

Stephen Loosley drew on his long-standing close relationships with administrations on both sides of the Pacific to give us some fascinating insights as he assessed the first 200 days of the Biden presidency, and also deeply and thoughtfully reflected on the important ties between the USA and Australia, as well as Asia.

He set the scene by noting the deep unstable divisions within the US over recent years, peaking with the storming of the US Capitol after the election.

By contrast, as we celebrate the 70th anniversary of ANZUS, the relationship between Australia and the USA has remained stable throughout, despite changes of government on both sides. With the departure of NZ from the alliance, the US/Aus relationship morphed into AUSMIN, an annual dialogue for meetings of Australia's ministers for Foreign Affairs and Defence, with US Secretaries of State and Defence, along with associated senior officials. The possibility of extending the scope of AUSMIN in future to encompass talks on economic strategy seems appropriate.

The US now sees itself with a clear responsibility in the Indo-Pacific region, which has seen the emergence of the Quad of US, Japan, India and Australia, and the importance of keeping traditional sea channels open, hence opposed to China's claims and actions in the South China Sea. He recalled referring to the "9 dash line" (attributed to Chiang Kai-Shek in 1947), to which a Chinese official said the claim to the South China Sea dates back to the Tang dynasty (9th century), which was seen as rather ironic that the claim of the communist PRC regime should draw on their Imperial past. By the same logic, Italy could claim the whole of the Mediterranean.

Thus, China has involved itself in border and other disputes with almost all its neighbours, and has become engaged in trade/commercial/political and cultural disputes with Scandinavia, Canada, and Australia, among others.

With President Xi's determination to extend its reach, especially in Asia but also beyond, Taiwan looms large in this context. From a region that was peaceful and increasingly prosperous, Beijing has ramped up the temperature, especially over Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, but also engaged in what has been called "debt diplomacy" in the SW Pacific and elsewhere.

President Biden has recruited many highly experienced, very capable people of consequence (Secretary of Treasury, State, Defence, etc) to join the administration, and notably these have remained, in contrast to the high turnover in the Trump cabinet and advisor staff.

The Afghanistan withdrawal was clearly a debacle, but it needs to be seen in context stretching back 20 years, and especially to the Trump deal with the Taliban, whereby an exit date was fixed in return for no firing on US troops (as distinct to firing on Afghan troops, which was permitted). There were many Afghan troops well trained and resourced, but when the Afghan President left by helicopter allegedly stashed with money, who can express surprise when many military units simply melted away. Pakistan will remain a critical factor in this region, including with the Taliban.

Covid remains a top focus in the US, with the new administration being far more consistent than Trump. Nevertheless, some states are resisting, eg seeking to outlaw the mask mandate in schools etc. By mid 2022, Covid may have receded as a focal point, so the US midterm elections then may be fought on the economy. Often these elections involve an anti-government swing, but this may not apply in 2022 (see California recall election).

Biden had been expected to be a competent, decent, stabilising figure boosting trust in the White House, and reassuring traditional US allies. Not only has he achieved that, he has performed well beyond, with an ambitious legislative agenda, including achieving significant bipartisanship, particularly with the infrastructure bill.

President Biden has issued several presidential orders, some focusing on the need to diversify supply chains to be more resilient, especially involving defence procurement.

Successive Australian ambassadors have performed very well in fostering the relationships with Washington. Even when there were sudden policy changes, such as sometimes announced by tweets previously, our diplomats have worked constructively without fanfare, adopting the “speak softly” approach, retaining relationships with all relevant parties, whilst also keeping Australia’s interests in focus. There may be lessons elsewhere.

Overall, the US-Australia relation is on a sound footing, with good cooperation and scope to develop further into the future, given key technology, energy, minerals, potential for private/public infrastructure partnerships, and cooperation. Australia needs to be a more self-sufficient partner, more resilient, and seek to do more, especially with countries in the region.

Stephen then very interestingly and eloquently answered a wide range of topics, not only confined to US and Australia, before David Castle expressed great thanks for such a comprehensive overview of the status of the US and the Biden administration plus more widely of Asia and in particular China, all of which are so important to Australia now and into the future.

PJ 9/21