THE JAPAN–AUSTRALIA PARTNERSHIP IN THE ERA OF THE EAST ASIAN COMMUNITY: CAN THEY ADVANCE TOGETHER?

This paper aims to examine the implications of the rise of East Asian regionalism for the Australia–Japan partnership. In particular, it investigates whether both nations can sustain their partnership, which evolved around Asia Pacific regionalism over the last few decades, by exploring the upsurge of Japan’s interest in East Asian regionalism and examining characteristics of Australia’s foreign policy under the Howard government, which lacked a regionalist approach in its first three terms but has shown a keener interest in furthering relations with East Asian countries and promoting East Asian regionalism since late 2004.

Introduction

Australia’s engagement with East Asia and the Pacific has been widely perceived to be its overriding foreign policy priority during the 1980s and 90s, especially when Prime Ministers Hawke and Keating were in power and Australia was actively engaged in regional economic diplomacy. The partnership with Japan functioned successfully as part of Australia’s strategy through their joint initiatives in establishing regional economic institutions such as Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) in 1980 and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989, which served as catalysts in promoting Australia’s regional engagement at that time. These regional institutions were designed to promote economic cooperation with member states and, more symbolically, to nurture togetherness with them by tackling common problems and pursuing shared goals such as trade liberalisation in the region. Sharing a view with Australia that the stability and prosperity in East Asia and the Pacific was a vital national interest, Japan — Australia’s largest trading partner — consistently supported Australia’s engagement policy. The significance of Japan’s supportive role in Australia’s engagement was fully acknowledged by Australia, as declared in Australia’s first Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper that ‘the partnership with Japan will have a decisive bearing on Australia’s overall standing in East Asia and [Australia’s] degree of participation in regional affairs’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997: 60).

The foreign policy priorities and approaches of the Howard government, however, were perceived to be distinctive from those of the Hawke and Keating governments. Conspicuous differences stemmed