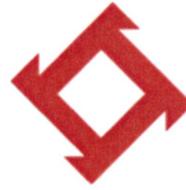


Public Consultations Team
White Paper Taskforce
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Canberra



Asian Studies
Association
of Australia

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ASAA Submission to the Foreign Policy White Paper 28 Feb 2017

About the ASAA

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) is the peak body of experts and educators on Asia in Australia. The ASAA also acts as an umbrella organisation for sub-regional organisations on Asia, such as the Chinese Studies Association of Australia, the Japanese Studies Association of Australia, the Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia, the Indonesia Council and the South Asian Studies Association of Australia.

Established in 1976, we promote and support the study of Asia in Australian universities and knowledge of Asia among the broader community. Our membership is drawn mainly from academics and research postgraduate students, but also includes Asia experts in industry and government.

We take a strong interest in promoting knowledge about Asia in schools and in contributing to state and Commonwealth government policies related to Asia. We provide informed comment on Asia to a broad public through our bulletin, *Asian Currents*, and specialist research articles in our journal, *Asian Studies Review*. Four book series published under our auspices cover *Southeast Asia*, *South Asia*, *East Asia* and *Women in Asia*. We hold a *biennial conference* at which our members and other scholars share their latest research and build collaborative networks.

We are the coalface of soft power diplomacy in and with Asia. Our members are at the forefront of building the research, educational and institutional links that connect Australia with Asia, many of which are established through our collaborators, students and alumni. Our members' work engages both Australian and Asian publics, to whom we frequently interpret and explain the workings of Asian cultures, the compulsions of Asian politics and the interconnecting arcs of Asian histories. Our members have helped to establish and run Asian institutions, educate their leaders, engage their diasporas, and advise parties to their conflicts.

We also teach Australians a range of Asian languages – a critical part of our mission as educators.

Recommendations

The ASAA recommends:

1. *That the Australian Government commit to prioritising Asia – or the Indo-Pacific – as a region of primary importance in its international engagement efforts.*

This recommendation assumes and asserts a range of benefits to Australia that derive from prioritising this region, given its status as a middle power in an increasingly restless Asia – or Indo-Pacific – and an increasingly multipolar world. The ASAA endorses the scheme DFAT has used to date, whereby it prioritises India, China, Indonesia, Japan and Korea, and adds that Australia also requires a strong foundation of expertise in *all* other areas of the region, particularly Southeast Asia, especially in light of rising tensions around the South China Sea. For example, more attention should be paid to understanding the political role of non-state actors in Malaysia and the Philippines as parties to rising regional instability, and to the reactions of ASEAN nations to perceptions that the region is being prepared for great power conflict.

2. *That the Australian Government commit to deep engagement with Asia, including by expanding the New Colombo Plan and the Endeavour Program.*

The ASAA supports the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan initiative, and the suite of people-to-people benefits it brings to the nation in light of its emphasis on education, time spent in study abroad, exposure to the benefits of language training and additional soft diplomacy benefits. We call on the Australian Government to consider expanding the New Colombo Plan to include postgraduate coursework students. We also call for more scholarships to be made available to postgraduate research students and professional academics through the Endeavour Program.

At the same time, the ASAA also points out that deep engagement is only truly possible when informed by high level language knowledge, and indeed that students' participation in schemes such as the New Colombo Plan often has the effect of stimulating their interest in language learning. We call on DFAT to promote in its hiring policies priority engagement for staff with Asian language skills, and to support training in smaller enrolment languages in the university sector.

3. *That the Australian Government commit to increasing Australians' intercultural competence as a key human capital development priority.*

Mainstreaming and investing in notions of intercultural competence – for example through building knowledge and experience of Asia and Asians – is a key priority for a middle power nation navigating a transforming world order. Investing in interculturalism can help empower all Australians, and not only the Australian Government, to assist in managing risks associated with racism and xenophobia, and the increasingly complicated politics of globalisation, immigration and multiculturalism.

The ASAA's view is that reasonable public debates about foreign investment, immigration, and the presence of Muslims in Australian society are legitimate and should not be suppressed. At the same time, however, the potential for such debates to descend into open racism can hamper Australia's

efforts to maintain strong and positive relationships with its Asian neighbours, including through forms of work performed by ASAA members.

For this reason, work to develop Australians' intercultural competence should not be left only to schools and universities, but should expand outwards into public policy frameworks and debates that set the tone for how Australians approach issues such as diversity, citizenship and national identity.

The ASAA considers that leveraging the skills of Asian diasporas living in Australia should also be a priority for a diversifying nation such as ours. The public promotion of intercultural skills as an important attribute in workplaces and institutions is also critical to Australia's interests.

4. *That the Australian Government increase its active collaboration with professional Asia experts to enhance Australia's policy responses to international affairs and better utilise national expertise.*

The ASAA membership consists of Australia's leading Asia scholars with deep specialist knowledge of the region. We regard greater collaboration with the Australian Government as crucial to enhancing Australia's interests in international affairs and domestic multicultural matters.

We call for the introduction of programs that reduce barriers between universities and the Australian Public Service, such as participation in joint APS-university projects, work placement exchanges, joint authored briefing reports, institutional exchanges, the provision of short courses and updates, or academic-authored commissioned briefing papers addressing APS needs.

The ASAA's view is that the introduction of such programs would facilitate this better use of Australian-based expertise on the Asian region.

We welcome the opportunity to expand upon these recommendations in person or in writing.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kent Anderson', written in a cursive style.

Professor Kent Anderson
President
Asian Studies Association of Australia

