



Caution on the East China Sea

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As Australia's Foreign Minister I had quoted several times an acute observation by Lee Kuan Yew. It was on the question of the future character of China. He said:

"Peace and security in the Asia-Pacific will turn on whether China emerges as a xenophobic, chauvinistic force, bitter and hostile to the West because it tried to slow down or abort its development, or whether it is educated and involved in the ways of the world – more cosmopolitan, more internationalised and outward looking."

I ceased to be Foreign Minister after the Gillard Government was defeated on September 7, 2013. I was representing Australia at the G20 in St Petersburg. As the polling booths at home closed I found myself in Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery, laying flowers on a memorial to the dead of the Second World War. I found myself reflecting on those mass graves – half a million people buried here – and how trivial it was to be voted out of government in a peacetime election compared to the mighty drama that was played out in St Petersburg between 1941 and 1944.

Like any politician I thought about what I would do out of government. In the spirit of that observation by Lee Kuan Yew, I committed to work on the Australia-China relationship, becoming Director of a newly established think tank, the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology, Sydney. I thought that this would be a good vantage point from which to observe this vast question being played out. Will China continue its trajectory of economic growth? What will be the character of Chinese power domestically, within China's borders? And what personality will it assume in world affairs? And what are the implications for Australia and its friends?

A WARNING

"For Australia, foreign affairs and defence policy are getting serious again." That warning had been laid down by the provocative Australian academic Hugh White. He was making reference to the maritime territorial disputes in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea, each a reflection of China's rising military power and foreign policy assertiveness, and of China challenging US supremacy in Asia. There were hints of this new seriousness recently from both the Chinese and the American sides. Promoting her recent memoir, Hillary Clinton observed on June 27 that the Abbott government push for more trade with China "makes [Australia] dependent, to an extent that can undermine [Australian]



freedom of movement and [Australian] sovereignty, economic and political." She went on to say, "It's a mistake whether you're a country, or a company or an individual to put, as we say in the vernacular, all your eggs in the one basket." Her comments brought a brisk response from Australia's Communications Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, that, "I'm sure that we'd love to export vast quantities of iron ore to the United States but they've never shown any enthusiasm in buying them."

The same week brought forth a mirror-image comment from a Chinese source. Visiting the Australian National University, Professor Wu Xinbo, Executive Dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, addressed the question from the other side. He said there were "limits" to the extent to which Australia could tighten strategic cooperation with the United States without putting its relationship with China at risk. This is the first time I can recall such a comment from a Chinese source.

Australia cannot bridle at Professor Wu's bluntness. Many Australians were startled and, I'm sure, the interest of Beijing piqued, when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was reported via WikiLeaks to have told Hillary Clinton on March 24, 2009 he was "a brutal realist on China" and supported a policy of "integrating China effectively into the international community and allowing it to demonstrate greater responsibility, all while also preparing to deploy force if everything goes wrong". He went on to say that the proposed strengthening of Australia's navy was "a response to China's growing ability to project force" and that Chinese leaders were "sub-rational and deeply emotional" when it came to Taiwan.

DEFENCE WHITE PAPER

In 2009 the Australian government released a Defence White Paper that warned "the pace, scope and structure of China's military modernisation have the potential to give its neighbours cause for concern if not carefully explained, and if China does not reach out to others to build confidence regarding its military plans." In his 2012 book *The Rise of China vs The Logic of Strategy* the American writer on strategy Edward Luttwak homed in on what he described as Australia's lead role in organising nations to respond to the more assertive Chinese posture. He wrote:

[F]or all [Australia's] ever-increasing ethnic diversity, it fully retains the Anglo-Saxon trait of bellicosity... It is not surprising, therefore, that Australia has been the first country to clearly express resistance to China's rising power, and to initiate the coalition building against it that is mandated by the logic of strategy.

The Gillard government in November 2011 hosted a visit by President Obama who announced the rotation of 2500 marines in the Northern Territory and criticised China in an address to the Australian parliament. There were some Australians who thought the US President provocative. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating said:

"...China is not the old Soviet Union. And we would make of course a huge mistake seeking to contain it... This was a speech that really would have been better made in Washington or elsewhere... here we



are in our Parliament – not in the American Parliament, our Parliament. The American president gets up and says, ‘The Chinese model will fail. It is bound to fail.’ And then all the speech’s basically hard rhetoric against China.”

I, at that time a private citizen, said on my blog:

“Like me, the former Prime Minister does not object to a rotating troop presence on Australia’s north but is concerned about how it gets wrapped up in an unmistakable anti-China stance. Why is it remotely in Australia’s interest to take that course?”

It wasn’t about us being committed to the US alliance; it was a matter of the way we express that alliance, about how prominent we render it part of our international character, and this is a theme I’ll return to. When I became Foreign Minister in March 2012 I was very much of the view that in our next annual talks with the Americans – that is, the first since the marine announcement – it was appropriate to avoid fresh strategic initiatives like more B-52 bomber flights and more frequent ship visits – both of which had been referred to in the 2011 communiqué – and not jam suggestions of still more Australia-US strategic cooperation into the headlines. Further work on those fronts – more flights and more ship visits – was proceeding anyway in accord with the 2011 communiqué. There was no need to return to it, seizing headlines to underline again an impression that the fullest expression of Australia’s international personality is our strategic partnership with the US.

UNDERSTANDING HISTORIES

I recall in my first visit to Beijing being challenged by then-Foreign Minister Yang over the Australian government’s 2011 decision to have US marines rotate through the Northern Territory. My response was, “Just as we attempt to understand China’s foreign policy by reference to its history, so Chinese might understand Australia’s foreign policy by reference to our history.” In this spirit, here is one very bold generalisation about my country: Australians have always aligned themselves with the dominant maritime power of our region and of the world. This is a grandiose way of saying we were happily part of the British Empire – never contemplated a declaration of independence from it – and, after the Second World War, settled on a security treaty with the United States. Or, as an irreverent left-wing acquaintance of mine joked back in the 1960s, “We went from being crown colony to banana republic” – he seemed to imply, without skipping a heartbeat.

The latest Lowy Institute Poll showed that the Australian-American alliance had the support of 78 per cent of Australians. Even when George W Bush was extremely unpopular in Australia there was still strong public support for the alliance. The Australian public was smart enough to draw a distinction between a two-term president they found distasteful and a treaty that met their need for long-term security.

GILLARD’S ‘STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP’



In 2013 Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard succeeded in her submission to the Chinese in favour of annual meetings with the Australian leadership. At the Chinese suggestion this was termed a “strategic partnership”. What, however, does a “strategic partnership” between Australia and China mean in practice? Former Prime Minister John Howard is reported to have declined such a relationship because of the difficulty of this question. The Chinese answer would probably be that a strategic partnership with Australia would be a relationship fleshed with work on:

- cooperation over non-traditional security questions;
- a more pluralistic, less hegemonic structure in Asia;
- building mutual trust; and
- a trilateral framework involving exchange and exercises between Australia, China and the US.

On the Australian side, the priority for the Abbott government has been resolving a Free Trade Agreement.

Elected a year ago, the government inherited this strategic partnership and the challenge of fleshing out what it means. The new government could be said to have gone through three phases in China policy. The first stage was a period of assertiveness or missteps. On October 15, 2013 Foreign Minister Julie Bishop described Japan as “our best friend in Asia”. This was a shift in language. Up until that point Australia had described Japan as “Australia’s oldest friend in Asia”. On November 26, 2013 the government responded to China’s declaration of an air defence identification zone over the East China Sea. The government publicly announced it had called in Chinese Ambassador Ma Zhaoxu to register a protest at the unilateral Chinese no-fly zone announcement. This went noticeably further than the response of likeminded countries such as New Zealand, Canada and Singapore. On November 28, 2013 Tony Abbott baptised Australia as “a strong ally of Japan”. He compared our alliance with Japan with our alliance with America: “We are a strong ally of the United States, we are a strong ally of Japan...” This is the first time an Australian Prime Minister has used such language. Australia is not an ally of Japan. Up until now we’ve described Japan as a friend and a partner or a strategic partner.

PERIOD OF CORRECTION

The second phase was a period of correction, apparent when Prime Minister Abbott visited Japan and China in April this year. Talk of Japan as ally or best friend was not revived. The Prime Minister said “Australia is not in China to do a deal, but to be a friend”, that Trade Minister Robb and his team would “redouble their efforts and focus single-mindedly” on clinching a free trade agreement and that “[Australia wants] to reassure the Chinese government that we are open for business”. In May when tension arose between China and Vietnam over the positioning of a deepwater drilling rig the response of the Australian government was markedly different from that of the declaration over the air defence



identification zone. If anything, the response was understated. A statement was issued in which the Australian minister was not even quoted. Nor was the Chinese Ambassador called in. The government limited itself to a routine repetition of Australia's position that:

Australia does not take a position on competing claims in the South China Sea, but has a legitimate interest in the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, unimpeded trade and freedom of navigation.

Australia urges parties to exercise restraint, refrain from provocative actions that could escalate the situation and take steps to ease tensions.

But when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan visited Australia in July the government seemed to remodulate again. This may warrant being described as a third phase. The atmosphere around the Japanese Prime Minister's visit suggests an elevation in Australian-Japanese ties. In this atmosphere one Australian reporter excitedly but wrongly reported that Australia was entering a security pact with Japan. In fact, the communiqué from the Japan-Australia consultations made reference only to a defence equipment and technology agreement long under construction. The communiqué also noted that Australia and Japan "reaffirmed that their respective Alliances with the United States made a significant contribution to peace and security in the region... [and] underscored the importance of strong US engagement in the region and strong support for the US rebalance."

The visit came at a time when Japan has revised its policy on use of its armed forces, when South Korea as much as China notes nationalist currents in Japanese leadership (confirmed by those woeful visits to Yasakuni Shrine) and when tensions between Japan and China are running strongly.

It is not unreasonable to raise two questions:

- Is Australia elevating trilateral engagement with Japan and the United States?
- Are we veering to some kind of informal or quasi-treaty between Australia and Japan?

HUGE STAKE

Australia has a huge stake in a constructive relationship with China. Our exports to China are double those to our next largest customer, Japan. Moreover, we have a stake in being able to influence Chinese behaviour, responding to the challenge laid down by Lee Kuan Yew in that quote I began with: what will be the character of China as its wealth and power increases and how can the West help shape it? Looking at a territorial dispute between China and Japan, we Australians have no interest in the Senkaku / Diaoyu islands. We have an interest in a peaceful and lawful resolution of the dispute and in both sides showing restraint. But why would Australia incline – in appearances or in reality – to one side over the other?



The Australian government should go no further than stating that Australia takes no side in the territorial dispute – in who has sovereignty – but urges both sides to avoid provocative action and to settle it in accordance with international law. But Australia should not only be neutral. We should carefully cultivate and reiterate that neutrality. By this test it could be considered unwise that Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott attended a meeting of Japan's National Security Council during his visit in April unless, of course, he had planned a mirror image attendance at China's National Security Commission. And why not? Our neutrality needs to be nurtured, and re-woven. This is the truest expression of our national interest and such a stance maximises our opportunity to urge both sides to avoid abrupt moves and to urge both sides to manage their dispute.

In my role as Director of the newly established Australia-China Relations Institute I have commissioned a paper by two Australian academics on the subject: "Conflict in the East China Sea: Would ANZUS Apply?" It will be released in Canberra in early November. It presents scenarios in which conflict might flare between China and Japan and reminds us of the American position, confirmed by the President in April, that the islands were covered under the US-Japan security treaty. When asked if ANZUS would apply, the Australian Defence Minister David Johnston said in Tokyo on June 12, "I don't believe it does." The Australian people, I believe, could rest easy with that position. They would believe it to be common sense and would hope he's not going to be overruled by any security adviser in the Prime Minister's office.

It comes down to what kind of an ally of the US we choose to be, and I quoted in my recently published diaries the spectrum of advice on this. One former Australian diplomat, Paul O'Sullivan, said we should aspire to be "a different kind of ally". That is, consistently in the US camp, supportive at all times. Another, Dennis Richardson, that "our interests are different from a great power's." Both positions are arguable. But in the context of the dispute in the East China Sea, the Richardson formulation is the one to guide us.

EAST CHINA SEA

The East China Sea is clearly a case of the interest of the US – a power with global responsibilities and a treaty with Japan – being different from Australia's. We are not a great power but a G20 member middle power with a strong economic stake in China's peaceful and prosperous rise. We are warm to Japan and its values but, like all its friends, have reservations about nationalist currents in its politics. Unlike America we are not Japan's ally.

If there were a conflict between China and Japan in which the US committed itself to Japan, Australia would not be involved in any military action until our cabinet decided to be. It would not be automatic. Cabinet consideration would be shaped by the nature of the crisis and how it came about. There are likely to be a number of "off-ramps" before it came to an Australian commitment to an American request.



Australia's economic integration with China is striking and confirms what stands at risk should decades of economic growth in East Asia give way to tension. Even assuming moderating economic growth it is likely to continue robustly. In April Australia's goods exports to China for the first time reached \$100 billion. All the evidence is that the value of exported goods will continue to rise and that includes raw material exports – yes, even in this post-boom period. China is already the number one destination for Australian services exports. That's even before China's transition to mature high-income economy is complete. According to some estimates, in 2030 China's economy will be 2.3 times larger than now and its middle class will be up from 10 per cent to 70 percent of its population. That's an increase of around 850 million people enjoying middle class living standards. That's a Chinese middle class four times bigger than today.

The Chinese trade with us, of course, because it suits them: Australia is a reliable supplier, adheres to rule of law, and is cost competitive. That's true. But it's not unreasonable for Australia to take account of the core interests of a country that makes such a contribution to our economic well-being, where these core interests align with international norms. In this spirit it's probably useful to imagine how the Chinese might interpret the various shifts and inconsistencies in Australian utterances. For example, the Chinese may think we have an obligation to explain the sentiments captured in the 2009 Defence White Paper. Or what we might mean by "hedging" strategy. In the same way, that is, that Australia routinely says to China it needs to explain more carefully its claims in the South China Sea and relate them to international law.

Again, I think of my own experience of returning Australian policy to some sense of balance after the 2011 visit of President Obama and the abrupt announcement on a marine presence in the Northern Territory. Settling on an unruffled pace; not taking partners by surprise. Former Ambassador to Beijing Geoff Raby warned in 2012:

"China understands that we, and others, would want to hedge against some unexpected events in China. It may not openly welcome this, but again, as realists, they would do the same."

To execute a hedging strategy effectively and not create mutual suspicion and hostility, it is important to have a solid basis of trust between China and us. That no longer exists. We should be able to speak openly to China about these issues. We should not be reticent in explaining our hedging to China, but we must also be credible. We can't seek to engage China on these issues, and then send China conflicting messages about whether we see them as friend or foe. Consistency in our messaging and positioning is crucial.

To revisit the case study I touched on earlier, a year after President Obama announced the marine rotation, we had the option at our annual meeting with American colleagues (the Secretary of State and the Defence Secretary) to grab headlines with a further upgrading of strategic cooperation – B-52 flights out of Australia and steady increase in US ship visits to Fremantle in Western Australia. As Foreign Minister, with the support of senior advisers, I formed the view that it was time to modulate – a useful



verb – expressions of security cooperation with the US. We opted to make the 2012 AUSMIN talks a matter of consolidation – “steady as she goes” – rather than generate a new raft of headlines about stepped-up strategic cooperation. As it happened, this suited the US.

Here, I think my instincts were broader than any simple desire to placate an uneasy China. It comes to this: Australians don't need to project their alliance with the US in every setting – including our relations with Southeast Asia – until it becomes the only expression of our international personality. I think this an even more useful bit of advice to the current Australian government than the last.

Yet the US alliance is a deep expression of our interests. All the more reason, I would argue, not to render it a cliché or caricature.

EARLY 20TH CENTURY ALLIANCE

The Australian desire for an alliance with America was apparent in the early 20th century as Australians faced the rise of Japan after it defeated Russia in the war of 1904-5. Alfred Deakin, Australia's second and then fifth Prime Minister, concerned to contain the Japanese and also the Germans in the South Pacific, saw the potential benefits of a geopolitical freeze in the region, a guarantee of existing borders and arrangements. He stole from American history. He said he wanted a “Monroe Doctrine for the South-West Pacific” – a pre-echo of Australian foreign policy as it was to develop 40 years later.

In the 1930s, Australia became increasingly concerned about the security of Singapore given the rise of Japanese power, desperately seeking assurance from the British government that even in the event of a two-ocean war Singapore would hold until naval reinforcements could arrive. In an energetic piece of Australian diplomacy in 1934, Australian Minister for External Affairs John Latham led the first goodwill mission to China, Japan and Southeast Asia. At the conclusion of the mission, Latham told the Australian parliament:

Our next nearest neighbours (after New Zealand), if one may use the phrase, are to be found in those countries which make up what is known as the Far East... It is the Far East to Europe, to the old centres of civilisation, but we must realise that it is the 'Near East' to Australia... It is inevitable that the relations between Australia and the Near East will become closer and more intimate as the years pass. Therefore, it is important that we should endeavour to develop and improve our relations with our near neighbours, whose fortunes are so important to us, not only in economic matters, but also in relation to the vital issues of peace and war.

This was a pre-echo of Australia's post-war commitment to Asia.

The darkest day in Australian history was February 15, 1942, the fall of Singapore, a day when a land army of 20,000 Australians was marched into captivity. Wartime Prime Minister John Curtin had already said on December 27, 1941, “Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks



to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom." It was with touching gratitude that Australia received General Douglas MacArthur in March 1942. The renowned warrior brought with him not a US commitment to Australian security but simply the news that he would be based in Australia until America recovered the Philippines and rolled the Japanese back. He was treated as a hero.

Support for the American alliance is deposited in Australian DNA. It's reinforced by common values.

On September 25, 2012 I sat in the General Assembly and listened to the address by President Obama. The President wrestled with Muslim resentment of attacks on Islam, specifically the YouTube video clip mocking the religion, and how this could be reconciled with the American value – no, he insisted, the universal value – of freedom of speech:

"[W]e believe that freedom and self-determination are not unique to one culture. These are not simply American values or Western values – they are universal values."

He then said:

"I know there are some who ask why we don't just ban such a video. The answer is enshrined in our laws: our constitution protects the right to practise free speech.

"Here in the United States, countless publications provoke offence. Like me, the majority of Americans are Christian, and yet we do not ban blasphemy against our most sacred beliefs ...

"We do so not because we support hateful speech, but because our Founders understood that without such protections, the capacity of each individual to express their own views, and practise their own faith, may be threatened. We do so because in a diverse society, efforts to restrict speech can become a tool to silence critics, or oppress minorities. We do so because given the power of faith in our lives, and the passion that religious differences can inflame, the strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression, it is more speech – the voices of tolerance that rally against bigotry and blasphemy, and lift up the values of understanding and mutual respect."

WORLDVIEWS

The writing was masterful, a riveting sequence of short, declarative sentences marching in rhythm. Here again was what I've taken to calling the charm – the pulling power, the appeal – of American values. That is, American values at their most generous and noble, as opposed to quirks like universal gun ownership or religiosity. One Australian businessman once told me, in simple summation, that there would never be a question here: "Australians will always prefer American values." That is, he implied, over Chinese values. When I raised the Obama speech with Henry Kissinger he reminded me that universal values – freedom of speech, for example – don't exist in the Chinese worldview. Chinese civilisation enunciates codes of behaviour, not principles for spreading democracy. One only has to look



at the recently published survey of American foreign policy from Truman to Obama – it's in a book called *Maximalist* by Stephen Sestanovich – to be reminded of the audacious uniqueness of the post-World War II American mission.

Or as Hillary Clinton herself wrote in a recent review of Henry Kissinger's latest book *World Order*:

"...what comes through clearly...is a conviction that we and President Obama share: a belief in the indispensability of continued American leadership in service of a just and liberal order."

There really is no viable alternative. No other nation can bring together the necessary coalitions and provide the necessary capabilities to meet today's complex global threats. But this leadership is not a birthright; it is a responsibility that must be assumed with determination and humility by each generation.

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

Some Australians enjoy teasing out alternative futures as they contemplate the re-emergence of China. Malcolm Fraser, conservative Prime Minister from 1975 to 1983, speculates about some of the problems in his recent book, *Dangerous Allies*. In April this year, President Obama pledged US support to Japan in the event of conflict over the Senkaku / Diaoyu islands. Mr Fraser points to a possibility that Australia could be drawn into an unwanted war between a US-backed Japan and China, grounding his reasoning in the increasing military integration between Australia and the US – for example, the decision in 2013 to "embed" the frigate HMAS Sydney with the US Seventh Fleet in Yokosuka, and the 2012 appointment of Australian Major General Rick Burr as one of two deputy commanders in the US Pacific Command, headquartered in Hawaii. The Fraser proposition is that we would lose our independence should a conflict arise. The level of tension, as this audience knows, is very real. So the Fraser speculation is an invitation to a debate.

Hugh White, in a favourable review of the Fraser book, did draw some cautionary messages about it:

"Fraser is right that the trajectory of US-China relations today is very worrying. And it is true that America carries some of the blame for this, because the prime US objective in Asia remains the preservation of US regional primacy and it refuses, so far, to contemplate any significant accommodation of China's ambitions to play a wider role. And he is right to worry that in these circumstances our US alliance could easily draw us into a war with China."

But Fraser's dark view of America leads him to overlook the chance that America might be brought to accept the need for accommodation with China as the basis for a long-term stable relationship. And his rosy view of China leads him to overlook the value to Australia of keeping the United States engaged in Asia to balance limit China's power. The best outcome for us would be an Asia in which America concedes to China enough strategic space to satisfy China's legitimate ambitions, and at the same time



imposes firm enough limits to deter China from pushing for more. In that Asia, Australia could happily remain a US ally, to our great benefit.

On the other side of the argument there are defence experts who point out that other countries have a similar integration with the US – a Canadian one-star general operating in PACOM, a New Zealand presence – without anybody suggesting it pre-commits them and erodes their independence. Singapore, of course, builds defence connections without an assumption that these mean an automatic commitment.

There is the danger – to push in the opposite direction a moment – of rendering self-fulfilling prophecies. Or, as a former Coalition foreign minister, Alexander Downer, said to me, “If you want a Cold War with China, you will get a Cold War with China”. It would be a mistake for Australian conservatives to think that somehow Washington requires it to relegate our relationship with Beijing to satisfy our ally, even if that recent comment by Hillary Clinton hinted at it. As Kurt Campbell said to me after I briefed him on our strategic partnership with China, “Australia should be the most desired girl on the block.” In other words, we don’t have to choose. We can be courted by both. And, of course, we can weave through all of these considerations a recognition that, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said, the US has been in Asia a “benign and constructive power”.

A Chinese interlocutor is likely to remind an Australian that the US-China relationship involves bonds forged over decades. As a reminder of this, both Jimmy Carter and Henry Kissinger were recently acknowledged in China for their contribution to this relationship – a sophisticated, complicated relationship. A Chinese strategist might suggest that the Japanese could find themselves isolated if they pushed too hard and found their truculence was too much for the US. Worthwhile, I think, to remind ourselves of the importance of that sophisticated, complicated relationship – that between the US and China – the most important bilateral in the world, and that if the two great powers settle on interests in common the rest of us will find we are pushed to the side.

In the meantime, Chinese foreign policy can be expected to develop.

One quality to watch for is the extent to which China will contribute to public goods in international security, such as anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, capacity-building, stabilisation and peacekeeping. There’s strong evidence of China, like India, having a growing role in contributing to security public goods. Rory Medcalf in the Australian Journal of International Affairs has recently assessed this:

“[T]he perceived furtherance of the common good has obvious resonance with China’s rhetoric about being a harmonious society in a harmonious world. More to the point, China recognises a need to try to offset perceptions that its rise is a threat to others. Beijing’s challenge here is to ensure that any military role in providing public goods does more to demonstrate goodwill than to heighten suspicions.”



Let's push further. Would China ever be willing to host an international policy discussion about the conditions that would legitimise invading another country to stop genocide or other mass atrocity crimes? Gareth Evans, former Foreign Minister of Australia (1988–1996) and President of the International Crisis Group (2000–09) found himself asking this question in October last year after a meeting hosted by the Chinese Foreign Ministry's think tank, the China Institute of International Studies, attended by various academic practitioners. Although very much a hard-headed realist, Evans allowed himself to entertain a little confidence that it may be possible, with China's support, to create international consensus "so long missing in Syria" about how to deal with the hardest mass atrocity cases. It's worth dwelling on this for a moment, even at the risk of appearing to read too much into a straw delicately poised in the wind. Evans found amongst his Chinese interlocutors a widespread acceptance that the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine unanimously agreed by the UN General Assembly in 2005 is here to stay; further, the majority sentiment among his Chinese partners had moved on from the days when R2P was seen as a mere cloak for interventionism.

LOSS OF CONSENSUS

The loss of consensus in the Security Council concerning how to respond to events in Syria is not an attempt by the global South to revive outdated notions of unlimited sovereignty, rather, a very specific reaction to the alleged overreach of the military intervention in Libya in 2011. You will recall that after France, the UK and the US (the P3) had been given a Security Council mandate to protect civilians based on R2P, they were then perceived by Russia and China as pursuing full-scale regime change. But Gareth Evans detected among the Chinese "widespread agreement about how consensus within the Security Council on the hardest cases might be recreated." The Chinese said the R2P principle should be "enriched" by acceptance of a complementary principle called "Responsible Protection". This notion had been floated by Chinese scholar Ruan Zongze last year. The core elements of Responsible Protection focus on tough criteria to be satisfied before any military mandate is provided, with conspicuous efforts to exhaust diplomatic solutions. And further – clearly this arises from the Libyan experience – there should be better methods of supervision and accountability to ensure that the "protection" objective remains foremost.

Gareth Evans, who played such a prominent role in the development of R2P, argues that these apprehensions, like the Brazilian initiative that preceded it, reflect serious concerns and "if not addressed, they will make Security Council resolutions in support of military action in R2P cases almost impossible to obtain in the future". While it remains to be seen whether China will ever champion the idea of Responsible Protection in an upfront fashion, it would be desirable that if they do, it should be welcomed as a move to expand Chinese foreign policy preoccupations – this is a crucial notion – and to assume co-ownership of R2P. Evans concludes, "In terms of getting serious about saying "never again" to mass-atrocity crimes, that is about as positive a development as anyone could hope for."



In canvassing these questions I'm picking up a challenge described by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in May, addressing scenarios in Asia in the next 20 years. He asked:

Will China be welcomed and respected as a large but benign power shouldering its share of international responsibilities, the way many Asian countries have accepted the US since World War II, or will it be viewed with wariness and apprehension?

The drama of China and the US in Asia is not the only Asian story, however. We have other relationships. As Shakespeare's Coriolanus put it, "There is a world elsewhere." One of them is ASEAN.

One Australian academic says "When I'm asked 'China or the US?' I answer 'ASEAN'." Certainly the Australian government under Tony Abbott has pointed to the importance of ASEAN with the now-Prime Minister saying before the elections he wants more Jakarta and less Geneva in Australian foreign policy, by which he meant more focus on our neighbourhood and less on multilateralism (which conservative governments in Australia tend to disparage). The Australian diplomatic attention to the world of Southeast Asia runs strong and, except for one lapse quickly corrected, Australia has been keen to emphasise ASEAN centrality. During my time as Foreign Minister I appointed the first full-time Ambassador to ASEAN, but more importantly, tried to align Australian foreign policy with ASEAN positions where it was in our interests. It was clearly in our interests to open up to Myanmar. In June 2012 I told President Thein Sein that Australia would lift its sanctions; I was expressing the position that had been pioneered by ASEAN. I committed to lobby other nations in the UN to change the language of the annual resolution in the General Assembly that ignored Thein Sein's reforms and each year beat Myanmar up all over again. Moreover, I undertook to lobby European foreign ministers to have them lift, and not simply leave suspended, their sanctions on the country. I saw Australia become the biggest provider of aid to Myanmar, with our aid flowing overwhelmingly to education. This was Australia moving in behind an ASEAN lead: support for the reformer Thein Sein in his difficult mission of transition.

If we are guilty of neglecting the importance of ASEAN, it's in two respects. First, Australian business is not active in ASEAN economies. Second, study of Southeast Asian languages in Australian schools and universities is a distinct failure of policy. Still, the Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University tells me that when he was at Oxford and sought Southeast Asian scholars he received no applications; when he was appointed to Sydney he found over 200 Southeast Asian specialists already in the campus. Australia has an opportunity to promote and study and interpret the world of Southeast Asia to friends in North America and Europe. Here, the questions are as challenging as they are with China. Will the other nine ASEAN nations follow the Singapore trajectory to first world living standards? How will they manage the challenge of ethno-religious tensions manifest in Myanmar, Indonesia and southern Thailand? And can ASEAN and China reach a robust agreement on the management of maritime territorial disputes and – beyond that – move to resource sharing agreements for which there are three precedents in the region and which must be considered the ultimate answer.



The potential of the ASEAN world has still not fully entered our national imagination. In Southeast Asia Australia can express its relations with both China and the US; here we can build our credibility with our partner China and our ally, the United States. Australia can make a bigger contribution to global affairs if we maximise our opportunities in the region, demonstrating that there's more dimension to our international character than might at first blush be assumed, or than we ourselves had realised.

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