

INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES

**We must all hang together, or, most assuredly,
we shall all hang separately.**

– Benjamin Franklin, 1776

GARETH EVANS

Before COVID-19 struck, Australia's international environment was already more challenging than it had been for decades. Towering over everything else was the reality of China's dramatic rise and new assertiveness, America's equally dramatic comparative decline, and the prospect of ever more serious confrontation between them. Beyond that we were affected, like everyone else, by the deteriorating worldwide commitment to multilateral problem solving, and in varying degrees by Europe's struggle to maintain its collective identity in the face of surging nationalist and populist sentiment and Britain's Brexit brain-fade, Russia's playing the role of regional hegemon and global spoiler whenever and wherever it could, and continued roiling conflicts in West Asia. Closer to home, it mattered for us that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was losing whatever remained of its coherence and credibility, that China's rival giant India was

continuing to punch well below its potentially very constructive weight, and that the South Pacific was re-emerging as a potential playground for a major power contest.

Whether the COVID-19 pandemic changes everything, something or nothing very much in all of this remains to be seen. One obvious scenario is for an acceleration of extreme nationalism, with protectionist, anti-foreigner and anti-globalisation sentiment fuelled by fear of further pandemics and supply-chain disruptions and a lack of confidence that multilateral institutions and processes can serve national interests. This would carry the risk, among many others, of not only a plunge back into a cold war between the world's great powers but, in an extreme worst case, hot war.

An alternative outcome, much more optimistic, would be for the crisis to serve as a giant wake-up call as to the absolute necessity of effective international co-operation and collaboration, not least between the world's biggest players, if the world's biggest problems, beyond the capacity of any one country to redress – including not only pandemics but climate change and potential nuclear annihilation – are ever to be solved, and if the economic and social benefits of globalisation are not to be squandered.

My own instinct is that when COVID-19 has run its immediate course, global and regional geopolitics will resume much of their present character, with neither the worst- nor best-case scenarios sketched above being fully realised. While the hard power of both the United States and China remains more or less intact, and their strategic competition will remain a reality, the international credibility of both has taken a drubbing over their performance during the crisis, and neither seems likely for the foreseeable future to be able to command the global legions of ideologically motivated allies, partners and proxies that Washington and Moscow could during the Cold War. While major

powers sleepwalking or stumbling into deadly conflict is hardly unprecedented, it remains barely conceivable that either country could seriously calculate that the rewards of a hot war – whether started over Taiwan, the South China Sea or anything else – could ever outweigh its catastrophic downsides. And major economic decoupling will be incredibly difficult to achieve given the extent to which the two countries are now joined at the wallet.

Elsewhere, while we can expect post-pandemic sentiment for harder borders and less supply-chain exposure to remain strong, there is simply too much interdependence now built into the global economy, and too much obvious benefit to be derived from the free movement of people, goods and services, for any kind of extreme unwinding to be really credible. Authoritarian populists like Bolsonaro, Duterte, Erdogan and Orban have done no better in managing the ravages of COVID-19 than their more democratically inclined counterparts – and sometimes much worse – and it should not be assumed that their brand of aggressive-defensive nationalism will gain any kind of boost from the crisis.

The biggest question mark is whether confidence can be restored in the capacity of multilateral institutions and the rule-based order they serve, to meet global, regional and national interests. At its height in the immediate post-Cold War years, that confidence has been dwindling over the last two decades, and has not been helped by the UN Security Council – and most regional organisations – going missing during the COVID-19 crisis, and bodies like the WHO manifestly underperforming. Whether confidence is capable of restoration depends, more than anything else, given the traditional centrality of the US international role, on the outcome of the November 2020 election: while a Biden presidency offers some hope of a return to decency, four more years of Trump's contempt and sabotage may simply be irremediable.

So how should Australia position itself in the conduct of

its international relations in the post-COVID-19 environment I have described – with the most likely outcome a continuation of the basic geopolitical dynamics that preceded it, but on one side the risk of things getting much worse, and on the other the hope of them getting rather better? My view is that our best policy response has been for some time, and should remain, one built on four pillars: Less America, More Self-Reliance, More Asia and More Global Engagement.

Less America

Australia should not walk away from the United States alliance, from which we unquestionably benefit in terms of access to intelligence and high-end armaments, and – however flimsy the ANZUS guarantee may prove to be in reality – the notional deterrent protection of America’s massive military firepower. Continued counter-balancing American engagement in our region is certainly highly desirable. But less reflexive support by Australia for everything Washington chooses to do or ask for has been, and remains, long overdue.

Neither we nor anyone else in the region should be under any illusion that, for all the insurance we might think we have bought with our past support, the United States will be there for us militarily in any circumstance where it does not also see its own immediate interests being under some threat. While that was almost certainly also the reality under previous administrations, it has been thrown into much starker relief by Trump’s ‘America First’ approach, and it should not be assumed that anything would be very different in a post-Trump era. I think the reality is, as my ANU colleague Hugh White has repeatedly put it, that ‘we need to prepare ourselves to live in Asia without America’.

None of this positioning is as breathtakingly adventurous, or politically dangerous, as it might once have been. Recognition that the United States is a much less reliable ally than it once might have been is alive and well in Europe, is creeping into the writing even of the conservative commentariat here, and was clearly a subtext of the government's own Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's recent update to the national defence strategy, announced in July this year, was also premised on this assumption of need for greater self-reliance. Both sides of Australian politics are going to have to think long and hard about how sensible it is to resist coming to terms with this new reality.

More self-reliance

Preparing ourselves to rely less on America certainly means being more of a diplomatic free agent: adding to our reputation and credibility with an activist foreign policy that is creative, proactive, value-adding and unconstrained by the constant urge to look over our shoulder to Washington. And with increased – not declining – diplomatic resources to match. But more than that, it does entail, in military terms, building defence capability that involves not only more bucks than we are usually comfortable spending but getting a bigger bang for each of them. More self-reliance certainly means maximising our capacity to protect our shores and maritime environment (including the South-west Pacific) from hostile intrusion, but also means having a capacity to engage in military operations wider afield if there is a good national interest (including responsible global citizenship) reason for doing so.

While defence expenditure has been increasing – with both

sides of politics committed to maintaining it at a credible 2 per cent, or slightly more, of GDP – given the size of our continent, our capacity to defend ourselves against any real existential threat is limited. I am optimistic enough to believe that in the world of today and the foreseeable future the costs and risks of waging war so wildly outweigh any conceivable benefits for any significant player that the likelihood of a major conflict in the foreseeable future is actually very low. But defence planning always has to be based on worst-case assumptions, taking into account potential adversaries' capabilities, not just known intent, and in that context we are going to have to get used to doing more.

More Asia

The first dimension of this is strengthening our relationships at all levels with key regional neighbours like India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan and South Korea, as a collective counterweight to a potentially over-reaching China. As much as one would welcome Australia developing an even closer relationship with ASEAN as a whole – with all its potential for harnessing the region's collective middle power energy and capacity – for the foreseeable future internal divisions, and the organisation's culture of extreme caution, make that unlikely. Our efforts in South East Asia should be focused on its two heaviest players, Indonesia and Vietnam, as well as our traditional partners Singapore and Malaysia.

The other dimension is getting back on a credible and sustainable track in our relationship with China itself. This does not mean becoming Beijing's patsy, any more than we should be Washington's. We should not hold back in making clear our own commitment to democratic and human rights values, and should be prepared to push back strongly when China over-reaches

externally, as it has in the South China Sea, or domestically as in Xingian, Tibet and Hong Kong. And of course, we have to resist strongly any undermining of our national institutions.

But we do need to rein in some of the counter-productive stridency of some of our public rhetoric, to recognise the legitimacy of many of China's own security and economic national interest claims, and to acknowledge how provocative some of our own self-interested actions are (for example, our very heavy reliance on anti-dumping trade rules). We should acknowledge the essential legitimacy of the scale and ambition of the Belt and Road Initiative, be a little less anxious about its regional security implications, and be prepared – with appropriate commercial caution – to be an active participant in the enterprise. And we certainly need to recognise the legitimacy of China's demand to be now not just a rule-taker but a participant in global rule-making.

When a relationship is under the kind of strain ours has been with China, the smart diplomatic course is to focus hard on potential shared interests, issues that can unite rather than further divide. I have long argued that one of the most productive ways of building new content – not just economic – into our presently very one-dimensional relationship is for Australia to play both on what's left of our reputation as a good international citizen, committed to finding effective multilateral solutions to global and regional public goods issues, and China's desire to project soft power. Beijing's efforts to improve its image have often been clumsy, and occasionally counterproductive, but in areas like international co-operation on climate, peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, arms control and – for the most part – response to pandemics, it has in recent times been playing a more interested and constructive role than has generally been recognised.

More global engagement

This should be a defining theme of our overall foreign policy, not just a core element in our relationship with China. Australia has been at its best, and our standing in the world highest, when we have projected ourselves effectively on to the world stage as a country deeply committed to our common humanity and determined to do everything we can to make the world safer, saner, more prosperous and just.

Intense commitment to multilateral engagement should ideally have committed bipartisan support, but regrettably that has not always been the case with the present government and a number of its conservative predecessors. Speaking of ‘negative globalism’, resisting international process on climate and refugees, and challenging the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court to protect Israel’s interests are recent unhelpful examples. The Morrison Government’s call for an international inquiry into the management of the COVID-19 crisis could have been a welcome demonstration of commitment to good international process, but was marred by being ill-thought-out operationally, ill-prepared diplomatically, and lending itself to the perception of playing into the Trump administration’s anti-China campaign,

One area where active Australian support for advancing global and regional public goods could make a difference is nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, where – rather more than in the case of pandemics – at least Labor governments have played a major role in global agenda-setting in the past. We did so with the Canberra Commission initiated by Paul Keating in 1996 and the Australia-Japan Commission initiated by Kevin Rudd, which I co-chaired in 2009, and can play a major role again, including – I don’t think it’s too naïve to hope – by working with

China, which has long been among the least enthusiastic of the nuclear-armed states.

Playing to Australians' natural, egalitarian instinct for decency, we should focus on co-operative problem solving, working not only through the United Nations but forums like the G20 and East Asia Summit and APEC where, as a result of past Labor government efforts we have a top-table place. Using all the energy and creativity that has traditionally been associated with Australian middle power diplomacy at its best will be far and away the best way of ensuring that this great country of ours not only survives but thrives in the years and decades ahead, in a region and world in which the tectonic plates are shifting and – not least post-COVID-19 – every possible kind of uncertainty abounds.

Gareth Evans

Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC was a Cabinet Minister throughout the Hawke-Keating governments, including as Foreign Minister from 1988–96, and later President of the International Crisis Group in Brussels and Chancellor of the Australian National University. He co-chaired the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, and the Australia–Japan International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. He has written or edited 13 books, most recently *Incorrigible Optimist: A political memoir*.