

Comment by Michael C H Jones

Should you have been reading the themes promoted by Chamber in this website over the last 5/6 years, certainly from the final years of the Howard Federal Liberal-National Government, the concepts of Key Cities Strategy or the internationalisation of municipal governments; Global Economic Relations or the politics/diplomacy of rival national trade, investment and financial policies; Peoples Diplomacy or the Right to Interfere by the new cosmopolitanists; Transnational Governance or the extension of domestic laws and party systems beyond borders; the emerging new global institutions and norms or the struggle of ideas; amongst others would be familiar. No one knows how these competing trends will work out in the end - an end that will probably last at least until mid century.

From Australia's perspective, as with all countries, the short, medium and long term interests have to be weighed and judgements made. One thing is for sure the concept of the nation state as we have known it for about 500 years in Europe is ending and mostly with a rush. Australia as a continent dominates the Indo-Pacific in a way that no other country can - certainly not the small island state of Singapore or the ultra dispersed thousands of islands Indonesia. Australia sits across three oceans and lays claim to maritime regions including up to 40% of Antarctica that makes it a geo-strategic prize. In my travels throughout China, EU and USA it has always surprised me how clued in the CPC is, jealous officials of various parties in Europe are, and non-committal both the US Democrats and Republicans. The only people who don't seem to understand are Australians. However we had better wake up quick because other Great Powers are not going to recognise Australian sovereignty unless it is protected and this can only be achieved through politics/diplomacy given our size and national resources.

If China is to soon have its own version of the US Monroe Doctrine or sphere of maritime influence wherein space is made for it by the withdrawal of the US fleets, then the crunch areas are likely to be in the northern Sea of Japan and the South China Sea interface with the ASEAN countries. Japan is beyond Australia's capacity to significantly assist - it is a Korea/Russia/US problem. However ASEAN is of monumental importance for Australia and especially Indonesia - it is the buffer, the barrier or shield that protects our maritime responsibilities. Indonesia is to Australia what the Dutch were to Britain during the 17th and 18th centuries. And for Indonesia to be strong and stable ASEAN needs to be strong and stable. It is not in our interests - short, medium or long term - for either China or India to too heavily penetrate any of the member nations economically or politically and thereby generate a version of Cold War rivalry.

The diversity of ASEAN religiously and socially is to Australia's advantage. We are a multicultural society and that should give us gravitas with their governments whether Muslim Indonesia and Malaysia, Catholic Philippines, Buddhist Thailand, 'communist' Vietnam or 'Chinese' Singapore. Our very large Chinese diaspora not only business but socially gives Australia entrees into the thinking of the emerging philosophical tendencies or factions of the Chinese Communist Party. Indonesia as with Malaysia still has a large Chinese ethnic population even through they may have changed their names. Nevertheless it is admittedly safer to operate from Australia/Sydney with Anglo allies.

So it is in Australia's interest in all ways to economically, politically and socially assist Indonesia - in some respects Indonesia plays a role in ASEAN similar to the German role in the EU/Europe. An Indonesian deal/agreement as the leader of ASEAN with the PRC about the South China Sea sovereignties would stand the test of time and permit a US phase out of China's maritime region. That is not to overlook or run away from democracy in China's leading province - Taiwan. But that is a separate question - put bluntly the 'fall' of Taiwan to China does not threaten Australia's vital interests but the disintegration of ASEAN and the destabilisation of Indonesia very seriously does.

The Australian political parties must debate seriously what sort of Indonesia they would like within the realities of Indonesia's history, culture, political and economic realities. Whilst not interfering directly Australian governments can support educational bodies and international agencies already working for religious tolerance and libertarian democratic outcomes. This we are already doing but the effort needs to be greatly expedited. And that may mean some very tough policy positions with real creative tension between both governments. Whatever, the motivation and direction must be based on the future welfare of the Indonesian people, not the 'threat' of China nor the need to cosy up to entrenched corrupt entities. One suspects the real Indonesian problem for Australia lies in the opportunist and short term thinking of the leaders of this country.