

Election 2010

Asia vital to Australia's future

ASIA RELATIONS MUST BE A PRIORITY FOR THE NEXT FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

"Australia's future depends on enhanced Asia relations and this must be a priority for the next Federal Government," Asialink and Asia Society AustralAsia Centre Group CEO, Jenny McGregor, said today.

In releasing a statement of Asia priorities for the next 10 years, Ms McGregor said a long-term bipartisan commitment was required to ensure Australians were fully able to engage in Asia over the coming Century.

The statement, endorsed by the Asialink and Asia Society, Australia, Boards, calls for greater resources to prepare Australia for the Asian Century.

"Australian governments must make an enduring and significant investment in equipping young Australians for the challenges of business, of solving regional and global issues, and of managing our increasingly complex interactions around our region," she said.

"Australia's top four export markets are all in Asia. Last year, sales of Australian product to these four – China, Japan, Korea and India – dwarfed US and UK sales eight to one. Our services trade with Asia grows twice as fast as with the rest of the world.

"Our security, health and development interests lie in the Asian region. In preventing pandemics and people smuggling, in building transparent and accountable systems to support trade and investment, in forging creative exchanges in the arts, and in science, Australians need to be more than ever focused on Asia.

"Closer relations have brought with them more issues and challenges. These include:

- Given our immense national interests in Asia, Australia performs poorly in the way we project ourselves in the region
- investment, unlike trade, is an underdeveloped area of Australian economic engagement with Asia

- Australia's involvement in the arts of the region is sporadic and poorly resourced, and we are therefore largely excluded from the extraordinary cultural dynamism of contemporary Asia
- the study of Asian languages and Asian countries is faring badly in Australia (even compared to a generation ago), despite the government's stress on the need for "Asia literacy"
- there is still a lack of broad Asia skills in Australian businesses from shop floor to boardroom.
- very few Australians study in Asia
- Australia is not taking full advantage of Track II processes to advance Australian interests and to strengthen Australian contributions to regional planning."

A National Forum in May 2010, convened by Asialink and the Asia Society AustralAsia Centre, led to a set of recommendations for strengthening Australia's engagement with Asia. Experts from across sectors - representatives of large corporations and industry groups, specialists from academia and government, members of the arts community, the education sector, and the health and development fields - addressed the crucial question of Australia's readiness for the "Asian Century". The following priorities for Australia have been developed from the Forum's outcomes.

Asialink and Asia Society AustralAsia Centre

Statement of Priorities for the next Federal Government

To assure Australia's future prosperity, security and social harmony, the next Federal Government must commit to:

1. Greater investment in developing broad Australian public support for Asian engagement.

Achieving an Australia capable of fully engaging with its region requires a serious investment in creating demand for Asia engagement. The wider Australian public still needs to be brought into a national "conversation" about the imperative of Australia-Asia engagement.

2. A National Asia Literacy Action Plan for both the school and higher education sectors that is adequately funded. For the schools sector alone, this means a minimum investment of \$100 million annually over 10 years.

Advancing Australia's increasingly complex relationships in the countries of the Asian region requires more qualified Australians. Governments and all sectors must invest long-term in equipping Australians for the Asian Century. This means increased support for both Asian studies and Asian languages. Young Australians need knowledge, skills and understandings of the histories, geographies, societies, cultures, literatures and languages of the diverse countries of Asia in order to help solve common problems and to benefit fully from the economic growth of the region.

3. Working with business to articulate a clear vision for enhancing Australia's economic engagement and growth in the region.

The Vision would include promoting a broad understanding of the national benefits of greater two-way economic engagement between Australia and Asia, fostering an open environment for investment from Asia and supporting a more Asia literate/Asia ready workforce, recognizing the value of cultural intelligence.

4. Strengthening people-to-people links, non-government alliances, and “Track II” endeavours – as well as cultural, scientific, research and sporting cooperation.

Over reliance on government-to-government relationship building can lead to “hollowness” in engagement with the region. The antidote is to give more power to the non-government sector, enabling and facilitating the development of collegial and collaborative relationships between countries across all sectors.

5. Expanding – not reducing – our diplomatic resources to manage Australia’s increasingly complex relationships with countries in the region.

A greater priority must be given to Australian diplomacy. The global trend away from the primacy of “defence” toward the notion of “security” - with its much broader agenda addressing such problems as pandemics, climate change and issues related to the movement of people - means agencies such as AusAID and DFAT require far greater resources.

Efforts to project Australia more positively in Asia must also be given greater priority. Cutbacks in expenditure on diplomacy are against the national interest.

6. Insisting that existing and future regional forums include Health and Development as a central plank for dialogue

“Asia’s health is our health”: Future prosperity and on-going development in Australia and the Asia Pacific are inextricably linked to the economic, social and political stability of our region. Health and development sectors must work closely with national security policy makers and the diplomatic sector to reduce the burden of disease and poverty in the region.

7. Supporting the development of a 10-year strategic plan for increased and advantageous arts and cultural engagement between Australia and Asia.

Such a plan should map the current status of Australia’s arts and cultural activities in the region, identify key issues, goals and projects, and recommend an agenda for greater interaction and integration into the arts communities of Asia to 2020. The arts have a crucial role to play in improving Asia literacy in both the cultural and other sectors, in promoting Australia abroad, and in building a sense of community between Australia and Asia.

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