



Report card on Australia's relations with the region 2007

Asia-Pacific NGO opinion survey

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Executive Summary

This paper reports on a survey of Asia Pacific non-governmental organisations (NGOs) conducted over a period of two months from 8 June 2006 by Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre in partnership with Griffith Asia Institute. The study seeks to understand how this population perceives Australia, the source of information on Australia, whether these perceptions are changing, and whether these organisations share Australia's concerns on a number of foreign policy issues. Some questions were based on previous surveys in Australia to ensure comparability.

NGOs are considered by some scholars to have strong links to the general public and would reflect or be able to influence the views and perceptions of ordinary citizens. Although there are suggestions that they are not representative of public opinion, this group is increasingly influential in national and international politics.

By providing new data and analysis, this study seeks to contribute to the debate on Australia's current relations with its neighbours; to increase the level of awareness among Australians of issues affecting Australia's regional relationships, and to offer new foreign policy insights into Australia's engagement with the region.

Information sources

Despite the rise of global internet usage, respondents continue to rely on their local media for information on Australia. Trailing the local media, the internet is the next most popular source. Asian NGOs are more likely to use the internet to gather information about Australia than their Pacific counterparts.

While Asian NGOs may be better connected electronically, Pacific NGOs rely more on people-to-people networks. The research shows that Pacific organisations rely on their contact with overseas networks and with Australians for information on Australia. Asians are more likely to have gathered the information from members or colleagues within their own country.

Generally, most NGOs in Asia do not have much face-to-face contact with Australian government officials. However, in the last year, Pacific NGOs have had more contact with Australian officials than their Asian counterparts. More Pacific than Asian NGOs had contact with Australians who are not government officials and most respondents said they met with them frequently in the past year.

Australia's place in the region

As researchers expected, the majority of respondents consider Australia to be culturally closest to either Europe or North America. However, over a third of respondents think Australia is 'culturally closest' to either Asia or the Pacific. While the reasons for this perception are beyond the scope of this study, increased immigration from Asia, New Zealand and the South Pacific may be an important lens through which the region sees Australia.

Looking beyond the region, asked whether they agree that a close relationship between Australia and the US is positive for their region, twice as many NGOs disagreed with the statement as

agreed. However, they generally agreed that a close relationship between Australia and China is positive for the region. NGOs do not seem deterred by China's growing economic and military influence in the region and although they consider Australia's cultural heritage closer to Europe or America, they would rather see Australia turn its attention away from the US and towards Asia.

Asia and Pacific NGOs generally agree that Australia is a 'good international citizen'. Moreover, they left little doubt that they believe Australia is important and that they respect its role in the region. However, this respect does not necessarily mean that the respondent will 'always listen to what Australia has to say'.

Perceptions of Australia

NGOs from Asia and the Pacific generally feel more positive than negative about Australia. Pacific NGOs registered slightly more negative feelings towards Australia than their counterparts in Asia. Many respondents said their feelings about Australia have not changed in the past year but of those whose feelings have changed, nearly twice as many have changed for the worse.

Overall, Australia still enjoys a high level of positive feelings from Asia and the Pacific but perceptions are slowly changing. Pacific NGOs – ironically the group with the most contact with Australians – are generally unhappier about Australia than Asian organisations and their feelings towards this nation are dipping further into the negative.

Comparing foreign policy goals

The survey reveals that 'protecting the global environment' is a great concern for NGOs in the region. Asians, who are paying the cost of decades of high growth and rapid urbanisation with deepening environmental problems, are slightly more concerned about the environment than Pacific Islanders who are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Controlling illegal immigration, combating terrorism, and strengthening their country's economy are listed among the least important foreign policy goals for the Asia Pacific respondents. The results reveal a noticeable gap between Asia and Pacific NGOs and Australia on issues such as security and the economy.

Suggestions for better relations

Even though respondents considered the environment to be an urgent foreign policy priority for the region, Asia and Pacific NGOs did not think it was a barrier to better relations between their country and Australia. Responding to an open-ended question, there was only one remark about the impact of climate change on Pacific nations. The most common response by far relates to migration issues.

Inadequate Australian foreign aid and unfair trade are also important barriers to better relations, according to the respondents. Foreign aid was the most popular topic after migration issues. However, respondents differed in the nature of the aid they advocated, with views ranging from budgetary aid, to aid for good governance, to private aid. Frequently suggested, particularly among Asian NGOs, was the need for cultural and educational exchange programs.

Another common theme among NGOs related to the nature of diplomacy. Asian NGOs wanted 'respect' and 'fair play between two countries'. The Pacific was a bit more direct, suggesting

'more humility' in both PNG and Australia and 'less blatant hypocrisy on the part of the Australian leadership.'

Emerging trends likely to affect relations

Respondents mentioned regional demographic changes and increased migration to Australia from Asia Pacific as the trends most likely to impact on relations between Australia and their respective countries. Interestingly, some respondents also feared that the proliferation of regional free trade agreements, increased international trade, and the 'convergence of financial markets' would affect future bilateral relations.

1. Introduction

As an Aboriginal and migrant country comprised of mostly European descendants and politically aligned to the US, Australia's place in the Asia Pacific region can be a source of curiosity for its neighbours, but also confusion and uncertainty for its people. In recent years this uncertainty has been apparent in debates over a variety of events and trends, including Australia's military and political interventions in Iraq and a number of Asia Pacific countries; its response to the threat of regional terrorism; its move towards harsher immigration, refugee and citizenship rules; and the proliferation of bilateral free trade agreements.

In this fluid environment, the researchers were interested in gauging perceptions on: how Australians perceive their place in the region, how people and organisations in the region perceive Australia, and whether these perceptions are changing. There has been some useful research on the former, including the 2005 and 2006 Lowy Institute polls.¹ However, very little has been done to explore how Australia's regional neighbours see this nation and no known research is available on the opinion of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in this area.

In the absence of reliable data, both supporters and detractors of current Government foreign policy are able to make unsubstantiated claims about Australia's place in the region. For instance, Foreign Minister Downer argued in 2001 that 'Australia's esteem and respect around the world is higher now than it has ever been in its history.'² More recently, the Prime Minister John Howard claimed during his first visit to Vietnam for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit that 'Australia has, I believe, done a very good job of reaching out to the ... Asia Pacific region, of which we will forever be a part.'³ On the other hand, others around the region, particularly academics and civil society groups, have claimed that, for various reasons including its human rights, environmental and diplomatic record, Australia's international reputation has been rolling on a downward slope since at least the mid-1990s.⁴

¹ Ivan Cook, *Australians Speak: Public opinion and foreign policy*, Lowy Institute, 2005; and *Australia, Indonesia and the World: Public opinion and foreign policy*, Lowy Institute, 2006.

² Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer, 'Australia – Meeting our international challenges', Speech to the National Press Club, Canberra, 1 March 2001, www.dfat.gov.au/media/speeches/foreign/2001/010301_fa_npc.html.

³ 'Howard upbeat about Australia's regional links', ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200611/s1793278.htm>

⁴ See, eg, 'Brown: Australia's reputation trashed over refugees', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 November 2003; Angus Nicholls, and Soe Tjen Marching, 'Australia's Indonesia, Indonesia's Australia', *Antipodes*, December 2002; Steven Ratuva, 'Cool Koala or Walloping Wallaby: Pacific Island Perception of Australia' in Greg Fry, ed. *Australia's New Interventionism in the Pacific*. Pandanus Publishers, Canberra, 2004; and Banham, Cynthia, 'Bilateral bond a thin veneer over suspicion' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 July 2005, www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/bilateral-bond-a-thin-

This study by Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre was conducted in partnership with Griffith Asia Institute. Uniya's focus is to influence public policy and opinion on key social justice and human rights issues, particularly by providing research and ethical reflections on the state of Australia's relationship with its regional neighbours. Griffith Asia Institute seeks to promote and contribute to a broad national debate on current issues of security, identity and political and economic change in Asia and the South Pacific and how these are relevant to Australia.

The opinions of NGOs are central to the missions of both organisations. NGOs are considered by some scholars to have strong links to the general public and would be able to reflect or influence the views and perceptions of ordinary citizens.⁵ Although there have been suggestions that 'the sum of NGO opinions does not equal public opinion',⁶ very few would doubt NGOs are increasingly influential at a national level and on the world stage. By providing new data and analysis, this study seeks to contribute to the debate on Australia's current relations with its neighbours; to increase the level of awareness among Australians of issues affecting Australia's regional relationships and to offer new foreign policy insights in Australia's engagement with the region.

Acknowledgement

The research was managed and conducted by Minh Nguyen, Uniya's researcher, with initial input from senior researcher Dr Mark Byrne, and the research assistance of interns Alison Jaworski and Nicola Gabay. The study benefited from the partnership with the Griffith Asia Institute and the advice of Professor Michael Wesley, Director of the Institute, and University of NSW Emeritus Professor Tony Vinson. The authors also appreciate the support of Uniya staff and volunteers, particularly Mary Bryant, Veronika Jeffery, Greg Campbell and Anna Ginty.

2. Methodology

2.1 The survey

Researchers from Uniya designed the quantitative research questionnaire with input from Griffith Asia Institute and Professor Tony Vinson. Before distributing the survey a draft was piloted among five regional NGOs known to Uniya to test the design and to ensure that it was clear and culturally appropriate. The comments resulted in the revision of a number of questions to minimise ambiguity.

veneer-over-suspicion/2005/07/24/1122143724353.html; Matt McDonald, 'Perspectives on Australian Foreign Policy, 2004', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 59, 2 June 2005, 153-168; and Richard Woolcott, Foreign policy priorities for the Howard government's fourth term: Australia, Asia and America in the post-11th September world, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 59, 2 June 2005, 141-152.

⁵ Sarah Maddison, Richard Denniss and Clive Hamilton, 'Silencing Dissent: Non-government organisations and Australian democracy', Discussion paper no.65, The Australia Institute, June 2004; see also Tony Kevin, 'Puppetmasters in a shadow play' in Minh Nguyen (ed.), *Good Neighbour, Bad Neighbour: Australia's relations with Indonesia*, Uniya, 2006, p.41.

⁶ Gary Johns, 'When "charity" really means "lobbyist"', *The Age*, 12 June 2004, www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/06/11/1086749892842.html?oneclick=true

A self-administered questionnaire survey was sent in two rounds to all NGOs with valid email addresses listed on the database over a period of two months from 8 June 2006. The first round was conducted via email and the second round via an identical but anonymous web-based questionnaire form because some respondents reported that they could not open the initial survey attachment.

A set of questions was asked in the survey which allowed for an assessment of Asia Pacific perceptions of Australia, their sources of information, whether and why their perceptions have changed over the past year, and whether or not they share Australia's concerns about a number of foreign policy issues. Some questions were based on the Lowy Institute poll 2005 in Australia to ensure comparability.

Researchers decided on a self-administered questionnaire as the best method for the purpose of researching perceptions. Since many NGOs operate with limited means and therefore do not have the resources to respond to complex or detailed questions or to engage in in-depth interviews, questionnaires allow information to be gathered while ensuring that this procedure is not too onerous for respondents. Questionnaires are also able to reach a wide range of respondents⁷ – an important factor given that the respondents are located overseas.

The survey questionnaire was conducted via email and the web. Although electronic surveys usually attract lower response rates than other methods, previous research suggests that these surveys obtain more sincere and thoughtful responses, since respondents can see all questions at once and are able to take as much time as they want to answer.⁸ Electronic surveys reduce the transmission and response time and are also inexpensive to distribute.⁹

Whilst it is acknowledged that electronic surveys automatically eliminate Asia and Pacific organisations that do not have access to appropriate information technology, the assumption was that organisations that are well integrated in the information superhighway have greater access to information about international issues, have a greater ability to transmit and receive information from overseas sources, are more influential, and are usually organisations with fewer time constraints.¹⁰

The survey was not translated from English, even though this would have also lowered the response rate with some local NGOs unable or unwilling to participate. In part, this approach has been taken because of the resources needed to create separate surveys for all ASEAN and Pacific Islands Forum countries included in the sample, in addition to the enormous amount of local dialects widely used within these states.

This study assumes that translation is not necessary for many NGOs since English language skills are often required for managers and administrators of NGOs. This study further assumes that organisations capable of communicating in English would have greater and more direct access to information about Australia and international issues.

⁷ Neuman, 2003, p267.

⁸ Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, *Global Views: American public opinion and foreign policy*, 2004, pp.54-5.

⁹ *Global Views*, 2004, http://thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/Global_Views_2004_US.pdf.

¹⁰ McKonnell, 1998.

2.2 Defining ‘NGO’

There is no general agreement on a definition for entities variously described as the ‘third sector’, ‘not-for-profit’ or ‘non-profit’ organisation, ‘voluntary association’ and ‘non-governmental organisation’.¹¹ As one study notes, ‘it is evident that there is not one single term that can be deployed to capture the wide range of organisations in the non-government sector.’¹² This study refers to these entities generally as ‘non-governmental organisations’ or NGOs. As with NGO definitions used for statistical research,¹³ the focus is on the sector as a whole and is based on the entity’s activity or organisational structure, rather than on its purpose. Included in the sample are organisations that ‘are not-for-profit and non-profit-distributing ... are institutionally separate from government, are self-governing, and non-compulsory.’¹⁴

2.3 The sample

ASEAN*		Pacific Islands Forum**	
Philippines	98	New Zealand	68
Thailand	69	Fiji	16
Malaysia	66	Papua New Guinea	13
Indonesia	53	Vanuatu	10
Vietnam	28	Cook Islands	9
Cambodia	16	Tonga	9
Singapore	16	Samoa	8
Burma/Myanmar	9	Marshall Islands	6
Laos	5	Solomon Islands	6
Brunei	1	Federated States of Micronesia	5
		Kiribati	3
		Tuvalu	2
		Niue	2
		Palau	2
		Nauru	1
Total	361	Total	160

Table 1: NGO sample size

* East Timor was not a member of ASEAN at the time the survey was conducted.

** Australia was excluded from the sample.

¹¹ David Neath, Submission to the Enquiry into the Definition of Charities, 28 December 2000, home.iprimus.com.au/dneath/non-profit/submission2.doc

¹² TAI, pp.1-2.

¹³ Charities Definition Inquiry, Chapter 10, <http://www.cdi.gov.au/html/report.htm>

¹⁴ ABS, Australian National Accounts: Non-Profit Institutions Satellite Account, 1999-2000, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/productsbytitle/A41A434D8A63A4DCCA256C7E0076ABE2?OpenDocument>

The quantitative sample was derived from a specially compiled database of NGOs operating in ASEAN and Pacific Islands Forum (formerly South Pacific Forum) member countries. The database was sourced from the internet and from a number of publicly available NGO databases, including the Conference of NGOs (CONGO), the *Directory of Development Organisations 2006*, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Resource Center for Human Rights Education's *Directory of Asia and the Pacific Organizations Related to Human Rights Education Work*, 3rd edition, 2003 and *A Directory of Southeast Asia: Selected Organizations Related to Sectoral Training and Capacity Building*, 2002, and the *Pacific Development Directory*.

This study was concerned with NGOs' perceptions. The survey participants were limited to persons in positions of authority, or persons authorised to speak on behalf of his or her organisation operating in the ASEAN and Pacific Islands Forum countries. To ensure that only data from authorised respondents were included in our research, the cover letter pointed out that 'This questionnaire should be completed by someone in a position to speak on behalf of your organisation (such as a Director, President, Secretary General, Spokesperson etc.) or who has been authorised by a person in such a position to complete this questionnaire on behalf of your organisation'.

As an additional measure, mandatory questions about the respondent's position and authority were included in the 'demographic' section of the questionnaire. The first part asked for the position of the respondent within his or her organisation. The second part asked whether the questionnaire is being filled out on behalf of the organisation. Based on the responses, each identifiable organisation was individually researched before researchers could make a final determination on whether or not to include their response.

A mandatory question about the organisation's non-governmental status was similarly included in the demographic section and each identifiable organisation was also researched to ensure that they met the definition of an NGO as set out in this study.

Researchers culled 15 responses from Asia and 5 responses from the Pacific because they did not meet the requirements for authority or the definition of an NGO. Four respondents from Asia and two from the Pacific were randomly chosen for verification by telephone. All of the respondents confirmed they completed the questionnaire in their capacity as a person authorised to speak on behalf of the organisation and that their organisation is non-governmental.

The type of sample used in the survey is known as a 'purposive sample.' Respondents were selected from a list formed by compiling a variety of existing NGO databases into one large database and any organisations that did not fit the NGO definition were eliminated from the sample. While this list may not be representative of all the NGOs in Asia Pacific, such a sample selection was necessary since the population of NGOs in South East Asia and the Pacific is unknown and therefore a random sample cannot be drawn.

This bias was compensated by using 'maximum diversity sampling'. This method is based on the statistical principle of 'regression towards the mean', whereby, if a group of respondents differ widely in some way, all their answers combined will be close to the answer an average respondent would give. For this reason, the researchers adopted a broad definition of NGOs to include a range of organisations from trade unions to business associations, women's organisations and faith-based organisations, so as to attract the broadest possible range of views.

Geographic spread

The response rate was 16.9% (61 responses) for Asia and 18.8% (30 responses) for the Pacific; however, as noted above, several responses were culled from the study because they did not meet certain requirements. *Figure 1* represents the valid responses (46 for Asia and 25 for the Pacific) sorted by country.

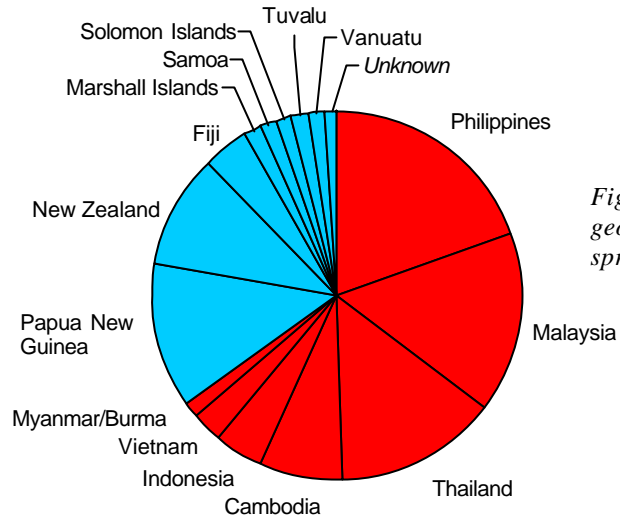


Figure 1: NGO geographical spread

With a few notable exceptions such as Papua New Guinea, Cambodia and Vanuatu, countries that appear to have a higher NGO population yielded a higher response rate.

Core interest of respondents

Most respondent NGOs (*figure 2*) were involved in development and education, followed by children and youth issues. There was an even spread between Asia and the Pacific in the NGOs' core area of interest with a few notable exceptions, such as organisations that identified themselves as 'religious' in the Pacific and with agricultural or environmental issues in Asia.

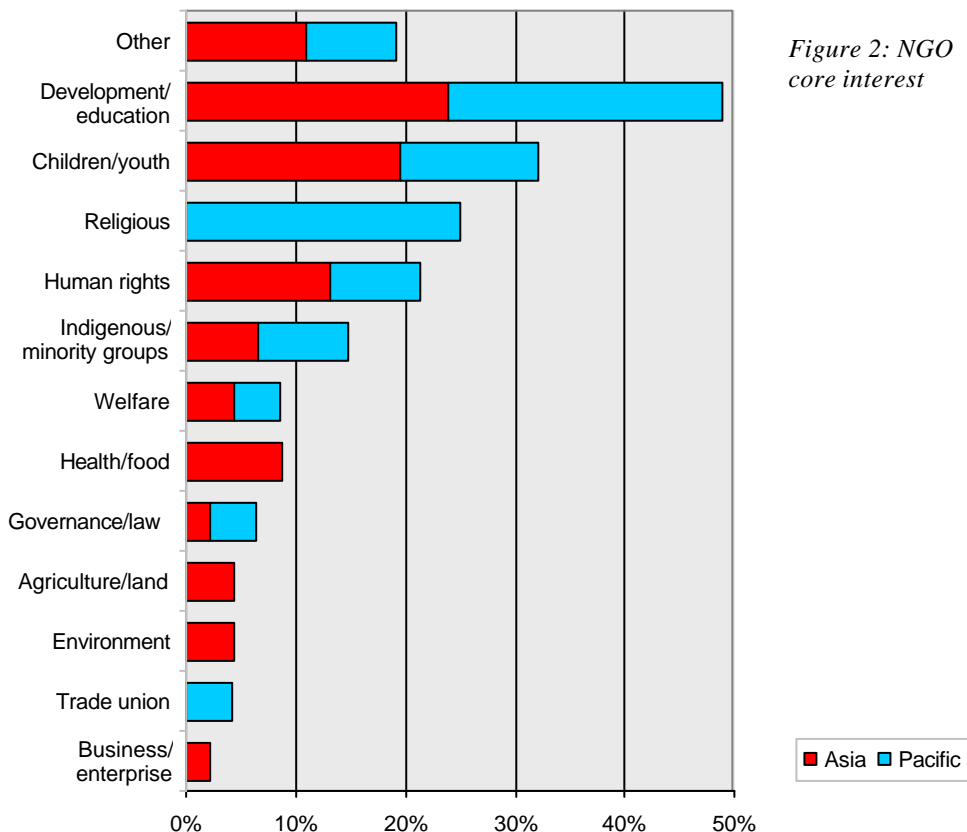


Figure 2: NGO core interest

3. Results

3.1 Information sources

The rationale for this question (*figure 3*) was to understand the main sources of information about Australia for NGOs in Asia and the Pacific over the past year; to discover any correlations between exposure to information about Australia or Australians and better bilateral relations; and to provide insights into ways of better communicating Australia's policies and objectives in the region.

Even though global internet usage has tripled in the past six years, the majority of respondents (73%) continue to rely principally on their local media (television, radio, newspaper and magazine) for information on Australia. On average, the internet is the second most widely used medium with 51% of respondents going online for information on Australia. However, Asian NGOs are twice more likely than Pacific NGOs (61% Asia compared to 32% Pacific) to rely on online information.

One area where Pacific NGOs are ahead of their Asian counterparts is the level of contact they have with overseas networks (36% compared to 26%) and with Australian government officials (20% compared to 7%). The research shows that Pacific NGOs have broader contact with Australians than Asian NGOs and Asian NGOs are more likely to have gathered information about Australia in the last 12 months from members or colleagues in their own country (26% compared to 12%).

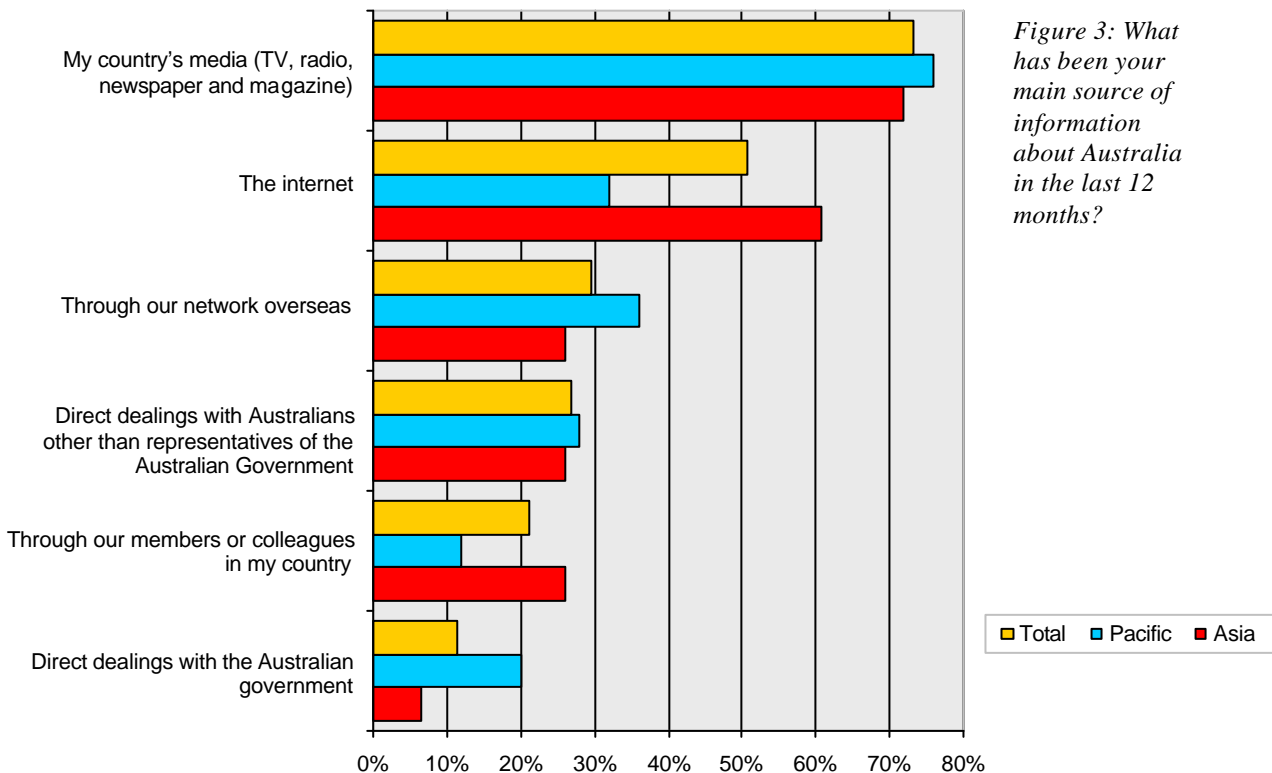
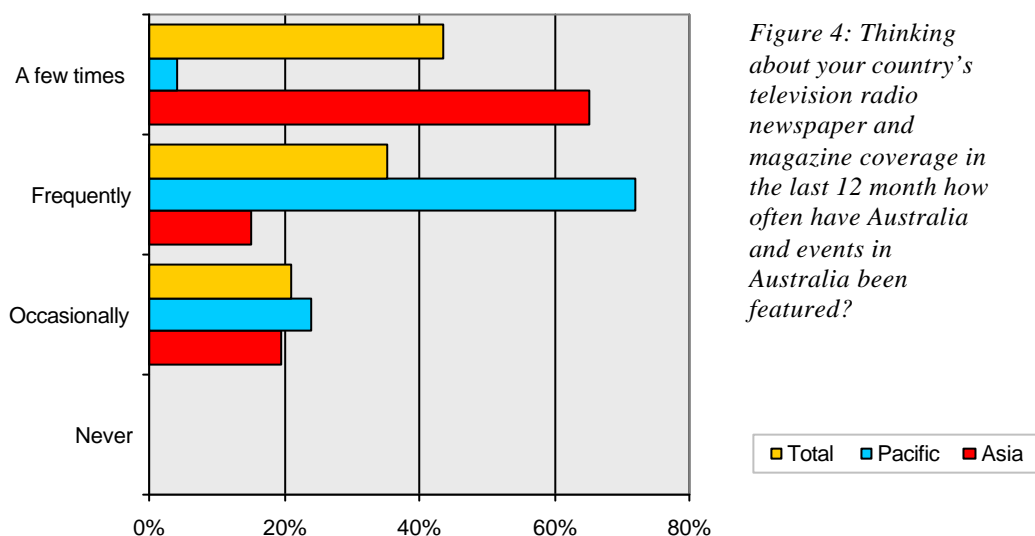


Figure 3: What has been your main source of information about Australia in the last 12 months?

3.1.1 Media coverage of Australia in local media

There was a marked contrast between Asia and the Pacific concerning the perceived coverage of Australia in their local media in the last 12 months. Most Asian NGOs reported seeing or hearing Australia or Australian events being featured 'a few times' (65% compared to 4%) on their country's television, radio, newspaper or magazine, while most Pacific NGOs reported 'frequently' seeing or hearing these stories (72% compared to 15%). The results seem to explain observations made by the Senate Inquiry in 2003 into Australia's relations with the Pacific that 'we are lucky in how well the [Pacific] region knows us.'¹⁵



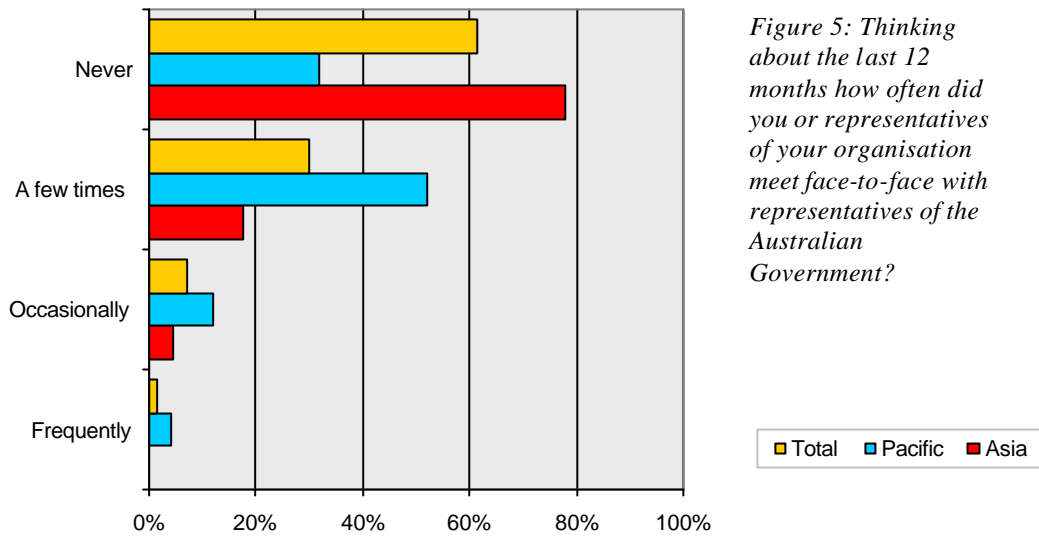
3.1.2 Frequency of contact with Australia

Former diplomat Alison Broinowski argues that in Asia, Australian government officials 'promote not the national image but the national interest. ... Where they promote it is primarily in Washington, and sometimes in London, but not much in Asia.'¹⁶ With respect to Asia, Broinowski's observation appears to have been confirmed by the survey's responses: NGOs in Asia do not get information about Australia directly from Australian government officials (*figure 3*). The survey result shows that this is also true for Pacific NGOs.

A more specific question (*figure 5*) on the frequency of meetings between NGOs and the Government reveals similar results. Sixty-one per cent of NGOs, mostly from Asia, have not met any Australian officials in the past 12 months. No Asian NGOs surveyed have frequent face-to-face meetings with an Australian Government official, while only one NGO from the Pacific said it did. However, most NGOs have had meetings 'a few times' with officials over the past year and the figure is higher at 52% for Pacific NGOs compared to only 18% for Asian NGOs.

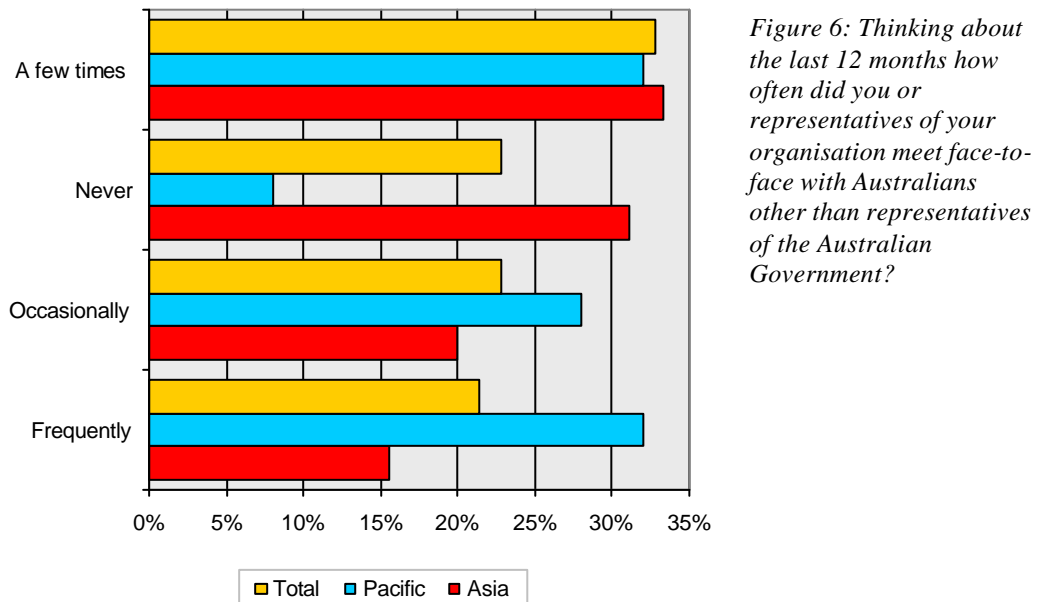
¹⁵ Inquiry quoting G Dobell, 'The Reluctant Pacific Nation', *Quadrant*, May 2003, ch.8, p.208.

¹⁶ 'Bali blowback,' 2003 p.61.



Comparing this to NGO contacts with ordinary Australians (Australians other than representatives of the Australian Government – *figure 6*), only 23% of Asia and Pacific NGOs said they did *not* meet with Australians other than representatives of Australia in the past year, while more than a fifth said they met frequently with these Australians.

Again, Pacific NGOs are more connected than Asian NGOs in the frequency of contact with ordinary Australians. Thirty-two per cent of Pacific respondents said they met ‘frequently’ with Australians who are not Government officials in the past year, compared to 16% of Asian NGOs. Only 8% of the Pacific respondents said they did not meet ordinary Australians compared to 31% of Asian respondents.



3.2 Australia's place in the region

Illustrating the long history of this debate, Stephen Crabbe recalls reading *The Australian's* letters page as far back as 1964 discussing whether or not Australia is 'part of Asia'.¹⁷ This is also a question that Australia's regional neighbours ponder, as former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir famously said before his retirement, 'Australia must decide whether it is Europe or America, or is it Asia?'¹⁸ As the views of the political leaders in Asia and the Pacific are well reported in Australia, the purpose of this question (*figure 7*) was to add another dimension to the debate by asking regional NGOs about Australia's place and its national characteristics.

Asked 'which region do you think Australia is 'culturally closest to'', it is perhaps not surprising that 59% considered Australia either European or North American. It is, however, a surprise to find that over 37% of the respondents thought Australia to be 'culturally closest to' either Asia or the Pacific. While the reason for this is beyond the scope of this study, responses to open-ended questions on future relations between Australia and their respective countries suggest that increased immigration from Asia, New Zealand and the South Pacific is an important lens through which the region sees Australia. With increased immigration from Asia, New Zealand and the South Pacific, Australia's cultural identity as seen by its neighbours may no longer be as clear cut as it has been in the past.

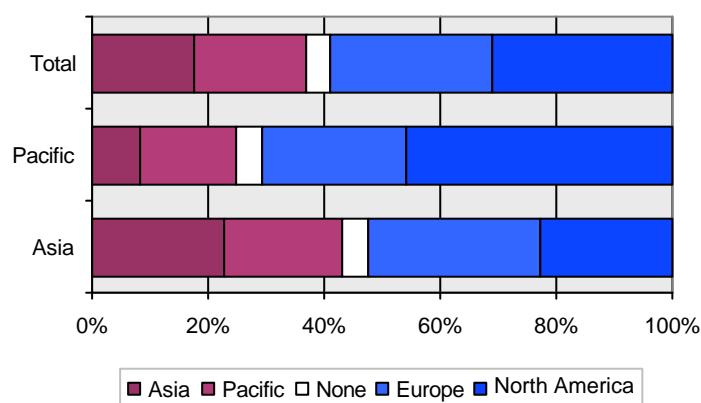


Figure 7: Which region do you think Australia is culturally closest to?

Asia Pacific NGOs registered (*figure 8*) their displeasure with Australia's close alliance with the US when the study asked a series of questions about Australia's national characteristics. Asked whether they agree that a close relationship between Australia and the US is positive for their region, twice as many NGOs disagreed with the statement (42%) than agreed (18%). Overall Asia registered the greatest level of disagreement with the statement at 48% compared to 32% for the Pacific.

Comparing this to the same statement regarding mainland China, there is a higher level of agreement that a close relationship between Australia and China is positive for their region (44% in agreement compared to 21% in disagreement). Asia Pacific NGOs do not seem deterred by China's growing economic and military influence in the region and although they consider

¹⁷ Stephen Crabbe, 'Incontinent times? Australia needs to develop a unique new world-view', *OnlineOpinion*, <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=1846>.

¹⁸ Mark Baker, 'Mahathir signs off with swipe at Australia,' *The Age*, 9 October 2003, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/10/08/1065601917833.html>.

Australia's cultural heritage closer to Europe or America, they would rather see Australia turn its attention away from the US and towards Asia.

Asia Pacific NGOs' keenness to see an Australia more attentive to the region is confirmed in a question that attracted the least controversy. Eighty-two per cent of Asia Pacific NGOs believe that Australia is important to their region with the Pacific NGOs being most certain about this position – 92% in agreement compared to Asia's 76%. No Pacific NGO disagreed with the statement and only 7% of Asian NGOs disagreed.

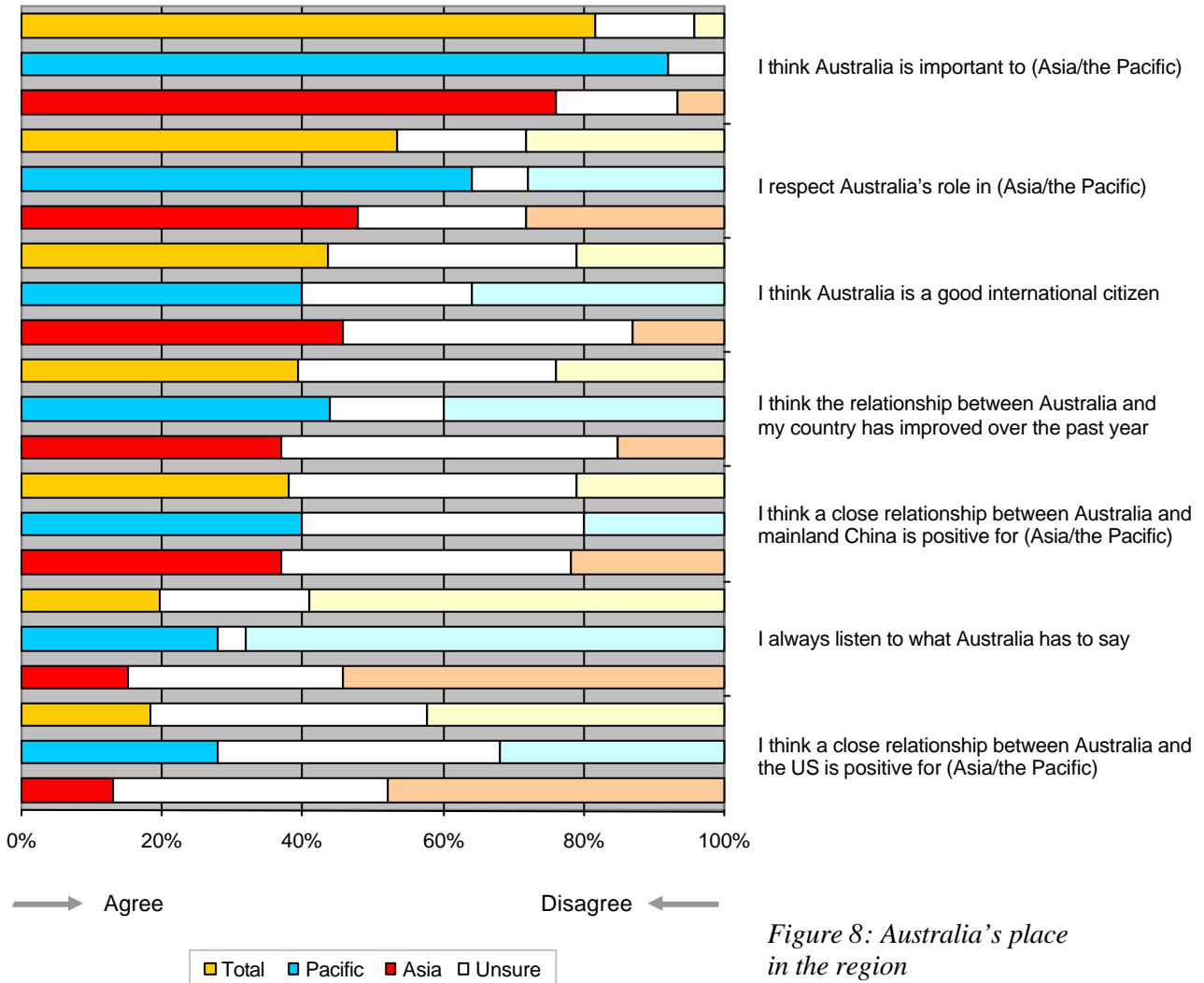


Figure 8: Australia's place in the region

Although some human rights groups claim that Australia's reputation has plummeted since the 1990s with both the Labor and Coalition governments moving away from a commitment to human rights and democracy, the survey shows that Asia and the Pacific still regard Australia as a 'good international citizen'. But a high percentage of respondents were unsure about this question. The Pacific is divided on this point (44% agreed and 40% disagreed). However, in a surprising result, Asian NGOs are more confident in their belief that Australia is a good international citizen than are Pacific NGOs (37% agreed and 15% disagreed).

Asia Pacific NGOs also recognise Australia’s importance and respect its role (54%) in the region. However, contrary to Government statements,¹⁹ Australia is not always listened to. 59% of regional NGOs disagreed with the statement ‘I always listen to what Australia has to say’, compared to 20% in agreement. The Pacific showed a high level of certainty on this question, with 68% of the respondents disagreeing with the statement. Asia also felt strongly about this question with 54% in disagreement.

3.3 Perceptions of Australia

The survey asked respondents whether they have positive or negative feelings towards Australia (*figure 9*). Although the Government spent \$93.5 million in 2005/6²⁰ on promotional programs and services, results are mixed on its efforts to ‘implement proactive public diplomacy strategies with our posts in support of the Government’s foreign and trade policy goals.’²¹

Australia scored well with an average of 56% of Asia and Pacific NGOs registering mostly positive feelings towards Australia compared to 21% negative feelings (23% unsure). Pacific NGOs registered slightly more negative feelings towards Australia (24% negative versus 20% positive) than their counterparts in Asia (24% positive versus 20% negative).

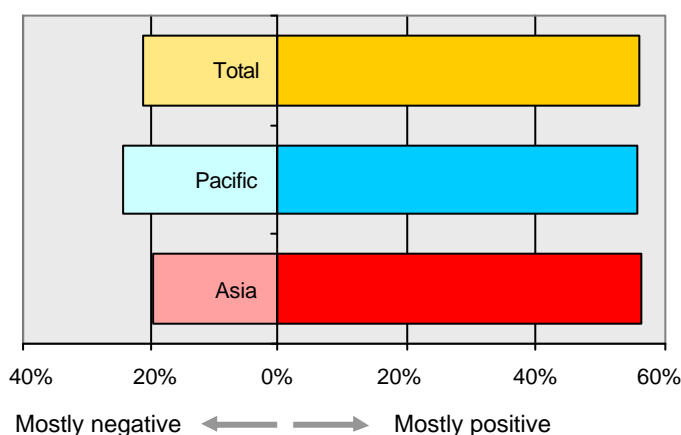


Figure 9: When you think of Australia do you have mostly positive or mostly negative feelings towards it?

In this survey, researchers also wanted to know whether there have been any changes in the NGOs’ feelings towards Australia over the past year (*figure 10*). Forty-two per cent of NGOs believe their feelings have not changed in the last year. Of those NGOs that have changed their feelings towards Australia, nearly twice as many Asia and Pacific NGOs (18% compared to 10%) said their feelings have changed for the worse (*figure 11*). Of those NGOs that changed their feelings over the past year, there were more Pacific than Asian respondents who became ‘more negative’ about Australia (24% compared to 15%).

Overall, Australia still enjoys high levels of positive feelings from Asia and the Pacific but perceptions are slowly changing. Pacific NGOs – ironically the group with the most contact with

¹⁹ Alexander Downer, ‘Australia - Meeting our International Challenges’, National Press Club, Canberra, 1 March 2001, http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/speeches/foreign/2001/010301_fa_npc.html

²⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Annual Report 2005/6, Outcome 3, http://www.dfat.gov.au/dept/annual_reports/05_06/performance/3/index.html

²¹ Ibid., http://www.dfat.gov.au/dept/annual_reports/05_06/performance/3/3.1.2.html

both Government officials and ordinary Australians – are unhappier about Australia than Asian NGOs and their feelings about Australia are dipping further into the negative.

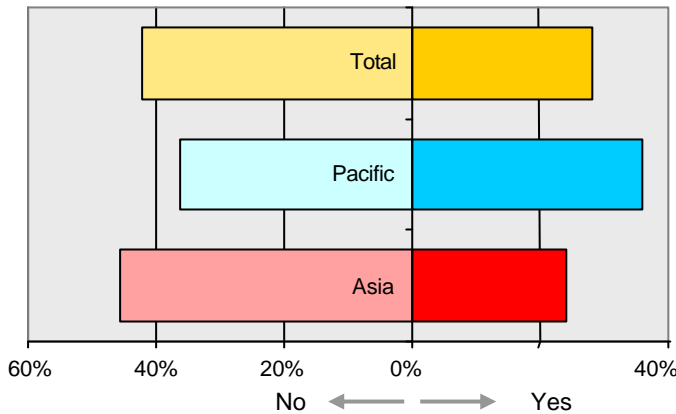


Figure 10: Have your feelings towards Australia changed in the last 12 months?

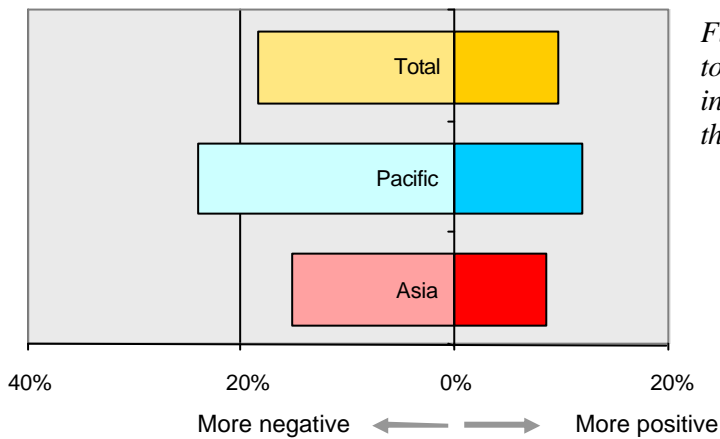


Figure 11: If your feelings towards Australia have changed in the last 12 months how have they changed?

3.4 Comparing foreign policy goals

Although the majority of respondents identified their core interest as 'development/education' with only one NGO identifying its core interest as 'environment', the survey reveals that 'protecting the global environment' is the greatest concern among the Asia Pacific NGOs (figure 12).

Asians, who are paying the cost of decades of high growth and rapid urbanisation with deepening environmental problems, are slightly more concerned about the environment than Pacific islanders who face more immediate threats to their nations from climate change – 87% 'very concerned' responses from Asia compared to 80% from the Pacific.

The concern for the global environment is the only result in the entire research that did not return 'unsure' responses from either Asia or the Pacific. The environment question is also the only foreign policy concern consistent with the result of similar polls conducted by the Lowy Institute in 2005 and 2006.

In the 2005 poll, Lowy Institute researchers found 75% of Australians considered 'improving the global environment' as a 'very important' foreign policy concern. In the 2006 poll, interestingly conducted nearly a fortnight after Uniya and Griffith Asia started conducting their own survey, the

Lowy Institute found that not only is the ‘global environment’ still the top concern among Australians, the number of respondents listing it as ‘very important’ has increased to 87%.

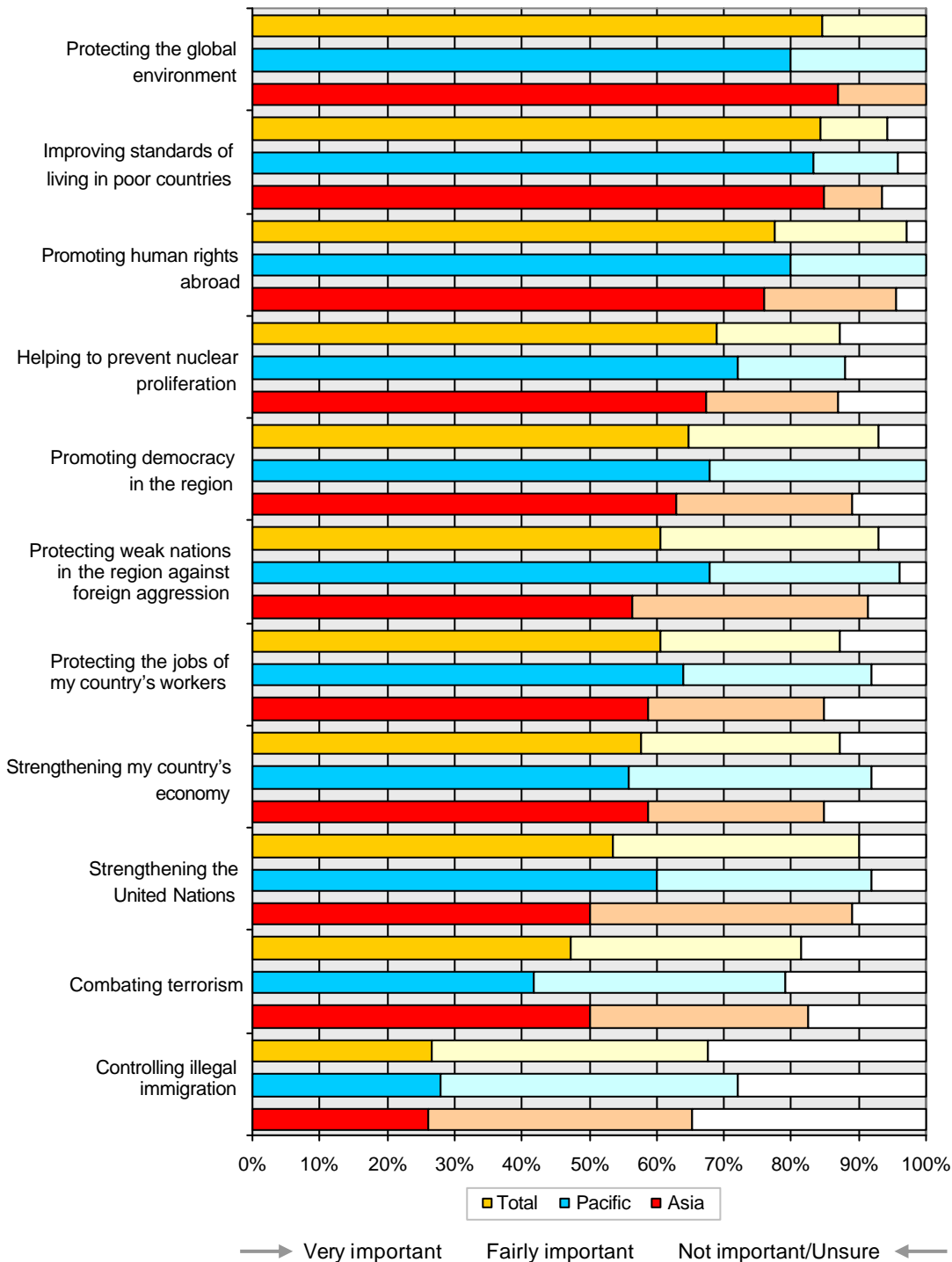


Figure 12: How important to you is each one of the following foreign policy goals in the list below?

But this is where common perceptions among the Australian public and Asia Pacific NGOs end. In the 2005 Lowy Institute poll, a telephone-based survey of 1000 people in February 2005, Australians placed greater emphasis on ‘national interest’ issues. The other top three foreign policy goals are ‘strengthening the Australian economy’ (75% very important and 19% fairly important) and ‘protecting the jobs of Australian workers’ (75% very important and 16% fairly important).

Whereas pragmatically minded Australians define their interests 'narrowly or broadly according to the issue in question', Asia Pacific respondents place far greater emphasis on the broader context, with the top six results relating to global issues. Asia Pacific respondents shared little with the Australian Government's top policy priorities. Controlling illegal immigration, combating terrorism, and strengthening their country's economy are listed among the least important foreign policy goals for the Asia Pacific. This is in contrast to the Australian Government's heightened concerns in recent years over these issues, illustrated by the Foreign and Trade ministers' foreword to Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper which lists 'security threats, especially from terrorism ... and people smuggling' and 'reform of our own economy' as the top priorities that have 'significant bearing on Australia's international standing'.²²

3.5 Open ended responses on improving relations

The study wanted to discover the issues that are potential obstacles to better relations between Australia and the NGOs' respective countries, as well as perceived emerging trends or events that will likely influence the relationship.

While respondents considered the environment as an urgent foreign policy priority for the region, Asia and Pacific NGOs did not think it was a barrier to better relations between their country and Australia. Responding to the question, 'What changes from either Australia or your country would help to improve relations between your country and Australia?', there was only one response relating to the impact of climate change on Pacific nations. By far the most common response related to migration issues.

Perhaps showing signs that Asians are still haunted by the ghosts of the White Australia policy and Pauline Hanson, the focus of most responses was on racial discrimination and Australia's strict immigration regime. One respondent called for 'decreased Muslim and Asian paranoia,' while another called for a more relaxed visa system. For the Pacific, many of the respondents asked Australia to consider guest worker programs as a policy which could help improve bilateral relations.

Lack of Australian foreign aid and unfair trade are also important barriers to better relations, according to the respondents. Foreign aid in general scored the second highest number of mentions. However, respondents differed in the nature of aid they advocated, with views ranging from budgetary aid, to aid for good governance, to private aid. Frequently suggested, particularly among Asian NGOs, were cultural and educational exchange programs. More trade and fair trade are also considered important issues. 'Australia should be open to import goods from the Philippines like bananas, mangoes, pineapple, abaca and other products,' one respondent wrote.

Another common theme among NGOs relates to the nature of diplomacy. Asian NGOs wanted 'respect' and 'fair play between two countries/not humiliating' (sic). The Pacific was more direct, suggesting 'more humility' in both PNG and Australia and 'less blatant hypocrisy on the part of the Australian leadership.' Another NGO leader said the Australian Government could do with a 'less arrogant' approach to diplomacy when dealing with its neighbours.

To the question, 'Are there any emerging trends or events that are likely to change the bilateral relationship between Australia and your country in the near future?', respondents mentioned

²² *Advancing the National Interest*, p.iv.

regional demographic changes and the growth of migration to Australia from Asia and the Pacific. One respondent predicted, 'People will become increasingly angry about the treatment Australia gives its neighbours as visitors/guest workers/tourists by comparison to the favoured treatment given to people from countries with "overstaying" tendencies.'

Interestingly, some NGOs also feared that the proliferation of regional free trade agreements, the increased trade and convergence of financial markets' would affect future bilateral relations, while others thought 'too much focus on the market economic approach' and at the expense of human rights is a trend that could impact on regional relations. Australia's pursuit of closer economic ties with China, for better or for worse, also rated several mentions among both Asia and Pacific NGOs.

4. Conclusion

For the Australian Government, 2006 has been a busy year in its engagement with the Asia Pacific region with several crises in the Pacific and the volatile relationship with Indonesia to manage. Prime Minister John Howard seems to have managed these issues well enough to confidently boast in Vietnam that Australia is 'naturally and comfortably and permanently part of this region' and 'a country which has both a presence and a significance in the region.' But to what extent does the region share his assessment of the relationship?

According to this study of regional NGO opinions, there is significant goodwill in the region towards Australia. The bad news for the Government was that there is no evidence of a link between Australia's good image and its foreign policies. In fact, the survey respondents cringed over Australia's immigration and trade policies, and the way in which it engages with other nations.

While many respondents said their 'mostly positive' feelings about Australia have not changed in the past year, of those whose feelings have changed, nearly twice as many said they have changed for the worse. Putting Australia on notice, NGOs in the Pacific, ironically the group with the most contact with Australians, have become even more dissatisfied about Australia over the past year compared to Asian organisations.

In addition, Asian and Pacific respondents showed little in common with the Government's top foreign policy priorities. Their concern for the global environment, which is shared by the Australian public according to the Lowy Institute poll, shows that the Government is also lagging behind regional opinion on this issue.

Controlling illegal immigration, combating terrorism, and strengthening their country's economy are listed among the least important foreign policy goals for Asia and the Pacific. This is in contrast to the Australian Government's heightened concerns in recent years over these issues, illustrated by the foreign and trade ministers' assertion that 'security threats, especially from terrorism and people smuggling' and 'reform of our own economy' are the top priorities bearing on Australia's reputation.

In his speech in Vietnam the Prime Minister may have talked up the positives for the region of Australia's close military and economic relationship with the US, the survey's respondents did not agree. NGOs do not seem deterred by China's growing economic and military influence, and

although they consider Australia's cultural heritage closer to Europe or America, they would rather see Australia turn its attention away from the US and towards Asia and the Pacific.

Although differences in perception of foreign policy priorities are not enough to threaten good relations, there are some issues that are clearly sensitive for the region. Australia's strict immigration laws, its restrictions on temporary working visas, and its harsh policy on asylum seekers are impacting on Australia's reputation. The quantity and quality of Australian development aid and unfair trade have also been listed as barriers to better relations.

The region in general feels positive about Australia but the survey suggests the need for improvement. It suggests that Australia's pragmatic bilateral approach to diplomacy is not enough to win the hearts and minds of civil society. It also implies that transnational issues like migration, development aid and fair trade are critical concerns for our neighbours. While Australia ponders about stricter immigration rules and citizenship requirements, the level of its contact with civil society in Asia and the Pacific remains worryingly low. All push and no pull does not make for a good regional image. These are considerations that the Government will ignore at its own peril as it seeks greater ties with ASEAN and greater influence over events in the Pacific.

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