



THE ACCELERATING GLOBAL ASIAN ENGINE

New Zealanders have only reluctantly come to realize that their country's geographical location places them squarely in the Asian sphere of influence, rather than in any other. The country's future growth and development is significantly linked with the Asia-Pacific rim countries (APEC grouping) simply because of the geopolitical, social and economic realities of the countries that make up our regional neighbourhood.

Unfortunately, there are too many citizens who fail to realize that an isolationist attitude, when we are only 4.2 million people strong, is bankrupt and simply foolish. We need Asia more than Asia needs us.

The bulk of the world's population lives in India, China, Indonesia, Japan and the other countries of the Asian continent. They are proud, dynamic entities with long histories and cultural differences which are rich and vibrant. It is exceedingly simplistic, let alone insulting, to lump half the world's population within the descriptor, 'Asian', when the uniqueness of each sovereign entity is often quite profound.

These countries are the swiftly emerging international economic and demographic engine of the world. While they are now not so often referred to as 'The Asian Tigers', de facto, they are.

The citizens of these countries are overwhelmingly hard workers committed to improving themselves educationally, socially and economically. They constantly scan the world for ideas, create their own and are not backward in creating goods and services and developing them.

New Zealanders, given our fascination with travel, are becoming more frequent visitors to these countries, which doesn't go unnoticed by these people of the region. Our first two Free Trade Agreements were with Singapore and Thailand. The similar emerging agreement with China will be a first for an OECD country. These are excellent first steps which do not go unnoticed, either. New Zealand's positive international reputation could be strengthened if, as citizens, we went more out of our way to welcome Asian people who visit our shores and

to actively befriend those who migrate here so they are able to more easily settle down and feel at home amongst us. Why do we not learn words of welcome in Mandarin or Cantonese, in Japanese, Korean or Thai? Small gestures of this nature would enhance our reputation as a country that is friendly to the peoples from the Asia-Pacific region and would reap long term benefits for our children and grandchildren.

Fortunately increasing numbers of Kiwi entrepreneurs, university and school personnel are recognizing that building relationships with these countries is not only self enlightened, it is a mark which sets us apart as individuals who view themselves as international citizens and who know they have international civic obligations and responsibilities.

What we do not know we often fear. What we do not understand we fear. Many fears are deep in our psyche and most are paper tigers which if exposed to the truth and the light of day, disappear.

While it may be a little hard to accept, we all are tarred with the brush of prejudice regarding others who are different from ourselves. Confronting any prejudices we may have about Asian people is a good place to start in building positive relationships which are fundamental to our nation's resilience and ultimate survival. The New Year is a good time to start with a more open attitude to the large sovereign entities in our regional neighbourhood.

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