Paul Keating has staked much on his attempt to redefine Australia’s relationship with Asia. Whatever his motives for doing so, his statements on Australia’s need to ‘come to terms with’, or to ‘become part of’ Asia, have opened up the debate on how Australia should reconcile its history with its geography. In this special Into Asia? supplement, we analyse some of the questions raised by the arrival of ‘Asia’ on the mainstream domestic political agenda.

Firstly, what exactly do we mean by ‘Asia’? Countries like India and Pakistan are certainly in Asia, but they are equally clearly not what most Australians mean when they use the term. At Asia’s other extreme, Australia has the potential to play an influential role in the development of the Pacific islands, but again they do not match Mr Keating’s idea of the dynamic, populous and booming ‘Asia’ with which we should be associated.

Even within a more restricted focus on East and South-East Asia, there are enormous discrepancies between individual countries. Japan, the ‘Asian Tigers’ (South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan) and to a lesser extent Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are flourishing, and presumably it is these countries and not, say, the Philippines, Burma or Vietnam which Keating has in mind when he locates Australia’s future in Asia.

But economic success surely cannot be the only indicator of the desirability or otherwise of ‘getting closer to’ Asia. Many of the countries in the region, whether successful or not, are very far from embodying liberal democratic values in their political systems. Does sharing in the development of the region also mean compromising those values? Or are we working on the assumption that democracy and liberalism flow naturally from economic growth, so that co-operation with Asian countries will help to make them more like us politically? Such an approach would seem to sit oddly with the view that it is us who should be learning from ‘Asia’ about how to run our economy.

Clearly, our economic, political and cultural interests in pursuing closer ties with our neighbours do not always coincide (indeed are sometimes in sharp conflict). Nowhere has this tension been more apparent than in Australia’s often stormy relationship with Indonesia. Here, ‘becoming Asian’ has often been equated with soft-pedalling on human rights issues. Whether such preoccupations as democracy and human rights are the greatest contribution that Australia can make to Asia, or whether they are cultural baggage which we need to shed before we can play our full role in the region, is a question which Paul Keating’s rhetoric has so far failed to address adequately.

While we debate our relationship with Asia, the Asian countries themselves are undergoing rapid and substantial change. One thing that is certain is that if Australia really does want to change its relationship with the region in a significant way, we need to keep much more closely in touch with the economic, political and cultural currents which are shaping its future.

Mike Ticher

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