# Australia's Engagement in the Asia Pacific: Reality, Utopia & Transformation

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JAMES RICHMOND, SEP 19 2012

## Introduction

From the 1970's there has been a seismic shift in the historical international world order. It's evident that the Asia-Pacific region has fast become the growth engine of the world economy (Milner, 2012; Hsiung, 2011). This paper applies international relations (IR) theory to examine the question of how Australia should engage with the region, in what has been termed the 'Asian Century' (Milner, 2012, pg1).I define engagement from the perspective of a singular nation state seeking to maintain or improve upon inhabitant's quality of life, through strengthening of economic fundamentals and hence the prosperity of the state and its people, additionally providing security and upholding legal independence – the essence of sovereign integrity (Lewis, 2010).

Within this paper, I mobilise selective concepts from Classical Realism, Neoliberalism and Constructivism and through synthesis demonstrate how these perspectives complement each other and provide a holistic framework in which to address, how Australia should approach regional engagement.Firstly, the paper presents the Classical Realist theoretical ontology as the logical starting point to develop Australia's international 'engagement model'. Secondly, I draw on the Neoliberal institutional approach to international relations, demonstrating how this builds upon the established view from Classical Realism. Thirdly, I introduce Constructivism theory emphasising how this further compliments the established point-of-view and facilitates a transformational approach to international relations.

## A Realist View of Human Nature

When one begins to contemplate how a nation state should engage internationally, it's critical to acknowledge that "politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature" (Morgenthau, 1956 pg.4). Morgenthau's international-political theory (Classical Realism) is conceptualized distinctively in human nature. Central to his theory is an idea that all humans are instinctively egocentric and competitive, which then naturally manifests in various forms of conflict (Morgenthau, 1948; Williams 2004). These behavioural traits described by the Classical Realists (Car, 1939; Morgenthau, 1998) are further substantiated and reinforced with elements of Sigmund Freud's 'Theory of Human Nature'. Freudian theory seems to support the Realist position through its examination of individual behaviour in groups (which can be likened to states acting in the national interest). This explains how fundamental human instincts result in the relentless pursuit of personal gain, avoidance of pain and use of force against other individuals, groups or organizations who look to interfere (Brunner, 1995, pg 238).

International Politics has been characterized throughout history by ongoing conflict regardless of the political systems in place, and despite 'utopian' efforts to galvanise and globalize the world through institutions such as the United Nations (Righter, 1995, pg1). Acknowledging both the ongoing and unpredictable conflict to this day, and also the arguments formulated by the Classical Realists, underwritten by Freudian psychoanalysis, provides us with not only an explanation for why the conflict continues, but concurrently forms a pragmatic starting point for assessing how the Australian state should engage with the Asia Pacific Region.

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This US-Japan led coalition of allies (South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Indonesia, India and Vietnam) since the end of the Vietnam War (1955 – 1975) has benefitted the Asia Pacific region in maintaining regional security and stability (Ikenberry, 2004; Cronin, 2012).  This enduring strategic relationship has kept Australia a secure nation, that is, free of large scale war during this time. However, evidence suggests that this regional order is being rapidly transformed. As Asian states, such as China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia & the Philippines have become more affluent they've invested more in their armed forces – almost all have increased military hardware including ballistic missile systems, attack submarines and fighter jets, which is increasing tension in the region (Milner, 2012; White, 2009). The competition is on – particularly given that for at least the past 30 years, America with its powerful military, has shown that it intends to maintain its position of pre-eminence (Milner, 2012).

These points collectively fuel a sense of uncertainty and point to broader regional insecurity.  There is no reason to believe that China or any of Australia's closer neighbours, such as Indonesia, will use their power to directly attack or intimidate Australia, however there is no reason to rule out this possibility either (White, 2010).  The rapid change in the regional economics and distribution of power may potentially destabilise the region, which could easily draw out the primal instinctual nature of man and be played out through the war machine of states resulting in devastating conflict. In this unpredictable context and current evolutionary point in the 'world of states', its integral that Australia seeks to strengthen and advance both offensive and defensive military capability – with a sensitivity towards not exacerbating regional hostility.  The nature of man dictates that pragmatic states maintain an independently strong defence and also strong offensive capabilities in order to ensure continuity of security for their people.

## Institutional Optimism

Seminal Neoliberal theorist Robert O. Keohane stated "In order for states to co-operate they must overcome a range of collective action problems … This means that states must find ways to avoid temptations to cheat, for example by reneging on agreements" (Dunne, 2007, pg 111).  Furthermore, Keohane argues that international organisations (IO) can provide a structure for enforcement and resolution of disputes on various issues between states (Keohane, 1989). Neoliberalism presents a multilateral framework or strategic approach to IO's which states can participate with and furthermore seek to create as a means to: 1. Achieving favourable objectives in line with national interest 2. Moderate the Classical Realist defined traits of human nature (Keohane, 1993).  At the nation state level we've institutionalised governance which upholds, maintains and enforces the 'rule of law' which deters and restricts mankind's primal instincts, maintains a degree of control, hence creating increased order, security and furthermore economic stability. The Neoliberal approach seems to extrapolate the long established domestic institutional order and argues that this will increasingly perpetuate the same conditions globally. Additionally, this builds upon the Classical Realist foundational assumptions of human nature providing a strengthened framework for international engagement.

Acknowledgment of the potential for increased regional tension and destabilisation caused by the rapid economic and military growth of neighbours, Australia must seek to further strengthen relationships with proxy neighbours (throughout the Asia Pacific) to build upon and form new security alliances and further economic prosperity. In efforts to mitigate rivalry and reduce insecurity in international relations, Australia must continue to take a proactive, optimistic and a strategic approach to regional institutionalism as a means to establish increased co-operation and understanding over a range of economic, security and development issues.

Leading Australian IR analysts, Hugh White and Corel Bell have shown public support for China and India to be inducted into a 'concert of powers' which would also include the United States, Japan and Russia (Milner, 2011). The central idea is that such a forum has the potential to diminish the concerns around China's rise.  Restraining the instinctual self interested and competitive state behaviour, the Neoliberal institutional approach to managing regional relations and more broadly international order will be fundamental to defining Australia's international engagement in the 'Asian Century'.

## Constructivism

The focus of Constructivism is on human awareness or consciousness and its place in world affairs (Jackson, 2007,

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pg.160). This shifts one's thinking away from Realist dominant theories of international distribution of power, military forces and economic capabilities and directs attention to the role of individual, group or state's thoughts and ideas, and how these construct the subjects existing reality (Dunne, 2007; Wendt, 1992; Williams, 2009). Thus, the world we experience is a 'social construct'. Constructivism highlights the power or ideas, underwritten with a fluid understanding of international structure. Through a constructivist lens, we see a world which is in a state of perpetual flux, in which change or transformation is not only an inevitability – but also that our individual and collective ideas and thoughts shape this (Williams 2004, pg 633).

With Constructivism, ideas, values, norms and shared beliefs matter – how individuals talk about the world shapes practices (Dunne, 2007 pg 50). The theory heightens actor's individual sensitivity to their socially constructed identities and interests. When framed in international relations this emphasises how states see themselves and their national identity. For example the identification with terms such as 'superpower' or a 'middle power' … and the subjective meaning applied defines the subject's behaviour and therefore these ideas impact on how nations and their leaders will engage internationally. Additionally, its frame provides unrestricted possibilities for constructing and enhancing existing international relationships – in line with national interest.

Australia's primary economic interests are in the Asia Pacific Region, in particular with China (Australia's largest export nation), however in contrast its cultural identification stems from historical ties, British and European settlement and an enduring strategic relationship with the U.S.  There has been extensive debate as to how it should engage with the region (Milner, 2010; White, 2009; White, 2010; Gynell, 2007).

Former Prime Minister Howard (1996 – 2007) debated that Australia need not choose between its history, which is grounded in the West, and its geography, which locates Australia on the periphery of the Asia-Pacific region. (Milner, 2010) Previously, former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991-1996) enthusiastically engaged Asia, building on his predecessor Bob Hawke's (1983-1991) efforts that included the formation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989 (Milner, 2010). In Australia many viewed that Keating's initiatives had gone too far, reflecting the essence that many Australians 'sense of identity' was not grounded in Asia. Australia's distance from key cultural partners and strategic allies in the West has traditionally resulted in an existential fear of being overwhelmed by Asia. This has been replaced by a view of Asia as source of prosperity and no longer of threat (Milner, 2010).

How Australia thinks about itself as a nation has direct impact upon how it perceives and receives the region and will ultimately play a part in shaping its future environment.  As with all individuals and states, some aspects of this identity will have positive impact, however some indeed may not.  Australia's economic future is inextricably tied with the growth of the region – China's continued appetite for raw materials will remain unabated for many decades to come (Fiscor, 2004). With such dynamic forces at play across the region we're seeing a transformation in regional identities; new wealth is bringing new aspirations, confidence and assertiveness. Australia needs to continually act internationally seeking to further construct a collective identity with its critical regional counterparts – with which its economical prosperity and security is entwined.  A continued embrace and projection of multiculturalism and global values will enhance relationships in line with national interest.

Constructivist theory builds an increased sensitivity towards the benefits of international institutions. Rather than viewing these as glorified 'talk shops' with little measurable benefit (Paletino, 2012, pg 1) we can view the formal and informal interaction as opportunity to nurture and build new relational possibilities – which may run contrary to historical relationships between states.  In fact in the Constructivists world, I see that individuals and states are not confined by history at all. Only so much as the subject identifies with the historical narrative. Objectively unconstrained from identity, subjects increase opportunities to transform the world in which they exist – be that between individuals, states, or regions. The perpetuation of a country's history and culture, forms a powerful social construct which has direct implications for international relations (Williams 2004; Dunne, 2007). The Constructivist theory combined with Neoliberal institutionalism injects transformational ideologies for Australia to approach regional relations. This heightens sensitivity to the importance of the national identity, a cumulative history which shapes regional actors' aspirations. Constructivism seems to emphasise transformation over change; this being that change is associated with a gradual and progressive movement towards an objective. Whereas transformation through

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Constructivism implies immediate shift to the new form or objective – the channel to regional or global transformation being projection of ideas, values, norms and shared beliefs, which originate from within. Australia should adopt a strategic approach to its cultural identity with the objective to construct a narrative which perpetuates new and prosperous regional relationships.

## Conclusions

This paper through limited application of several dominant IR theories has argued a case for Australia's engagement in the Asia Pacific Region. Within, I have demonstrated how Classical Realism, Neoliberalism and Constructivism theories can synergise and complement each other providing a multidimensional approach to regional engagement. Evidence suggests from preliminary analysis that the sum theoretical perspective is greater than the individual parts – providing a more comprehensive framework for nations to approach international engagement.

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*Written by: James Richmond*
*Written at: Sydney University*
*Written for: Dr Charlotte Epstein*
*Date written: April 2012*