

46th AusCSCAP Meeting - 28 June 2017 - ANU

The 46th AusCSCAP tested a new format. More typically, some 30 to 40 members and participants (including overseas guests) engage in open and collegiate debate on a pertinent theme. This meeting was a smaller, by invitation affair in which a prominent guest, the recently retired Secretary of the Defence Department, Mr Dennis Richardson AO, and some 14 academics, current and former officials and media probed the theme:

'How can Australia build further on our strategic relations in Asia.'

The co-chairs introduced the topic, observing that with growing uncertainty in the region regarding the United States commitment to Asia, and an apparently emboldened China, the smaller countries of Asia may need to do more to protect and advance their vital interests. A key example was the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), where eleven countries of the Asia Pacific region were still thinking of pushing ahead without Washington or Beijing's involvement. The co-chairs asked – should Australia be more ambitious about developing its strategic relations in the region, and where should we concentrate any additional effort?

Debate opened with some participants asserting that we were already doing a lot, and asking what more could we do in a practical and realistic sense. It was easy to suggest that our relationships should deepen, but more specific, tangible examples needed to be identified to confirm that there were important gaps. We already had our largest embassy in our immediate neighbour Indonesia, and links there were long established and thorough. The Whitlam Government of the 1970s had invested in deepening the relationship in Asia, with some success, and our relationship had grown considerably since then. Examples were given of the greater depth of intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism and people smuggling cooperation that was 'light years' ahead of any previous arrangements. From time to time differences and problems occurred in the various bilateral relationships, and elements of our engagement suffered as a result (Defence Cooperation often being the first casualty), but overall the relationships endured and strengthened. When opportunities to enhance cooperation emerged, and they coincided with our national interests, they should be embraced enthusiastically and astutely. In this regard, participants mentioned Indonesia's proposal for joint naval patrols in the region and floated the idea of declaring to our ASEAN neighbours that RAAF C17 transport aircraft based in Darwin were available to them for humanitarian and disaster relief operations. One participant lamented that given the extensive developments in cooperation over the last decade or more, there was unlikely to be any further 'clever ideas' in regard to enhanced engagement waiting in the wings. Equally however, it was argued that Australia's adherence to the rule of law, property rights, and human rights amplified our voice and influence in the region and continued to build our standing, and that we should take fuller advantage of this fact.

Attention turned to ASEAN as an institution, as well as to its individual member countries. It was observed that, although Australian commentators had often bemoaned the perceived weakness of ASEAN over the years, we should not forget the region's history pre ASEAN, where conflict and instability was never far below the surface. Similarly, while some cynics measured ASEAN's success by reference to the number of meetings held each year (over 1,000),

others pointed to the lack of conflict and examples of cooperation across the region since ASEAN's founding.

[Prime Minister Turnbull's speech](#) to the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue was praised as a valuable justification and reframing of Australia's engagement with Asia. Some still felt that intensification of relations with Asia remained relatively superficial, citing as evidence the diminished depth and sophistication of Australian media coverage of Asia, and the tendency for our politicians to play to popular sentiment regarding Asia. Others felt that the populist media treatment of Asia in Australia, and public opinion, mattered little, as long as Australian Government policy towards the region was based on sound principles, a clear sense of what we wanted, and underlined by our fundamental values. As an example, it was suggested that few people seemed aware of Australia's current support for the Philippines Government in combatting IS terrorism in Mindanao, but this was likely to be remembered in the Philippines (and contrasted with the lack of Chinese support).

Others did not agree that our engagement with Southeast Asia was as deep as indicated, and drew attention to a number of critical gaps in Australia's investment in its relations with Asia. By way of example, reference was made to the decline in Asian literacy across Australian universities. Fewer students were currently studying Asian languages in schools or universities than previously, and the number of economics graduates with an interest in Southeast Asia was abysmal (most concentrating on N.E. Asia or elsewhere). Australia was now much less well served re Asia by its educational institutions. Even on trade, we were not as regionally significant as we think. As far as Indonesia was concerned, we were Indonesia's 11th largest trading partner, and they our 12th largest. Our trading relationship with other ASEAN countries was similarly modest. There had been little change in Australia's investment profile in Indonesia over the years, despite considerable effort to increase it and despite strong opportunities to do so, especially in the so-called 'soft power' areas like education. Perhaps Singapore was seen as an exception, being described as the 'Israel of Asia' - its limited territory (and hence reliance on Australia for military exercises), and similar values meant that it holds a somewhat special relationship with us.

Some, whilst acknowledging our declining Asian literacy, still felt that Australia generally understood the different cultures and countries of Asia - at least as well as they understood each other. One practical suggestion that emerged was the proposal for a website on Southeast Asia, maintained by a small unit within DFAT (or other department) with general information not readily available elsewhere. This was supported, as long as it did not duplicate current private sector efforts.

The issue was raised that Australia should not, as it sometimes does, define its relationships in Asia through the prism of China. We can still 'lead from the front' with independent analysis and views without jeopardizing our wider relationship. Other countries in the region were in a less fortunate situation - Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam could potentially pay a high price in terms of sovereignty for displays of independence or criticism of their powerful neighbour. Some of our close allies might expect us to exercise this relative advantage on their behalf more often than we do.

In looking to the future and issues not hitherto considered, artificial intelligence, robotics, automation (especially in transport), and the future of work were raised. The two giants in this field were the United States and China (with Japan and South Korea also important). Some felt that these technological developments could change the strategic landscape dramatically, with geo-economic influence and issues replacing conventional strategic concerns. When these developments are combined with the new 'imperialism' inherent in China's 'Belt and Road' initiative, the AIIB, and emerging regional security architecture, it could be argued that a new paradigm was taking shape to challenge conventional thinking. Taking these issues into account, one participant commented on the inconsistency in some recent statements of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and a leading academic which together failed to give sufficient recognition to this impending massive change.

The issue was raised of Australia's relations with India and Japan, and whether the changing character of great power rivalry would invite or compel a new approach to these countries. Some felt no, and that the relationship in both cases was progressing smoothly (albeit somewhat glacially in the case of India), while others felt that the precipitous termination of the quadrilateral 'alliance' concept (India, Japan, South Korea, Australia) was one of Australia's worst strategic decisions of the past decade or two.

Defence cooperation within the region was effective, despite the tendency for some bilateral arrangements to suffer – often for political reasons in the country to which our cooperation was directed (Indonesia and the 'poster' issue being a case in point). Sometimes the long-term impact of disrupted defence cooperation can produce unintended consequences - cutting-off officer training with the Fijian Defence Force (a necessary diplomatic act following the coup) had cost us contact with a generation of military officers in Fiji and affected their capacity to engage in Peace-keeping Operations and other sectors. On the other hand, our English language training for Vietnamese officers meant that Vietnam was now better able to contribute to UN Peace-keeping Operations (and earn foreign exchange for the country in so doing).

Discussion concluded with a range of general statements – there was agreement that the encouragement of more open trade and globalization was necessary for enhancing our economic relations in Asia, and, strategically to diversify our trade relations and lessen dependence on China. Others felt that while we must continue to advance the rules-based order that has prevailed since 1945 (and to encourage the United States to do like-wise), it was also time for us to engage with the new evolving regional security architecture being promoted by China - the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) being a case in point. If observer status at the SCO could not presently be pursued at Track 1 or governmental level, then perhaps Track 2 could play an interim role. There was reference to the Government's White Paper on Foreign Affairs, including the intention to release it in mid to late November 2017.

LIST OF GUESTS -

Guest of Honour -Dennis Richardson; with Chris Barrie, Scott Dewar, Greg Fealy, Allan Gyngell, Ron Huisken, Doug Kean, Angus Macdonald, Anthony Milner, Alison Moore, Gary Quinlan, Ric Smith and Brendan Taylor.