# The Fall of the Berlin Wall: Perceptions and Implications for Australia

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## FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL – THE END OF AN ERA?

In Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 was a watershed for East-West relations.[1] This soon became evident at the meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on 19 November 1989, which culminated in a declaration stating that the NATO Alliance and the Warsaw Pact members were no longer adversaries. *Annus mirabilis* of 1989 was also seen in Australia as a year that had brought about monumental changes to the ordering principle of the international relations after the Second World War, altering the central geo-strategic balance, and closer to home, in North-East Asia.[2]

Australia had opposed the construction and maintenance of the Berlin Wall since the early 1960s.[3] In 1989, Australia did not have an embassy in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to convey Australia's concerns to the GDR Government.[4] As one Australian academic, Dennis Rumley (2001), correctly observed, the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolised a *regional* (or European) rather

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[1] The term 'Europe' in this article refers to a loosely defined European continent, which spreads from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains. The term 'Eastern Europe' is deployed as a political concept, rather than as a separate geographical area in Europe. It denotes a loose group of countries which had a socialist system of government, such as Warsaw Pact countries and Yugoslavia.

[2] International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), IISS, *Strategic Survey 1990–91,* Brassey's, London, March 1991, p. 15.

[3] G Evans (Minister for Foreign Affairs), 'Berlin Wall', Senate Hansard, 24 October 1989, p. 2072.

[4] Senator Button, 'Answer to the question without notice: relations with the People's Republic of China and the German Democratic Republic', Senate Hansard, 4 October 1989, p. 1646.

than a *global* collapse of communist regimes in the international system.[5] A visit by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Gareth Evans, to Europe immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall demonstrated that the Australian Labor Government followed the unravelling events in Europe with great interest.

In the Asia Pacific region, communism nevertheless continued to exist as a system of government, albeit in vastly different forms, in China, Vietnam and North Korea. In regional discourses, the policies of comparative isolation by China and Vietnam have been gradually replaced, before and after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, with the policies of more regional and global engagement, and deeper economic inter-dependence. A point of departure in Australia's foreign policy towards China was Australia's public and diplomatic response to the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 1989; however, economic and trade relations continued almost unaffected.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN THE 1980S

In the late 1980s, Australian foreign and defence policy was characterised with a move towards a greater self-reliance; an increased importance of economic issues for Australian diplomacy, and faced issues of greater complexity and strategic uncertainty. Although Australia was, during the Cold War, 'perforce aligned with the Western camp' in terms of democratic institutions and 'values, cultural heritage and trade', it had a moderate trade relationship with the Soviet Union.[6] The latter had been put into jeopardy due to a declining Soviet Union and the resulting consequences the fall of the Berlin Wall had for the European continent.

In the Asia Pacific region, Australia's closest ally, apart from the United States and New Zealand, was Japan. The fall of the Berlin Wall had reignited domestic debates about Australia's role and place in the world. Even though the fundamentals of Australia's defence relationship with the United States were not

[5] D Rumley, *The Geopolitics of Australia's Regional Relations,* Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, Netherlands, 2001, p. 20.
[6] R O'Neill, 'Diplomacy and Defence', In *Agenda for the Eighties,* C Bell (ed), 1980, pp. 45–64, p.55.

brought into question by the Hawke government, the Opposition wondered in the late 1980s whether the Labor Government's policy of greater self-reliance in terms of defence was proceeding at the expense of Australia's relationship with the United States.

Furthermore, following the *Harris Review*'s emphasis on economic issues, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Trade in Canberra were amalgamated into a single Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 1987. This was a significant development in the history of Australian diplomatic service as trade became a more significant component in the conduct of Australian diplomacy, including in its relations with Europe and Asia.

In the late 1980s, Australian foreign and defence policy debate was characterised by a move towards a greater self-reliance. An Australian academic, Stewart Firth, said that Australia's defence policy at that time had incorporated some of the recommendations from a review in 1986 of defence capabilities by Paul Dibb, which was effectively based on the principle of continental (rather than forward) defence.[7] In the 1987 White Paper, the Hawke Government had embarked on a policy of greater 'defence self-reliance'.[8] After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the question of the future role and presence of the United States in the Asia Pacific region resurfaced in the mainstream discourses among Australian policy-makers, academic community, and society at large.

Despite the decline of the Soviet Union, symbolised with the fall of the Berlin Wall, these events did not bring a pivotal change to Australia's preference for bilateral alliances in maintaining a regional balance.[9] Events in the Asia Pacific region in the 1980s had a significant influence on the orientation of Australia's foreign and security policy. As Prime Minister Keating later recalled in his book, his belief during his term that the 'more Australia was

[7] S Firth, *Australia in International Politics. An introduction to Australian foreign policy,* Allen & Unwin, Australia, 1999, p. 45.

[8] Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987 [White Paper]. Presented to Parliament by the Minister for Defence the Hon Kim C Beazley MP,* Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, March 1987.

[9] For a discussion about the central balance and regional balance, see C Bell, 'The International Environment and Australia's Foreign Policy', In *In Pursuit of National Interests. Australia's Foreign Policy in the 1990s.* FA Mediansky and AC Palfreeman (eds), Pergamon Press, Sydney, 1988, pp. 67–84.

integrated into the Asia-Pacific the greater would be our relevance to Europe and our influence there on the things that matter to us', such as trade and agriculture.[10]

## PERCEPTIONS

### AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

As evident from the Australian strategic review of 1993, there was a realisation in Australia that the United States would play a unique role as the sole superpower in the international system at the end of the Cold War.[11] However, as Australian academic David Goldsworthy (1997) observed, in the 1993 strategic review and the Defence White Paper of 1994, the US alliance was said to be '*a* key element' rather than '*the* key element'.[12] This further highlighted the degree of change in Australia's defence policy.

On the one hand, the Australian Government welcomed the proclamation of the New World Order (famously announced by US President George Bush in November 1990 in the midst of the First Gulf War), and the belief it enshrined that Communism (or socialism as a system of government) had ceased to provide an alternative in international affairs, and a credible threat to the Western alliance. On the other hand, the greater complexity in international politics that became evident after the collapse of the Berlin Wall became part of the discourse of many Australian policy-makers and strategic analysts. Many had also recognised that the rise of China was an important development in the Asia Pacific region, and of increasing strategic significance to Australia in the post-Cold War period.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, a greater emphasis had been placed by the Australian Government on opportunities for increasing Australia's influence in the Asia Pacific region,

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[10] P Keating, *Engagement. Australia Faces the Asia-Pacific,* Macmillan Australia, 2000, p. 246. For further reading, see D Lee and C Waters (eds.), *Evatt to Evans: The Labor Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy,* Allen & Unwin, Australia, 1997; and G Evans and B Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s,* second edition, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1995.

[11] Department of Defence, *Strategic Review 1993,* Commonwealth of Australia, December 1993, p. 1.

12 D Goldsworthy, 'An overview', In *Seeking Asian Engagement. Australia in World Affairs, 1991–95,* J Cotton and J Ravenhill (eds.), 1997, pp. 17–31.

particularly through regional forums such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and playing a more active role in peacekeeping and peace enforcement.[13] The end of East-West confrontation, therefore, had strategic implications for the formulation of Australian foreign policy, and defence and strategic outlook after 1989. This was coupled with the Australian Government's consideration of key regional developments in its long-term assessments.

The Australian policy-makers had recognised by the early 1990s that the ideological competition that had dominated the post-Second World War period had become less significant. For the Labor Government, the end of the Cold War had presented Australia and the international community with an opportunity to reinvigorate United Nations (UN) mechanisms, such as preventative diplomacy, arms control and non-proliferation regimes. The Australian Government also saw participation by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in multilateral security operations (such as the UN mission in Cambodia in the early 1990s) as forming the backbone of Australia's foreign and defence policy. Such operations were seen as having the potential to provide operational experience that the ADF would not otherwise obtain.[14]

The Australian Defence White Paper of 1994 had recognised that 'the end of the Cold War meant the passing of the structures which have shaped the regional strategic environment' for over four decades'.[15] In the early 1990s, the Australian Government's priority became the strengthening of national capacities. In the immediate sense, there was relief from the Soviet nuclear threat and the government welcomed the Bush Administration's call for the New World Order.[16] Only gradually did the government become aware of the necessity to respond to new and complex challenges, such as non-traditional security threats, whose advent was symbolically announced with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Paul Keating was the first Australian Prime Minister to visit a reunited Germany in March 1995. His meeting with Chancellor

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[13] Ibid, p. 5.

[14] Ibid, p. 17.

15 Department of Defence, *Defending Australia. Defence White Paper 1994,* Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1994, pp. 10–11.

[16] I am grateful for this point to Prof. S Harris from the Australian National University.

Helmut Kohl in Bonn on 7 March presented both leaders with a unique opportunity to talk about deepening Australia's relationship with Germany, closer cooperation between the two countries in Asia, and the future of Europe. It is evident from Keating's memoirs that after the demise of the Berlin Wall, Australia saw Germany as 'the dominant economy in Europe' with its centre of gravity shifted towards the East.[17]

## MEDIA

A survey of the Australian press in the late 1980s demonstrated that despite the initial euphoria, there was concern about the future course of events in Europe, as democratic changes across Eastern Europe had unstable outcomes. Some commentators warned of a return to discontent in the Soviet Union as well as in other Eastern European states.[18] There seemed to be a genuine concern in Australia that millions of refugees could try to emigrate from Eastern to Western Europe if the Soviet Union were to disintegrate.[19] This was, in turn, seen as a potential source of instability in Western Europe.

## PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

Many members of the Australian Parliament saw the Berlin Wall as a symbol of suppression of freedom and fundamental human rights in Eastern Europe, and thereby welcomed its demise. Some Members and Senators viewed the 'breach of the Berlin Wall' as a 'symbol that we [were] moving to a new stage and that we must rethink the type of approach we have had in the past'.[20] Senator Hill, for example, said that the collapse of the Berlin Wall was 'a powerful symbol of the triumph of freedom over oppression'.[21]

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[17] P Keating, *Engagement. Australia Faces the Asia-Pacific,* p. 250.

[18] A Clark, 'Europe speeds up economic reform', *The Australian financial review,* 11 December 1989; G Haigh, 'The year of Europe's great leap forward', *The Age,* 30 December 1989. See also N Markovic, *Courted by Europe? Advancing Australia's relations with the European Union in the new security environment,* Parliamentary Library research paper, no. 1, 2008–09, Commonwealth of Australia, pp. 11–12.

[19] IISS estimates that 'in 1989, a total of 1.2 million people left eastern Europe and the USSR for the West', IISS, *Strategic Survey 1990–91,* Brassey's, London, March 1991, p. 41.

[20] Senator Macklin, Senate Hansard, 21 November 1989.

[21] Senate Journal no. 203, 21 November 1989.

Senator Vallentine equally 'welcomed the pace of change in Europe … in particular the demolition of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the old regimes in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and the German Democratic Republic'.[22] She also warned the Australian Parliament that 'we [ought to] think of security in a global sense' rather than in terms of East-West confrontation, because that was 'the stuff of the Cold War, that is, the stuff we have to leave behind'.[23]

These remarks demonstrate that the collapse of the Berlin Wall had brought about a renewed hope (as expressed by many Members and Senators of the Australian Parliament and which have resonated within sentiments of Australian society more generally) in fundamental values of democratic freedoms, human rights and human dignity. The fall of the Berlin Wall was seen as a change towards a political discourse on global community rather than 'as part of one ideological set opposing another' which was seen as a matter of past practices, policies and endeavours.[24]

## Concluding remarks

The fall of the Berlin Wall constituted the beginning of a new era in Australia's relations with Eastern Europe countries. It altered Australia's geo-strategic perception of Europe. Following this monumental event, Australia had begun to re-evaluate its relations with member states of the European Community, and to build and expand foreign relations with countries located east of Berlin, as well as a reunited Germany. Australia also became (and to date continues to be) a financial donor to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which is a key source of funding for economic recovery projects in Eastern Europe.

The events in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, in particular the demise of the Soviet Union, had significant geo-strategic implications for Australia. However, the significance of other events (such as the rising role of China and other regional powers in the Asia Pacific region) had a more profound long-term strategic impact on Australia's foreign and defence policy deliberation.

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[22]  Senate Journal no. 203, 21 November 1989.

[23] Senator Vallentine, Senate Hansard, 21 November 1989, p. 2929.

[24] Ibid.

This became evident during the Keating Government (1991–1996), which placed a robust emphasis on regional engagement, multilateralism and Australia's middle power diplomacy.[25]

An evaluation of the perceptions in Australia of the fall of the Berlin Wall has yielded mixed results, displaying elements of optimism and caution. On the one hand, the Australian Government had expressed solidarity with peoples in Eastern Europe and their desire to live in freedom by ridding their countries of Communism as a dominant ideology. On the other hand, Australian policy-makers were realistic in their expectations that a colossal task—political, diplomatic, and economic—lay ahead for nations in both Western and Eastern Europe, and the European Community more broadly, in building a united Europe. The looming discontent in the Middle East and the Balkans had only reinforced their view.

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[25] For further reading, see the Parliamentary Statement by Australia's Foreign Minister Gareth Evans on *Australia's Regional Security* of 6 December 1989.