**REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES**

Notes for Presentation by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans, Chancellor of The Australian National University, to ANU National Security College Indo-Pacific Strategic Policy Program, Melbourne, 10 October 2016

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Address four major challenges – China, potential use and misuse of nuclear weapons, Islamist extremism, and building effective regional security architecture.

1. **The China Challenge**

China manifestly becoming much more assertive internationally. Under Xi Jinping, with political authoritarianism resurgent domestically, Deng Xiao Ping’s injunction for it to “hide its strength, bide its time and never take the lead” internationally has been abandoned. Economically there has been a clear determination to no longer accept China’s second-rank status in international financial institutions: creation against intense US opposition of the AIIB exhibit one.

Geopolitically, manifestly expansionist territorial claims have been pursued, most notably in the South China Sea. Very significant modernization and expansion of military capability, including into Indian Ocean – not excluding nuclear weapons, where until now China’s position has been moderate and minimalist. Clear determination to resist the indefinite continuation of U.S. dominance in the region, with the U.S. constantly being described as intent on isolating, containing and undermining it. China manifestly no longer willing to continue to accept a situation where the US is unchallenged rule maker and enforcer, both economically and militarily.

*How to respond?* Our starting point should be to recognise that much of this is no more than can and should be expected of a rapidly economically rising, hugely trade-dependent regional superpower, wanting to flap its wings and reassert some of its historical greatness after two centuries or more of wounded pride. To a large extent we should be prepared to go with the flow. Not only as Australia and others did with AIIB, but we should have been actively working to embrace China in the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact (not that this seems now to have much of a future) rather than exclude it from the negotiation process as the US has insisted.

*South China Sea?* Most potentially volatile of all the current tension points between China and the US, most salient issue for South East Asian nations – especially Indonesia. Now authoritatively determined by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague in July that China’s “nine-dashed line”, identifying as its “historic waters” some 80 per cent of the whole area, is a manifestly unacceptable foundation for any kind of sovereignty claim under international law. The PCA also ruled that there was no legal basis under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea for China to be building airstrips and other potentially militarily-relevant infrastructure on certain reefs and rocks in the Spratly Group, and asserting at least a 12 nautical mile exclusion zone them.

China has strongly objected to the whole PCA proceeding and no doubt will continue to do so. We can’t expect it to abandon occupancy of any reef, rock or island where it currently has a toehold, or to stop insisting on its sovereign ownership of most of the land features in the South China Sea. So long as China’s objections to the PCA decision remain essentially just rhetorical, as they have been so far, there is a strong case for the rest of us giving Beijing some space to quietly adjust course.

But should there be such adventures as further militarization of the reef installations, new reclamation work started on the Scarborough Shoal, or an ADIZ declared over any of these features, pushback, in the form for example of so-called FONOPS operations past features like Mischief Reef, cannot be avoided. True, any such naval or airborne operation runs real risks of incidents occurring, which can escalate out of control – but believe that China, while certainly wanting to push the hegemonic envelope as far it can, and willing to take advantage of any perceived weakness, is not remotely interested in embarking upon or promoting violent military confrontation, and that any such escalation is extremely unlikely.

*ASEAN Response?*  Should not underestimate individual and collective military capability - Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore (tho Philippines a weak link): China would need to think long and hard about provoking conflict. But crucial that be united *political* front – and here are obvious weaknesses: consensus rule making it possible for China to weaken communiqués through influence over Cambodia and Laos; obvious political fragility in Thailand, Malaysia and to some extent still in Myanmar -- and real concern about direction Duterte is taking in the Philippines (how far will tilt away from US to China go?)

Crucial that *Indonesia* play leadership role, as has in past – fourth most populous country, rapidly developing economy to match, demonstrating democracy and Islam can coexist, and with President, after uncertain start, finding his feet: already giving very clear messages on Chinese fishing incursions in Natunas (scuttling seized vessels/ naval visit).

May be other ways[[1]](#footnote-1) of giving clear messages to China that region not prepared to lapse into tributary-state mode:

- considerable scope for *maritime cooperation* on search and rescue (MSAR) and humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) operations – including involving US, Australia, India, Japan – to promote greater interaction between armed forces without triggering political sensitivities;

- also more specific idea (promoted by Rory Medcalf) of leveraging FPDA relationships as basis for new cooperative regional maritime arrangement involving India and Indonesia (connecting with but not directly involving US)

*United States and China?* Most critical challenge of all for sustainable regional peace is finding way of keeping US productively – but not *counter*productively – engaged in regional security issues, i.e. still offering enough defence assurance to its allies and partners (including Japan and South Korea) to avoid them rushing into new and destabilizing arms race, but at same time recognizing reality of China’s rise: and unwillingness to be no longer just a second-class rule taker.

Although US policymakers like Kurt Campbell argue plausibly that the “pivot” is about broader engagement with Asia, and cooperatively shaping a 21st century order in the region for everyone’s benefit, is the case that much American public discourse sounds much more provocative and confronting to Chinese ears. Still hear too often “DLP” words: maintaining the *d*ominance, or *l*eadership or *p*rimacy of the US in East Asia.  Whatever many policymakers say privately the public discourse is overwhelmingly about US *leadership*, implying when not stating directly that America should remain No 1 in perpetuity, both globally and specifically in Asia.

If the US-China relationship is not to end in very serious tears, it will be necessary for the US to some extent accommodate the reality of Chinese power and influence, to give it a little more strategic space in its own immediate region, and be much more careful about asserting institutional and rule-making dominance of the kind that was so evident in at least the initial US approach to the Trans Pacific Partnership and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

The right language for the US to be using is that which I once heard from Bill Clinton after he left the White House: “The real choice for America is not to use our enormous economic and military might to try to stay top dog on the global block in perpetuity, but to create a world in which we will be comfortable living when we are no longer top dog on the global block.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. **The Nuclear Challenge**

Issues relating to nuclear weapons should matter more than it seems to for most publics and policymakers: ultimately an *existential* issue, because policy failure may lead to the destruction of life on this planet as we know it, and the risks of policy failure are very high. Same true of climate change – other great existential issue of our time – but nuclear weapons can kill us a lot faster than C02. Risk here not so much from deliberate use – to go homicidal with nuclear weapons is also to go suicidal – but from human error, system error, miscalculation, misjudgement or cyber sabotage. Sheer dumb luck that have avoided nuclear catastrophe since 1945, and cant expect that luck to continue indefinitely.

With the advent of President Obama in 2009, there were real grounds for optimism among those of us who wanted to see serious movement toward a world free of nuclear weapons. But now that optimism has almost completely disappeared. Since the deterioration of the US-Russia relationship we have been going rapidly backwards – with arms control negotiations on hold at all levels; expensive force modernization programs everywhere proceeding; the Russian President talking up the useability of nuclear weapons in language we haven't heard since the Cold War years, and above all in Indo-Pacific: net weapons numbers increasing across Asia with Pakistan, India and China all increasing their arsenals; the use of tactical nuclear weapons being openly canvassed by Pakistan; and North Korea getting ever closer to deliverable weapons.

Only recent good news is momentum building in UN and civil society around humanitarian impact movement, and related move to initiate negotiation of a Nuclear Weapons Convention: but this being vigorously resisted by all the nuclear-armed states, supported in case of US by allies and partners from Europe and East Asia, with Australia unhappily in forefront. My own view: better to devote our energies in first instance to *minimization* objective as per ICNND – i.e. reduction of stockpiles, deployments, alert status, doctrinal change – recognizing verification, enforcement, geopolitical and psychological barriers to getting to zero any time soon, but no harm whatever in getting negotiation process started, and working to delegitimize whole concept of nuclear deterrence.

*North Korea.* The situation causing most visible alarm at the moment, at least for policymakers in the US and East Asia, is the rapidly developing capability of North Korea – to the point where it may within the next two years or so have 20 or more nuclear weapons, and a capacity to deliver them to the US mainland. This is generating calls of increasing stridency from various quarters for everything from sanctioning Chinese companies that may be contributing to Pyongyang’s weapons program, to nuclear-arming South Korea, to the consideration even of pre-emptive military strikes.

It does now seem that, unlike the situation in the 1990s (in the Agreed Framework talks in which I was involved) and until the Bush Jr administration slammed the door shut again on negotiations in the mid-noughties, when the DPRK program was not nearly so far advanced, it will be very difficult now to achieve any denuclearization outcome, and very difficult indeed to make any progress at all if a commitment to this continues to be demanded as a precondition to any further negotiations.

But that is absolutely no reason to abandon any kind of negotiations as a way of stabilizing the situation and limiting further damage – perhaps along the lines of the “Three Noes” proposal from Stanford’s Siegfried Hecker: no new weapons, no better weapons, and no transfer of technology. This is the kind of course favoured by former US Defense Secretary, one of the coolest and wisest heads in the business – who argues that there is still room for international leverage to be applied given the Kim Jong Un regime’s basic goals of securing its own dynasty, winning some international respect, and improving its economy.

There has also been a just published Council on Foreign Relations task force report, a majority of whose members – including its co-chairs former US Senator Sam Nunn, and retired former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, argued for a new negotiation initiative.

The North Koreans are erratic, deeply unpleasant, irresponsible and unhelpful. But they do not bear all the blame for the negotiations that have failed in the past, and are not behaving completely irrationally. None of the suggested alternatives to further diplomacy are likely to bear fruit, and some of them run enormous risks of generating catastrophic conflict. It’s time to take a deep breath and try again.

*India and Pakistan.* Many ways more immediately dangerous situation than North Korea. With constant risk of terrorist attacks on India – with or without support of Pakistan Government – is enormous potential for war, and one escalating not only to point of nuclear devastation of both countries, but (through nuclear winter effect of exchange of just 50 weapons – less than quarter of current combined arsenals) destruction of life as we know it planet- wide. Nuclear war on any scale between the two would be “the most destabilising and catastrophic event in the international system since World War II” [[3]](#footnote-3).

While the Indian response to the 18 September attack on a fortified army base in Indian Kashmir, killing 19 soldiers – a reciprocal ‘surgical strike’ across the Kashmir Line of Control killing a similar number of suspected terrorists in their own home bases described accurately as ‘as carefully calibrated as any use of force could be’. But more worrisome possibility is that terrorists will attack soft civilian targets in a major Indian city, crossing international not just Kashmir border to do so – like Mumbai in 2008: ‘pressure on Indian leaders to respond with unprecedented ferocity would be enormous’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Ensuring that cooler heads continue to prevail on the sub-continent in these situations will be enormously difficult but absolutely crucial. While most of the problems generating these knife-edge situations have been concentrated on the Pakistani side, and that’s where the biggest institutional and mindset changes need to be made, one cannot the reality that a change of approach, and real leadership, is still needed on the Indian side, above all in relation to Kashmir. The ball is not only in Nawaz Sharif’s and the Pakistan military’s court, but Narendra Modi’s as well.

As Ramesh Thakur wrote last month, ‘India has proven it lacks the wit to resolve the Kashmir dispute through diplomatic negotiations and its long history of brutal rule has alienated large sections of the province’s population. Inflammatory statements by Hindu hardliners have added palpably to the sense of insecurity of Muslims and other religious minorities, which in turn is ground fertile for exploitation by domestic and external mischief makers’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. **The Challenge of Islamist Extremism**

Cross-border terrorist assaults by Pakistan-based jihadists into India just one of the many dimensions of the threat posed, in Indo-Pacific region – as in Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America – by Islamist extremists.

About only good news on this front is that threat of *nuclear* terrorism from these groups tends to be overstated, at least so far as exploding a fission bomb is concerned: given the scale of the operations involved, the coordination required, and the extent to which intelligence and policing agents are already on the case, the chances of a full scale attack on a major city are quite small, though certainly not vanishingly so.

That said, certainly the case that much more likely event would be for extremists to assemble quantities of non-fissile radioactive material like caesium 137, much more readily available in multiple industrial and medical uses, and detonate it with a conventional explosive like TNT as a "dirty bomb" in the middle of a city. The physical damage would be relatively minimal, certainly by comparison with a fission bomb, but the psychological damage unquestionably great – made so largely by the way this threat continues to be so talked-up by policymakers. It may be that by talking the risk down it will that much less likely to be perpetrated.

Critical challenge for all of us is prevention: finding ways of stopping jobless, hopeless, rootless, and alienated young Muslim men, in the Islamic world and in the West, from embracing violent Islamism in the first place.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For the foreseeable future, hard measures will continue to be necessary: tough policing, intrusive intelligence gathering, effective border protection, and oppressive airport security. And sometimes, as well, outright military attack will be called for – particularly where the innocent are at immediate risk (as with the Yazidis in Iraq) and the targets are clear.

But violent jihadism is a complex problem that requires a similarly complex response. Because military force alone (particularly if applied by forces from non-Islamic countries) will always risk creating more new fighters than it kills, it is not softheaded to insist that we pay attention to the underlying causes of Islamist extremism, not just its surface manifestations.

In part, that means addressing the political grievances of the Arab and Islamic world, not least Israel’s continuing occupation of Palestinian land. This is not to appease the violent extremists, many of whom will not be moved in the slightest by such initiatives. The point is to change the atmosphere in the communities in which extremism ignites, denying it some of the oxygen it needs to spread.

Reducing the pool of hopeless young men also requires implementing strategies to expand economic opportunity, both in the developing world and in the most depressed pockets of the developed world.

It also needs to be recognized that fighting extremism is a matter of opening more human rights and democracy channels for the expression of demands and grievances. When the only open door is that of the mosque, it is not surprising that popular discontent often takes on an Islamist cast.

But these longer-term strategies are all difficult to implement. We need to support them with preventive strategies that have an immediate payoff. When an epidemic is raging, the most pressing task is to interrupt the transmission of the disease, change the behaviour of those at highest risk, and get community support for that change.

Since 9/11, community-based “Countering Violent Extremism” programs have aroused interest in a number of different countries. What is already clear is that the most successful programs are those that are least visibly associated with government and law-enforcement authorities; those developed in close consultation with local communities; and, above all, those that are most practical and specific, relying primarily on individual interventions.

Those young men (and occasionally women) who are susceptible to extremism’s appeal respond best to those they trust – people who can help them step back from violence in a way that does not cause them to lose face. Sidney Jones, in her brilliant work for the ICG on Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, found that potential recruits were not at all receptive to exhortations from moderate Muslim leaders to eschew violence; they could, however, be turned away by those whom they saw as having legitimacy within the jihadist movement.

1. **The Challenge of Regional Security Architecture**

In responding to all the kinds of regional security challenges addressed here, and others as well, remain a firm believer in utility of both regional organizations, and multilateral regional dialogue and policymaking forums – and remaining challenge in my list is to make *them* work as they should.

Regional organizations are often designed with primarily economic cooperation objectives, but in fact achieve security objectives by their very creation, and the enhanced degree of general intergovernmental dialogue, cooperation and interdependence that comes with the association. The European Union in this respect is probably the single most effective conflict prevention mechanism ever constructed, when one considers the history of Western Europe before its creation, and it is a tragedy that Brexit and other recent developments have been putting its future at risk.

ASEAN, similarly, although not itself a primarily security-focused organization, has evolved since its creation in the 1960s to the point that – weak and divided as it still is in many ways – conflict, endemic in the past, is now almost unthinkable between any of its members. But other regional organizations created with similar objectives - like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in the 1980s – have not evolved to anything like this extent.

In the Asia-Pacific, or now Indo-Pacific region, a number of attempts have been made over the last 25 years (in a number of which I was closely involved as Foreign Minister from 1988-96) to build more broadly based economic and security architecture – often with the ASEAN countries at the heart of the enterprise – with some progress being made but less than I for one would have hoped.

* ***APEC,*** initiated in 1989 with annual leaders’ meetings institutionalised from 1993, is a purely economic dialogue and policy organization, but security issues have regularly been discussed in its margins, nowhere more importantly than at the New Zealand meeting in 1999, which mobilized a response to the explosive situation in East Timor.
* The ***ASEAN +***summits, especially ASEAN +3 (South Korea, Japan and China).
* The ***ASEAN Regional Forum,*** meeting since 1994 at foreign minister level, and now with 27 members, which was intended to evolve through three phases over time –  starting with confidence building measures, moving from there to more explicit conflict prevention roles  and ultimately conflict management and resolution. Although it has done some useful work on initiating discussion on a code of conduct for the South China Sea, and developing cooperative disaster relief  capability – and there has been some useful regular dialogue on issues like counter-terrorism and transnational crime, maritime security and non-proliferation and disarmament, it would be fair to say that ARF is still largely stuck in the first groove – dialogue about confidence building – rather than living up to the hopes that by now it would be doing something more substantial;  and now
* The***East Asian Summit*,** initiated in 2005 involving leaders level meetings  - growing out of the ASEAN + 3, + another 3 (India, Australia and New Zealand), and now, since 2011, largely as a result of active diplomacy from Australia embracing the US and Russia as well.     Although nothing very substantive has yet emerged from the EAS, it has the potential to be by far the most significant grouping of them all – and very important that it be supported.

Of course it is easy to be sceptical about multilateral summitry, lending itself as it does to familiar gibes about wildly expensive photo opportunities, set-piece speeches endorsing pre-cooked lowest-common-denominator communiqués, and more time devoted to parading around in silly shirts (at least in the case of APEC) than to policy substance. But when well prepared and properly conducted, summits of the EAS and APEC kind, and some major ministerial-level meetings as well, can and do add value to regional governance in a number of ways.

They can set the policy agenda on crucial economic and security issues, from which participating leaders will be embarrassed if they backslide – even if, as is often the case, agreement has been wrung out of them by strong peer pressure. They can be an antidote to inertia. The pressure of looming deadlines, with the need to produce “deliverables” both for the formal meeting itself and the usual surrounding buzz of bilateral engagements, often force agreement on important but contentious issues that would otherwise remain indefinitely unresolved. They can achieve things that meetings of lesser political mortals cannot. Leaders bring a broader perspective than any portfolio ministers can, and they usually have much more authority to make decisions and commit resources on the spot.

And they can build mutual trust and confidence among their participants, particularly if they are repeated at regular intervals and include ample time for one-on-one and small-group exchanges. There are pathological exceptions to every rule, and sometimes familiarity does indeed breed contempt. But personal relationships are the lubricant on which both domestic and international policymaking depend, and multilateral summits and major ministerial meetings are among the most cost-effective ways to develop and sustain them.

For all the time and energy that academics put into international relations theory, and for all the effort that goes into describing the underlying currents that determine the flow of history, it really is the case, in my long experience, that what tends to matter more than almost anything else are the personal qualities of those who at crucial times find their way into leadership positions. With the prospect of President Trump not yet entirely dead, afraid that that is a rather alarming note on which to conclude – but it’s the way the world works.

1. See David Brewster, *Australia, India and the United States: The Challenge of Forging New Alignments in the Indo-Pacific*, US Studies Centre, August 2016, pp16-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Best recent analysis of how to manage relationship not pushing legitimate competition to tpoint of dangerous confrontation is Kevin Rudd’s “constructive realism” April 2015 Harvard Kennedy School paper on *The Future of U.S.-China Relations Under Xi Jinping.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Toby Dalton & George Perkovich, ‘Pakistan and India: The Art of Peace’, Carnegie Endowment, 19 September 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. George Perkovich, ‘Managing the Next Moves’, Carnegie Endowment, 6 October 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ramesh Thakur. ‘The Dangerous Drift towards Militarization’, The Strategist, 29 September 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See further Gareth Evans, ‘Combating Terrorist Recruitment’, Project Syndicate, 27 November 2015, <http://www.gevans.org/opeds/oped180.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)