

AN AWAKENING Australia

By P. S. Suryanarayana

BRAIN-STORMING poser for possible argumentation in the current political discourse on international relations is whether Australia deserves a place at the high table of the Group of Eight. A rationale for this question is the fact that the latest G-8 summit took place in Okinawa in Japan. It is almost axiomatic that the Asia-Pacific Rim is crucial in the economic sphere, by certainly three, and arguably four, developed countries — the United States, Japan, Canada and, of course, Australia in that order. What separates Australia from the other three is the complexion of its attribute of a "developed" society — i.e., the degree of industrialisation. Yet, in this reckoning too, Australia can be seen to be the missing player at the G-8 poker table, albeit at the lower end.

France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy are of course the "natural" European members of the G-7 club of major industrialised nations, while Russia's status as a present-day geostrategic state and a yesteryear-superpower has given it a right to rub shoulders with the rich countries and enlarge their exclusive forum to an East-West caucus of eight.

If Australia is to be considered unlucky in finding itself outside the G-8 (as distinct from the G-7, whose membership standards are higher), no less strange are the cases of China, as a pristine Asia-Pacific player with indisputable political strategic relevance to a coalescing new world order, and India, which can boast similar qualifications while being under the penumbra of the traditionally defined boundaries of the Asia-Pacific zone.

These and other aspects of the politics of a presumably enlargeable G-8 can determine the extent of Australia's elitism in world politics in a long-term perspective. Of more immediate urgency to the politics of the Asia-Pacific region is Canberra's current effort at playing to its potential in its neighbourhood, which has already been delineated quite expansively. At home, the present Australian Prime Minister, Mr. John Howard, is often criticised for being inward-looking without much flair for projecting Canberra's relevance to the world outside. The allega-

tion, a matter of quite intense domestic political debates, is that he has not really bothered to sustain the momentum generated by some of his predecessors for Australia's role in world affairs consistent with its "Western" values and its local-national Asia-Pacific "opportunities". Despite this criticism, Australia is beginning to make its presence felt outside its huge continental shores.

With Australia coming under the international spotlight ahead of the Sydney Olympic Games in September in Sydney, some of Canberra's unresolved domestic

issues, though, that they are seized of these Canberra's insistence on running the country as a modern-day polity with a multi-cultural matrix is very real indeed. Not surprisingly, therefore, the international community is simply not impressed by the latest cynical attempt by the Indian racist, Mr. George Speight, to equate the political "cause" of the indigenous people in his country with that of the aborigines of Australia. This is not to discount the possibility of a political pro-

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test at the time of the prospective Sydney Olympics by the activists among or on behalf of the Australian natives and perhaps also the indigenous Fijians.

A significant sub-regional aspect of Australia's proactive global-scale foreign policy at the beginning of the 21st century is Mr. Howard's categorical preference of a non-racial basis for the resolution of the current crisis of blatant political discrimination against the ethnic Indians in Fiji. While Mr. Howard does not wish to pursue the idea of an international conference on Fiji at this juncture, Australia will stand to enhance its prestige if it can make a success of its choice of "smart sanctions", measures designed to punish the present racist rulers of Fiji without causing much hurt to the ethnic Indians there with an economic clout. Canberra's suspected line of circumspection in regard to the latest ethnic tensions in its more immediate neighbourhood, the Solomon Islands for instance, is best classified as a micro-level issue.

However, a new strand in Australia's growing internationalist foreign policy is its response to another form of violence that occurred in its neighbourhood — last year's carnage in East Timor. Relevant still is the lead that Canberra took on that occasion to influence the thinking of the

U.S. and virtually carry the United Nations onto the East Timor theatre in an aggressive peace-restorative mood. Australia's top officials conversant with its East Timor expedition tend to cast it as an exceptional response to an extreme situation of human rights violations and not as any new sign that Canberra has become a political agent of the U.S. in the region. Canberra is also not credited with any new proclivity for freelance gunboat diplomacy.

The really new aspects of Canberra's foreign policy relate to a singular central theme as identified by Australian policy planners in briefings to this writer. Australia, despite its "privileged access" to Washington's technology and of course its nuclear security umbrella, tends to act autonomously, without trifling with America's global geopolitical interests. On trade, Canberra often finds itself opposing the U.S. in multilateral fora.

Now, the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA), the only security-community not led by the U.S. in the Asia Pacific region, is a group in which Australia is very much the prime mover. Yet, it is not inclined at present to envision new security communities. For Canberra, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is no more than a significant clearing house of ideas without being a military-oriented security outfit. This certainly is an unexceptionable view, while it does offer Canberra a chance to interact periodically with China as also India and Japan in a multilateral setting that includes the U.S.

Australia's Western moorings had in the recent past impelled it to play a pivotal role in fast-forwarding the international agenda in regard to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. In the past few months, Canberra tried to read the mind of North Korea in regard to its romance with the mysteries of missile knowhow. These and other signs of an internationalist activism, as also Canberra's moves to play a global role in the information technology sector, are comforting to Australians — that their continental insularity does not condemn them to the diplomatic solitude of a 21st century Robinson Crusoe.

THE HINDU

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N.Korea, Australia stand to gain with renewed ties

By F.J. Khergamwala

TOKYO, MAY. 9. North Korea and Australia both benefit from re-establishing bilateral ties at a time when the reclusive State seems to have decided that an opening out will help the stability of the ruling Kim Jong Il regime.

Both countries were negotiating the new basis for their relationship and therefore the announcements on Monday in Pyongyang and Canberra made much less news than the abrupt rupture of their ties in 1975 after just one year of having established diplomatic relations. Contrary to the common perception that being recognised again by a big Pacific nation is a one-sided gain for North Korea, it is Australia too that has much to gain.

The Howard Government has been talking to the Kim Jong Il regime, at least since June last year. The Foreign Minister, Mr. Alexander Downer and his North Korean counterpart, Mr. Paek Nam Sun, met in New York in September during the United Nations General Assembly session. Then this winter, a senior Australian official travelled to Pyongyang, setting off speculation about the early re-establishment of diplomatic ties. By then, Italy had restored ties with the North, thus becoming the first major Western nation to make such a

move. South Korea, which was kept informed by Australia about the developments, and Japan have both welcomed the announcements. The Australian Prime Minister, Mr. John Howard is due in Seoul next week and the timing of the announcement on re-establishing relations is no doubt partly intended to raise Australia's profile on the northern Pacific scene.

Nonetheless, Australia's timing puts it among the earlier bidders for Pyongyang's affections when North Korea opens out more and makes available its cheap and disciplined labour force for foreign investors desirous of using the North as a manufacturing or processing base. Furthermore, this well-timed move gives a fillip to Canberra's effort to establish a greater political presence in the Northern Pacific. Australia could also be a major source of technical assistance in the North's weak agricultural sector.

For the North, the gains are obvious. North Korea is not yet in the various Asia-Pacific councils, but it is a matter of time before objections are removed to having it admitted to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or the ARF (the Association of South East Asian Nations Regional Forum). Once in, the North

could hope to get Australian lobbying assistance for Pyongyang's economic and financial needs.

The reason for the suspension in ties in 1975 still remains a mystery. Then riding high because of its activist membership status in the then vibrant Non-Aligned Movement, North Korea asked Australian diplomats to leave and recalled its own mission staff from Canberra, leaving unpaid bills.

The dues, which according to *The Financial Times*, exceeded \$200 million may or may not be part of the present terms of re-establishing ties, but both sides are quiet on the 1975 break, which may be because of a pro-South Korean vote at the U.N. by Australia.

As part of its drive to widen its diplomatic relations, especially with countries which have shunned Pyongyang mainly because they were allies of the U.S., it is quite on the cards that the Philippines will be next to open ties with North Korea. Myanmar, where North Korean agents staged a bombing incident in 1983, wiping out more than half the South Korean cabinet of Mr. Chun Doo-hwan, who was enroute India, has also said it is now ready to forgive Pyongyang.

THE HINDU

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A 'stolen generation'

FIRST IT was moral indignation among the socially-sensitive Australians over the transparent race politics of Ms. Pauline Hanson and her "One Nation" Party nearly a year ago. Her brand of politics was rejected in a parliamentary poll. This was followed by a vibrant intellectual debate over the constitutional status of the continent-country. And now, the poser over justice for the indigenous people of Australia has turned the spotlight on the country's old moral-political dilemma.

The sequence, dramatic in substance if viewed over a contemporary timeframe, may indicate that Australia is experiencing a deep ferment of political renaissance or reformation. However, to those not conversant with Australia's evolution as an "Anglo-State" with a hallmark of diversity in the Asia-Pacific context, the present issues of prime political concern in Canberra are but a painful revival of the challenges of simple social justice.

The broad question is whether Australia, too, is becoming a "social laboratory" — a delicate phrase applied to neighbouring New Zealand by researchers such as George Lafferty and Jacques Bierling. In the event, the eventual outcome might be a new Australian society. Viewed differently, the present-day information age can be blamed for providing a new impetus to an old issue about the Australian aborigines, even if the latest concerns are not definitively a battle cry against the perceived racial discrimination of the indigenous people. Despite such doubts about the real scope of the ongoing debate in Australia over the status of its aborigines, the political rumpus has acquired three distinctive dimensions.

Traditionally, the aborigine question is one of land rights — the perceived dispossession of the indigenous population in this regard by the white settlers who colonised Australia by seeing the continent as *terra nullius* or uninhabited land. Given that doctrine of colonisation, the rights of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in their full description, relate to land. However, the latest controversies pertain to other aspects — the "wrongs" heaped by the white Australians on the so-called "stolen generation" of indigenous inhabitants, the harshness of "mandatory sentencing" in pockets of the country and the political opportunity of promoting the aboriginal agenda under the glare of international publicity that had already begun to her-

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reports.

families and handed to mainstream Australians for being raised in conformity with the values of the dominant whites. This, of course, is an over-simplified account of the complex event and the aborigines so dislocated are known as the "stolen generation".

For the human rights groups in Australia and outside, the most objectionable part of the report is its perceived "denial" of the existence of a "stolen generation". It is an issue of both semantics and substance even as the Government's critics take a dim view of the official version that the numbers at stake would not merit the appellation of a "stolen generation" with all its attendant

nous people. These values were acceptable in that social-political milieu, but not now. Mr. Howard has now sought to tame the political tempest by acknowledging that there is no intention to whitewash or deny the historical occurrence of a practice.

The practice of "mandatory sentencing" in Western Australia and the Northern Territory relates to compulsory prison terms for certain categories of offences generally regarded elsewhere as relative minor crimes. The official word on this, too, is that the federal Government is not supportive of this and that the mandatory sanctions apply to aborigines and the others. Given the preponderance of aborigines among the



Members of the "stolen generation" stage a protest before Parliament in Canberra, Australia.

ald the prospective Sydney Olympics.

The latest worries for the Prime Minister, Mr. John Howard, began with the "media leakage" of an internal Government report on the aboriginal issue with reference to the "stolen generation" among other themes. Over several decades in the past, up until the 1950s, the children of indigenous people were separated or snatched (depending on the observer's perspective) from their

odium of wrong-doing by the non-governmental organisations of that period such as some community groups and by the state which permitted the re-location of select aboriginal children in the past.

While there is no major mainstream political opinion today in support of what had happened, the pro-establishment view is that the the state had in the past taken a "paternalistic" attitude of "nurturing" the affected indige-

"victims" of the relevant laws, the "mandatory sentencing" too has acquired racial overtones, and it is being addressed accordingly by human rights groups.

Looking beyond these legal and political niceties, the champions of aboriginal rights have seized the moment offered by the prospective Sydney Olympics to demand justice, and the latest outburst of opinion may have exposed only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

THE HINDU

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New Zealand seeks N-free Southern Zone

WELLINGTON: An international conference on disarmament in Geneva next week will see New Zealand intensify moves towards a southern hemisphere nuclear weapons-free zone, arms control minister Matt Robson said on Thursday.

New Zealand plans to float the idea of hosting so-called new agenda countries at a forum aimed at boosting disarmament prospects as the newly elected centre-left government moves to put its stamp on foreign policy.

The new agenda coalition — which includes Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden — seeks the swift and total elimination of all nuclear weapons.

The Wellington meeting would give these countries a chance to identify ways to increase nuclear disarmament pressures on major powers and could win support for New Zealand's bid to develop a southern hemisphere nuclear weapons-free zone, Mr Robson said. "It is opposed by the nuclear powers, and even countries such as Australia at the moment are not keen on taking that issue on," he said, adding that impetus was building for a blanket southern hemisphere nuclear weapons free zone despite opposition.

Wolfgang Hoffman, executive secretary of the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban (CTBT) Organisation, said New Zealand could

achieve a great deal as a credible mover in arms control and disarmament circles. "The word of New Zealand is in high esteem and that is why it is useful to have New Zealand at our side," he said in New Zealand following visits to Singapore, Canberra and Sydney.

New Zealand is an active signatory to the CTBT, which bans all nuclear explosions and tests in all environments — underwater, underground and in the atmosphere. New Zealand is also a party to the South Pacific Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, as a signatory to the treaty of Rarotonga.

New Zealand's plan was to wrap the southern hemisphere areas together, add the gaps which were in international waters, and create a nuclear weapons free zone to blanket the lower half of the globe, Mr Robson said.

"Clearly this is a large task because you're asking nuclear powers to give up something which they see as an important strategic interest for them.

"We have nuclear-free zones at the moment but the law of the sea operates (allowing free passage through international waters) and nuclear powers claim that it is their right to transport nuclear weapons, materials throughout the whole of the southern hemisphere," he said.

"I think it's absolute arrogance that they continue to use the law of the sea which is an international convention — the spirit behind it is for peaceful use," he said. (Reuter)

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Queen knows attitudes have changed in Australia: PM

BRITAIN'S Queen Elizabeth II is well aware Australians view the monarchy differently now to how they once did, Prime Minister John Howard said after meeting her on Saturday.

Howard, a diehard loyalist who helped the monarchists defeat the republicans in last November's referendum, refused after their meeting to say whether the historic vote had been discussed. But he told reporters, including a large contingent of British correspondents, he believed the queen was well aware that attitudes differed to those that existed in 1954 when millions of adoring Australians lined the streets to see her.

"It's a different world from what it was in 1954 or even 1963," he said. "We have a very, very diverse, busy life, all of us." He said he believed there would be considerable interest in the royal visit, "but nobody should imagine that it would be like what it was in 1954. The world has moved on. It is very different. I am quite certain that

Australians have always been warm towards her, including many people in Australia who voted for a republic.

"The queen as a person has not been the issue in the constitutional debate in Australia."

The queen, he said, had also made clear during their discussions that she was quite happy with his decision to invite Governor-General Sir William Deane to open the Olympic Games here in September instead of

her. Howard's decision not to invite her to open the games was seen by a segment of the British media as a snub to the queen — but



Queen Elizabeth with Australian PM John Howard and his wife, Jeanette, in Canberra after being presented with a book of botanical prints on Saturday. AFP photo

not apparently by Her Majesty. The queen and husband Prince Philip are spending most of the 18-day visit as the guest of Deane and will make day trips from there around the eastern states of New South Wales and Victoria.

The first major engagement begins on Monday with an official welcome at the Sydney Opera House.

The Australian visit, which has been billed as her most arduous tour for years, is her 13th as queen.

The royal couple will spend two days in Sydney before the queen travels to the dusty outback town of Bourke where she will visit a primary school and an Aboriginal radio station.

Howard also rejected any suggestion the queen's visit just four months after the referendum would be any embarrassment to her. "Australians handled that referendum with the maturity and commonsense for which we are renowned," he said.

But he admitted to being unsure if her visit would have any impact on Australia's attitudes towards the monarchy.

—Agence France Presse