Program designed to promote and assist with the development of effective telecommunications facilities, equipment, services and human resources to serve the Pacific Island communities and the region as a whole.
Australia's Asian market

In more commercial terms, a keen interest in Asia and the Pacific, particularly Asia, has been shown by Australia's three government-owned carriers, all with a monopoly over their allotted activities: Australian Telecommunications Corporation (Telecom Australia), which handles terrestrial, domestic traffic and operates Australia's public switched network; Overseas Telecommunications Commission of Australia (OTC) which handles traffic in and out of Australia; and AUSSAT Pty Limited (Aussat) which handles domestic satellite transmissions and provides a domestic service in New Zealand.

It is these three, along with railway and airline systems, which are currently at the heart of top level decision-making in Australia.

The Australian Government has announced plans to amalgamate Telecom and OTC into one government-owned carrier and privatise Aussat to provide a substantially foreign-owned competitor. Beazley claims that ending Telecom's monopoly will create 'an extremely competitive' telecommunications industry in Australia which would become a world leader.

Telecom and OTC, in particular, have already begun separate programs for the transfer of technology and management to Asian countries, often working through joint ventures.

Telecom Australia's wholly-owned international subsidiary, Telecom Australia (International) Ltd (TAI), reports an active presence in 30 countries since formed in 1986. It recently won what it claims to be the world's largest telecommunications service and maintenance contract, worth about US$70 million, in Saudi Arabia.

In Asia, TAI is spending about US$2.5 million upgrading transmission and switching networks in Laos and has smaller contracts in India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.

TAI is a partner with the Japanese companies Fujitsu and Mitsui in the Toyo Menka consortium which is reported to be front runner to win about one third of a US$6 million-plus contract to install 3 million phones in Bangkok, Thailand, in the next five years. TAI and Fujitsu have a joint venture in Australia manufacturing switchboard equipment similar to that needed to establish the Bangkok network.

Other foreign equipment manufacturers have manufacturing facilities in Australia. Thus the Australian Trade Commission is actively promoting Australia's ability to serve the international market, not just for services, but for equipment as well.

Beazley's predecessor as Communications Minister, Ros Kelly, said earlier this year that the international involvement of TAI and OTC provide the slip-stream effect for the private sector to
increase the export of telecommunications goods and services. OTC, through its subsidiary OTC International (OTCI), has participated in joint ventures and has carried out consultancies and training programs in over 40 countries. It is the sixth largest investor in INTELSAT and the third largest investor in submarine cable systems.

This month, OTCI won a 10-year contract worth more than US$200 million to help the Directorate General of Posts and Telecommunications (DGPT) in Vietnam with the development and management of its international telecommunications network. OTCI has already built and commissioned satellite earth station facilities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Additionally, OTCI is: helping develop the telecommunications network in Cambodia; working with the Malaysia carrier, Syarsrikat Telekom Malaysia Berhad (STM) to upgrade management of its international business; and providing, as a major shareholder in Samart Telecoms, Thailand, network engineering, network operations and marketing. It has built a satellite earth station with Lao Post and Telecommunications Department (EPTL) in Laos and has an INTELSAT contract for tracking, telemetry, command and monitoring of satellites in the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions.

Australia: on the edge of Asia

Australia's current commitment to cooperating in the economic development of Asia, at least East Asia and the wider region surrounding it, justifies discussing its role at this seminar. Australia enjoys a unique position in the Western Pacific which forms the basis of some researchable issues I will raise.

It has a gross national product per capita of US$12,390 which, while not as high as that of Japan, is higher than that of most other Asian countries. (The average GNP per capita in Asia is just US$410, a mere 0.0331 percent that of Australia's). Its population density of two people per square kilometre compares with Indonesia (90), China (112), India (330) and Singapore (4215), and the Asian average of 135.

Australia is a middle-ranking power whose threat of economic dominance is not the same as that of the United States or Japan. As we shall see, it lives in a vacuum defined by its relative population density -- something which threatens certain Australians -- at the same time as it enjoys a relatively better developed telecommunications system than most of its Asian neighbours. The following statistics tell part of that story.

There are more than 150 Asians for every Australian, but when it comes to access by telecommunications, there is a striking reversal. The World Bank estimated that in 1988 there was one telephone for every two Australians compared with one telephone for every 147 Chinese, 189 Indians, 226 Indonesians, and 880 Nepalese.
Australia is also the major English-speaking country in the Western Pacific and enjoys a high literacy rate thanks to its universal access to education.

But, of course, Australian culture is not Asian. The proportion of Asians in Australia population continues to rise with a recent influx of people from Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, adding to a Chinese-Australian population established last century before the white Australia policy (there are nearly three quarters of a million people living in Australia who were born in Asia).

Where do Australia's responsibilities lie?
Given the scenario above, Australia's economic policy concentration is on Northeast Asia -- the relatively better developed countries of Asia. Yet its commercial enterprises, Telecom and OTC, have in their sights the telecommunications export markets of Southeast Asia and China (Telecom, at least, is actively seeking business here), the relatively less well developed parts of East Asia. The Indian subcontinent, one of the world's most populous areas, receives even less attention in terms of either government policy or market potential.

Northeast Asia is important to Australia. But one cannot help feeling that more attention needs to be given to the developing nations, which are closer Australian neighbours than the countries of Northeast Asia. And I would like to see more evidence of Australia's involvement in the cultural and human considerations of the developing nations in particular.

To give credit, Australia did remain an active member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) when the USA and Britain withdrew. It supports the International Program for the Development of Communications (IPDC), among others, mainly in the South Pacific nations, through training programs and other aid for broadcasting and publishing.

I am one Australian who hopes that Australia, despite its small population, but with a significant, emerging telecommunications system, will not stand guilty of imposing its cultural values on its less well developed neighbours. Australia seeks some power in telecommunications, having put forward the idea of forming, with Southeast Asian partners, a South Pacific communications hub. But it will not, at least in the foreseeable future, rise to any position of dominance near that which is held by the United States and Japan which control the cross-Pacific super-highway by sheer volume of their information traffic.

I would prefer Australia to concentrate on its self-professed mediating role in the Asia-Pacific through APEC. While economics is the present focus of discussions, I hope that Australia will see the merit in also facilitating, more directly, cooperation on cultural and human development. This is not to impose its culture but to encourage a sharing of ideas and desirable futures among a rich diversity of cultures to bring creative thinking to
bear on the world's pressing problems.

Facilitating cooperation with telecommunications

Thus, there needs to be research on the use of advanced telecommunications in the role of facilitating cultural and social cooperation between nations and regions.

Elsewhere, I have called for research to develop groupware teleconferencing networks to facilitate active learning processes among people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

In the event such an interaction is ever introduced through, say, APEC to enhance interpersonal communication between formal face-to-face meetings, it still would be restricted to an elite group of political leaders. It would exclude participation from the rest of the people, those most likely affected by their leaders' decisions.

APEC's telecommunications project does embrace information technology, but I have found no evidence that energy will be spent in the near future to study how people give meaning to the information transmitted and the manner in which they use it -- or need it. Present work in most forums seems to be concerned with building an infrastructure and training people to develop, operate and maintain it. The focus is on the structures rather than any synthesis of social, cultural and technical factors.

Technology has given us some new means of putting people together. Yet relatively little research is being done to test its use for a more participatory, anticipatory form of democracy. If only the people in the social superstructures retain the technology for their special use, it will not help address the world's most serious problems of poverty, hunger and alienation.

Nor will it, without facilitating some cooperative learning process, help address the serious problems of environmental degradation and its repair.

The mass media, particularly television, has begun changing awareness, at least in industrialised countries, of the hazards of fouling our own nest. Yet research I am conducting among farmers in North Queensland, shows that active learning situations are more likely to change the way they treat their own land than, perhaps, all the television programs in the world. We need to go beyond the useful analysis of networks in studies of the diffusion of innovations, which tends to analyse rather than point the way to strategies for unlearning harmful habits and relearning alternative ways of caring for the land.

Elsewhere, I have argued that changing the communication is less likely to have people learn to accept responsibility for their own learning, than changing the social structures and learning processes themselves.
Research gaps
I am advocating that in considering the research gaps in mass communication in Asia-Pacific we focus some more attention on the learning environment, in addition to the more traditional research on the content and delivery of messages and meaning in the more established means of mass communication, such as broadcasting and publishing.

Another fertile area for research would involve determining what proportion of diplomatic and other government-to-government exchange in forums such as APEC involves anything beyond trade, finance and other economic topics. If we must have elite networks, can we build a case for networks facilitating intellectual exchange; for collaborating on the envisioning of desirable futures; for growing beyond the concept of the nation state and the striving for a modern industrial society?

Taichi Sakaiya has advocated to his Japanese compatriots that it is time to overhaul the society they have so laboriously built up since World War II to find its place in a new global order.

We need to bring together the rich array of methodologies available to communication scholars in the Asia-Pacific region, to address the issues that will truly help develop a better sense of humanity and cultural cooperation in the so-called information age.

This means rejecting any imperial claims for the superiority of any single methodology over any other. Certainly one of the methodologies, or modes of engaging other people in the world we all constitute, is that proposed by Gareth Morgan: conversation.

Let us talk with each other some more!

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