Our Unstable Neighbourhood: The Contest for South-East Asia

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Ebony Bennett [00:00:03] Goodbye, everyone. I'm Ebony Bennett, deputy director at the Australia Institute and welcome to our webinar series. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that I live and work, as does Allan, on Ngunnawal and Ngambri country and pay my respects to elders. Past and present. Sovereignty was never sated and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. And very encouraging this week to see the new Parliament begin with a beautiful, welcome to country ceremony on the steps of Parliament House and a new commitment to a voice to Parliament. Days and times for the Australia Institute's webinars do vary, so please head on over to australiainstitute.org.au to catch up with our latest webinars and register for them. And I'm delighted to announce that the Australia Institute next week will be speaking to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, winner of the 2022 Sydney Peace Prize. That's next week we'll be talking to Pat Anderson and Professor Megan Davis about the Uluru statement from the Heart and the Voice to Parliament. Just a few tips before we begin to help things run smoothly today. If you hover over the bottom of your zoom screen, you should be able to see a Q&A box where you can ask questions of our panel. You should also be able to upvote other people's questions and make comments a reminder to please keep being civil and on topic in the chat or we'll kick you out. And lastly, a reminder that this discussion is being recorded and you can head on over to Australia Institute TV to find that on our website later. So thank you all for joining us today as part of our ongoing series in partnership with Australian Foreign Affairs, published by Blackpink. You can see the latest copy here and I believe many of you were sent an offer earlier in the week. This is the 15th issue of the Journal. This month is called Our Unstable Neighbourhood and it looks at the fragile state of democracy and the growing threat of

instability in the South-East Asian region, as well as the risks for Australia as it navigates ties with nations which have vastly different interests and outlooks to us. To discuss some of the themes and essays from this issue, I'm delighted to introduce our panel today. Allan Gyngell is national president of the Australian Institute of International Affairs. With a long career in Australian sorry, with a long career in Australian foreign policy, including appointments as the director general of ONA, a founding executive director of the Lowy Institute and senior positions in the Office of the Prime Minister, the Department of PM and C and in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. And Allan's essay reviews Australia's diplomacy in the region and puts the case for any kind of statecraft. Kishore Mahbubani is a Singaporean academic, diplomat and geopolitical consultant. He served two stints as Singapore's ambassador to the United Nations and also held the position of Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 94 to 98. And we're so delighted he can join us today from Singapore. His essay explains how Southeast Asia vs China differently to Australia and advocates for Australia to change its course. Melissa Connelly Tyler is programme lead at the Asia Pacific Development, Diplomacy and Defence Dialogue or AP four day. Melissa served as national executive director of the Australian Institute of International Affairs for 13 years. She co-authored think tank Diplomacy, the first book length discussion of the role of policy institutes in the international sphere. And she was recently a visiting fellow in Taiwan at the Ministry of Defence think tank. And lastly, my colleague Allan Behm is director of the Australia Institute's International and Security Affairs Programme, and he has long experience in international policy, national security policy and defence policy. He was Greg Combet, his chief of staff in the Rudd and Gillard Governments dealing with climate change, and more recently, Penny Wong, senior foreign policy adviser. Thank you to all of you today for joining us. We really appreciate your time. Allan Gyngell, I'm going to begin with you. One of the issues raised in your essay is obviously how Australia has effectively sidelined South East Asia. How difficult will it be for a new government to re-engage in the context of the great power rivalry that's underway?

Allan Gyngell [00:04:34] Well, it will require a bit of of skill and cunning, but it's certainly not, not beyond the capability of the Albanese Government to to do it. I think one of the problems for Australians dealing with South East Asia is that for about the past 20 years really Australia saw South East Asia as a place from which threats like like terrorism came or through, through which, you know, by people coming to Australia. So it was, it was sidelined away from the centre of our, of our foreign policy first because we averted our eyes to the, to the Middle East, along with the United States. And then because after the emergence so the elevation of Xi Jinping and America's realisation that that their main focus was going to be on great power competition for Australia, the region became all China all the time. So it was really no more than a platform on which things happened. And my argument really is that we have to begin seeing South East Asia itself freshly in its own terms and its own diversity. It's a it's a very hard and difficult region for us to come to terms with. But but it's the single most important job of Australian foreign policy at the moment I think.

Ebony Bennett [00:06:23] Hmm. Kishore, I wanted to come to you next plays. I was really struck by the opening of your essay. You begin with a very succinct description of the strategic dilemma faced by Australia. Do we choose to be a bridge between the East and West in the Asian century or the tip of the spear projecting Western power into Asia? What

are some of the key limitations or barriers preventing Australia from being that bridge between east and west?

Kishore Mahbubani [00:06:54] Well, first of all, thank you very much for inviting me to join this discussion. I think the fundamental challenge that Australia faces is actually a very simple one and it's actually in some ways a major strategic dilemma because Australia has grown and succeeded and prospered, I would say, over the course of the last 200 years in the period of Western domination of world history. You know, when Western powers, as you know, in the 19th century colonised the world, the 20th century dominated the world. But the 21st century will be very, very different from the 19th and 20th century. And the 21st century will go back to being an Asian century, because, as I see it from the year one of the year 18, 24, 1800, the last 2000 years, the two largest powers of the world were always those of China and India. So we saw Australia psychologically, especially as a Western country, got used to living and operating in a world which is been dominated by the West, and now it's going to move into a world where we are going to be not dominated by the West and where you will have a multipolar world, but the Asian powers will play a bigger role and Australia is beginning to discover that it is not Canada. My view of Canada, you can frankly, it doesn't matter. The world changes. You're completely protected by the United States of America. You can just switch off your defence and security mechanisms and you'll be safe forever. Where it is. By contrast, Australia's geography, as you know, is very different and in fact Australia is so geographically close to a 670 million people in Southeast Asia, 1.4 billion people in China, 1.3 billion people in India. So it's a very different neighbourhood. So I would say psychologically Australia has got to accept the fact that the 21st century will be very different and therefore frankly Australia will have to make the strategic adjustments that fortunately, as I see in my essay, they are blessing choices, not unpleasant choices for Australia because you can actually get to work much more closely with ASEAN. And ASEAN, as I describe in my book, is a real miracle because in the most diverse regional organisation in the world where you have 250 million Muslims and Christians, 50 million Buddhist, Mahayana, Buddhist, and I end up with this Bali's Confucius Institute, you have everything, and it's a region of peace and prosperity. And so that's remarkable. It's an ASEAN is a geopolitical gift to Australia. And what I'm advocating in my essay is that Australia and ASEAN can work more closely together and ASEAN welcomes closer cooperation with Australia. So at the end of the day, what you have is a pleasant choice, but unfortunately your previous government made an unpleasant choice and therefore we have a lot of these problems.

Ebony Bennett [00:09:56] Yes, certainly. I think that's an excellent summary of of the situation we find ourselves in. Thank you. I'm a listener. I want to come to you next. I guess following on from some of Kishore's points there. The title of this edition is Our Unstable Neighbourhood, as we've said. But it did remind me of another quote The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves. I think that unstable neighbourhood title kind of implies that there's a problem out there in South East Asia for Australia to deal with and the problem is out there. How much does Australia have to look at its own approach? And I know we've spoken in the past of some of those issues of megaphone diplomacy as as our approach.

Melissa Conley Tyler [00:10:45] Yeah, well, I mean, following on from both Kishore and Alan, I mean, in terms of Australia being used to living in a certain world, a world that is Western dominated. Kishore I love a quote from Richard Rigby where he talks about Australia as being the high watermark of British imperialism. That's the world we've always lived in and that's the world that we're used to. But I think it's Alan put really well in his piece. South East Asia is where we've actually had to learn to work with cultures that are fundamentally different from our own and to develop the diplomacy that takes us out of that paradigm. I would say that a couple of experiences recently. I'd actually say that Australia is better at this than we sometimes get ourselves credit for. So earlier this year I was at the Senate Dialogue in India and then at a global security forum in Warsaw. And in both of those I saw, you know, Europeans and Americans very strongly pushing an idea of the West and that we are all together now. Is the West in particular, of course, following the invasion of Ukraine. I saw a lot of pushback from Indians, from others who don't see the world in those terms. And I simply don't think that is how South East Asia, for example, sees the world. It's a contest of great powers. It wants to maintain as much strategic autonomy as possible. The idea of putting everything in West versus res terms is not very helpful and I actually think Australians get this more than we sometimes realise. I'm thinking in particular about Foreign Minister Wong's trips to Malaysia and Vietnam, to Singapore recently where she gave speeches which talked so much about strategic equilibrium, working with the region on the basis of shared interest. And I think there's a lot there in Australia in diplomacy. I think we're a lot more attuned to the region than some other parts of the world. It's a matter of really consistently putting that in place in our diplomacy.

Ebony Bennett [00:12:49] MM Allan, I'll come to you now. Another theme that runs through this edition, I think, is the inability on Australia's part to really exercise our agency commensurate with the actual power we do have. Why do we have such trouble with that?

Allan Behm [00:13:08] Well, if we knew the answer to that, we'd have a much more successful diplomacy over time, I think, as you penalty would know today. I put a book out this year trying to explore some of the the mindset issues that Australia has and and identify. Rice and misogyny, insecurity, isolation, an inability to self affirm all of those things coming together to make us very diffident in the way in which we conduct international relations in general. But our relationships with South East Asia in particular, and the points that Kishore just made and that he makes in his essay and reiterated again by Melissa, just bring home to me that there are serious obstacles standing in the way of our being able to maintain a sustained engagement with South East Asia, not just on our terms, but on the terms of South East Asia as well. We don't have a great degree of cultural resonance with South East Asia, and we've had this part of a century to build that, but we've not really invested in it. And so where we're left as a kind of outpost sitting at the the bottom of South East Asia, but continually looking far beyond Asia for our long term security. Kishore makes the point in his essay is that that Orcus is a throwback to an entirely inappropriate way of thinking about the world in which we currently live, and the world in which, while ever China is on the rise and continues to to be, in effect, a regional hegemon, we're going to continue to live for some very considerable time. Now this particular edition of Australian Foreign Affairs, it's fantastic. I mean all of the essays are wonderful. Alan's essay is, I think, an extremely optimistic essay, and I'm particularly taken by Alan's sort of emphasis on statecraft as something that we've got to redevelop as a principal tool by which we we not only re-engage with with South

East Asia, but build that engagement is something which is substantial at the time. And I'm equally taken by Kishore's warning of this essay that the danger for us is drifting apart. So I come back, I think, to a kind of double headed take on this particular set of essays that. In L.A., I was provoked to think, Well, can we have a state craft, which is anything more than an artefact of dependency and insecurity? What kind of a state craft can we have when we're hankering after nuclear powered submarines and looking to a new confection such as orcas to deliver it and at the same time thinking about key issues recommendation that that the problem is one of drifting I think. I mean it's it's as much drifting together as it is drifting apart that while ever we have a lack of direction, a lack of serious long term strategy and a lack of common purpose with South East Asia will continue to be the kind of unpredictable entity sitting to the south, which may be interesting or maybe not. And just as a little coda, let me just put on the quad for the sake of completeness. We all have views about that. But it's very difficult, I might say, for for me, as somebody who has served as a diplomat in South East Asia and managed complex defence relationships with South East Asia, I have a very long period of time to imagine any kind of strategic grouping for Australia that doesn't include our long term partners, Malaysia and Singapore, with whom we've had relationships since back in the sixties, and, and Indonesia, which is growing in strategic significance in Asia. So a quad even looks to me like something which is extrinsic to where our real intrinsic interests lie. And so in all of that, I really love that it is. That is because they confront all of us.

Ebony Bennett [00:18:05] Certainly, there's a lot to unpack in this edition of Australian Foreign Affairs. Allan Gyngell, coming back to you and Allan just picked up there on Indonesia and its importance. I think you've mentioned in your essay that Australia's engagement there kind of waxes and wanes, but the relationship has been, you know, one of strength sometimes in the past. But you also mentioned that if Australia's objective is to build coalitions within ASEAN against China, that it's going to be disappointed. I just wondered if you could kind of unpacked the dynamics that you're talking about there.

Allan Gyngell [00:18:49] Yes, certainly. One of the things that went wrong in my view anyway, under the under the last government was the tendency to judge the actions of every government in Southeast Asia by where they stood on their robustness towards towards China, rather than looking at the region, their attitudes to the region as a whole. The importance for me anyway, the importance of Southeast Asia for Australia lies far more in its capacity to hold itself together to avoid the the the fractures which ASEAN was originally set up to, to prevent and to and to to sit there as, as a, as a group of countries which is able to ensure that the region into which China rises. And we accept that China will will rise is one in which every country has a voice and in which one in which rules where they've been mutually set out and agreed are followed. So it's ASEAN itself, which is important to us, in my view, rather than rather than its attitude to say to China or to to the United States. And there will be variations in between. You asked us before we came on Monday whether we could engage with others. And I'd really like to hear Kishore on this. On the point of ASEAN. He described it properly, I think, and I agree with him as a geopolitical gift to to Australia. But but as we've seen just in the past week with Myanmar and and developments there, it's, it's not an easy organisation and it has its own has its own fractures. I'm really interested in key issues, judgements about ASEAN's capacity to continue doing the things that it has done so well.

Ebony Bennett [00:21:08] Yeah. Kishore, did you want to respond to that?

Kishore Mahbubani [00:21:10] Oh, sure, sure, sure. You know, I completely agree with you, Ebony, when you're saying this is a wonderful issue of foreign affairs. But I was slight disagreement with the title, but it says Unstable Neighbourhood. I think the unstable neighbourhood would refer to Europe. I think today you look at the disastrous the Ukraine war has been. And of course, I argue elsewhere the Ukraine war is a war that was eminently preventable and it was eminently preventable because what you have to do is you always have to understand the geopolitics of your neighbourhood. And if you have a great power like Russia, don't alienate Russia. Bring Russia into your arrangements. And that's the genius of what ASEAN has done. ASEAN realised very early on that China and India would be rising powers again. And ASEAN, as you know, engaged China and India very early and included them in all of the arrangements. So the inclusive approach of ASEAN is now paying off big time. And that's why you don't have a war like Ukraine war in our neighbourhood. But of course ASEAN is clearly not a perfect organisation. In fact, the paradox of ASEAN is that its strength lies in its weakness. And because it is weak, no one, no one is afraid of ASEAN. Everyone trusts ASEAN. It's a one organisation, it's trusted by everybody. And one of the weaknesses is that we have problem states within our members and Myanmar has long been a problem state within ASEAN. And indeed, you know, Myanmar is actually we look back since World War to spend more years isolating itself from Southeast Asia, from the rest of the world. And occasionally you hear that periods of engagement, especially when Aung San Suu Kyi came back, but now it's gone back to isolating itself in Myanmar. It will be a problem for sure. But at the end of the day, whether it's 40 or 50 million people in Myanmar, it's still about much less than 10% of ASEAN's population. And Myanmar hasn't held back ASEAN's growth and development. And just to give you one statistic that I think every Australian should know for a start, because in all you've been talking about the Quad and Australia thinking, gosh, we are so lucky, we have a great power like Japan as a partner. Well, let me give you one piece of statistic. In the year 2000, Japan's economy was eight times the size of ASEAN, eight times in year 2000. Today, Japan's economy is only 1.5 times larger than ASEAN. By 2030, I shall be bigger than Japan. So, I mean, in terms of economic opportunities, ASEAN is going to become a great place for economic growth and development than Japan. As you know, because of its ageing and all, it is going to have a real struggle to maintain its economic growth and development. And, you know, one of the lines I see in foreign affairs, he says he talks about how often policy makers used to go in the 1990s and tell the people in Washington, DC, Don't you realise that Australia's economy is bigger than the ten ASEAN countries combined? But guess what? Today ASEAN's GNP is three times larger than Australia's and it's become larger too. So it is actually good for Australia and good for the region that ASEAN is doing well. Not just any believer site in Myanmar. It's actually quite stunning how countries like Indonesia, which could have become the Yugoslavia, Southeast Asia, Yugoslavia of Asia is now growing and succeeding and in fact is the world's most successful Islamic democracy, which is a big deal, I think, for Indonesia. And, you know, while you may have Myanmar, you also have what I call the the VIP development of ASEAN, the VIP stands for Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines. And these three economies, by the way, are about to do very, very well. And Vietnam is going to become a superstar economy, by the way. So you can you going to talk about Myanmar, you also have to talk about the other more successful societies in Southeast Asia. And so all this, I want to emphasise is a geopolitical gift to Australia because you do have a happy

neighbourhood north of you and not an unhappy neighbourhood, because I can guarantee you one thing that both China and India will court ASEAN very, very carefully. And so ASEAN's geopolitical importance and significance will grow over the next 10 to 20 years. And Australia should also be doing the same and investing far more in ASEAN that it has, especially in the last ten, 15 years.

Melissa Conley Tyler [00:26:08] Sure.

Ebony Bennett [00:26:09] I'm sorry.

Melissa Conley Tyler [00:26:10] I'm just going to come in on that question of, you know, is the neighbourhood unstable? I think what this shows is more about Australian perceptions than reality. So I mean, Suzanne, the path that Lowy is has looked at the data and said, no, look, you know, statistically this is not an unstable neighbourhood. What I think is in flux actually is Australia's perspective on the region. So we have, as Alan has put in his article, you know, we at times overlooked the neighbourhood and what we have to move to is saying the neighbourhood is absolutely crucial. And so I think that is about that sense of common purpose with the region that you mentioned, elevate and step forward. We we worked at this lot for the last year. We did consultations with 150 defence diplomacy and development experts in Australia and in South East Asia. And the message that came through from that is so clear. You know, don't just treat the region as such a great power competition. Connect on what is South East Asia as priorities. Engage on the basis of shared interests. It's all about working together with South East Asia on our shared future. We want strong, successful, thriving countries. They are well on their way to being. So how can we be a part of that success linked with and benefit from that success? That's the sort of questions that Australians should be asking themselves.

Ebony Bennett [00:27:36] Yeah, I just want to remind everyone that you can type in questions for our panel using the Q&A box. I can see one question there, but if your question is in the chat, it's very hard for me to say it. So just a reminder to happening in the Q&A box there. Kishore, I wanted to, I guess, pick up on some of those points that you had mentioned earlier, but also. Turn the discussion a little bit towards China and that being one of the questions that Australia is grappling with really how to deal with the rise of China as a superpower. In your essay you kind of talk about, you know, Australia could adopt some wisdom of some Vietnamese wisdom for managing the relationship with China. So I wanted to ask you to expand on what does Vietnam understand about China that Australia doesn't and how it manages that that relationship?

Kishore Mahbubani [00:28:37] Yes. Well, I think if there's one country in Southeast Asia that understands China the best is no question, is Vietnam, because I mean, they've had a close relationship for 2000 years or so. And Vietnam, by the way, was occupied by China for 1000 years. I mean, you get a sense of the historical. So there's a lot of deep wisdom in Vietnamese political culture on how to handle China. And that's the number one foreign

policy challenge for for Vietnam, really. And the Vietnamese have a saying that, you know, to become a leader of Vietnam, you must be able to.

Allan Gyngell [00:29:16] Stand up to China.

Kishore Mahbubani [00:29:18] But at the same time, you must be able to get along with China. And you can't stand on China and get along with China, then you cannot be a leader of Vietnam. So I think that's good advice for an Australian leader. You must be able to stand up to China, but you must also be able to get along with China. And what the ASEAN countries have found is that it is possible to get along with China. But one thing I want to emphasise is that in Asia and this is a very critical thing, face is very important and you notice that Asian countries almost never publicly insult each other, never and will always be. They have disagreements. They'll find a way of either expressing it in private or expressing it in very subtle ways so that, you know, you don't you don't you never say anything explicitly, publicly. And that I think is one of the major cultural adjustments that Australia has to make in dealing with China and also with other Asian neighbours, including Indonesia. I think Australia's if I talk, if I think of geopolitical challenges for Australia, number one is China clearly no question whatsoever. And Australia hasn't handled China very well in knowledge. You know, your relations are not very good. But I would say you on your face an equally daunting challenge. As Indonesia becomes bigger and stronger, you'll find that dealing with Indonesia also requires a certain degree of subtlety and sophistication, which is sometimes missing in Australian diplomacy. But I also want to emphasise that it is possible to get along with China, that it is possible to find ways and means of achieving win win arrangements with China because at the end of the day, the Chinese don't have any desire to invade or occupy any of their neighbours. And you know, if you look at how the United States behave as a great power as it emerged in the 1890, and my sources, grandmothers and the Harvard professor in this book, destined for voices when the Americans say, keep saying, oh, why can't China be like us? You said to be careful what you wish for when America emerged as a great power and you know a number of wars it for the conquered Philippines trample on its neighbours. No, China doesn't have that kind of militaristic tendency to use the military as a primary force, but at the same time, dealing with China as a great power would be difficult. I mean, dealing with any great power is difficult. So don't think that it's going to be a smooth road, but you've got to then you deal with a great power. You've got to understand the nature of the great power. And that's what I tried to do in my book. As China once explained what is the essential characteristic of China's behaviour as a major geopolitical actor? And as ASEAN shows, ASEAN has learnt the art of managing China and Vietnam too. And you know, I'm sure you all know that we're not the number one trading partner is is China, despite all the differences that they have with each other. And at the same time, Vietnam's number one model for development is China, even though they have a deep suspicion of China that goes back 2000 years. So that's that's the kind of complexity that you've got to absorb and handle. And I think a little bit of sophistication and complexity in Australian analysis of this region would be very, very useful other than the kind of black and white news you get. In the Australian discourse. China's either good or evil is neither.

Ebony Bennett [00:33:04] Yeah. Allan Behm. That brings me back to you. China's obviously a big question that everyone is grappling with, though not a question. But Kishore makes

some really good points there. But also that relationship with Indonesia and thinking of things that, you know, Australia hasn't just got a deteriorating relationship with China, but because of the way that we're trying to deal with that, in part I'm thinking here of the Orcus announcement where we didn't give Indonesia a heads up that that was coming. I just wonder if you could reflect on some of those past engagements and how we might move forward now?

Allan Behm [00:33:44] Yes, we've we've had an up and down relationship with Indonesia, as we have had with the rest of south east Asia. And I mean, I'm going to I'm going to riff a little bit on what Kishore has just said, because I was in total agreement with that, except for one point. I don't think that ASEAN is weak at all. I think it's quite strong. And the reason I think that is that ASEAN has got a remarkable capacity to deal with diversity and to deal with ambiguity. And that's how I think about the way in which Indonesia deals with so many things that it has a cultural habit of of looking at things not just in the stock light of day, but looking at things as the shadows fall. The way Young Theatre of Indonesia, I think, is incredibly instructive because it gives you a sense of a capacity to deal with things as they are and as they seem to be at the same time. And that's something that the West finds very difficult. I think it's part of the reason that we reach immediately for the megaphone that we've we've got to shout out a clear solution to problems that we actually haven't analysed properly. And I do think that what you see historically in in Asia is a capacity to learn from history and to turn that into quite deep cultural, cultural expressions. I remember, Kishore, one of your colleagues might be a bit before your time, but I think both of us had been on the block, saw a bit of a bit of a time here. But when the UN class, the Law of the Sea negotiations were were being conducted and your great ambassador, Tommy Koh, had a lovely expression, which is we should always exploit ambiguity constructively. And I actually think that that's one of the big keys to the way in which ASEAN operates, that there is massive ambiguity, as there is actually in all international relations and all international relationships. And the big lesson, I think, that we're able to learn, at least I hope we are as Australians, is to be just a bit less binary and to be very, very much more multiplex in the way in which we look at the randomness and the effect of chaos within which international relationships actually operate and that we're not nearly so reductionist. And I think that's one of the reasons that I take such a lot of encouragement out of this collection of essays, is that there are quite important cues in ebony for for Australia to reshape and re-energise its foreign policy, but without having to chuck everything overboard. What we need to do is to learn from the things that haven't gone quite that well and to capitalise on the things that have gone pretty well over a long period of time. And that generally has been as a quality of our quiet diplomacy, as distinct from the lack of quality in our noisy politics. And I think that, again, is something that shines through in the two major essays that we're talking about this morning.

Ebony Bennett [00:37:13] And I'm going to go to questions from the audience now. The first one I've got is from Kieran Strain, who says how can Australia reach a sustained bipartisan approach beyond the political cycle that embraces ASEAN as the future of our neighbourhood? Melissa, can I throw that one to you?

Melissa Conley Tyler [00:37:33] Absolutely. No, I like to question is also a great question by Cliff of solving on, you know, to what extent government is on board with this. I'd say there's a lot and it is bipartisan. So if I look at, you know, the new government, but I'd say also building on what we saw with the previous government, with the South East Asia step up with the biggest investment in the region since the tsunami. A lot of things being done on COVID, on transnational crime, fisheries, maritime budget support, etc. There's been a lot of action in the area and I would say that what I really liked with the new government, it's been taking the opportunity that every new government has to try to reset and reframe the way it's made. Priorities in South East Asia has been really positive. So you've got the additional funding you've got sitting out the new Office of Southeast Asia, like the Office in the Pacific, to bring together more integrated approach across government. And you've had fantastic messaging. If you look at Foreign Affairs Wong In the region, it's all been about shared future de-emphasising, geopolitics, strategic equilibrium. How can we work together? It's been a fantastic set of messages and I think that's what you want over time. You want to build up a long term bipartisan commitment to say that outside of political cycle, this is a region that absolutely matters to Australia's future and will always matter and we can't afford to have that sort of chop and change. We'll get excited for a few years, but then something else will get exciting. This has to be core to our development, diplomacy, defence always.

Ebony Bennett [00:39:21] Allan Gyngell I wondered if I might throw that second question that Melissa referenced to you from Claire about the degree to which the government, but in particular the the public service and DFAT will hear some of the views that we're talking about today and take them on board.

Allan Gyngell [00:39:42] Well, you know, modestly. I do think that if they if the government were to listen to the to the full people on this on this panel, I'd be they'd be doing. They'd be doing very well. But I don't look, I don't think they need us. You just have to read the sort of things that Penny Wong was saying, you know, not only since she came to office, but for she was there. And Alan Beam knows this better than anyone that South East Asia and the need to refocus on South East Asia goes to right at the centre of her views of the world. And you can and you can track all that through the actions that the incoming government has taken and the speeches that they've made. I just want to make another additional point, though. It's not enough for government to to understand this and to focus on it. One of the other points I make in the essay is that if Australia is not the best place in the world outside South East Asia for understanding South East Asian politics, languages and economy, then something has gone badly wrong. And at the moment, we're nowhere near that language. Language numbers are going precipitously down through the schools and the and the universities. South East Asian regional studies are disappearing. Something has to be done to do that because unless you have that underpinning foundation, a narrow group of policymakers at the top is not going to be able to sustain the policy over a long period.

Ebony Bennett [00:41:34] The next question I've got is from Sumithri Venketasubramanian and it's for you, I think. Kishore, I'll direct this one. It's the state of human rights in Southeast Asian countries are poor, including countries. Australia has strong relationships with black Singapore and obviously more extreme examples like Myanmar. How might this affect the Relationships Australia builds with South East Asian countries? And of course,

acknowledging that Australia has its own human rights record. Dismal on things like, of course, the treatment about First Nations people, for example, and refugees amongst other things. But that issue of dealing with some of those concerns that the Australian public obviously expects to be dealt with at that level. What are your comments on that?

Kishore Mahbubani [00:42:24] Well, I'm actually very glad that the question of human rights has come up because it is definitely going to become a major issue in Australia's relations with South-East Asia. And this is the one area where Australia needs to make a very carefully thought out long term policy decision. Should Australia arrogate upon itself the right to pass judgements on the human rights conditions of other countries? And of course this comes very naturally to many Australians, but as you know it does upset countries when you pass judgement on them. And of course most people will notice that Australia, like any other country, has double standards. I mean Australia was opposed to the use of torture in every country except of course when the United States set up Guantanamo. But in the United States and at Guantanamo, the Australian Government pretended it never happened. Didn't say a word. I mean, Australia's civil society protested of newspapers, criticise it, but the Australian Government just kept absolutely quiet. And the one rule I've done in practising 33 years of diplomacy is that all countries have to make uncomfortable adjustments in one way or another to deal with the reality of the world. So for example, even in the quiet, for example, you notice that Australia is very, very careful about criticising India. And you have to realise if I want a partnership, I'll keep my mouth shut. So Australia basically doesn't have to be any different from any other country in the world, which is which basically says, okay, I'm going to start work with countries. Some of them will have great human rights record, some of them will not have a great human rights record. And but that's the reality of the world, and that's the world that we have to deal with. Now, of course, if the whole world was just full of Western style liberal democracies, life would be very easy for Australia. But that's not the real world. If you look at the population of the world, only 12% of the world's population lives in the West, 88% live outside the West. And you know, for a small country like Australia to pass judgement on how the remaining 88% should conduct their societies would be rather arrogant on the part of Australia. So I would say Australia's got to learn to be quietly pragmatic and say we live in an imperfect world, we will deal with imperfect regimes but we still have to work with them. Because if you if you start to moralise in your diplomacy and you try to pass judgement on other countries, that is the surest route to isolate Australia once again from the rest of Australia. You've got to handle these things very carefully, very sensitive. And by the way, the best way to raise any human rights issues to be found is to do it privately and quietly and not use megaphone diplomacy.

Melissa Conley Tyler [00:45:35] I might come in on that because I agree entirely that Australia doesn't want to be seen as moralising. At the same time, Australia really does care about human rights and should be promoting human rights internationally everywhere. And I think, you know, it's easy to say Australia has been hypocritical. I think all countries even critical on things like human rights. You know, we do care about human rights, but we have to balance that with other interests. Of course it's harder to criticise our friends than our enemies. I agree. But I don't think that means we give up. I think all countries have committed to a universal aspiration of trying to live up to human rights. And none of us do completely live up to that aspiration. But we should try to encourage each other. And I think one of the great models that Australia has is one that's based much more on peer support.

So for example, with Vietnam we have an Australia, Vietnam human rights dialogue and the basic concept is we both come and we share what are some of our issues at the moment? We're dealing with a royal commission on aged care. We're dealing with indigenous deaths in custody, and they say, Oh, well, we're dealing with change to our labour laws or etc. and we treat it very much as the challenges we have to live up to these universal aspirations rather than Australia being better than other countries. We're all trying to live up to them and all that. So I'd be pushing that more, but I really think it's important that countries don't take the field. I don't think because Australia has a poor human rights record, that means we shouldn't try to promote human rights internationally. We should be a country that does try to make the world better.

Ebony Bennett [00:47:17] And as you say, perhaps we'd get a lot further in those kinds of dialogues if we came in a spirit of humility. Knowing we have our own issues as well might be a good place to start. Would anyone else on the panel like to comment on that issue before we move on?

Allan Behm [00:47:32] I'm not just pick up on on what Melissa has said. It's a very important point. It's not the objective. I mean, universal human rights is something that the entire United Nations would really like to have in place. The question is how you get there. And I don't think that you get there through criticism, finger pointing, calling other countries out and putting out that as a way of causing other countries, as Kishore said earlier, to lose face. I think a much better diplomacy is to be able to talk. And this is what Melissa was saying, to talk about what actually works for us, what makes our society more harmonious, more inclusive, more stable, what makes our society a better society to live in. And I think walking the talk is a very, very much better diplomacy than simply bellowing, which is what we tend to be quite good at. I'm reminded of a remark that Wang Gongol made back in, oh gosh, in the early 1980s when he was talking about Australia and South East Asia. And he made a really good point, which was that if Australia could settle down, make the most of its own opportunities, build the kind of society that it has the gift to build, then it would be creating a society which most countries in South East Asia would like to be like and that they would envy. And that is a much surer way of projecting the kind of policy virtues that we would like to reject than it is simply by getting out the megaphone. And so I think that the point that Melissa has made is a really important one. But it comes back, I think, curiously, to the point that Kishore made earlier, and that is that you don't need megaphones, just need to be able to do it.

Ebony Bennett [00:49:39] Allan Gyngell That reminds me of a point in your essay, I believe it was. I've got a question here from Colin Burke. He says Does Australia need to become more undemocratic to interact with similar countries in Australia? I think you mentioned in your essay, one of the things we have to grapple with is that we're not always dealing with liberal democracies as we understand it in ASEAN. What's your reflection upon that?

Allan Gyngell [00:50:07] Yeah, I say in the in the piece, Ebony, that one of the changes that Australia needs to make is to the sort of language that we that we use about the region. It's come up several times already. But you know, when we talk about the West, which has

become increasingly common since the Ukraine war and, you know, Europeans sort of rediscovered the cold, cold war language, this is completely meaningless for for the region around Australia. Similarly, you know, liberal, liberal democracies, the last Government's description of a world divided between anarchic autocracies and and liberal democracies is just as has no resonance in the in the region. The you know, the Communist Party of Vietnam is at least as determined to to to hang onto to power as the Communist Party of China. So liberal democracy ain't going to make it. Nevertheless, and this sort of came up in the last discussion about human rights. There are principles that we can that we can all agree on that might be ambitions, but but but indicate where we are, where we want to, to get to. And and we should be able to work out with, you know, sitting down with the countries of of ASEAN exactly what those those principles are. So, no, we don't need to become less democratic. That would be a terrible mistake. We need to be more democratic if if anything. But we do need to understand the world is not made exactly in Australia's image.

Ebony Bennett [00:52:09] Hmm. I've got another question here from Megan. Algeria, how should the extreme vulnerability to climate change impacts across our region and the risks that this poses for regional security shape Australia's approach to diplomacy? And what should we do differently going forward? I wonder if I might widen that out to ASEAN's approach to diplomacy and climate change and throw that one to you, Kishore.

Kishore Mahbubani [00:52:35] Well, I think I'm really glad that the issue of climate change has come up because they you know, one one of the biggest psychological adjustments we have to make as a human species is to realise that different countries are no longer different boats, that different countries are just cabins on the same boat. And so if the boat is sinking at all, it doesn't make any sense. To protect your cabin, you've got to protect the boat as a whole. So climate change is something that is affecting the whole planet. And we have to come together as a human species to deal with these planetary challenges. But the way you do that, therefore, is to say that the differences between our two cabins don't meet us as much as our common interests in saving the global boat. And this is where I think I hope that more and more countries will realise, for example, just to give you a concrete example, that for all the differences between the United States and China, in the end, the US-China contest will definitely accelerate the next ten years. If you look at it objectively and rationally, the common interests that United States and China have in fighting climate change is far more important than the differences they have on geopolitical issues. So countries like Australia and ASEAN should work together to persuade United States and China especially to say, Hey, why don't you press the pause button on the geopolitical contest? Let's come together to solve climate change that's more urgent, more pressing. Because if we don't do it, and if the temperatures go up beyond 1.5 degrees, they are likely to do so. Then we are all literally fried.

Ebony Bennett [00:54:25] I think that might be sorry, Melissa. Yeah.

Melissa Conley Tyler [00:54:27] Well, I was I was going to agree entirely. I think climate is a shared challenge and we have to say it in that way. I'd also say it's a shared opportunity if I could put that there in the. Work that AP photo did looking at Australia and Southeast Asia

on climate issues, looking at how Australia could be part of the region's green energy transition. Exporting renewable energies, whether through cable or through hydrogen, shipped to the region. Green manufacturing in Australia are critical minerals for all of the infrastructure you need to move to renewable energy. There's actually this massive opportunity for Australia to be this renewable energy superpower and to help Southeast Asia's transition, which given its huge energy needs. So yes, there are things we can do on disaster risk reduction, etc. but this is also a massive opportunity and working together.

Ebony Bennett [00:55:24] Allan Gyngell, is there anything you'd like to add to that before we wrap up?

Allan Gyngell [00:55:28] No, no. I mean, everyone agrees enthusiastically on that and I have no different perspective.

Ebony Bennett [00:55:37] Well, we might wrap it up there. Thank you so much, everyone, for a great discussion. As always, I'm sorry we can't get to everyone's questions, but thank you Allan Gyngell, Kishore Mahbubani, Melissa Connelly, Tyler and Alan Bain. For all of your time today and for your excellent insights and a really interesting discussion today. Thank you. Also to Australian Foreign Affairs editor Jonathan Poneman and the team at Black Ink. Please make sure that you head on over to Australia Institute TV where you'll be able to find a recording of today's event and make sure you subscribe to our podcast. Follow the money where we explain big economic issues in plain English. Thank you so much for joining us today and we'll see you next time. Stay safe out there. Bye bye.

Melissa Conley Tyler [00:56:21] Thank you again, Ebony.

Allan Gyngell [00:56:22] Thanks, Ebony. Thanks, everyone. Thank you.

Kishore Mahbubani [00:56:24] Very much. Bye bye.