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REMARKS TO THE ROYAL UNITED SERVICES INSTITUTE

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******CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY******

As a cricket loving Australian addressing the Royal United Services Institute in London just weeks before the beginning of an Ashes tour, it is impossible not to start with a plea to all of you: enjoy the feeling of holding the sacred urn while it lasts, because its tenure here in England only has a few short months to run.

While the trophy itself maybe physically tied to Lords, its spirit has always belonged down under: from the first win of Dave Gregory's Australian XI in 1877 to Billy Murdoch's astonishing victory in 1882 which gave rise to its birth as a result of the efforts of that demon bowler Spofforth.

I was last in England in 1989, just months before another famous Australian Ashes triumph - which was just as well because I'd spent 1985 here also and had to endure the ignominy of defeat at the hands of David Gower's fantastic English side.

This grand contest over 140 years has reflected for most of that time an epicentre of the cricketing world located in England or maybe Australia, but certainly one or the other. It meant this trophy naturally took its place at the very heart of global cricketing life and culture.

How wrong that assumption would be today.

By some measures near 80 percent of the global cricket economy now emanates from India. It has become the world's cricketing superpower, and that is a clear reflection of the trajectory of the nation itself.

The emerging middle class of India is not only reshaping cricket: together with the emerging middle class of China, it is reshaping the world. It is the engine room of a global economic shift to the Indo-Pacific which brings with it the most significant shifts in political power in the world today.

As the 19th Chinese Communist Party Conference concludes in Beijing it leaves the world with a view of a confident, assertive China, proud of its remarkable achievements in lifting 800 million people out of poverty and ready to take its place

as the regional leader of East Asia and a global leader second only to the United States.

In turn there are no shortage of those who question whether the US is in retreat from East Asia. While I don't agree with them their argument cannot go unnoticed. They point out that the US has a shrinking share of global GDP, has an enigmatic President seeking to govern by tweet, and has sent a message by withdrawing from the Trans Pacific Partnership.

To be sure reports of an imminent US departure from East Asia are highly premature. The US will increase its military footprint in our region as its pivot to East Asia quietly continues. In Australia we are seeing this first hand with the very successful marine rotation in the northern city of Darwin.

Whatever one's view of Donald Trump there is no doubt Australia's national interest lies in an ongoing, strong alliance with the United States based as it is on establishing a global rule of law where disputes are settled by reference to rules and not power. This has been the predictable basis upon which prosperity has been built in East Asia. America has and will continue to be its principle underwriter.

Of course China's emergence is welcome. All the countries of East Asia, including Australia, have benefited from it. They are not the Soviet Union. They are not an exporter of an ideology. The achievements of lifting their own population out of poverty renders them a force for good.

Yet China has a different political tradition, and its actions in seeking to build sovereignty in the South China Sea in a way which is inconsistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea causes anxiety. This is not the rule of law. It is an exercise of power, changing facts on the ground. Given as much 60 percent of Australian trade traverses the South China Sea it is a serious issue of concern. It is a reminder that Australia, and all nations of the region, must have the clarity to see their own national interest with a laser like focus and to have the courage to act in pursuit of it.

If these changing fortunes were not enough to test nerves in our region, North Korea has grabbed the attention of the world in the most frightening way.

Conflict on the Korean Peninsula is unthinkable. At the same time, the international community accepting a nuclear enabled North Korea will place an unbearable burden upon Japan, South Korea and Vietnam to consider the nuclear road themselves. It would also provide a playbook for any other rogue state as to how to acquire a nuclear capability. All of this would set the cause of nuclear non-proliferation back by decades.

The complexity of this issue teaches us how important the East Asian time zone now is. It highlights how critical it is that there be a productive working relationship between China and the US. Nothing else can possibly offer a hopeful solution to the North Korean issue. Given the intricacies in making that work it is unlikely that diplomacy by tweet will be the answer.

For Australia these are the tremendous forces shaping our world view. If we are to navigate them then we need to be squarely on the front foot.

We do diplomacy well. Australia is liked. We are seen as dependable, competent and willing to pull our weight. That's because we are.

This puts us a long way ahead of most as we seek to take our place in the world.

But it is not enough. If we are to navigate the turbulent waters of East Asia then we need to develop that part of our international personality which is specifically about leadership. That in turn means we need to have a clear sense of who we are and what we are on about.

We are a New World country that never had an independence movement. Until the Second World War Australians saw themselves as an outpost of this country. Our most unifying national figure was not a war hero or an independence leader. It was a cricketer: Don Bradman - and he definitely saw this place as the mother country.

The kind of national discussion about nationhood that would lay the groundwork for who we are and what we are on about was never had.

This is not a bad thing, but it does mean we have work to do and we need to begin to lead. We particularly need to lead among the Pacific Island Countries where we are expected to lead. We need to take this leadership into South East Asia and seek to shape affairs as a respectful interested partner. A former Australian foreign minister, Gareth Evans, showed us how to do exactly this in his critical work with Cambodia in the early 90s.

Leadership in the Pacific, activism in South East Asia, are the ingredients to empowering Australia to plot its course more broadly in East Asia.

It will help us engage the United States in our region over the long term, which is essential. It will help us build the political relationship we would want with China, based on a mutual respect of the rule of law.

The future is the Indo-Pacific, and while it is a big change from our identification with Britain, a look to our cricketers can help illuminate the path.

Doubtless playing on the MCG or Lords would remain a magical moment for David Warner. Yet it is his exploits in Chennai and Bangalore which provides the bulk of his income nowadays and the exposure to the greatest number of people. He thrives in India, which is wonderful for him and provides an expression of Australian leadership in our region.

It is a nice example of how Australia on a larger scale should navigate the challenges and opportunities of East Asia.