Australia And Asia Relationship Essay, Research Paper

This essay analyses the Australian-China bilateral relationship since 1945 and in particular its political significance to Australia. Many global factors have influenced this relationship, including the advent of the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc European nations. In addition, internal political changes in Australia and China have both affected and been affected by the global changes. It will be analysed that Australia’s bilateral relationship with China has always had a sharp political edge but that approaching the new millenium economics and trade considerations are shaping Australias and for that matter Chinese politics.

A central feature of the Government’s approach to foreign and trade policy is the importance it attaches to strengthening bilateral relationships. Bilateral relationships are not an alternative to regional and multilateral efforts. Indeed, bilateral, regional and multilateral efforts are mutually supportive. When Australia works closely with another country on a global initiative, such as the conclusion of the Chemical Weapons Convention, it strengthens the bilateral relationship with that country. Similarly, cooperation within APEC helps to consolidate Australia’s relations with individual APEC economies. In this way, multilateral and regional efforts feed back into, and broaden, bilateral relationships (Aggarwal 1998).

In the Cold War years of the late 1940’s and lasting well into the proceeding four decades (Vadney 1998) Australian government policy towards China after the Chinese communist birth in 1949, was virtually achieved by an overriding commitment to anti-communism. Australias participation in the Korean War and later the Vietnam War meant that in a very real sense China (which gave direct tangible support to both the North Koreans and the North Vietnamese) was Australias enemy (Vadney 1998). Not surprisingly during this period there was a substantial body of public opinion which, either because of initiation at Australias involvement in both the Korean and Vietnam War’s, was because of interest in developing closer ties with China in economic and humanitarian grounds, was influencing the political orientation of the Australian government.

The election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972 saw the emergence of an explicit “recognition of China policy” and although this government was relatively short lived, its bilateral relationship with China was arguable its greatest achievement in Australias development in international affairs, especially in the Asia Pacific region (Cotton and Ravenhill 1998). The Fraser government continued this policy direction with China, which was strengthened even further during the Hawke and Keating years (1983-96). The Howard government has continued this policy and has chosen to place economic and trade considerations above ideology. Pursuit of a strong bilateral relationship with China by Australian Labor governments might have been predicted on political grounds but, increasingly, as the world moves to embrace a global village profile governments of all political persuasion’s are shaping the foreign policies on the basis of national economic self interest.

In handling bilateral relationships, the Government often claims to have adopted an integrated approach taking into account the totality of Australian interests. But, a closer analyses of this claim reveals it would be almost impossible to meet the totality of Australia’s interests in any bilateral relationship and this is especially true of China which has such a different socio-political system. This close relationship continues to raise political questions for Australia to grapple with, such as her relations with Taiwan, Tibet and Chinese human rights issues. In some instances Australias interests will be confined mainly to trade and investment; in the more substantial bilateral relationships, the Government will implement comprehensive strategies which attempt to integrate Australia’s security, economic and political interests with efforts to forge a wider network of contacts in such areas as education, tourism and cultural exchanges. A comprehensive approach to bilateral relationships also involves working closely with the Australian business community to expand market access and other opportunities for trade and investment. It means facilitating institutional links in fields such as the arts, sport, and education. In this way, each strand of the relationship not only has value in its own right, but also contributes to building a broader base from which to develop and advance mutual interests, hence the burgeoning of cultural links between Australia and China since 1972 (Aggarwal 1998).

Working through bilateral relationships also enables the Government to calibrate strategy to take into account national differences. This is particularly important in terms of regional issues. East Asia, for instance, is enormously diverse, and Australia’s regional policies must take this into account. The same is true of Australia’s interests in ASEAN and within the South Pacific. In relation to China some Australian government policies, for example, supporting the student protest in Tiananmen square (Cotton and Ravenhill 1998) damaged its relation with China and engendered antagonism from some Asian countries that Australia seemed to impose its will on other nations in the region. John Howards meeting in 1999 with Chinese Leader Jiang Zemin was significant in that it skirted around controversial humanitarian issues (despite considerable public pressure) and concentrated on economic and trade matters. Arguably there appears to be an acceptance by Australian political leaders that China represents communism with a capitalist (if not democratic) face.

The growing strength of regionalism means in turn that Australia’s bilateral partners will increasingly view issues through a regional prism, and with an eye to regional solidarity. This has certainly been the pattern among member states of the European Union, and it is likely to become more of a feature of Australia’s relations with the members of ASEAN (Aggarwal 1998).

As a nation with global interests, Australia must deal with countries in many regions. Each relationship engages Australian interests in different ways.

This is not to suggest that the interests Australia pursues with each country are equally important, or that the Government can devote equal resources to each of them. The countries which most substantially engage Australia’s interests are those which are not only significant trading and investment partners, but which are also influential in their own right in shaping Australia’s strategic environment. China has the potential to become the most significant of all the nations with which Australia deals on a bilateral basis. Its on this basis of massive population size, increasing technological advances and market demand, China presents itself as an attractive trading partner to be negotiated with despite political differences.

Since 1949 China’s overriding concerns have been security and economic development. In working toward both of these goals, China has focused on its relations with the superpowers since the collapse of the USSR (1989) and because most of the developed world, with the exception of Japan, is fairly distant from China. China’s relations with the developed world often have undergone significant shifts. In the 1950s China considered most West European countries “lackeys” of United States imperialism, while it sided with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The collapse of communism has left only one superpower – USA – and although China wants American trade (and vice versa) She also seeks to build strong ties in the Asia-Pacific region and this is deemed by Australian governments to be to Australias advantage because of our developed economy.

The developed nations have been important to China for several reasons: as sources of diplomatic recognition, as alternative sources of trade and technology to reduce reliance on one or the other superpower, and as part of China’s security calculations. In the 1980s China stressed the role of developed nations in ensuring peace in an increasingly multipolar world. Australia and Canada were important trading partners for China, but Beijing’s most important relations with the developed world were with Japan and Europe (Bell 1991).

For much of its long history, China has had the status of a major power. As China’s economic stature grows so too will its impact on the security and politics of the region and the world. Its relationships with the United States and Japan will be particularly critical to the stability of the Asia Pacific, and therefore of Australia.

China is likely to be among the three or four largest economies in the world in fifteen years, and to be integrated into the international economy through multilateral and regional mechanisms such as the WTO and APEC. Australia continues to support China’s accession to the WTO. Its economic growth and integration has been officially welcomed. It could enhance the prosperity and stability of the region. But a more likely explanation for this pro-China push is Australias national economic self-interests. This is perhaps reflected in the statement made by Rupert Murdoch where he flatly rejected moral considerations in Australias relations with East Timor and Indonesia.

China will, however, also face challenges as globalization, and the sheer complexity of governing the world’s most populous nation, lead to pressure for change. Political stability will be an important factor in ensuring sustained economic growth and continued international integration. How China manages the Taiwan issue and the special status of Hong Kong will have potentially far-reaching effects for the region, both in economic and security terms.

China will remain one of Australia’s key relationships. The Government’s approach to China should be based on shared interests and mutual respect. These principles provide the basis for a realistic framework for the conduct of bilateral relationships, and offer the best prospects to maximize shared economic interests, advance Australia’s political and strategic interests, and manage differences in a sensible and practical way. However political factors invariably intrude, for example, The one-China policy appears to be a fundamental element of the bilateral relationship, yet Australia has an important separate economic and trade relationship with Taiwan, which is a source of tension within the framework of the one-China policy (MacKerras 1996).

In pursuing a productive and broadly based relationship with China, the Government will be seeking to expand cooperation in those areas where the two countries have common interests. As two countries with different traditions, cultures and political systems, there will be some issues on which Australia and China do not share the same view. The Government consequently places a high priority on expanding its bilateral dialogue with China in areas such as defence and security issues, as well as on human rights and consular cases. Yet these relations don’t come without their problems. On the issues of human rights Australia is in a position whereby they trade with countries that don’t recognize the rights of individuals as we do. The most problematic of Indonesia’s neighborly relations were those with Australia. The tension inherent in the population differential between the two countries in such close geostrategic proximity was exacerbated by the very different political cultures. Criticism of Indonesia in the 1980s and early 1990s by the Australian press, academics, and politicians provoked angry retorts from Jakarta. For example, a story in the early 1980s about corruption in the president’s family in the Sydney Morning Herald (1986) led to a temporary banning of Australian journalists from Indonesia. The implicit long-term Indonesian “threat,” as it appeared in Australia’s defense planning documents, underlined a latent suspicion in Jakarta that Australian policy toward Indonesia was based on fear, not friendship. This perception constantly had to be allayed by official Australian visits to Jakarta. For example, there were bitter diplomatic exchanges between the two countries regarding unruly demonstrations over East Timor at the Indonesian embassy in Canberra in November and December 1991. Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating made a point, despite domestic criticism, of separating the Dili incident from Indonesian State policy and visited Jakarta in April 1992. Once there, he announced that bilateral ties between the two countries had “deepened and broadened” (Keating 1993).

Australia also has important interests in other countries of the Asia Pacific and other regions. The nature and the weight of these interests will vary over the next fifteen years, as will the resources the Government is able to commit to them. And there is no guarantee that they will always coincide with the Australia-China priorities.

As noted in the Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper (1997), Australia recognizes China’s importance in regional and international affairs, and regards it one of our four key partners, (alongside the United States, Japan and Indonesia), forming an increasingly important part of Australia’s political and economic considerations well into the next century. Since 1997 there has been a major strengthening of relations, assisted by a strong program of high-level visits in both directions. The visit by President Jiang Zemin from 6 to 11 September this year is the first ever visit to Australia by a President of China, and reciprocates Prime Minister Howard’s visit to China in March 1997. Six Australian Ministers have visited China so far this year (former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Foreign Minister, the Defence Minister, the Attorney-General, the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Justice and Customs).

The past three years have seen the establishment of new areas of regular dialogue between the two countries. In defence relations these include regular dialogue; exchanges of defence officials; resumption of naval ships’ visits between Australia and China; and an expansion of the annual disarmament talks to include discussion of broader regional security issues. Other linkages include: an upgrading and expansion of the Joint Ministerial Economic Commission; an annual bilateral dialogue on human rights; consular consultations and implementation of Chinese recognition of Australia as a designated tourist destination. Cultural, legal, scientific and educational exchanges are also increasing people-to-people contacts, and since 1979 all Australian States have established a twinning arrangement with provincial governments in China (Gounder 1995).

On the economic and trade front, there is high degree of complementarily between the Australian and Chinese economies and substantial potential for further growth in bilateral trade and investment. China is currently ranked our fifth largest trading partner, and Australia as China’s eleventh largest bilateral trading partner. Australian investment in China has expanded in recent years, and Australian firms have established a significant and growing presence. The Australian government has been working to advance these interests by improving market access to China. On 31 May 1999 Mr. Fischer, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, announced that, during his visit to China, Australia had reached in-principle bilateral agreement on key market access issues relating the China’s accession to the WTO (Aggarwal 1998).

The evidence is clear, Australias political appraisal at Chinese communism has changed dramatically since 1945. From an ally in World War 2, to an enemy in Korea and Vietnam and from an ideological assessment of “marauding yellow hordes” ready to invade Australias shores to a friendly regional Nation (partner almost) in the universal drive for economic growth and superiority. This bilateral relationship appears to have subsumed political differences and may well be ushering in a period or international economic and trading conglomerates encompassing hitherto sworn political adversaries.