

The March of Autocracy

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Noah Schultz-Byard 0:05

Hello, good morning and welcome, everybody. I'm Noah Schultz-Byard, the South Australian Director at the Australia Institute. Now I'm filling in today for the usual host of our webinar series, the Institute's Deputy Director, Ebony Bennett. I can see that there's a whole stream of you coming through the digital doors, so to speak. Thank you for being with us today. But before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. I'm currently on the land of the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains and I know that some of our guests are appearing today from the land of the Ngannawal people in Canberra. I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and pay my respects to elders past and present. Well, like I say, thank you so much for joining us today for this the next installment in our webinar series for 2021. We are hosting these webinars each week, but the times and the days of the week that we host them on do vary. You can make sure that you don't miss out on any of these fabulous webinars by signing up for notifications on our website, which is australiainstitute.org.au. You can also find recordings of all of our previous webinars on the site. Now just a few Zoom tips before we begin to help things run smoothly today. If you hover your mouse pointer over the bottom of your screen, you should be able to see a Q&A function where you can ask questions of our panelists. And you can also up vote questions from other people. You can also make comments in the chat which is also down the bottom. Speaking of the chat, we ask that you please keep things civil and on topic in there or will have to boot you out of the webinar. We haven't had too much trouble with trolls but we are ever vigilant. So watch out. We've got Liam on the patrol today. If you do find the chat popping up to be distracting, you should be able to click on it which will let you move it and then hopefully move it to the side of the screen where it will be less distracting. And finally, this discussion is being recorded, will be posted on our website and emailed to all of you after the discussion. So today, we are very pleased to host a discussion on the latest edition of Schwartz Media's Australian Foreign Affairs. It's Australia's leading journal in the field, and it makes foreign affairs accessible to wide readership and encourages debate on the most significant global issues facing Australia. You can see Allan there. He's got his coffee in his hot little hands, and another behind him. So this issue is called the March of Autocracy. And in it, it examines the rise of authoritarian and illiberal leaders whose growing assertiveness is reshaping the western-led world order. It explores the challenge for Australia as it enters a new era in which China's international sway increases, and democracies compete with their rivals for global influence. Joining us today is Professor John Keane, Dr. Huong Le Thu and the Australia Institute's own Allan Behm. John Keane is a Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney, and has a piece in this edition of Australian Foreign Affairs on the strategies of resilience within the growing Chinese Empire, and Western misconceptions of its rise. Professor Keane is the author of "The New Despotism", and is the author of "When Trees Fall, Monkeys Scatter". He is also widely published on the subjects of democracy and authoritarianism. Thank you very much for joining us Professor Keane. We're also

joined by Dr. Huong Le Thu who is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, and has a piece in this issue of Australian Foreign Affairs on how Australia can improve its digital engagement and diplomacy within Southeast Asia. Prior to joining ASPI, Dr. Le Thu taught at the Australian National University and worked across several think tanks throughout the Indo Pacific. She is widely published, and I've been told speaks five languages. Thank you very much for joining us, Dr. Le Thu. And finally, Dr. Le Thu and Professor Keane are joined on the panel today by Allan Behm, the director of the International and Security Affairs program here at the Australia Institute. Welcome Allan. And I did just want to note that all participants are appearing in their personal capacity today and we are thrilled to have them with us. Now I wanted to start our conversation, if I may, by asking Professor Keane: in your essay, you say that China often confounds the usual terms used in political science textbooks. You talk about terms such as autocracy and tyranny and how they don't quite fit China, when you look at the literal definitions of those words, so how do you think we should define the Chinese policy in your view?

Professor John Keane 5:31

Well, Noah, I'd like to reply as briefly as I can, on a note of disloyalty to the whole theme of this webinar. Because it seems to me that we're living through an epoch or historical shift, we could say it's from west to east. It's of great historic, historical significance. And it's a period in which terms like autocracy or authoritarianism, totalitarianism come back. They're not neutral terms, they have a history. But in this context, I think they, they're carriers of power. They are part of a "bull in a china shop" mentality, we could say, part of an attempt really to pick a Cold War, against what is perceived to be the main opponent, called the rise of China. You can see this emerging Cold War mentality in talk of the need to repel Chinese naval strategies in the South China Sea, growing alarm about what will happen in Taiwan, and I would say the very first press conference of Joe Biden is symptomatic of this crystallizing Cold War mentality when he spoke, as we all probably know, about the grand, you know, struggle emerging between autocracy and democracy, as if he'd read Australian Foreign Affairs issue number 11. I mean, I think that that point that these words are not neutral, and that they are part of an attempt, I would say, to pick a fight with China, and have some other ingredients. Stereotyping China, I'll be very brief, stereotyping China is part of this Cold War mentality. China is said to be totalitarian, it's run by gangsters. They steal our jobs. They engage in espionage through, you know, companies like Huawei, they threaten our sovereignty, and they likely are stirring up a Cold War, that's Clive Hamilton's view. And this, this will lead to no good. What is striking is that I think there's a failure. On this point, there's a failure to understand the complexities of China. And this is another quality of the Cold War thinking, I would call it. It could be called Falun Gong-ism, you know that this is, that China is a gangster regime, it's run by Marxist Leninists, there's, you know, the autocrat at the top of the system. This kind of urge willfully to simplify complexity is part of this Cold War mentality. And as you can tell, I don't particularly like this black and white thinking. Yan Lianke, who is one of contemporary China's greatest novelists says that simple-minded thinking about China is to be resisted, because so many things go on inside China and China in the wider world, that are, that you wouldn't dream of, and and that rule, you know, needs to be borne in mind when thinking about China. So the simple, the simpleton thinking that I think comes as part of this Cold War mentality. Turns... it's either silent about matters. For instance, no Australian media platform in the last 48 hours, has reported the Greenland elections, at the center of which is an Australian company, Greenland, which has Chinese capital that wants to mine rare earths, in Greenland. It's become the central issue. Silence. This is a complication of the kind that I'm objecting to. The Cold War mentality doesn't see the anomalies, the paradoxes, the ironies. We are members with China of the AWIB, this important global bank, we are part with signatories to the Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the RCEP, I could go on. And then finally, I would say that this Cold War mentality of which the words autocracy and authoritarianism and totalitarianism, there's this Cold War mentality

is rather blind to the consequences of a Cold War, which in my view, or those strategic matters ought to be part of a rethinking of how our relationship should be with China. For instance, I don't think that any great global problem is to be solved in these early years of the 21st century without the cooperation and negotiation, sometimes tough negotiations, with China. That's true on matters of climate change. It's true in matters of, let's say small arms trade, military buildup and so on. And not only that, but imagine, as some cold warriors do, who call for the collapse or the destruction of China - Mike Pompeo, towards the end of his term, in a call for the people of China to rise up against the regime, what will be the consequences of that economically, politically, geopolitically? Well, there's very little consideration given to that. And so I, in this essay, against this Cold War thinking, try to point out that we need to think in more complex ways about China, we need to pay attention to the anomalies, we shouldn't stereotype, and we should pay attention to the consequences of economic geopolitical picking a fight with China.

Noah Schultz-Byard 12:08

Professor Keane I might ask you in there, you've talked a little bit about

Professor John Keane 12:12

One last thing...the upshot is, you know, it's a version of Kevin Rudd's recent call for what he called managed strategic competition. I call it agile realignment or non-alignment, agile non-alignment. I mean, being like a cat, rather than a lion is what I think Australian foreign policy makers should do. And I would say flagwaving is, it's an old adage, you know, people who wave flags don't deserve to do so. That I think is the bottom line. My whole approach to thinking about rethinking our relation with China.

Noah Schultz-Byard 12:56

And there were a few terms that you touched on there from your essay that I was hoping we might be able to unpack. Agile non alignment, I'm hoping to ask about in just a bit, but there was the term Phantom Democracy that you use in your essay talking about the complexity of the political, structural and organizational system and how difficult it is to find, you have some interesting terms: Phantom Democracy is one and Galaxy Empire is another that you use in the essay. Could we unpack what you mean a little bit when you use these terms, perhaps starting with Phantom Democracy, and the organizational structure of the polity in China?

Professor John Keane 13:39

Yes, gladly. These are mouthfuls at 11.14 in the morning! But on Phantom Democracy, the idea is that if you call China authoritarian or totalitarian or autocratic, you missed the point that this very complex polity, which is becoming a global polity, I think, an empire, you miss the point that those who govern at all levels, right to the top, are skittish, they worry about the loss of popular loyalty and therefore, in various strange ways that are not very well researched, or widely understood, journalists tend not to pay attention to them. Therefore, those who govern, experiment with what they call democratic neutral mechanisms. You know, the party at all levels in China depends upon public opinion polling and methodologically, that public opinion polling is pretty accurate. There are local elections. There are public forums, there is a certain toleration of digital mutinies as I call them

online. And you look at the Anchorage meeting, one of the things that the Chinese delegation said to the American delegation is, you know, you've been lecturing us for a couple of 100 years about democracy, well, we have our own version. That is not entirely false. There is a semblance of democratic accountability in that the party worries that if that, that when trees fall, monkey scatter. If they lose their power, millions of lives will be damaged, and the whole system would collapse. So the idea of a phantom democracy rather like phantom limb, or phantom pregnancy, it's not, it's not false. It's not just, you know, a mere illusion. It's true, and it's not true. I mean, the great weakness of the Chinese polity, I tried to say in this essay, is the shortage of accountability, democracy. You know, it's the shortage of open, open disputes about power and the abuse of power. It's its great weakness, and yet, it's a system, it must be understood, it's a system that pays homage to democracy and practices the democracy in such mechanisms as local people's courts, for resolving property disputes and marital disputes and custody of children. These are, you know, the system is not to be understood as a kind of Nazi or Soviet Union model of power. It's more complicated, cleverer than that. That's what I tried to talk about in *The New Despotism* book at some length.

Noah Schultz-Byard 16:39

Hmm, great. Well, thank you for that summation. The time is flying so I was hoping to ask Dr. Le Thu, in your essay, you argue that Australia should be engaging with our Southeast Asian neighbors with a specific view to building up their digital capacity, and you want, and you think that should be undertaken through a whole-of-government approach, sort of akin to the Pacific step up. Why is such an approach so important in your view? And what would it comprise off in practical terms?

Dr Huong Le Thu 17:18

Thank you Noah. Yes, the discussion of my essay is based on what actually Professor John Keane mentioned, we have a world of competing great powers. And Australia is an active actor and Southeast Asia as well. But Southeast Asia is our next door neighbour, we can't look away. Australia has started to re-insert its influence and position in the South Pacific with a big step up. And there's a debate whether it should attempt to do a similar thing in Southeast Asia. But Southeast Asia is so much more bigger. It's over 670 million people with very diverse political and economic landscape with very strong agencies as well. Yet, you know, it's well recognized, you know, in the US or China or elsewhere, that Southeast Asia will remain the epicenter of power competition. Now, what can Australia do about, you know, the influences that some of them that John just detailed earlier on. Late last year, Minister Marise Payne said that Australia intends to compete constructively in the region, right. It wants to have agency, it has a say in this great power competition. But you know, dollar to dollar competition is not the way to go. We don't simply, don't have that capacity. Australia's Development Aid programs and funding had been on the decline lately. So I was thinking what can we do, you know, where is our strength? And in the appearing very, you know, fast moving, fast developing arena is the digital arena. Australia has an upper hand, Australia's digital capacity, digital readiness and digital maturity is ranked globally very high. The government is committed to the agenda. It is actively promoting the cyber norms within the UN seven norms and has actively taken upon that test. Australia has the Cyber Ambassador, not every country has that. There are many ways that Australia's digital capacity is really you know, world leading. Now Southeast Asia is also very dynamic in that sphere. We have countries like Singapore who are on par with what Australia can do and actually, Australia and Singapore do have digital commerce agendas of cooperation, but we also have countries whose digital maturities is lagging behind, such as Laos and Myanmar, and are likely to further lag behind after this pandemic. So it is possible that the digital gap within Southeast Asia will continue to grow after the pandemic. So I think this is a really,

you know, very important area where Australia can contribute. And we should not think about just engaging with the region in terms of aid and assistance, it's actually a region where the digital space, particularly, will grow. It's very young nation, a very young region, in terms of population. So the innovation potential is great. In the next decade, or two, it can easily surpass, some of them can easily surpass Australia's capacity too, and not only in terms of GDP, but also digital performance and digital innovation capacity. So it's a long term investment. I'm arguing that by engaging in a digital agenda, and we can go about in very different ways, depending on which country we are talking about, and have tailored strategies to those countries, we are investing in our future, in our embedded future in the next decade or two where the digital epicentre will be in the Southeast Asian region.

Noah Schultz-Byard 21:35

Yes, for sure. Thank you for that. I did just want to say I see that we've had a little over 500 people join us so far in the audience. Hello to everybody who's joined us and thank you for being with us. There'll be an opportunity in the second half of the webinar for us to take questions from the audience. So please feel free to put your questions in the Q&A section at the bottom of your screen. And we'll get to them in a little while. But Dr. Le Thu, I wanted to ask - in engaging more deeply with Southeast Asia in a digital capacity way, what are the risks that would be associated with that? And would we be seen to be attempting to counter China's influence in the region? And what would that result in, a sort of two-step technology approach into the region, a separated technology or separated internet? Or are we able to work cohesively in the region while building up our capacity?

Dr Huong Le Thu 22:38

With the broader context, the discussion of technology is already happening. And I think we thought quite, you know, apparently, during the 5G Huawei debate, Australia's Huawei debate was very different from the debate in the region. And when I did my research, I did a report, on different responses in Southeast Asia to Huawei, and Huawei ban from the US, I... one thing that I discovered is that the views are very different across the region. And the views on cyber safety and security issues. And those were the main arguments that dominated Australia's debate on whether to use Huawei or not - security, right. But that cyber awareness and security awareness across the region was very different. And before we start, you know, asking partners and allies about the choice, which one do you prefer, whether Huawei or other alternative, and talk about the norms of safety and whatnot, it is very important to really understand the variety of cyber-awareness in the region, and what Australia has been already doing in many ways, whether it's through a promotion of UN Cyber Norms, or even engagement through like CSIRO that has presence in some of the Southeast Asian countries, is really to build up that public awareness across the region. And as I said, there's a huge gap that needs to be bridged before we get to the discussion about Huawei and choices. So in a way, the suggestion of the proposals that I'm putting in this essay is not just simply geopolitics, it's actually very utilitarian, but also very pragmatic and very useful. This is something that Southeast Asian countries would benefit from immediately and in the long term, Australia as well. So you know, that by engaging early on, it's not early anyway, Southeast Asia is actually already a very competitive region but like I said, Australia has an upper hand in those areas. Australia can engage constructively by, you know, building up the capacity, bridging the digital gap and you know, investing in a more equal or, you know, more equalised region, rather than letting those divisions deepen. And also could be exploited by the geopolitics and power competition.

Noah Schultz-Byard 25:26

Yes, that's great, thank you. Allan, if I could come to you now, I feel like in these conversations, it's very useful to define key terms and to talk about the importance of language. We're using language to talk about these hugely important concepts. And I was wondering if you could talk a little, specifically about the concept of security, in terms of national and international security. I feel, as a lay person, often the concept of security boils down to conflict, weaponry and armed forces. But it's not as simple as all that, is it?

Allan Behm 26:07

Well, it's not, of course. And it's one of the reasons that I think Professor Keane's contribution is very important, that we need to deconstruct language all the time because the way in which we use it, brings with it the baggage of previous use. And so we have to decontextualise language very often, so that we're clear in what we're talking about and then, instead of making things muddy, by sticking words like strategic or democratic or autocratic or tyrannical, in front of a country's name, we look at the country as it is, and are very careful that we don't mis-diagnose, what is going on in any given country - and I include the United States in this by the way, I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about what's going on in the United States right now, simply because language is clouding our capacity to analyse clearly. So that's why I was thinking I might riff off Professor Keane's essay a bit and go on a bit about language. But I'm pretty much aware of the time and I noticed in the chat room, there's been a fair bit of discussion about language so I'm going to just skip through that, I think, and just make a couple of very short remarks about the rest of the volume, just in case the participants this morning, haven't read all of the essays - they are all really worth reading. They're all quite different in the take that they have on China and on the sorts of problems that we're dealing with around autocracy and democracy. But certainly, the essay by Natasha Kassam and Darren Lim, is a helicopter essay, it takes a very high level view of the issue and offers rather high level commentary on the sorts of things that we might be able to do in current circumstances. I think what is really interesting about their essay, is that they see absolutism, sorry autocracy, as the system where the prerogatives of the State are put above the rights of the individual. And that's actually quite an interesting way of looking at what autocracy is. It's not the only way but it is, I think, helpful. And for any of the denizens of the bubble, I note that Jonathan Pearlman who's the editor of Australian Foreign Affairs, and Natasha Kassam, will be actually talking on this next week in Canberra at Muse, so I won't go any further into their essay, they can do that themselves. I was really taken by Linda Jaivin's really quite remarkable essay, I think. She, as I think many of the people participating this morning would know, is a really eminent Sinologist and Chinese language expert and, although her essay begins with a few niggles about China, she moves quite quickly into a set of very constructive recommendations about what it is we really all need to do. And at the heart of her essay, I think, is that what we really need to do is to understand China. And as I was reading her essay, I was thinking, well, isn't it interesting that since at least the time of Deng Xiaoping, China has invested enormous energy into accessing English and European languages. There's a very high level of linguistic expertise in China these days, particularly amongst the diplomats. And they've done it, not because they particularly love or admire the Anglosphere or Europe, it's because they need to understand it. And I think we've got exactly the same problem, most particularly in Australia where our levels of expertise on matters relating to China, whether it's Chinese language or using language to access an understanding of Chinese culture, Chinese politics, how the economy actually works, we are well behind the queue line here. And I think that a lot more effort needs to be put into that and I think Linda's essay pushes very hard for that. And the final of the essays this week, this month is Sam Roggeveen's very interesting contribution. It's a very sobering contribution, because he grounds the whole of his approach in the reality of the world in which we currently live. And that is a world in

which relatively, the power and the influence and the credibility of the United States has begun to decline. And so, if that's the starting point, what Sam is really talking about - and I might, by way of declaration of interest here, Sam and I have been sparring partners on matters like this for 20 years, and I always read carefully what he's got to say - he offers a really, I think, optimistic caution. And that is that the United States and China, notwithstanding all the pressures that so-called experts put on them to enter into some kind of Cold War, he offers the view that actually going to war is simply not an option, because for both of them, the task is too big, and the stakes are too small. In other words, what they get out of it is not proportionate to what they'd have to put into it. So he really recommends the defence of democratic values, rather than simply trying to impose them on everybody else. And, to that extent, I think, has offered a set of quite realistic and usable recommendations that will allow us to get into the business of an engagement with China, which is not about appeasing power, but simply accommodating power shifts. And that I think, is the theme that sits underneath all of the essays that are in the current volume. And I will just end with a remark about "The Fix, because that's Dr Le Thu's particular contribution, and that is an innovation of Jonathan Pearlman's, which I think is very welcome, that we can have all of this abstract stuff, and we can all talk about it and get an enormous thrill out of doing so, but at the end of the day, people say to us, well, what are you going to do about it? And I think what Dr Le Thu has offered is a concrete example of what a country like Australia can do to leverage the skill sets that it's already got available to it, both in its broad community - that's the skill sets that come out of our universities, essentially - and across our economy. I think the only comment that I would make, and I would strongly suspect that Dr. Le Thu is going to agree with this, is that \$34 million is a drop in the bucket. And if we're going to take that kind of task seriously, as perhaps taking the broader task of a deeper engagement with the Pacific and with Asia, then we've got to put our money where our mouth is, and radically increase the investment we make in the long term economic and strategic security of the world in which we immediately live. And I think that would be a pretty smart investment. And I might just leave that question mark hanging because Dr. Le Thu might want to respond to that straight off because it is "the fix".

Noah Schultz-Byard 33:34

Yes, Dr. Le Thu, did you want to add to Allan's comments, then?

Dr Huong Le Thu 33:38

Yes, absolutely. Like I said in the essay, the 34 million that you mentioned, Allan, but also other initiatives, are a drop in the ocean and we don't have to reinvent the wheel, actually, some of them have already been in place. What I'm arguing is, you know, double-down or triple-down on those good initiatives, make it a whole-of-government and as he said, multiply the investment amounts to really make a difference. Because for the Pacific Step Up, for example, we are talking about billions. And for Southeast Asia, which is so much more bigger, we still don't care about millions, which is really not going to make much of difference. But those are exactly the areas where Australia can make a difference. So and also perhaps, you know, the government can't do it alone. It can, it has to bring along with it, companies in the private sector who will largely profit from this very vibrant and innovative market. So here it is. It is a, you know, a public- private partnership opportunity.

Noah Schultz-Byard 34:47

That's great. Thank you. I might switch now to questions from the audience. Looking in the Q&A section, there's a range of questions there. Professor Keane, I might go to you first with this question, but if our other panelists want to engage as well, please do so after we hear from Professor Keane. Alan Sharples asks, What do we know about China's goals regarding its relationship with the West? A question there about goals and the future for China?

Professor John Keane 35:23

Well, I'm working on a book with a Chinese colleague, which comes out of the Foreign Affairs essay, which makes the case for thinking that China is not, well, not properly understood as a territorial state, but actually is an empire. It's got... and it's an empire of a kind that we've never seen before. And it has a kaleidoscopic quality, and so there are many things going on in relation to the West, that are difficult to comprehend at first glance. For instance, yes, Xinjiang. Yes, Hong Kong and Tibet, you know, that, like all empires, there are crackdowns and people disappear and people are put into camps, yes. But it's an empire in which - it may not be known to those present this morning - it's an empire in which, after seven years, a major deal was signed with the European Union, a comprehensive agreement about trade investment, respect for the values rule of law, in which the Chinese agreed to honour free trade unions, of European companies operating in China and respect trade unions within the European Union. So this is, on the story of, it's a very complicated story, and I think one other thing that's worth mentioning in this question of the West and China is that we saw four years of an American Empire probably accelerating in decline, where there was an attempt to shift to bilateralism, to break up institutions, you know, don't agree to the Trans Pacific Partnership, paralyse the WTO, etc. What's striking is the commitment of China, as I think several questions and comments have already said, is the commitment of China to the continuation of multilateral institutions and during the last 30 years, according to my calculations, are around about 25 new cross-border institutions have actually been built by the Chinese. They have gained from globalisation, they are committed to cross-border, non-violent negotiations and deals. And that's something that we can take advantage of, as we did, when we joined the AIIB, as we did when we joined the RCEP and as we did in patching up the Dispute Court in the WTO. Not many people may know, but effectively under Trump, the WTO was paralysed, because the United States decided to simply shut down the apple at court. A parallel court has appeared - a substitute court - with the backing of Australia and Canada and China and other states. So, you know, that's an example where the relationship of China and the West is extremely complicated, but in which there are opportunities. If you think of it as an empire, rather than a kind of Nazi, you know, state or a Soviet Union that, you know, wants to crack heads and colonise and, you know, whatever. Then you miss I think the the nuances and you miss the strategic opportunities that we can gain. This applies, of course, to fields like education, tourism, which are suffering at the moment, because of this emerging Cold War, you know, bull in the china shop thinking.

Noah Schultz-Byard 39:29

Fantastic. Thank you for that. Did either of our panelists want to add any comments on that? No? Great. There was another question here and I'll ask this one of Dr. Le Thu. An anonymous question asks "Is Elon Musk's satellite internet network going to help close the cyber gap in Southeast Asia?" I think we could talk more generally about major leaps in technology that may be coming and you mention in your essay as well that the pandemic itself is accelerating digital growth. I don't think we would all be sitting here on Zoom with 500 of our Australian friends, if it weren't for the pandemic encouraging us all into the digital space. Are there major leaps in technology coming that will help bridge this digital divide in Southeast Asia?

Dr Huong Le Thu 40:26

I think it won't be one thing that will help bridge the divide. It is a continuous effort. And as you say, some would leap forward, the speed of development won't be equal. So the gap and lagging behind, would be a phenomenon that would persist but that would need constant effort to counter. Like I said in the essay, for example, the pandemic also enabled some to move digitalisation faster. But not all of them have been equipped to do that and transition so fast and so smoothly. And even with education, if a school started online teaching, not all schools have computers, not all families have computers, or internet. So we might have, you know, a group in individual countries and societies where are left behind because of lack of that simple capacity. But at the same time, many countries in Southeast Asia and Vietnam, of course, being one of them, Thailand, Singapore are other examples that really lead in this digital transformation. And a study done by the Asian Development Bank was very interesting to show the bigger picture statistics that Southeast Asia is actually leading in many aspects ahead of the global average in this digital transformation. And some of them have their own national strategies in place. Like for example, Vietnam has its 4G, a fourth industrial revolution strategy in place, which is pursuing quite actively and even aggressively. And Southeast Asia has also its master plan of digital connectivity, that it wants achieved by 2025 in some aspect. So it is very uneven development and depending on what we are talking about, some of, you know, for example, Vietnam will, and Singapore, and some other countries would want to pursue artificial intelligence in its future labour forces, and future of jobs, for example. But there will be other things that will be lacking, for example, the security norms and standards are not equal either, even though those countries are looking for mutual cooperation. So there's a lot of, you know, it's a moving target. It is a huge domain that is evolving as we speak. And really, it waits for no one. So Australia, it really wants to play a meaningful role and have an impact and, you know, influence positively, should really start doing it sooner than later.

Noah Schultz-Byard 43:25

That's great, thank you. Next question. I might ask you, Allan, John Neve asks, "How important is helping China in a non condescending way?"

Allan Behm 43:37

There's a lot in that question, I think, and one would need to unpack it. I'm not certain myself the extent to which we're in a position to help China on very much. And maybe the very fact that we think we can help China is the most condescending thing that we can do. I think the way in which we all need to deal with each other, whether it's a massive country like China, which is an economy 10 times the size of Australia's, or whether it's a country like Australia, which has got a population of 25 million, which is nothing like the 1.5 billion that China has, is to realise exactly who you are, where you stand. And so issues around any form of condescension are simply not playable in that kind of appropriate conversation that has to be conducted between countries which are different, very often disparate, and most often not equal. They've been a number of questions running through the chat column there, which, in a way touch upon this question, and some of them are around human rights. And I thought I might just touch on the human rights question given that we've only got 15 minutes to run because there is a quite a stream of it. And I think that there are a couple of things that we can do about human rights, which are not obvious. The first one is make sure that our own house is in order. The UN has made a couple of quite seriously critical reports about Australian approaches to human rights here, most particularly with respect to refugees, but if one looks more

deeply into human rights, as it operates, or as they operate in Indigenous Australia, one can see that there are a lot of things in which Australia is still falling short. So the first thing to do, it's a bit of the "glass houses" syndrome, I suppose. If you're going to live in one, please don't throw stones. Now, that's not to say for a moment that you don't talk about human rights. The question that you do talk about is - and you reflect on your own experience of human rights - is that generally speaking, an accepting and positive approach to difference, and accepting and positive approach to inclusion, offers a sounder social fabric, than does any movement which seeks to mash down difference, and to turn everybody into a kind of homogenised replica of everybody else. Now we have a bit of that conversation going on in Australia at the moment around identity, for example, where identity is often imposed on people as a kind of way of being the same. Whereas what we really want in Australia, I think, is an identity which is about diversity, and that we're stronger in diversity than we are by simply being all the same. And so when one talks about human rights in the broad, such as the Uighurs problem in western China, or in the more narrow sense, the rights of protesters in Hong Kong, or the rights of people to vote in Taiwan, then you have to talk about it in the positive terms that replicate your own experience, rather than refer negatively and critically, to what you imagined to be the experience of your interlocutor. It's a very difficult area to work in but I do think that it is possible to have an engagement with China on human rights as we did a decade ago, which is constructive in both ways, but which doesn't seek to point obliquely and criticism and shame to China, that is an act of condescension, but rather talks about it in a way, which is to the benefit of the Uighurs in the first place, but perhaps also to the credibility and the authority and the legitimacy of the government in Beijing at the same time.

Noah Schultz-Byard 47:53

Thank you for those observations Allan. Professor Keane, you wanted to add to that?

Professor John Keane 47:57

Yes, I mean, very much in support of what Allan has said. I think cleaning up the Augean stables, you know, of Australian democracy is a priority. And I think that if we are to refuse block thinking - you know, black and white block thinking, China is, you know, the great threat to democracy, whereas we, you know, should be proud of our democracy - it forgets we need a new deal for women in this country. We have no representative body for our indigenous peoples. We have several million permanent residents who do not have the right to vote. We do not have an anti-corruption commission at the federal level. I mean, it's these kinds of reforms and, as Allan says, the protection of our multiculturalism, and its strengthening, it's these kinds of reforms, democratic reforms, the democratisation of our democracy, which I think would make us much more resilient, and more able - that is less hypocritically - to make comments about other polities in the world, including China.

Noah Schultz-Byard 49:16

Look, thank you for that contribution and it does... in the questions from the audience, there's a sort of a thread that's emerging that I wanted to ask you about which touches on that. And it's about how Australia engages with China and the United States in this new world. In your essay you say that both reckless China bashing and moonstruck love affairs with America are dead ends. And earlier in the talk, you mentioned your concept of "agile non-alignment". Could you unpack that a little further and how that could work for Australia going forward?

Professor John Keane 49:58

Well, I think I'm putting me in charge of strategic policy would be a little bit like allowing a goat to look after the garden. But what I do think, is that in this great historical moment that we're living through, where I think the evidence is accumulating, that there is something of a shift from West to East, it's a very complicated shift, but we're caught up in it. And we are, whether we like it or not, part of this broader region. I do think, as I said at the outset, and I think, in a way, there's quite a lot of agreement that that block thinking, that Cold War mentality is strategically unhelpful, and would lead actually to very undesirable consequences for us as for the wider region. And therefore, the trick in sectors such as education and tourism, and new information technologies, robotics etc, that the trick is to find ways of protecting our interests, without compromising our values and negotiating deals. I do think that waking up to the decline of the United States, the evidence is mounting, waking up to that dynamic is very important. The old arguments don't work. Militarily, of course, the United States out guns the next seven or eight major powers, including China. But if the argument is that our values are the same as the United States', it's not true. We don't do guns, we don't have a murder rate, we do not have a gap between rich and poor, etc. and we're not an empire. So, you know, the talk that we should naturally be aligned with the United States seems to me to be wearing thin and strategic non alignment, "managed strategic competition", as Kevin Rudd recently said, is a clear alternative. And it's worth for those who are in this webinar, it's worth recommending that Kevin Rudd piece published quite recently, I think, in Foreign Affairs, and he's done a version at the Lowy, where he says, his final word is "May the best system win". I mean, you know, that's tongue-in-cheek, but it's to say that we need to prove our own resilience. We need to strengthen our democracy, our multiculturalism and so on. And that would make us stronger in the world, economically and geopolitically, or so I think. Hence, no flag waving for those who don't deserve a flag.

Noah Schultz-Byard 53:08

Yes. Thank you for that. Dr Le Thu, there's a question in the chat asking, "Will artificial intelligence displace many workers throughout Southeast Asia?" And I think that might point to a broader question around, are there fears or dangers or opposition that we would have to overcome if Australia were to step into the region and invest more heavily in digital engagement?

Dr Huong Le Thu 53:38

If I could continue John's point for a moment before I get to that? Yeah, I couldn't agree more that the whole narrative about alliance of democracies versus autocracies can be found dangerous and Southeast Asia is really a good example to look at. Because if... and that's why, you know, Trump's foreign policy and Pompeo's rhetoric were very unpopular in Southeast Asia in the region, because that simply didn't resonate at all. And if you look at global indexes of democracy and democratic health, it's actually not doing very well globally, not only just Southeast Asia, and democracies or full democracies are actually in the minority, and the US has a lot of issues itself as well. And if you look specifically in Southeast Asia, we're talking about 10 ASEAN countries and one Timor as the 11th one, and you know, depending which, which indexes you look at, but in general it's only Timor that is considered free. The rest is either partially free, or, you know, hybrid regimes or one party regimes. So, if you look just in Southeast Asia, and if you want, kind of solidarity based on democracies, you're not going to go very much far with that rhetoric and what countries are interested in is development, rather than, you know, pure ideological solidarity, that's not gonna, that's not going to

go far. It didn't really work out during the Cold War, it had a lot of issues there. I think it won't even work nearly as close this time around, if we want to call it, a lot of people call it, you know, Cold War 2.0. Coming back to your question about artificial intelligence, I think it's a question that we are still struggling with that, even in so called cyber mature countries such as Australia, I think some jobs will be at risk that but I think, you know, in a way, you can look at it as a positive kick for Southeast Asian, the developing economies that we're looking at, you know, growing in the value chain anyway. What is interesting though, that China is also grappling with that, you know... it is a model in terms of developing economy in many ways and have leaped so fast in embracing the digital agenda. And it's also, you know, pouring a lot of money into R&D and wanting to transition into artificial intelligence. So I don't think that alone would keep the innovation, would keep or slow the progress of that phenomenon anyway, I think, if anything, Southeast Asian populations, which are young and innovative, and very, very tech savvy, in many ways, in many cities, would find a better way to coexist than many developed countries.

Noah Schultz-Byard 57:01

Thank you. We only have about one or two minutes left. So I might give the closing word to Allan. And I wanted to ask you about, if we could zoom out the broader global context. We talk about the march of autocracy, and looking at the editor's note from Jonathan Pearlman, in this issue of Australian Foreign Affairs, he notes that, for the first time since 2001, more autocratic states in the world than democracies exist currently. Can you briefly, considering the constraints on time we have, summarise where we're at in the global context and any concerns or hopes for the future, around Australia's place in that world?

Allan Behm 57:51

I think one of the problems we've had since really the end of the Second World War, is that the winners thought that it would be a good thing, that the whole of the rest of the world adapted itself to the fundamental principles that united the winning side. And they largely were expressed through the UN Charter - if you read the UN Charter, it's a very nice document - but one wonders, here we are, you know, 75-80 years later, exactly whether that is the prescription that we need to follow? Do we need to have a universal system? Or are we prepared in the broad global community to accept the kind of diversity that we actually love in our own society, and that we see as one of the strengthening factors in the way in which our society works. I mean, it's fabulous, that the whole of Australia doesn't look like me for God's sake. And it is equally fabulous that we have the model of indigenous Australia which see themselves as belonging to the land, but what 60-65,000 years, whereas we tend to think that the land belongs to us. And if we don't sort of break up that binary a bit and have an entirely different way of thinking about it, then we're going to bring binary analysis into the way in which we look at the world. And I think I might just complete with, by coming back to Sam Roggeveen's remark at the end of his essay, which is essentially that China feeds on liberalism. It doesn't want universal liberalism. In other words, there has to be a plurality of systems that allows everybody to get on and to get on well. There will be tensions, but the more you accept difference, and so on, the better it will be for everybody and calming it down and negotiating our way forward. So let me just end there.

Noah Schultz-Byard 59:52

Well, thank you Allan, for those summary comments and it has brought us to the end of our time. Thank you, everyone, for joining us. And can you please join me in thanking our guests, Dr. Huong Le Thu, Professor John Keane and Allan Behm. I also wanted to thank everyone who joined us and for your great questions. As always, I'm sorry, we were unable to get through more of them but we appreciate your attendance and your engagement in these conversations. I just wanted to mention that you can buy the issue of Australian Foreign Affairs that we have been discussing today, and Allan is so capably holding up to camera right now. If you go to australianforeignaffairs.com, you can use the code AFA11TAI to get \$3 off and receive the copy for just \$20. Please join us in the coming weeks for more exciting webinars. As I mentioned, you can sign up via our website australiainstitute.org.au. Next Wednesday, April 14 at 11am we will be discussing the economics of climate and energy with Chris Bowen, the new Shadow Minister for Climate Change and Energy. I want to thank you all again. Thank you to our panelists for joining us today. And ask we all look out for each other out there, and we look forward to seeing you again next week. Thanks all and bye.

Dr Huong Le Thu 1:01:16

Thank you. Bye

Professor John Keane 1:01:17

Thank you.

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