Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC KC in conversation with Jersey Lee and Richard Gray at Pacific Polarity, 18 May 2025

Jersey Lee: Today, we're speaking with the Honourable Gareth Evans. He is one of the two longest-serving Australian federal Cabinet Ministers in Labor Party history, including serving as foreign minister from 1988 to 1996. After leaving politics, he served in a number of roles, including president and chief executive officer of the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, co-chair of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty and the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament.

As a former Labor minister, could we get your thoughts on the remarkable landslide victory of the incumbent Labor government, much more emphatic than the polls had predicted and what it means in a global context?

Gareth Evans: Well, thank you very much, Jersey, for the opportunity to join you. Great pleasure. Yes, the Labor Party victory in Australia was spectacular and much greater in scale than I think anybody had contemplated, including the party's most rusted on supporters. I think that's attributable to a number of factors.

It was a very limp opposition that the Labor Party, the Labor government faced. It was one that misconceived the nature of the dynamic currently operating in Australia, a belief that all they simply had to do was to criticise the government rather than bring into play any economic, cost of living focused policies of their own.

But it was an election that was also influenced significantly by the reality of the Trump administration in the United States. I'm not sure that it had as big an impact as it did in Canada, where Canada was facing almost an existential risk from the Trump administration. But certainly it played into the Australian election, in the perception that the opposition party that was contesting the election was really a little bit of a lightweight clone of its American counterparts in the Trump administration. That's not something that the Australian electorate wanted.

I think foreign policy did not feature largely in the election in Australia. But what we can say is that the electorate was unimpressed by the "red threat", heavy duty anti-China talk that had been characteristic of the opposition conservative Coalition over the previous three years, and did not want to succumb to the scare notion that was being perpetrated.

Secondly, as I've just said, the electorate was definitely unimpressed by the key features that had emerged already about the Trump administration: its treatment, essentially, of allies like Australia as more encumbrances than assets; its total willingness to tolerate naked breaches of the international legal order, in particular naked aggression by Russia in Ukraine; its distaste for international institutions, for which Australians, like most of the rest of the world, have a reasonably sentimental attachment, certainly to the United

Nations, but also organizations like World Health Organization, World Trade Organization, the International Criminal Court, and the Trump hostility to all of those institutions was noticed, not to any enormously significant extent by the electorate, which doesn't focus very closely on these details the way that people like you and I do, but nonetheless, it was there as a backdrop.

And of course, the impact of the trade war that was initiated by the Trump administration with just about everybody, including indifference to countries like Australia, with a 10% tariff imposition; not a huge one, but nonetheless, as our Prime Minister Albanese said, not the act of a friend.

These factors did operate in the Australian context and will be part of the ongoing debate in Australia.

As to how the new Albanese government, the second term of this Labor government, will act in the foreign policy space, I guess that's what we'll now talk about in a bit more detail. Basically, I think it comes down to this: probably more of the same, but hopefully with a slightly greater spirit of adventure and creativity than we've seen in the first three years.

I think we can expect moderation in dealing with China. I think we can expect caution in dealing with the United States, a willingness to recognize that the alliance might not be what it's been previously cracked up to be. The question of the AUKUS submarine deal is no doubt something we'll talk about, but that's maybe a bit of running in the opposite direction, the enthusiasm of the government for continuing that, which may well not be very rationally justified. But I think there will be a degree of caution about the US.

I think we can expect certainly a renewed attention to building relationships with our Asian neighbors, one by one, the countries that matter most to us. The Prime Minister's first visit in a few days' time (as we speak) will be to Indonesia. That's a critical relationship for us, but so too are our relationships with India, with Japan, with Korea, a number of the other ASEANs. And there'll be, I'm sure, continued attention by Foreign Minister Penny Wong, who's been quite active in this space, in building those relationships, including rather self-consciously as a little bit of a counterweight to excessive dependence on China, and a little bit of willingness to build some confidence that if China were to overreach in the future, there'd be a strong regional backlash to that.

I think we can expect fairly strong support for international institutions, which has always been a hallmark of the Labor Party in government, and a generally balanced approach to peacekeeping and peacemaking, and those things that are pretty important. I think there'll be a willingness, at least principle, to be very supportive of policies that are aimed at addressing the big existential risks that the planet faces: climate, pandemics, and nuclear weapons. I would like to see more activism on those fronts than has been associated with the government in its first term. But the instinct will be there to do useful things in that space. It'll be an interesting three years from that point of view.

Jersey Lee: You kind of already brought this up: Do you see any prospect of AUKUS being re-raised as an issue in any way within the re-elected government? After all, it wasn't their plan originally, and there's obviously a lot of suspicion within the Labor Party, including from people such as yourself. I've listened to your speeches over several years, and I know you have a strong view on this subject, but I'd like to hear what you think could realistically happen, given on the ground political realities, given the thinking within the current Labor leadership over this term and perhaps the next, as we approach the proposed delivery timeline of the initial Virginia submarines.

Gareth Evans: The AUKUS deal certainly should be very comprehensively and very skeptically reviewed by the new government, in a way that it felt unable or unwilling to do first time around. This issue really is an absolutely central one, in terms of the rationality of our defense preparedness and our response, because there's very serious problems with this big submarine deal, that you mentioned that I've certainly described in the past. Those problems are essentially threefold, if I can summarize them in a sentence each.

The first is deliverability, whether we'll ever actually get these big beasts, particularly the first three Virginias that are supposedly being purchased from the United States, given the real problems their manufacturing system is having and building the boats they need for themselves, let alone ones that can be given to us. Add to that the real question mark about the achievability of the design and the build, centrally by Britain, for the second tranche of the enterprise, extending over the next 30, 40 years. I think huge skepticism is justified on whether these things will ever actually emerge.

The second ground for concern is cost benefit, the eye-watering cost of building these eight hugely capable but hugely expensive [submarines], given that only two of them ultimately will ever be able to be deployed at any one time, because of the operational realities of dealing with these machines. And given the huge maritime environment that we do have to defend, should anything turn nasty in the future, there's a real question as to whether that money would be better spent on a much larger fleet of less capable boats, more particularly on air capability, in unmanned underwater capability, plus missile defense, cyber security, cyber operations, there's a whole bunch of alternative ways of spending this money which might well make a hell of a lot more sense. So that cost benefit argument objection is very real.

The third big objection that I have, which to me is more important than almost anything else, is the is the impact on our sovereign independence of acquiring this enormously sophisticated technology from the United States, without being further enmeshed in US defense decision-making, that we will sacrifice any capability of making our own decisions about how these boats are used. My own view is that it's inconceivable that we'll get this technology from the United States, except on the assumption, whatever they say publicly, that those boats will be available to be deployed in support of an American kinetic military operation at a flick of a presidential finger. That will be the expectation. And given the

degree of subservience that we've traditionally had to the United States in these areas, I think that will say goodbye to our capacity to resist, for example, joining the United States in a war over Taiwan, should that ever unhappily eventuate.
So there's all those reasons for comprehensively reviewing it. I think the reality is that it's unlikely that the government will initiate any step back from where we're at at the moment. I think you have in the Defense Minister, Richard Marles, someone who's an absolute true believer in the U.S. alliance, and not particularly troubled by the sovereignty issue and completely a prisoner of that view of the world. You've got Penny Wong at the other end of the spectrum, who is much more skeptical about it all, but Albanese is somewhere in the middle. And I think the balance of the government is somewhere in the middle, not wanting to rock the boat on this, and certainly not to unilaterally walk away from this particular deal.

If the deal is to fall over, I think it's going to be because the Americans simply don't deliver, find it impossible to deliver those three big Virginias that are the first part of the operation, which are due in the early 2030s, and don't deliver them because their own industrial capability will be incapable of simultaneously doing that while meeting their own obvious replacement and renewal needs. I think the deliverability issue is a very real one, and I think there's every prospect this thing will fall over, but I think it will be in a few years' time, as a result of American dynamics, rather than a deliberate policy decision of the Australian government now in the next few months.

I think that's an unhappy situation because it will leave us then with no effective submarine capability whatsoever if this deal falls over, because I think it'll be far too late to talk about alternative options with the French, the Germans, the Swedes, the Japanese or anybody else. But maybe that's no bad thing. Maybe it will mean that we're forced back to building our defence capability on alternative structures involving, as I said, much more use of aircraft, plus maritime capability, unmanned underwater capability, plus cyber, plus missile, etc. So I think that's the reality, and that's an unfortunate state of affairs, which goes back to the decision of the Labor Party to just inherit the decision made by the preceding Conservative government, and not review it thoroughly when we first came into office three years ago.

Richard Gray: A lot of what you're talking about is a broader question of how integrated Australia should be with the United States in terms of military coordination, in terms of buying US platforms and shipments and things of this sort. I guess one of the things that I'm curious about is how you would conceptualize your vision for the US-Australia relationship, and what Australia should be doing. What is, in your view, the right balance between integration and coordination, while also maintaining Australia’s strategic autonomy

Gareth Evans: I don't argue for walking away from the American alliance, because it has served us remarkably well in the past, in terms of access to very sophisticated intelligence which we wouldn't otherwise have, very sophisticated technology, not as sophisticated as

we're now talking about with AUKUS, but certainly very upmarket capability, which would otherwise probably be unobtainable from other sources. And we've also benefited, I think it's fair to say, from the general balancing role that the United States has played simply by virtue of its regional presence.

We haven't benefited from jumping aboard the American bandwagon and some of its more egregious misadventures of the past, the Vietnam War, and also the second Gulf War in 2003 very much fit in that category. I think there's always been a sense, certainly by people on my side of politics, that while not walking away from the Alliance, we ought to be very, very careful about further enmeshing ourselves in it.

We've been doing a lot of enmeshing recently. There's the implications of the AUKUS deal, which I've already described for the future use of these big boats, if we ever acquire them. But there's also a whole bunch of things going on: there's the development of a submarine base in Stirling, just outside Perth, which will be heavily used by American capability; even if the AUKUS boats don't eventuate, that's on offer to the Americans. There's the B-52 base, which has been basically accepted and becoming operational in the Northern Territory in Tyndall, south of Darwin. There's the marine base that's now operational, albeit on a small scale, but potentially much larger in Darwin itself. There's the possibility of a further maritime base for submarines on the Australian East Coast. And all this, of course, on top of the existing Pine Gap facility, which has always been a target on our back, in the event of any possible hostilities, because of its role in American war fighting as well as intelligence gathering. But that's the sort of risk that we've been prepared to tolerate in the past.

Whether it makes sense to further enmesh ourselves in all these ways that I'm describing such that we are seen by the Americans as an extension of their own capability and an indispensable part of their capability, whether that's compatible with maintaining our own complete sovereign independence of decision making, is something that I'm very troubled about. I don't think the present Labor government is particularly troubled about it, but the Coalition opposition, to the extent that it exists at all after the election, I don't think it's at all troubled about it. It rather likes the idea of what one of their fellow travelers call pooled sovereignty.

But I think the Australian public is a bit more skeptical about all of this, particularly in an age of Trump. The reality is that even in a non-Trump administration, even going back through Biden and Obama and Clinton, there's always been a degree of “top dog” assumptions in America's dealing with its allies that had been more respectful than what we've seen under Trump, but was nonetheless an expectation that the allies would know their place and fall into place if ever they were needed.

I think that's an unfortunate state of affairs for a country like Australia, which needs to fiercely maintain our independence, and fiercely maintain our capacity for independent judgment about what our own core interests actually are. And they're not the same as American interests. We are gigantically trade dependent, as we all know, on the China

relationship. And to be sucked into, for example, a war over Taiwan, as terrible as that would be for the flourishing democracy in Taiwan, for Australia to be sucked into it, without any great capacity to make a military difference, but an enormous capacity to be profoundly hurt economically by what would obviously then be a complete cessation of our trade with China, it's just not a place which we want to be in when it comes to making assumptions and judgments about our own national interest.

We obviously want to play our part in ensuring that Chinese don't overreach; I don't particularly think that's extremely likely in the future. But the notion of just being sucked into what might be a fairly mindless slide by the Americans from general competition into full-scale confrontation, I think that's not a place we want to be, and we've got to be very, very careful about any further enmeshment of our military capability. I mean, a degree of interoperability does make some sort of sense, given our own scale of defence needs. But the notion of interchangeability, the language that's now assuming a bit of enthusiastic prominence in Washington, and the notion of being essentially just an extension of the American forces in any adventure that, misconceived or otherwise, the Americans might wish to engage in in the future. That's not a place where Australia wants to be or needs to be.

Richard Gray: Turning to trade, and as a bookmark for the audience, we're recording this in Washington on May 12th and in Australia May 13th. Earlier this morning, the Americans and Chinese released a joint statement, and they've mutually agreed to reduce tariffs. And we're looking at a moment that perhaps is, at least for a 90-day pause, a reduction in trade tensions. How are you thinking about this moment in time? In Washington, at least for those outside of government, there was a lot of surprise about where we are in the negotiations and how they ended up, in more of a positive sense, that there was actually that tension reduction. Has some of this surprised you? And what are your thoughts on sort of the actions preceding this agreement?

Gareth Evans: Almost nothing that happens with the Trump administration surprises me. The capacity to turn on a dime and move from one extreme crazy position to another position, which may or may not be just as crazy, is pretty unprecedented in our experience of even the weakest and most bizarre American administrations of the past.

This is very difficult stuff to follow. Trump was obviously under huge pressure from American business to restore some degree of sanity to his tariffs policy, in particular with China, where the 140% plus stuff that was previously announced, was in fact creating a complete trade embargo. Basically, it wasn't just making goods more expensive. We were seeing a dramatic stop in exports and shipments going out of China to America. And the implications of that for prices and so on in America was screamingly obvious. And Trump had to somehow respond to that. His Treasury secretary seems to at least have some adult characteristics, which are absolutely inconceivably in some of his other people like Navarro, the tariff warmonger.

Yes, it's good news. It's not a nothing burger, as some people have described it, to step back to the kind of levels we're now talking about, 30%, 10% for the next 90 days. Hopefully some attempt is made to find a way through this, which will have some degree of permanence.

In the meanwhile, China is moving very rapidly. Recent figures I've just seen, in the last 24 hours, of its exports in the last month or so, have actually been increasing. It's already finding alternative markets for a lot of its goods around the region and in the wider globe. There's a real question as to how much damage ultimately will be done by a profound slowdown in US-China trade, if China can rapidly build up its domestic demand base and find equally rapidly alternative markets for a lot of its exports, then maybe the implications of this for the world economy and for exporters to China, like Australia with our primary products resources, maybe it won't be so bad. But the jury's out on all of this.

It's still crazy for there to be any significant move towards protectionism at all. 10%, 20%, 30% tariffs just don't make any kind of sense. What we should be looking at is maximizing completely free trade in the way that the region had been trying to move for so long. It's just critical to keep in mind the reality that really nobody benefits. Yes, there was legitimate pressure to put upon China for a number of its own protectionist policies, its unwillingness to accept certain categories of investment, its intellectual property breaches, all of which have been the subject of many, many discussions and quite a lot of concern about Chinese policy for some time. And yes, it's fair enough to put some pressure on that. Fair enough, I suppose, for the US to be obsessed with, or Trump to be obsessed with these fentanyl imports and so on. And maybe some achievement is going to be made on those fronts. But overall, as I've just said, the jury is out on whether this indicates any kind of return to sanity on the economic warfare front, or whether it's just a pause hoisted upon Trump by business economic necessity, and one that doesn't necessarily signal that we're going to be much more rational in the future. The jury's just out on that.

Jersey Lee: Going back to a slightly earlier point, you mentioned balancing China with regional countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia. Is it even possible to build a robust regional coalition, in the absence of the US, that can actually constrain China, or at least push its behavior in a more benign direction? Should constraining China even be a goal for countries like Australia? Or should countries in the region have to essentially pray for Chinese magnanimity, and plan their national strategies with this in mind? I ask this because our first guest, Patrick Buchan, had argued that regional middle powers, even collectively, don't have the weight to resist China alone, which is part of why he believes it is critical to ensure America remains engaged in our region.

Gareth Evans: There's quite a lot of military capability when you add it together. Japan, albeit notionally self-defensive, is certainly pretty capable in multiple fronts; Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Vietnam; some contribution can also be made by Singaporeans, Malaysians, the Thais, the Filipinos. Getting them together into any kind of formal military alliance, bringing the Indians into a military alliance is pretty much wishful thinking.

Nonetheless, that combined weight, if exercised in a reasonably coordinated way, should be—and that's the sort of thing that a lot of regional diplomacy is currently focused on, discussion about military cooperation, preparedness, not so much formalized stuff, but nonetheless willingness to be thinking about what kind of capability is necessary. All of that sends some signals to China that, if it does happen to overreach in its territorial aggression in the region, it can't expect to do so in complete comfort. Obviously, if the United States were to be part of that enterprise in the way that it has been traditionally, working closely with allies and partners in the region, the messaging, the optics of all that for China is significantly stronger.

But all of this is premised on a very pessimistic view about what China might be wanting to do in the region. While I don't think we should be naive about any of this stuff, it's certainly the case in my mind and in the mind of most of the regional countries that we're now talking about, that people don't see the China threat in quite as graphic and gothic terms as some of the "Red Scare lobby" are painting it. There's no doubt at all that China wants to be a regional superstar, wants to be the regional hegemon. There's no doubt at all, China would love to recreate the tributary relationship that it largely had over the previous 2,000 years with most of its neighbors, China would love to have a kowtow relationship with Southeast Asians in particular. And that's all understandable, but that's not quite the same thing as saying that China has territorial aggression ambitions of the kind that Japan had, obviously, in starting in the Second World War. I think it obviously wants to make the South China Sea its own domestic lake. It is indefensibly in breach of international law, and what it's doing with the militarization of those reefs and islets, and some of the heavy-duty behavior that has been going on with oil exploration and so on, particularly with Vietnam and also the Philippines.

But again, I just don't think we should overreact to all of this. I think the only real risk of outright kinetic aggression, military aggression by China is in relation to Taiwan, and that's a very special case, as much as we all should be sympathetic to Taiwan's position. The reality is the rest of the world doesn't regard it as a fully independent, sovereign country in the same way as it does Ukraine and Kuwait, and other victims of naked aggression in recent decades. It's always going to be a more problematic situation.

The notion of China is perfectly understandable, it should be wanting to build a military capability that matches its economic might and its aspirations to be a global player. It's perfectly understandable it should be wanting to have a capability to protect its trade routes in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere, should they be ever put under threat. As much as I hate the whole business of nuclear weapons development and retention and competition, it's not entirely unreasonable in the present environment for China to be building its military arsenal, given how far behind in terms of raw numbers it is from the United States and Russia, although I live in hope that China can be persuaded to engage in some serious nuclear arms control limitation negotiations in the future. I don't think China's got any great disposition to be an aggressive nuclear power. I think it's essentially defensive what it's doing in that context.

So when you add all of that up, yes, it would be desirable for the United States to stick around as part of the visible balance against possible overreach in the region. But I do think there's a lot of a capability apart from the United States to send that message to China that it won't be entirely comfortable if it does overreach, even without the United States playing an active role. And secondly, I do think the whole context of this is one where we need to step back a bit, before overexaggerating the kind of threats that we might respectively face in the future. I'm not a happy camper with a lot of things China is doing, but I do think to translate that into a fiercely pessimistic and fiercely enthusiastic campaign to build military alliances and to shut down any effective attempt at military cooperation with China, I think all of that is just an overreach and pushing in the wrong direction.

Richard Gray: I guess follow up from what you've been talking about on China, is trying to get a sense of what its intentions are, and then as an extension of that, about how to react to China's growing presence in the world. One of the complicated conversations we've been having lately is how to view China as either an ideological entity, but also a rising entity. And what I mean by that is on the ideological front, particularly in Washington, there's this perception that China's political system, its philosophy, its culture lead it to do certain acts. And that's the prism for which we view China today. This is where you'll hear things like China's a Marxist-Leninist state, which gives illustrative perceptions to any number of actions. On the other end of it, there's a question of that China's just a rising power, that China as it grows has more capabilities and will expand regardless of what its government system or ideological perceptions are. So as you think about the rise of China today, what it means for Australia and the broader region, how do you think about the disaggregation between China as a global power versus an ideological power? And how do you think the Labor government should try to approach those two differing perceptions of what China is?

Gareth Evans: I think we've got to accept the reality that China wants a recognised place in the world no longer as a rule taker, but as an actively engaged rule maker. And certainly, it wants influence in international institutions which reflect that reality, not just China as a rising power, but China as a risen power that's right up there in a G2 world, as we speak. That's the reality. And you've got to expect a bit of chest beating to go with that. But I don't sense that China's domestic ideology, its Marxist nationalism, it's chest-beating in that respect, I don't sense that it's an aggressive ideologue, in the sense of wanting to impose its particular system on other countries, which was always the shtick, of course, of the Soviet Union, all those years of the Cold War.

China likes being seen as a bit of a role model for authoritarians and one-party systems or authoritarian governing regimes in other countries, and it's basking in the attractiveness that it has as such to a number of these countries. But the notion of the “Communist Party supremacy” model really catching fire elsewhere is really wildly overstated. I don't think Australia, the United States or anyone else ought to be particularly concerned about that. What we ought to be focusing on is finding ways of accommodating China's legitimate aspirations to take its place on the world stage as a superstar player, finding ways of

accommodating that without sacrificing our basic principles, without sacrificing our concern about human rights values and democracy values elsewhere, and not succumbing to a belief, as Trump seems to be doing, that all this stuff is just irrelevant noises. It is important that we continue to exercise our persuasive power and to push back against violations. It is important that our voice collectively continue to be heard on human rights violations in Hong Kong, in Xinjiang, in Tibet. That's all certainly the case, and certainly I feel very strongly about that.

But I think we should have a little bit of a lie down and a regrouping in terms of our angst when it comes to the fears of Chinese global domination and the absolute need to push back against that. I've often quoted this, but the smartest thing I've ever heard said by an American leader in this respect was a comment made by Bill Clinton, 2002, at a function I was at in California, which was private, off the record, not in the public domain. One of the things he said absolutely stuck with me in that context. And that is that the United States, as he said then, had two choices about the way in which it used its great and unrivaled economic and military power—then unrivaled, much less so now. But he was anticipating this shift in the tectonic plates. He says there's two choices we have. Choice number one is to use that power we have to try to stay top dog on the global block in perpetuity. Choice number two—and this is what really stuck with me, and these were his exact words as I remember them—Choice number two is to use that power to create a world in which we will be comfortable living when we're no longer top dog on the global block.

I thought that was just pitch perfect. It was a recognition of the trends that were already visible nearly 25 years ago, and a recognition that there would be absolutely futile and counterproductive to push back against that trend to the extent of wanting to maintain absolute American primacy. That's a message that you won't find any American leader, to this day, are prepared to articulate publicly, but many of the smarter people in the American policymaking community do perfectly understand that reality. So I don't think we should be talking about America having any pretensions at retaining primacy, certainly in the Asia Pacific region. But I think there is some reality in looking for American continued presence as a balancer, to have a presence in the region, but also to be confronting the reality of China's rise with not a confrontational, but a cooperative cast of mind, recognizing that, in this world—it's always been the case—you best buy your security with others rather than against them. The old Olive Palmer common security concept is still one that makes more sense than any other way of conceptualizing our global and regional security needs. I think if we can just find a way of working with China at the great power level, as well as at other levels, in trying to find cooperative solutions to those big global problems that no country can solve by itself, climate, pandemics, nuclear weapons, if we think in terms of what's achievable through cooperation, through what we need fearfully to do to preserve our integrity against possible threats to our security in the future, if we approach it in a more optimistic cast mind, I think that optimism could be a lot more self-fulfilling and less troubling to future outcomes than the kind of pessimism, which is the alternative approach, which fears Chinese ideological dominance translating into some kind of security dominance. And that's the world we're in at the moment. We've got to make

that judgment and make that choice.

Jersey Lee: In a recent speech, you argued that countries have a moral imperative to act decently on the international stage, and while there are different philosophical frameworks for doing that, they all point in the same direction. I'd like to explore how you think of the trade-offs involved. Specifically, a frequent critique of your time as foreign minister was, as you've acknowledged previously, being too optimistic about the Indonesian military's behavior when it was engaged in human rights abuses in East Timor. Do you think that to some extent, Australia should sacrifice some moral objections towards the actions of others in our neighborhood, given the relative lack of strong liberal democratic traditions? You had just mentioned Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong in relation to China. But even in some of our partners, with whom we would partner to constrain China, there's quite a divergence in values we would have, for example, with the Philippines. How much do you think we should pursue realpolitik?

Gareth Evans: There's quite a lot wrapped up in that question. Let's untangle it. The first thing I would quite clearly want to say is that I've believed for decades, since I was Foreign Minister, that a country's national interests should not be narrowly conceived in terms of the traditional duo of security interests on the one hand and economic prosperity interests on the other. My strong belief continues to be that every country has a third category of national interest and that is being and being seen to be a decent country, a good international citizen. I think there are not just warm inner glow, moral returns that follow from a humanitarian decent approach to aid, development, human rights, active engagement in peacemaking and peacekeeping, active engagement in refugee resettlement, active engagement in addressing some of the big global and regional public goods issues that need collective action. I think they're not just moral returns and decency in doing that. I think there are national interest returns and reputational returns, classic returns that we associate with soft power, being the kind of country that people respect, trust, want to invest in, want to travel to, want to support in a critical situation. There's reputational returns, there's reciprocity returns, and there's returns in terms of getting stuff done.

So when we approach these issues, I think it is important in practice to behave decently on human rights issues, which you've raised specifically, to act in a way which is committed to improving the global human rights environment to the best that we can influence it—regional environment, neighborhood environment—to do so in a way that is either productive at best, unproductive at worst, but not counterproductive. And that's my mantra in raising and dealing with human rights issues.

In the context of the Timor case that you specifically raise, Australia, despite a lot of perception and mischaracterization to this effect by a number of commentators, Australia never, ever applauded the human rights abuses that were occurring in East Timor, going all the way back to the invasion originally in 1975, Australia was always deeply troubled by that and always seeking ways of achieving a better set of outcomes. I worked very, very

closely with my Indonesian counterpart, Ali Alatas, who I worked with so effectively on the Cambodian peace process and creation of regional security and economic architecture. I worked very closely with him because he was as troubled as anyone else by Indonesia's reputational deficit that it was suffering worldwide from its treatment of the East Timorese. He desperately wanted a solution. And none of us thought, not even Jose Ramos-Horta and Xanana Gusmao, the Timorese leaders at the time, none of them thought that achieving independence was going to be a realistic possibility until it eventuated with Habibie's misjudgments later on, which was another story. But what everybody was focused on was trying to get genuine autonomy for East Timor within the Indonesian system, to get the military out, to get economic aid in, to get cultural and linguistic respect back on the table. And we were very close to achieving that under the Alatas, Suharto regime.

What threw it off—it's worth telling the story, showing you the problems of best intentions in this respect—Bill Clinton, on his way to the APEC meeting in Indonesia in 1994, said with the best possible intentions, very publicly, that one of the things he wanted to achieve during his visit to Indonesia, was to persuade President Suharto to fundamentally change position on East Timor, to recognize the territory's autonomy, to get the military out and to do all the things I've just described, which, of course, had the immediate result of Suharto saying, well, I'm not going to be lectured, I'm not going to be seen to be responsive to that kind of pressure, you can go jump. And that was a classic example of well-intentioned but counterproductive human-rights behaviour.

It doesn't stop me for one moment advocating an approach to the conduct of foreign policy, which does put right up there—alongside protecting and advancing your security, protecting and advancing your economic interests—it doesn't stop me for one moment putting up there alongside that, being and being seen to be the kind of country that cares about our common humanity, cares about doing decent things and advocating decent positions, even if there's no immediate or obvious or direct return economically or in security terms for that engagement, I think that's just one of the things that countries like us should be doing and should be seen to be doing. I still believe that very strongly. I'm having some difficultly periodically in persuading Australian governments to articulate it as clearly as that, but I live in hope that we may be able to achieve that.

Jersey Lee: Thank you, Mr. Evans, for joining Pacific Polarity. It was a great discussion.

Gareth Evans: Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity, you and to Richard. Thank you. Great. Pleasure to be speaking with you.