

Alan Dupont
Neighbours back on track
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Far from being marginalised in the region, Australia is actually being courted by Asia. There can be no clearer illustration of our rising stock in Asia than the impending visits to Australia of Indonesia's recently elected President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his Malaysian counterpart, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Yudhoyono's willingness to come so early in his presidency, and despite the ravages inflicted by a second Sumatran earthquake, means the turnaround in Australia's once-fraught official relations with Indonesia is almost complete. The raw anger in Jakarta over Australia's 1999 intervention in East Timor has been replaced by a grudging acceptance that good relations with Australia are an imperative for Indonesian foreign policy.

The simple reason is that Australia can no longer be ignored or treated as a marginal player in Asia. More than 15 years of sustained economic growth has transformed the Australian economy into one of the strongest in the region, the most effective possible repudiation of former Singapore prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's mid-1980s dismissal of Australia as the "white trash of Asia".

Australia's economic meshing with Asia is deeper and more broadly based than at any time in our history, propelled by a renewed regional appetite for our minerals, energy resources and agricultural products and underpinned by a raft of bilateral free-trade agreements already signed or in prospect.

A government which once seemed curiously detached from Asia and prone to rhetorical faux pas has become more adept at dealing with the region and attuned to its needs. The generous tsunami relief package of \$1 billion is indicative.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's visit is even more significant, given his predecessor's vilification of Australia and trenchant opposition to our membership of what former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad clearly intended to be an Asians-only club, now rebadged as the East Asian Summit.

The Association of South-East Asian Nations' consensus rule meant that Mahathir was able to exercise a 20-year veto on Australia's aspirations for greater access to the core institutions of Asian regionalism, an unstated goal of Australian foreign policy dating back to the Hawke Labor government.

Although dismissed as an inconsequential spoiler by his legions of western detractors, Mahathir spoke for many Asians when he argued that Australia was not part of the region because it remained, in essence, a European transplant.

So Abdullah's visit is doubly important. It signifies his rejection of the Mahathir view and is a powerful signal that, henceforth, Malaysia will seek a qualitatively better relationship with Australia based on a hard-headed assessment of what we bring to the regional table — economic strength, strategic weight and a valuable repository of technology, education, trade and investment.

All this has been made easier by a steady convergence of values and the presence of nearly 200,000 Asian students in Australia who are palpable evidence of the singular importance of soft power and a far more reliable indicator of Australia's acceptance in Asia than fluctuating official ties.

At one level this is a vindication of the Howard view that you can have all the rhetorical flummery in the world but it's what you actually deliver that counts. Doing is usually better than talking and the government can justifiably point to an impressive list of regional achievements.

But how the message is delivered also counts, as does the spin imparted. Unfortunately, the government can still sound badly off-key in Asia and needlessly belittles the importance of regional symbols; for example, Howard's reluctance to sign the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation. The government ought to give more attention to tailoring its language and message for regional audiences.

Getting this right would reap considerable political capital in Asia and help consolidate Australia's growing reputation as an indispensable partner for our once-sceptical neighbours.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the Yudhoyono-Abdullah visits put paid to the myth that Australia is not welcome in Asia and that we need the region more than the region needs us.

The reality is that the futures of Australia and Asia are inextricably linked and our common interests are growing rather than declining.

We have recognised this for a long time and now it appears that our Asian neighbours do, too.

Alan Dupont is senior fellow for international security at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, which will be officially launched in Sydney tonight.