

## **RICHARD BROINOWSKI AO**

### **Australian Foreign Policy– are we heading in the right direction?**

Drawing on his extensive experience in foreign policy both in Canberra as well as many overseas postings, Richard gave us insights into recent foreign policy settings and challenged us to consider the appropriateness of some of these for the future, with particular focus on US and China. He began by noting Australia is currently heading in two contradictory directions in respect of China: 1. Minister Penny Wong and her department have been working assiduously to rebuild links with PRC after relationships between the governments were allowed to deteriorate under PM Morrison and to some extent under PM Turnbull, with consequential impacts on Australian exports of some key products and resources. 2. Meanwhile, Australia's military, defence, intelligence officials were publicly excoriating China, being suspicious of China's expansionary plans, which could include taking over or at least extending Chinese influence over some countries in SE Asia, as evidenced by PRC's actions in the South China Sea. This has led to massive multicountry military exercises, eg recently Talisman Sabre involving 13 countries, clearly aimed at sending a containment policy message to Beijing. Richard challenged the view of some (especially in Washington) that the PRC is striving to become a hegemon, to rival the US, which has 700-800 bases around the world, compared with PRC which has 1 base in Djibouti (set up at US prompting to counter pirates operating off the Horn of Africa). China is not hegemonic in a military sense, and is cautious about appearing to be so, because of unresolved land border issues with many of its neighbours. He referred to the four periods of tensions between Australia and the Chinese as set out in former Ambassador Geoff Raby's new book – "China's Grand Strategy and Australia's Future". These were the 1850s gold rush, when moving towards federation in the 1880s, during the 1950-60s Cold War period post Chairman Mao's eviction of the Nationalists to Taiwan and today. Richard considers that much of the recent tension was of Australia's own making, initially through the 2017 anti-dumping tariffs on steel and aluminium, banning Huawei and a major Chinese dairy company from investing in Australia, implementation of a foreign GUEST SPEAKER influence law, then in 2020 just after a trip to USA, Minister Payne led the demand for an international inquiry into the foundations of Covid, focusing on China as its prime source. The Chinese slowly began to reciprocate by imposing bans on imports of some key Australian products and commodities. From his own contacts with Chinese officials, Richard did not consider that China wants war. He believes that key countries in the region share that perspective, notwithstanding periodic heightened tension, noting these countries critically depend on shipping peacefully through the South China Sea, including to and from China itself. AUKUS is seen to be a reaction to China becoming a long-term threat in the Asia/Pacific. However, Richard said we should beware of purchasing too much US or British military hardware. He referred to a 2010 article by Fred Bennett (chief of capital procurement for Australia's defence forces) who set out a number of examples of past purchases of British and American ships, planes and other equipment that were inappropriate for Australian needs (and which sometimes

required very expensive refits). Richard referred to the purchase of Virginia class submarines as part of AUKUS, which may land us with similar problems. Furthermore, about 10 non-nuclear air-independent propulsion subs could be purchased off the shelf from Sweden, Germany, Japan or Korea for the same price as one Virginia sub, and potentially be better suited to the defence of Australia's coastline. Also, foreign policy circumstances often change, so buying nuclear powered submarines to contain China may be completely irrelevant if, by the time of their delivery in the 2040s, we have reached a rapprochement with that country. Australia could also find itself losing sovereignty over its Virginia class subs for deployment in North Asia. Disposal of spent fuel cells is an associated issue. Richard cited former Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Peter Vaghese, who stated that if Australia tethers itself to the cause of US primacy, it leaves Australia exposed to US policies, which may make sense for USA but not necessarily for Australia. It risks structuring Australia's defence to fight alongside the US rather than primarily for the defence of Australia. It risks buying into a narrative of democracy versus autocracy which however inspiring, misreads the strategic and historic drivers of China's actions and which has little resonance in our region. It risks paying the price for a strategy which is not Australia's and over which it has little control. And that price could rise all the way to being dragged into a war which may not be in Australia's interests. Other aspects were addressed in the Q&A. Much of this focused on USA/China themes. Comments included that, despite AUS/USA having much in common, the two countries had stark differences including on gun laws, religiosity, political divisiveness, the possible election of Trump, etc. In view of this Richard asked whether we should be so dependent on and intertwined with USA on defence policy? Some Asian countries are wary of USA hegemony in the region at the risk of confrontation with China, yet recently NATO indicated willingness to be involved in Asia. Richard said he has found the Chinese are measured and pragmatic, but (unlike those who point to its bases in the South China Sea and foreign aid/investments) he believes China does not have the same hegemonic values that the USA displays. China has begun to move on world stage in a professional constructive way, including brokering a deal between Saudi and Iran, and has put a 10point peace plan for Ukraine. The United States should get used to the idea that it is no longer the world's sole hegemon. On behalf of members, Rod Binsted thanked Richard, who was once "our man in Havana", for his insightful and interesting talk.

Peter James