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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the dark green background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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SEEKING SECURITY AND TRADE IN ASIA?
OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AUSTRALIA

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Sam Roggeveen, *The Echidna Strategy, Australia's Search for Power and Peace*, Collingwood: La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc., 2023, 1+233pages (ISBN: 978174823279 ebook).

Andrew Charlton, *Australia's Pivot to India*, Collingwood: Black Inc., 2023, 1+311pages (ISBN: 9781743823316 ebook).

Roggeveen's *The Echidna Strategy* and Charlton's *Pivot to India* are both about opportunities for Australia to build closer diplomatic and strategic relationships with Asian powers. They argue that changes in Australia's domestic and international environments provide compelling reasons to overcome past obstacles.

In their accounts, two factors stand out. First, while Australia has long clung to its European foundations and alliance with the US, it trades with Asia. It trades especially with China—a source of both profit and fear. Second, Australia's population of 26.3 million is no longer predominantly Anglo Celtic. Following the 1939-1945 war an assertive immigration program brought migrants first from Britain, then from northern Europe and then from southern Europe. Immigrants account for 30 per cent of the population. Migration from Asia, recently from China and more recently still from India, has confirmed it as multicultural, with notable Asian components. At the 2021 census 17.4 per cent of the population identified as having Asian ancestry. That current migration policy emphasises graduate qualifications and skills in high demand makes it attractive to the many potential immigrants from Asia who meet these criteria. Multiculturalism is likely to continue to deepen. However, it is likely also to remain contested.

Both authors are more than aware of continuing inhibitions, not to mention outright fears, that obstruct explicit changes in direction. Since the 1980s, changes in economic and social policy combined with rapid technological change have widened gaps between social groups. The egalitarianism on which many Australians have prided themselves has frayed. Aspiration has collided with stunted access to economic success. Professional and well-educated Australians do well. Less well-educated ones struggle for well-paying jobs and for the comfortable lifestyles they see others enjoying. Further, for many in Australia, trade on a transactional basis with Asian powers, even an assertively rising China, is one thing; diplomatic closeness and strategic links to culturally different countries are quite another. In these

circumstances, fiercely contested domestic politics means that opportunities advocated can easily become choices avoided.

In *The Echidna Strategy* Roggeveen advocates, against the grain of the security community of which he is a member, that Australia rethink its dependence on ‘great and powerful friends’, principally the US. In particular, he argues against bipartisan support for the recently promulgated AUK-US Partnership (Australia, UK, US). This aims to provide Australia with access to conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines and to joint advanced military capabilities deployed in the Asia Pacific region. Under AUKUS Australian power would be technologically advanced and projected beyond its shores. And with familiar allies.

Roggeveen takes a very different tack. He proposes a defence strategy based close to home. He argues that Australia should make a strength of its geographical position adjacent to Asia and of its sprawling but often unwelcoming island continent. He names his strategy for an Australian animal, the echidna. It has porcupine like quills, is solitary, and is uncomfortable to get close to. It is also generally inoffensive unless attacked. He is director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute (a prominent privately funded think tank) and worked previously as an intelligence analyst in government. His standpoint is explicitly centre right.

In *Pivot to India* Charlton argues that the time is right to make closer ties with India. He explores opportunities for increased security links and trade. He celebrates the substantial Indian origin diaspora in Australia—about 1 million people or nearly 4 percent of the population—and sees Indian origin Australians as vital enablers of closer ties. However, he is very aware of the failures of past attempts at closer relations.

Charlton represents the Australian Labor Party in the national parliament in a marginal metropolitan seat in Sydney. The seat has a substantial Hindu population, approximately 31,000 or 17 percent. Charlton also has a distinguished academic record as an economist, was an adviser to a former Labor Prime Minister, and founded a data driven strategy consultancy acquired quickly by a major consulting group. His interest in India is long standing and began with participation in a program of India Australia youth dialogues.

The Echidna Strategy aims to persuade by analysis and reason. It sets out a carefully argued case. *Pivot to India* aims to persuade by outlining opportunities, including, but going further than, security and trade. It invites Australians to think about the benefits of the cultural change closer relations with India might bring. Taken together the books invite readers to think about the ways such approaches could help build improved relations with Asian powers.

Roggeveen's advocacy of an Echidna Strategy is based on three elements: distance from potential threats, alliances with neighbouring powers, and capability to inflict unacceptable pain on an invader. He gives two main reasons: first, that the US is unlikely to remain the leading strategic power in Asia; and second, that Australia can defend itself without calling upon the US. In Australia neither point is uncontroversial. However, both have been welcomed in influential quarters as usefully provocative. Similar views have been expressed by former prime minister Paul Keating (Australian Labor Party 1991-96) and former foreign minister Gareth Evans (Australian Labor Party 1988-96).

Roggeveen argues that in its approach to Asia, the US is rich, powerful and unmotivated. While China and other states are building up military capability in Asia and the Pacific the US is not. He sees a gap between the disposition of US forces and US strategic interests. Inertia, rather than strategic responses to vital threats, is keeping the US in Asia. By not building up its forces it can be seen as having begun a gradual withdrawal. He foreshadows a gradual separation that is beyond Australia's ability to prevent. In his view, a continued US presence is likely to be based on sharing influence with Asian powers, especially China.

That Australia can defend itself runs contrary to settled policy by both major political parties since the 1940s. The US alliance, embraced by wartime Labor prime minister John Curtin, and further formalised by the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand, US) in 1951, is regarded as critical. US requests for military assistance are rarely denied. AUKUS, the eight nuclear powered submarines to be provided under it, and access to US and UK advanced military technology are presented as a necessary strengthening of an indispensable alliance.

However, delivery of both submarines and technology is contested. Objections by US politicians have had to be negotiated. Possible delivery dates for the first submarines are well in the future; not before 2030. The first craft built in Australia is due only in 2040. In the meantime, the Australian government works to maintain support from the US, embed treaty arrangements, fund a large financial commitment to US and UK suppliers, and implement interim measures. Risks remain. So do perceptions of a gap in defence capability.

The Echidna Strategy proposes not interim measures but a switch. In a non-offensive defence strategy, enhanced foreign policy development aimed at improving relations with Asian powers would help keep potential security risks at a distance. Instead of paying large sums to the US and UK for submarines and technology that can project power, and hosting US bases that may invite retaliation, Australia could look to its own resources.

Above all, Roggeveen argues, it should be clear about actual threats. In his view a rising China does pose threats to be countered. Its control of and militarisation in the South China Sea, maritime disputes with Southeast

Asian countries, grey zone coercive tactics and pushing forward slice by slice all demand effective pushback. So do coercive trade restrictions, as applied to Australia in 2020 and only recently in part relieved.

But he poses also questions that do not, in his view, require AUKUS answers. He asks: how far might China want to push; would it want to invade; and does Australia need the capability that AUKUS could potentially provide to strike the Chinese homeland? In response, he argues that China has shown no interest in invasion and would suffer unacceptable losses if it did. He supports his argument with an analysis of China's interests, the logistics of mounting an invasion force, and the ability of conventional arms to disrupt an invasion force well before it landed. He argues further that conventional weapons can be used to respond to grey zone tactics.

Roggeveen mounts a challenging case. Improved relationships with Indonesia and the Pacific can be supported as strong priorities. So can taking foreign policy initiatives that secure closer ties with other Southeast Asian countries. Strategic ties with Indonesia and the Pacific would guard against a potential invader getting close enough to threaten the mainland. Australian defence forces could be adjusted accordingly.

Roggeveen's argument can be read as a case for not pursuing AUKUS. It can be read also as a primer for how to respond to shortfalls in what AUKUS can eventually deliver. If AUKUS falters it may turn out to be the alternative proposal whose time has come.

However, significant challenges to his argument can be expected. Four may prove difficult. First, military technology does not stand still. The pace of development of new weapons using missile, electronic, space, drone and other emerging technologies will demand continuing vigilance. Further, strategic experts can be expected to challenge the author's assessment of what can be achieved with conventional military technology.

Second, the major enhancement of diplomatic endeavours envisaged by Roggeveen will challenge the political will of government leaders and the capabilities of a foreign service often under-resourced and bypassed. As he recognises, relationships with Indonesia have often at best been prickly. In the Pacific smallness of scale, combined with distance, diversity, past Australian tendencies to paternalism, and dilatoriness in responding to the impacts on Pacific states of climate change will call for significantly enhanced strategies.

Third, Roggeveen limits his regional vision. He does not give priority to improved relations with India. Its commitment to strategic autonomy is seen as a limit to its involvement in bilateral and multilateral arrangements. However, as Charlton suggests this underplays India's potential importance. India is a big country looking for friends. It is concerned at the prospects of an Asia in which China is dominant. Like Australia it is active in Southeast Asia and interested in a 'regional balance' where no country dominates.

Fourth, whatever the wishes and skills of Australian ministers and officials, the constraints of domestic politics are likely to be critical. For the

most part bipartisan enhancement of the US alliance with AUKUS has been met if, not by popular enthusiasm, with resigned forbearance. Should AUK-US falter adjustment will be difficult. In its restrained and careful way, The Echidna Strategy is a demand for a major change that will call for political courage and skill of a kind rarely recently seen.



Charlton's advocacy of closer ties with India is urgent and enthusiastic. He sees India as a friend Australia needs. He presents a 'pivot to India' as a transformative 'national imperative'. As well as enhancing diplomatic ties, closer relations with India can help recast Australia's perception of itself. He bases his advocacy on three main reasons: the emergence of a substantial Indian diaspora that can change Australia 'inside out'; the strategic advantages of becoming closer to an 'inexorable superpower' that can change the world; and opportunities for trade with a rapidly growing economy.

However, he recognises that past efforts at closer relationships foundered on a lack of common interests. Current opportunities followed a slow change in the circumstances of both countries. As he puts it, they 'only recently drifted within reach'. He draws on the existing literature on Australia-India relations to explain the persistence of fitful exchanges. First, for much of the time post-independence, Canberra made most of the running. However, for India, such Australian initiatives held little attraction. A combination of a lack of substance in initiatives and diplomatic muck ups over, for example, Indian nuclear tests and attacks on Indian students in Australia in 2008-10, kept relationships distant.

Second, differing colonial experiences and world views reinforced lack of interest. In India the colonial destruction of the country's wealth and global economic influence, which Charlton emphasises, still rankles. In contrast Australia developed a wealthy economy as a settler colony within the British Empire. Indeed, Australian trade with India was greater when it was still a colony. Further, differing colonial experiences led to different geopolitical outlooks. Independent India favoured self-reliance in economic management and non-alignment, then strategic autonomy, in international affairs. However, Australia developed a mixed, more open economy and favoured alliances with culturally similar countries. As the author puts it, in international affairs, India feared subjugation; Australia feared abandonment.

The emergence of a sense of interests in common took place slowly. To describe the process by which opportunities opened-up as 'drift' is apt. It was planned by neither country. For India the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an increasingly assertive China encouraged, however incrementally, a geopolitical rethink. Internally, a gradual liberalisation in economic management, however partial, provided opportunities for faster economic growth (described in some detail in the book) and a moderated enthusiasm for public ownership and self-reliance. For Australia a more

liberal approach to immigration from Asia, ironically under a conservative government, provided the country with a growing number of Indian immigrants. It coincided with increasing concerns about maintaining a stable regional order and a sense that India might be interested in the same thing. Further, as India improved relationships with the US, Australia's reliance on the US alliance became less of a hindrance. In sum, economies managed differently became less different and differences in geopolitical outlooks narrowed.

For Australia current opportunities comprise two main elements, trade and education on the one hand, and security and defence on the other. While a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement has proved elusive (a sticking point has been access by Australian agricultural products to Indian markets) a more limited agreement secured in 2022 encourages increased two way trade. In education the author's optimism has been rewarded in 2023 by enrolment of 122,00 Indian students in Australian universities. Further, in 2024, after India implemented legislation to allow foreign university campuses, Deakin University opened in Gujarat the first overseas university campus in India. This followed a thirty year history of involvement in India. The first offerings at the new campus will include masters programs in the currently popular topics of business analytics and cybersecurity.

In security and defence, conceptualisation of the Indo Pacific region as one in which both countries have vital interests has provided a language in common. It has been accompanied by joint exercises, for example, Exercise Malabar, 'that seeks to deepen interoperability between participating regional partners' (Australian Government 2023).¹ It has been accompanied also by more regular Indian participation in strategic discussions, for example the Quad, a diplomatic forum on Indo Pacific issues including the US, India, Japan and Australia.

However, as the author is fully aware, opportunities are not self-fulfilling. Essential mutual understanding is hard won. And in India mutual understanding needs to extend beyond transactional approaches. For this reason, he sees Australia's Indian diaspora as a vital resource. Knowing about and participating in the diaspora communities is a way of learning about India. However, the book does not provide a detailed analysis of the diaspora. It notes the diversity of immigrants and provides snapshots of cultural activities and media. It encourages interaction. It also provides practical advice.

In this spirit, the book endorses a suggestion from the CEO of the Centre for Australia India Relations, one of several officially supported bodies, that members of the diaspora can help Australian businesses find their way into the 'nooks and crannies' of Indian society and business life. How-

1. Australian Government, 2023, 'Australia to host Exercise Malabar for the first time', <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2023-08-11/australia-host-exercise-malabar-first-time>, 11 August.

ever, it does not discuss in detail how such bodies, ambitious in goals and often short on funds, including the Australia India Institute founded with support by the Australian government and several universities in 2008 only after the violence against Indian students in Melbourne, can best promote mutual understanding.

It does, nevertheless, argue that the diaspora needs recognition and inclusion. There is a paucity of diaspora members in state and national politics and on the boards of leading companies. Underemployment among professionals is still too frequent. Restrictions on qualified professionals practising in Australia need to be eased. More promisingly it notes the increasing prominence of diaspora members in business generally. While it does not set out an equal opportunity plan for the diaspora, one can sense that the author may have it on an agenda for the future.

Charlton's book is timely and accessible. It encourages people previously not closely involved with India to discover more. However, India has yet to achieve the decisive status he claims for it. What it has done is to take a more engaged role in global affairs and a prominent role in promoting domestic economic growth. It has also taken leading initiatives in the use of digital applications in the public and private sectors, including notably in citizen identification and access to welfare benefits. In doing so it has staked effective claims for its voice to be heard in global forums.

While Roggeveen has made a persuasive case that India is unlikely to take a front-line role in Australian defence, its preparedness to engage with issues in the Indo Pacific is a change that Australia can explore to advantage. Similarly, while improvements in trade relations are moving slowly, opportunities for Australia to contribute to Indian development by the complementary investments and initiatives valued in India are becoming more tangible.

For Australia, Indian immigration has brought a significant domestic change. Yet more dimensions have been added to a multicultural society. While Indian immigrants may not alone change Australia 'inside out' they may add force to the impacts of Chinese and other Asian immigrants on how Australia sees itself. As a country's population changes so does its culture and how it presents itself to the world. However, quiet acceptance of changes that many regard as overdue is contested by loud voices demanding continuing endorsement of an Anglo Celtic settler culture with a shrinking base. Further, that many Indian immigrants are well educated professionals may strike some as adding to concerns about asymmetry in access to well paid jobs. In a future edition it would be useful to examine more explicitly the challenges of managing the changes Charlton so clearly welcomes.

On India's internal governance, social relations and policy directions the book touches lightly. Indeed, on governance and economics it searches too much for similarities. In a future edition it would be useful also to include a more extensive account. People and institutions in Australia need to

appreciate the multilayered nature of Indian society, business and politics. They need to appreciate also that since 2014, the BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has initiated a drive towards a 'New India'.

Prime Minister Modi's enthusiasm for extending India's participation in international affairs makes him a welcome host and guest. However, for those wishing to build enduring relationships, a sketch of the country as it is under the BJP, rather than as Australians might hope it to be, is desirable. As John McCarthy, a former Australian High Commissioner to India has noted, the image of an India of 'economic growth, technological capacity and increased competence' can easily be welcomed.² Less easily accommodated are accompanying currents of strong nationalism and Hindu supremacy. But this does not mean Australia should draw back. McCarthy is clear that a 'strong relationship with India' is in Australia's interest. However, he concludes with a firm recommendation: 'let us be clear in our own mind about with whom we are dealing'.



While Roggeveen's topic is national security and Charlton's is closer relations with India, their arguments are complementary. In security, economics and national identity they identify directions still unpursued. In doing so they recognise that the changes to Australian priorities they advocate face continuing inhibitions and obstacles. They mount arguments to help overcome them that will be useful when opportunities arise.

Roggeveen's Echidna Strategy is based on a hard eyed, conservative analysis. Australia cannot rely on the US alliance. There is a viable home grown alternative. But the political costs of making such a large shift in strategy are large and immediate. Such costs inhibit political leaders from attempting to persuade a conflicted Australian public to endorse it. Nevertheless, his analysis provides an available fall-back position. Despite the current full throated political support for AUKUS Australia may yet need it.

Charlton's Pivot to India argues that looking to India is more important than Roggeveen allows. Closer relations with India can provide Australians not only with opportunities in trade and security but help them become more comfortable with the country's deepening multicultural identity. Engagement with India and an updated self-perception can lead to benefits for both countries. Charlton does not say so explicitly, but effective engagement with India may provide hints on how to engage more effectively with other Asian countries too.

In sum these books provide new ideas for what to think about next in Australia's long standing but still contested debates about its self-perception and priority relationships.

2. McCarthy, John, 2023, 'This isn't the India we once knew', *Australian Financial Review*, 9 December.

