



The power of speech

We have dumbed-down so far that we are unable to talk to the people in our own region in their own tongues. **PROFESSOR TIM LINDSEY** says our Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister must act urgently to avoid missing the Asian express

ASIA is rising so fast that we are in danger of being left behind. By 2020, Asian economies will have grown to 43 per cent of world GDP and will be larger than the US and Europe combined.

According to the Asialink Index, trade flows between Australia and Asia grew 25.4 per cent in 2008. This is double the rate with the rest of the world.

Even now, we have two-way trade with Asia of \$300 billion, against \$235 billion with the rest of the world combined.

The good news is that Australia — the only Western society geographically in Asia — is uniquely positioned geographically to benefit from the Asian century. In fact, we *must* exploit our unique access to Asia just to maintain current economic performance and our high standard of living, never mind improving them.

The bad news is that our fast-disappearing Asia literacy is letting us down. The constant public rhetoric in government, business and education of internationalisation and engagement with Asia is just that: rhetoric.

It is rarely matched by action. We tick the Asia box but do little to follow up.

We continue to see the part of the world that will determine our children and grandchildren's welfare as a market and not an investment.

The result is that a lack of consistent funding and institutional support for Asia education over the last four decades has stripped out our regional literacy: more people studied Asian societies in the 1960s than they do today.

Then, 40 per cent of year 12 students across Australia took second languages — now it's just 12 per cent and falling. And it beggars belief that, although we live next door to Indo-

nesia's 240 million people, the world's largest Islamic society and the world's third largest democracy, under one per cent of year 12 students study Indonesian today.

Universities do even worse: fewer than three per cent of tertiary students now choose any Asia-related subjects at all.

The result? Despite our proximity to Asia, it may be the case very few young Australians learn the languages of our region.

Incredibly, the largest of the West's Asia-Pacific nations is now the lowest-ranked OECD country for second language skills.

We have dumbed-down so far that we are unable to talk in their own tongues to the peoples of our own region — the very societies that will largely determine our economic future, our national security and our place in the crucial global interfaith and cross-cultural dialogues of the coming decades.

All this means that a first order policy priority for Canberra must be, as Prime Minister Kevin Rudd put it at the 2020 Summit, to ensure that the major languages and cultures of our region will become familiar and mainstreamed into Australian society.

So why not set our sights high? Many 2020 Summiteers agreed that our target should be 60 per cent of Australians speaking a second language - any language - but with Asian languages up front.

Achieving that would not be simple.

The first step — starting now — should be a comprehensive, cross-agency, national strategic plan for the reinvigoration of Australia's disappearing Asia literacy, with education at all levels the key.

But for this to be more than mere hollow rhetoric, any new national Asia literacy program must be backed by serious money.

The Rudd government has committed

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\$62 million over four years to Asia literacy, but that is nowhere near enough. We must at least match the former National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy (NALSAS), axed by the Howard government in 2002. NALSAS had a budget in today's terms of \$100 million **per year** and in its eight years of existence, it doubled Asian studies enrolments across Australia. They have plunged since it ended.

Once properly funded, a new 2020 national Asia literacy program would have two limbs. The first would be mainstreaming language education. Like it or not, our current low base means the only way we can realistically re-tool quickly enough is to make learning LOTE (languages other than English, both Asian and others) compulsory in our schools.

Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian should be priorities, but to be effective internationally we need to develop capacity in a wide range of other, second priority languages we now barely teach at all, such as Hindi, Urdu, Korean and Thai, among others (including, of course, European languages).

If we make LOTE compulsory, we would obviously need more language teachers, so we also need to expand professional teacher training for language teachers.

In doing this, we should draw on the rich pool of raw talent offered by our ethnic communities and other native speakers.

This will lead to larger numbers of Asian studies entering our denuded universities, which are now busy closing these courses or cutting their staff to dysfunctional levels.

Rebuilding tertiary Asian studies will require serious financial incentives in our

tertiary institutions, and that will likely mean bonus points, fee exemptions and HECS waivers for Asia courses, at least initially.

The second limb of a new 2020 national Asia literacy program would be helping Australians directly experience Asia. Immersion is, in the end, the only real way to grasp a language and its cultures, so Asia has to be taken out of books and made part of Australian lives. By 2020, tens of thousands of young Australians should be linked to Asian communities through support for school twinning (actual and online), exchange programs, mentoring, in-country and community-based learning programs. They will become our future bridges to Asia. To do this, barriers to studying in Asia must also be removed. Difficult though it will be, that must involve a review of travel advisories and, at the very least, travel insurance arrangements. Unfortunately, these now obstruct student visits to the very places that our strategic interests demand we understand better, like Indonesia and Timor.

Yes, it's nice that Kevin Rudd speaks Mandarin, but the reality is that the country he now governs is failing the Asia literacy test precisely when we most need to be engaging with our near North. The 2020 Summit showed a way forward. Will the government now do something serious — and expensive — about Asia literacy before we miss the Asia train?

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