

THE ASIAN CENTURY: an Australian-Asian Perspective

Augusto Verzosa, 19/11/2012

Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the Asian Century – its opportunities and challenges for Australia. It is based on the direct experience of an Asian Australian who spent 45 years of his life in Asia and subsequently migrated to and lived in Australia for the last 8 years.

Geography 101

It is not surprising that Australia is finally seeing the criticality of Asia to its future. Asia is the region where Australia resides. Southeast and south Asia, because of geographical proximity, have been naturally the earlier pre-historic partners of Australia, as opposed to Europe, Africa, and the Americas in terms of population cross-migration, cultural patterns and osmosis, and trade. What is surprising is that this criticality has only been recently formally acknowledged. This is probably because the entry of the British Empire and successive early migrations from Europe established a semi-European heritage and society in this region, much like in the Americas. This has been in many ways enriching, and will be a lasting legacy. However, the strength of this legacy could only be sustained through continuing heavy investment of resources from the British Empire and Europe in order to maintain the supply chain of culture, trade, and talent. With the balance of wealth and opportunities shifting to Asia in the last decade and in this new century, the distance has become a big cost factor in sustaining this chain. Thus, Australia has now recognized the need to look closer to prosper in this new century.

Asians Looking at Australia From the Outside

How do Asians see Australia from the outside? Many Asians see Australia as the far outpost of the Western world. It is seen in many ways, among which are:

- 1) The last British colony in Asia
- 2) The new America
- 3) The local self-appointed sheriff of the U.S. and the U.K. in Asia
- 4) The new land of hope where West and East can finally live in harmony
- 5) The last land of hope for a sustainable environment

Australia evokes mixed emotions among Asians looking in from the outside. There is the respect for a stable, democracy that young Asians yearn for. There is also dislike

for Australia's outspoken criticism of Asian governments and societies by the same young Asians. For many Asians, Australia personifies a desire to migrate to a land of economic promise. Yet, there is also fear of racial discrimination upon landing.

Asians Looking at Australia from the Inside

For an Asian migrant, during the first few years of migration from Asia, Australia looks and feels like everything you hoped for. There is decent work for the hardworking Asian migrant. Everyone gets to eat the same food as everyone else. There is space everywhere – giving you the sweet feeling of freedom. You finally get to see wildlife thriving in your urban neighbourhood. There are few lines and when there are, Australians line up in an orderly fashion. You not just dream of but actually are able to buy a car and a house in a few years if you work hard. You have no fear of persecution if you stand up for your rights. Elections are clean and fast. And, finally, you find it hard to believe that you are not only allowed to but are actually encouraged to strike a healthy balance between work and your family life.

After the first few years, things change a little. The good things are still there but now the difficult stuff settles in. You sometimes experience discrimination in a subtle way – in competing for a job, in trying to get a promotion, while waiting to be attended at a hospital - the “Asian glass ceiling”. You get shouted at for a minor traffic violation, as opposed to other folks who get tender advice. A referee picks on your kid in a sporting event and when you complain, you are told to “tell your kid that life is inherently not fair”. And of course, you begin to realize that the hard, physical labour of household chores is harder each year as you grow older, and that you have no extended family to share it as you used to in Asia.

But then, on the balance of it all, it is a better life here than where you came from. There is a better future for your kids (which is one of the biggest reasons you migrated in the first place), you see that your taxes go to the right places, and you have a country that you can help shape through hard work and participation in the social and political process.

How can Australia get the best out of the Asian Century?

I always tell my children, that now that we are living in Australia but have the benefit of having lived in Asia previously, we should marry the best of our Asian heritage and experience with the best of our newly-learned Australian values and opportunities. That way, we simultaneously contribute to and benefit from Australia as good and progressive citizens should. And I firmly believe, this is a microcosm of how Australia should relate, partner, and interact with Asia if Australia is to prosper in the Asian Century. In concrete terms, this overall approach leads to the following insights and recommendations:

A. Understand Asia:

Understanding Asia is not an easy thing. Asia is not a single, monolithic land, culture, language, history, economy, political system, or people. Asia is home to many of these. You will find most of the major religions represented as a majority in different countries. A vast number of languages and dialects persist. You have ethnic Chinese, Indian, Malays, Pacific Islanders, and other people living together, interacting daily, inter-marrying, and competing as well. You have democracies, Communist states, and constitutional dictatorships federating underlying feudal local/village societies. You have middle age-to-aging populations steeped on tradition clashing with the more Westernized youth. However, despite this diversity, most Asians nurture the following core values:

1. Belief in God or a Supreme Being – this is a faith that is lived and practised, and is not merely a paper-based affiliation.
2. Importance of and caring for the family and extended family
3. Respect for elders and the wisdom they carry
4. Life-long devotion to the welfare of children
5. Patience during abundance, and through adversity
6. Quiet determination and fortitude through difficult times
7. Enduring loyalty to friends
8. Enduring loyalty to good institutions (good employers, good governments, good communities and societies)
9. Enduring gratitude in exchange for a single act of kindness
10. Hospitality and generosity to people in need
11. High importance and priority to the university education of children
12. High regard for hard work and diligence

These are at the core of most Asians and should therefore influence the ways and means Australians should approach relations with Asia.

B. Accept Asian-Australians as true Australians:

Migration to Australia is a tough call for most Asians. It means leaving parents, children, relatives, and friends behind. It means leaving comfortable jobs and/or lifestyles in exchange for the promise of a better future for the family (including those left behind) and specially for the children. When Asian-Australians migrate, there is no turning back. There is that firm commitment to Australia – to make it in Australia and to raise the next generations as Australians. And this commitment is often tested by the reluctance of some Australians to genuinely accept “off-the-boat” Asians (as my head hunter told me once) as fellow Australians entitled to the same rights and respect. Firstly, this reluctance is a natural, primeval reaction to Asians who look, act, and

sound different. Secondly, there is the misconception that Asians come from the “less-civilized Third World” and therefore degrade the quality of Australian society. Thirdly, Asians are viewed as a threat to locals in terms of employment opportunities. These viewpoints are misguided because:

- How Asian migrants look, act, and sound do not take away anything from our commitment to our new country, Australia. We are here because we believe in Australia and have cast our lot with Australia.
- Asian migrants do not come from less-developed countries. The state of our old country is a matter of popular choice, a product of history (including Western colonization), technology, and the global economy. Most Asian migrants are respected professionals because we go through the skilled migration route.
- Asians are not a threat to hard-working Australians. We are not vain or choosy and are happy to take on work within our capability under reasonable conditions.

Needless to say, manifestations of intolerance and rejection of Asian migrants/Asian-Australians constitute the worst public relations nightmare as Australia tries to engage Asia and benefit from the Asian Century.

The true and genuine acceptance of Asian-Australian migrants by local Australians can only lead to good things:

- Asian-Australians will become much more productive contributors to Australian society in an atmosphere of acceptance than in an atmosphere of intolerance and rejection. Genuine acceptance leads to inspired determination to succeed and contribute to society. Asian-Australians then become Australia’s most credible ambassadors of goodwill to Asia.
- The way Asian-Australians look, act, and sound will be a strategic advantage in dealing with leaders and potential partners in our old countries in Asia. Asians will see Australia as a country of people who understand them because of a shared heritage.
- The professional skills of Asian-Australians are a fresh injection of talent that can overcome the skills shortage and help propel the economy. Many Asian-Australians are educated in Western or Western-style universities and often have multinational experience in the West and across various Asian countries.
- The Asian-Australian work ethic, born in the competitive fires of large pools of talent in Asia, can only encourage younger Australians to work as hard as the Australian pioneers (which is what we want anyway).
- In addition, the core values of loyalty (#7- #9 above) serve as assurance that the loyalty of Asian-Australians to Australia will only grow over time. What better contribution is there to the Asian Century goals of Australia than to have its own Asians, loyal to Australia, yet who have a deep

understanding of and good relationship with Asia, its leaders, and its people because of shared heritage.

C. Leverage Asian-Australians in strategic initiatives

No academic study can substitute for the insights and common sense that decades of experience can instil. Asian-Australians have worked in all sectors/industries of their old countries for decades, have navigated the business practices and public sector constraints of their old countries, and have built networks of reliable relationships in Asia over a long period of time. These are all vital to working with and engaging effectively and efficiently with Asia. Why do you think multinationals hire locals in top management roles in Asia? The vital experience, insights, and common sense that Asian-Australians bring to the table in dealing with Asian corporations, governments, and markets are a strategic advantage to the planning, execution, and sustainability of Australian government, business, and social relations and engagements with Asia.

D. Educate Australians about Asia

A powerful way to prepare for engagement with Asia is to formally educate Australians about Asia (as part of the curriculum). This education should include:

1. The history of Asia written by both Asian and Western sources (to see both the Asian and Western perspective)
2. Asian culture, including religions
3. Asian economics
4. Asian governments
5. Asian populations
6. Asian languages
7. A day in the life of an Asian in Asia

These areas should be delivered through:

1. Local Asian-Australian communities/organizations
2. Asian teachers
3. Invited Asian experts from Asian countries

This approach ensures an unadulterated, unbiased view of Asia.

E. Engage with Asia in technology

The most universal of modern languages is technology. It is culture-neutral, religion-neutral, ethnicity-neutral. To prosper in the Asian Century, Australia needs to partner tightly with Asia in technology. Asia offers both resources and a market for technology products and services. Already, the Philippines and India together account for the bulk of ICT development and outsourcing as well as business process outsourcing resources worldwide – which shows how techno-savvy these countries are. On the other hand, Asia has large, emerging technology markets in China, Vietnam, and Myanmar. The key is to partner with the technology leaders (such as the Philippines and India) to co-develop products and services and to sell these to the emerging technology markets. This partnership should be founded on trust, intellectual property protection, and fair profit sharing. Where any of the 3 components is absent, there is risk of exploitation of one party leading to reactionary IP piracy, and eventually unhealthy competition, business espionage, and costly litigation. Promising areas of partnership are ICT, manufacturing technologies, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and environmental/green technologies, green power, cybernetics, mechatronics/robotics, medical research, and climate research.

F. Engage with Asia as a security partner, not as a self-appointed regional cop

Australia needs to engage Asia as a security partner. Unilateral action in Asia or the Pacific will only invite animosity from other Asian countries. There is obviously a 2-superpower competitive scenario emerging in the region. While the United States remains as Australia's reliable and powerful ally in the region, Australia needs to balance its economic interests which makes non-adversarial relations with China a necessity. The pragmatic yet decent approach is to establish and develop a multilateral security alliance with the ASEAN countries and close South Asian neighbours such as India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. These are countries with a combined military capacity manpower-wise equivalent to a superpower, with specific countries possessing battle-tested skills and experience (Philippines, India, Indonesia) by virtue of their history. Australia, apart from its own manpower, can supply the advanced technology component of the multilateral capability. This will help ensure regional stability on a daily, on-going basis while reserving U.S. allied support only during crisis scenarios.

G. Build bridges through cross-border exchanges

The promotion of alliances between Asia and Australia and Asians and Australians will strengthen the economies and governments of both through exchange of fresh ideas, complementary skills deployment in business and public sector initiatives, and better synchronization of ventures to maximize

impact while minimizing costs and investment. This alliance promotion can best be effected through educational exchange, business exchange, and government exchange programs. This approach builds simultaneously institutional and personal alliances that benefit both Australia and Asia long term.

H. Security at the grassroots level

The management of security of Australian society, as it engages Asia, will become more complex and risky as manpower, goods, services, and information are exchanged at an accelerated rate. The best way to manage this increased complexity and risk is to grow security at the grassroots level. By being a society inclusive of Asian migrants/Asian-Australians through genuine acceptance, loyalty to Australia will grow naturally in the Asian-Australian community. This natural growth of loyalty is the best deterrent against terrorism and other security threats to Australian society. By tighter integration of the Asian community into Australian society, risks and threats to security are mitigated and contained early in the game through education, community pressure, and open communication. No artificial security and control apparatus can substitute for the early warning and intervention this grassroots approach offers. As they say, loyalty is earned. And with loyalty comes security.

Conclusion

Australia in the Asian Century has the opportunity to prosper greatly. This will be contingent on: genuine acceptance of its own Asian migrants/Asian Australians; developing a profound understanding of Asia; leveraging the strategic contribution of Asian Australians; building sincere bridges with Asians, Asian businesses and Asian governments; nurturing genuine, fair, and long-term partnerships with Asia in technology, education, business, government, and security. This is the vision from one Asian Australian who has participated in a successful microcosm of the macrocosm that Australia hopes to benefit from in the Asian Century.

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