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[www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au)  
[enquiries@asialink.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:enquiries@asialink.unimelb.edu.au)

## **Asian Democracy and Australia**

### **NO GOLD PASS TO A TROUBLE-FREE FUTURE**

**Greg Sheridan**

The summer of 1985 was a beautiful time in Beijing. Not because of the sweltering heat, or the relentless pollution, or the ubiquitous cigarette smoke, often mixed with garlic, which you inhaled at seemingly every meeting. Indeed, in most ways the Beijing of 1985 was a much more centrally controlled, much less “liberal” place than it is today. Certainly it offered many fewer toys and gadgets and shopping malls and the like. There were still, in 1985, plenty of touches of the old Stalinist total quality of Chinese communism – the work units which provided accommodation and food for their workers but also had a big say in who their workers could marry. But amid the acrid stench of proletarian glory achieved through industrial self sufficiency, there was a singular, intoxicating scent in the air – the scent of liberalisation.

GREG SHERIDAN is foreign editor of *The Australian*, and one of Australia’s most influential foreign affairs commentators. He has been writing about Asia for 30 years and has produced five books on Asia and foreign policy. He has interviewed prime ministers and presidents all over Asia. He is a Visiting Fellow at the Land Warfare Studies Centre, a member of the board of the Australia Indonesia Institute and a founding member of the Australian American Leadership Dialogue. His work has been translated into many Asian languages and has appeared in newspapers and foreign policy journals around the world, including *The Sunday Times* of London, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Jakarta Post* and *The South China Morning Post*.

The liberalisation train was running in China then and it seemed to be accelerating. It hadn't been running for long. Nobody had any idea about its limits. There was a hope, almost an expectation, that it might go all the way. In those pre-lapsarian days before the massacre of 1989, visitors, and even some Chinese, thought that liberalisation could produce a version of Chinese democracy. I lived in Beijing in that summer, working as *The Australian's* first ever Beijing correspondent. I remember the tiny Australian press corps, of which I formed a third (more measured by bulk) attending a press conference with Sir Peter Abeles.

I don't want to verbal the late, great 'capitalist road'er, but I have the strongest memory of his saying that he was sure China would in time become a more thoroughly liberal, capitalist society even than Australia. It was typical of the intoxication of the moment. The horizon was clear. Then came 1989 and the Tiananmen massacre, Bob Hawke's tears and broad Australian disillusionment with the promise of Chinese liberalisation. For a little while, after 1989, believers in the ultimate promise of Chinese democracy indulged in a kind of Irish optimism - situation desperate but not serious. This optimism held that the Tiananmen massacre demonstrated the ideological, and therefore political, bankruptcy of the Chinese Communist Party. The brave pro-democracy students had forced the party to resort to the use of crude force. In time, and according to the more optimistic prognosticators in a fairly short time, its hollow structures would collapse, or, to change the metaphor, in the best scenario they would simply fade away, to be replaced by the vigorous institutions of a new civil society yearning to be born. The Tiananmen massacre would be the mid-wife of history, and to Chinese history would be born democracy.

The idea that democracy is the end point of history has a long and distinguished genealogy in Western political thought, especially in American political thought (less so in Australia). Abraham Lincoln described America as mankind's "last best hope" because he thought that democracy was the natural system of government for human societies. Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, typically regarded respectively as the realist and liberal internationalist polar opposites of US foreign policy, both believed democracy was not only the superior, but the natural, state of man.

More recently, the US writer and former State Department official, Francis Fukuyama, made this the central idea of a dramatic essay and book, which shared the same name: *The End of History*.<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama's thesis was essentially simple, though he enshrouded it with elaborate academic drapes and clothings, a whole paraphernalia of scholarly throat clearing and recondite research of dubious relevance. Fukuyama argued specifically that the death of communism meant the universal triumph of liberal democracy. Fukuyama overestimated communism as the only alternative lodestar of civic loyalty to democracy available to modern societies. Every contemporary impulse of reform and modernisation, he mistakenly argued, was based on the idea of liberalism and this idea was the only big idea which had near universal, or even widespread, legitimacy. Those societies which owed civic allegiance to some form of Islam were merely "trapped in history", in Fukuyama's view, and would one day throw off history's chains and embrace their rightful liberal democratic destinies.

1. Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, No 16, 1989.

Also Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Penguin Books, London, 1992.

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**In China the world confronts for the first time in many decades a more or less successful dictatorship. And this poses not merely a geo-strategic but also a political, even in a sense an ethical, challenge to those of us who believe that democracy does indeed represent a universal value.**

Right from the start, one of the greatest holes in Fukuyama's leaky construct was Asia. The experience in Asia was too cross grained, too diverse and contradictory, to fit Fukuyama's, or indeed any other, general political thesis. In Asia, the particular always trumps the general.

Ten years ago I published my third book, *Asian Values Western Dreams*, in part as a response, and a rebuttal, to Fukuyama.<sup>2</sup> *Asian Values Western Dreams* argued inter alia that it was very unclear that Asian nations which mattered to Australia were going to embrace liberal democracy. I also argued that powerful ideas of human freedom and some kind of democracy exist in virtually every major Asian socio/political tradition, and even in religions which are important in Asia, but that these impulses would be worked out very differently in different societies and would not necessarily produce liberal democracy.

I was also rejecting the triumphalism which disabled much Western analysis in the wake of the Asian financial crisis which began in 1997. It is a mild irony that the Asian financial crisis of a little more than a decade ago led Western analysts to underestimate the durability of Asian political structures, while the global financial crisis of today is having a similar effect in reverse. This time analysts are underestimating both the durability and the recuperative power of the American economic and political system.

However, in *Asian Values Western Dreams* I was not only answering American arguments, Fukuyama's and others. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Australia's then foreign minister, Gareth Evans, dominated the intellectual debate on Australian foreign policy. This changed a little when Paul Keating fully hit his stride in Asian diplomacy and Evans became increasingly focussed on the United Nations. But for a time Evans was almost unchallenged as the dominant thinker in Australian foreign policy. A frequent theme of his speeches, as he strove to reconcile Australian identity with deeper Asian engagement, was that there was a process of convergence under way in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Although Evans was happy to celebrate and encourage Asian influence in Australia, this process of convergence was essentially a one way street. Asian societies were meant to become democratic. Then they would be, politically, more or less just like us. We would be moved by the same civic values, though our religious affiliations and much about our cultures might remain diverse. We could then just all get along.

Evans admired Fukuyama's essay, and praised it lavishly. But history, and more specifically Asian history, has not been kind to Evans or Fukuyama's views on Asia. The glaring rebuke to convergence theory, or the end of history, or the mere triumph of democracy, is China. In China the world confronts for the first time in many decades a more or less successful dictatorship. And this poses not merely a geo-strategic but also a political, even in a sense an ethical, challenge to those of us who believe that democracy does indeed represent a universal value, because it offers a system of government which most conforms with human nature and is most likely to pay due heed to human dignity.

2. Greg Sheridan, *Asian Values Western Dreams, Understanding the New Asia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999

3. Keith Scott, *Gareth Evans*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999

For China is successful not merely in the sense that North Korea is successful, that is to say, perpetuating the regime, keeping the same group and their chosen successors in power. It has been successful in lifting the living standards of hundreds of millions of people. It has avoided gross disorder. It has delivered broadly effective government across its vast territory and population. It has solved the problem of succession. Like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan before it, China has established rapid, sustained economic growth under an authoritarian government. It leaves citizens free to get rich, provided they don't oppose the government politically. But unlike Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, it has not moved on from that situation to one where a rising middle class successfully demands democracy, even as it values stability.

China has achieved all this without taking any significant step towards a national democracy. Citizens enjoy greater personal space than before, there are many means of consultation with the population, but there is no serious move towards democracy. Indeed, China's political theorists, and its countless Western apologists, often argue that democracy in China would have made all this impossible.

But those who would generalise from China's experience to the effect that democracy does not suit big, diverse, impoverished Asian societies have their own serious empirical road blocks to get past, in particular India and Indonesia. Since India entered the ranks of high growth Asian economies in the 1990s, it has been impossible to argue that democracy and economic growth are incompatible in big, poor Asian countries. It is of course conversely impossible, in the wake of the Chinese experience, to argue that they are necessary enablers of each other.

Indonesia is in some ways an even more striking example of how democracy and development can go together. Under Suharto, it had experienced solid economic growth in tandem with an autocratic political system. Then came the Asian economic crisis which brought a temporary end to high economic growth and perhaps a permanent end to dictatorship. Instead it has moved solidly into the ranks of genuine democracies, defined for the purposes of this essay as nations where the people can and do change their government through peaceful, popular elections. Indonesia has also recovered respectable if not stellar economic growth.

It is pretty clear that there is no generalisation to make about a connection between democracy and economic growth. Vietnam is obdurately authoritarian but has achieved high economic growth. Burma is obdurately authoritarian and its economy has generally done poorly. Singapore is not a liberal democracy but is one of the best governed, least corrupt and generally amenable societies in Asia. Thailand, which had become a stable, democratic, middle class South East Asian nation, seems in the last couple of years to have lost the knack of democracy, with governments changed by coup or intractable, mass demonstrations. Having lived through the Asian financial crisis with no real threat to its democratic traditions, in the last few years Thailand has had its democracy on life support, with the military a resurgent player. The Malaysian status quo, which Harold Crouch memorably classified as "repressive/responsive", has been challenged by democratic impulses but has held together overall.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996

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All of this presents itself to Australian policy makers, and to some extent to the Australian nation, not as an absorbing political seminar, but as a series of urgent and particular policy challenges. George Orwell taught us to distrust abstract nouns in politics.<sup>5</sup> Asia conforms to no grand theory, but its peoples do aspire to human rights and often to democracy.

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Four controversies in 2009 demonstrate the way Asian democracy, or at times an Asian lack of democracy, and our expectations about Asian democracy and our own democracy, will confront Australians with hard choices in the future.<sup>6</sup> Asia's political cultures will affect Australia's political culture and will certainly affect the policies we can pursue.

These controversies involved India, China, Burma and Indonesia.

The first was the truly remarkable case of the Indian students and the Indian media and the way the Indian media compelled a strong government response in Australia and a strong social response as well. This is a unique case in Australian history. Even during the controversies surrounding Pauline Hanson, the Asian media did not influence Australia quite so strongly.

5. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in *Why I Write*, Penguin Books, London, 1984

6. The general accounts of these four recent controversies I have drawn from the common understanding of them as evident in countless newspaper articles. I have myself written numerous newspaper articles about all four subjects. I encourage any diligent researcher who wishes to see my original articles on these matters to type my name and the specific subjects into any internet search engine.

Moreover, in the Hanson case the Asian media followed the Australian media. The Asian media were substantially alerted to Hanson by the Australian media making a fuss. In the case of the Indian students, the process worked in reverse. The Indian media made a fuss and this caused a response by official Australia which helped alert a rather drowsy Australian media to a big story unfolding under their noses which they had all but ignored.

The sequence was simple but remarkable. In 2007 and the next two years, the number of Indian students coming to study in Australia rose greatly, to about 90,000 by 2009. It transpired, for reasons which became contested, that a substantial number of them in Melbourne and Sydney were victims of assault, especially late at night on public transport. As the story trickled into the Australian press, the authorities, in Melbourne especially, rushed to say that these were not racial assaults. The Indians were working late at night, sometimes in the city, they carried iPods and lap tops and sometimes wads of cash, they looked and acted submissively. They were targets of convenience. The attacks on them, the Victorian Police in particular assured all and sundry, were opportunistic, not racist.

But at least some of the Indian students who suffered attack, and some of their friends, believed the attacks were racist. Indian students reported in interviews with me that they suffered sporadic but quite widespread racial abuse.

Now the Indian students, whatever else can be said about them, were accustomed to living in a democracy. And they understood the power of a free press. They organised a couple of demonstrations in Melbourne and Sydney. Much more importantly, they got in touch with the Indian media. Not the Indian media in Australia, and not the Australian media in Australia, but the Indian media in India.

There are almost no full time Indian correspondents based in Australia but in our techno savvy world, and especially for techno savvy students, this is no bar to gaining a big presence for a story in the mass media. It started in India with newspaper stories, fed by students and their friends in Australia. But soon enough there was video and plenty of it. There were clips of bashings taken with mobile phone cameras, there were clips of Indian students in hospital after assaults, and of course there was television footage of the Indian students' demonstrations.

It is a paradox of contemporary visual media that there doesn't need to be a vast quantity of images in order for the story to take up a vast amount of air time. The same images can be shown over and over again, discussed in the studio, analysed, reacted to. This happened in India. One Indian TV station ran a strap at the bottom of its reports about Australia saying: "Racism beyond shame". Famously, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was burned in effigy. Indian political leaders were virtually forced to respond to the story.

This is when the Australian political system found it had to respond too. Kevin Rudd and Opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull made statements in parliament deploring attacks on Indian students. The Victorian Police conceded some of the attacks were racially motivated after all and undertook a range of measures, such as increasing police presence at the worst railway stations.

It turned out that Chinese and Indonesian authorities had also expressed some concern about the safety of their students in Australia, but this, too, had not figured prominently in the Australian media until it figured in the Indian media. A huge export industry was threatened. High level Australian delegations started to leave Australian shores bound for India

in large numbers. Their purpose was to reassure Indian students, and their parents, that Australia was safe and that they were welcome.

Then the story morphed. It turned out that most of the problems afflicted not the students at substantial Australian universities but at small vocational colleges, which seemed to offer insufficient pastoral care and in some cases an unsatisfactory educational experience. That became the heart of the story. In a sense the Indian press had got perhaps the lesser story, about the assaults, before it got the bigger story, about the vocational colleges. And of course elements of the Indian press exaggerated and over dramatised things. But before we get too sanctimonious about that, we ought perhaps to recognise that this is what a free press often does. It's like a market. It over-shoots on the positive side, and it over-shoots on the negative side. There is reason to suppose that media consumers are accustomed to this over-shooting, and make some allowance for it. But part of the historic role of a free press is to alert a society and its governing institutions when something bad is happening. That's why democracies tend not to have famines. The free press forces the Government to do something about it before too many people die.

In this case the free press of a democratic society alerted the Australian society and its governing institutions to real problems Indian students were facing, real institutional failures and real social pathologies. It's just that the free media which did this job were not the Australian media but the Indian media.

The purpose here is not to chart forensically the cause and effect of media reports and specific government and other responses. In such a sweeping story, with so many players and so many media reports, causation is complex and

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disparate. But the overall narrative thread is clear. Indian students suffered serious injustices and social and other problems in Australia. The Australian media was not alert to this. The Indian students went to their own media in India, which broadly went berserk over the story and as a result Australia responded vigorously.

Australia has suffered a serious loss of reputation in India but eventually it may be seen to have responded effectively, if belatedly, to fix the problem, which is always the best way of fixing the perception.

In all this, Australia suffered some problems as a result of India being a democracy. In a dictatorship, the media could not have run this kind of boisterous campaign focusing on the plight of Indian students in Australia without some sort of official approval from their own government. It is quite possible a more authoritarian government would have accepted official Australia's assurances that the attacks were not racially motivated and left it at that. It was more complex for Australian authorities to manage this issue because India is a democracy and has a free press.

But Australia also benefited from Indian democracy. First, it was alerted to a real policy problem. Second, official Australia could at least make its case meaningfully to a free press. Indian journalists were brought to Australia, Australian officials went to India. You can at least contest ideas and facts and interpretations in a free press. This is not the case in a dictatorship.

Finally, the whole story indicates just how important and unpredictable the consequences will be of India's emergence into the heart of Asian affairs. Indian sensitivities will be important to Australia in the future.

Controversy Number Two was the visit to Australia in August of the Uighur leader, Rebiya Kadeer. This visit occurred in the context of considerable controversy and neuralgia in the Australia-China relationship. The Chinese state owned enterprise, Chinalco, had failed in its bid to acquire a big stake in the giant Anglo-Australian miner, Rio Tinto. The Chinese were also extremely unhappy about the iron ore prices they were paying Australian companies. Stern Hu, an Australian citizen and Rio's second most senior executive in China, was arrested in China on what were originally described as espionage charges. Previously, the Australian White Paper on defence policy had expressed some criticism of a lack of transparency in Chinese military development and had foreshadowed a substantial increase in maritime military capability by Australia.

All of these are very big issues in themselves, much bigger than the issue of the Kadeer visit. They are beyond the scope of this paper and are adduced now only to indicate the fraught atmosphere in the relationship which prevailed in early August, 2009, when Kadeer came to Australia.

The Kadeer visit illustrates official China's difficulty with Australia's democratic culture, and the insistence of Australian institutions to maintain and give expression to their democratic culture.

Beijing did everything it reasonably could to prevent, and when this proved impossible, to frustrate the Kadeer visit. First, it lobbied the Rudd Government not to grant her a visa. Beijing even called in the Australian ambassador to underline the seriousness of its objections. As I outlined in a series of articles in *The Australian*, Beijing alleged that Kadeer was a terrorist, an Islamist extremist and was responsible for the demonstrations and violence in Urumqi in early July.

When Kadeer, who lives in Washington, DC, had visited Australia previously her visa had been issued in a couple of days. This time it took about two weeks. This is because the foreign minister, Stephen Smith, got the Chinese Government accusations against her checked out as fully as he could. And the bureaucracy came back with the answer that there was no evidence to support the charges. The Chinese, according to well informed sources, were furious and intensified their protests but the Rudd Government issued the visa nonetheless. Its only seeming concession to the strength of Beijing's sentiment was to decide that no minister or official would meet Kadeer. This in itself was a concession to China's undemocratic political culture. Australian officials do meet opposition figures in democracies, and even in some autocracies which are less powerful, or less paranoid, than the Chinese Government. US officials routinely meet Kadeer and she also met representatives of the Japanese Government in Tokyo shortly before she came to Australia.

There were unofficial attempts to stymie Kadeer's tour. The Melbourne International Film Festival scheduled an Australian documentary about Kadeer's life, *The Ten Conditions of Love*. This led to several Chinese films being withdrawn from the festival. There was also a remarkably vigorous campaign of harassment against the festival in the form of hacking into the festival's web site, nuisance faxes, nuisance phone calls and the like. This may have been a spontaneous campaign by people who are offended by Kadeer's views, or it may have had some official inspiration. Chinese officials tried to convince the festival to cancel the screening of the film. The festival organisers stood their ground and maintained their commitment to the film. The controversy created by such Chinese interventions led to a vastly

bigger audience for the film. The festival organisers switched its premiere from a cinema with a seating capacity of 700 to the Melbourne Town Hall, which attracted a sell-out audience of 1750.

Chinese officials also approached the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Robert Doyle, to demand that the film not be allowed to screen at the Town Hall. Again, Doyle and the Melbourne City Council stood their ground. However, according to a later statement by Smith, the nature of the Chinese approach to Doyle was so robust that it warranted an official Australian rebuke to the Chinese.

Things got no better for the Chinese when Kadeer went to Canberra. Michael Danby, the federal Labor member for Melbourne Ports, and chairman of the Foreign Affairs sub-committee of the parliament's Joint Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade committee, hosted a function for Kadeer in Parliament House which attracted 15 members of parliament from all the main parties. The Chinese embassy also approached the National Press Club and requested that it cancel a scheduled appearance by Kadeer. The National Press Club refused the Chinese request and went ahead with Kadeer's appearance.

Somewhat drolly, Kadeer thanked the Chinese Government for making her visit to Australia such a success. Every official and unofficial Chinese attempt to censor Kadeer or keep her out of the country generated substantial publicity in Australia. Kadeer's visit generally received huge nationwide publicity on television, radio and in the press and of course on the internet. It is difficult to imagine that any public relations company could have generated a more comprehensive and successful campaign.

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In terms of the consideration of Asian democracy, however, the episode holds several lessons. The first and most important is that the Chinese Government remains extremely clumsy in dealing with public opinion in a democratic polity. The Chinese Government did not mount a persuasive case against Kadeer's arguments. It sought instead to have her silenced in the Australian debate. This very attempt guaranteed Kadeer's success. Had the Chinese Government restricted itself to a single statement denying Kadeer's charges against it, Kadeer, who does not speak English, would probably have struggled to get attention.

The other lesson from the episode is that Australia's democratic institutions, private and public, will not readily submit to overt interference even from Australia's fastest growing export market and the largest nation in Asia.

Finally, the episode undoubtedly damaged the Australia-China relationship, but apart from appearing intermittently nervous about this, neither the Government nor anyone else of consequence in Australia was unwilling to bear this cost in order to remain faithful to the democratic nature of Australian culture. This confirms the proposition that consideration for Asian relationships will not significantly compromise Australia's democratic and pluralist culture. While Australia has been significantly less evangelical than the US in the international promotion of human rights, it also suggests that concern for human rights will tend to outweigh diplomatic considerations, at least as far as non-government activity is concerned.

The Rabiya Kadeer visit was a case where an Asian partner had expectations of Australia which Australia's democratic culture made it impossible to meet. It is likely that there will be more such cases. It is also possible that the almost laboratory

like clarity of the moves and counter moves in this case may make future expectations more realistic.

Controversy Number Three was the Australian reaction to the sentencing of Burma's dissident leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, to three years hard labour, commuted to 18 months house arrest, by the Burmese military junta. Aung San Suu Kyi was charged allegedly as a result of an unwelcome and unsought for visit by an American enthusiast who had swum across a lake to get to her villa. It is reasonable to assume, as most Western press commentary did, that this charge was contrived, as was the penalty, to ensure that Suu Kyi cannot participate in the election scheduled for 2010.

However, there was something formulaic and unthoughtful about Australia's reaction. Smith described the charge as baseless and contrived. He also said it was important to get a unified international reaction. But in tone and in substance Smith's reaction was much more similar to UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown's, than to that of any Asian leader.

Burma's domestic extremism has been a grave problem for its South East Asian neighbours. The responses among the other nine members of the Association of South East Asian Nations have varied widely, depending to some extent on the democratic nature of their own domestic arrangements. But this is not a wholly reliable guide to the responses to Burma by other Asian nations. Democratic India has been almost as muted in its response to Burmese depredations as has China, because India and China are strategic competitors within Burma.

Official Australian rhetoric on the other hand has tended to keep pace with US and UK official rhetoric rather than with any Asian partner. This suggests that, in terms of democratic culture, Australia still tends

to think of itself in terms of the company it keeps with its traditional Western partners rather than with any of its Asian neighbours.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. Democratic values need to be argued on their merits. But it is also striking how little public debate there is in Australia about Burma policy, especially how little evaluation there is of 20 years of failed sanctions and policies designed to isolate or punish Burma. It may be that the near unanimity of view in Australia in favour of some sanctions and broad diplomatic isolation does not only reflect deeply held democratic values, but also reflects an insouciant lack of engagement with the issue. This is especially a lack of that kind of engagement which grapples hard with both the moral and the practical dilemmas of an issue.

If the policy of sanctions and isolation is ineffective over two decades is it still worth pursuing because it is absolutely necessary to make the moral statement of democratic values? Is there a cost in this to the Burmese people, as for example in vital, humanitarian aid foregone? Is there a danger that isolation and sanctions increase Burmese Government paranoia to the extent that it seeks ultimate protection in the illicit nuclear weapons? Notwithstanding Australia's view of itself as integral to South East Asia, there is a much more sophisticated debate about Burma in the United States. The ostensible controversy in this case was the sentencing of Suu Kyi, but it revealed what ought to be another controversy, the absence of a sophisticated Australian debate on Burma policy.

It is not the purpose of this paper to argue any of those lines but simply to suggest that their absence from the Australian debate suggests a lack of depth in that debate. It is reasonable to conclude,

therefore, that democratic values alone are not enough to inform effective policy responses in Asia.

Controversy Number Four was not really a controversy at all. It was the overwhelming mandate won by Indonesia's President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, in Indonesia's presidential election earlier this year. For 32 years Indonesia was ruled by Suharto, who could fairly be described as a military dictator, though there were formal electoral contests under his presidency. When Suharto fell a little over a decade ago, many scenarios for Indonesia's future were envisaged among the pundits and analysts. Would Indonesia break up and become several nations? Would it be subject to repeated military coups, similar to Thailand in the 1970s? Would a gradually more Islamised army dominate civic life more structurally, as in Pakistan? Would there be ethnic civil war, as in Yugoslavia? Or, just perhaps, would it come to resemble India, with many problems of governance, but solid economic growth and genuine democracy taking root?

So far, Indonesia has achieved all the democratic stability that its dearest friends could possibly have wished for. Under Yudhoyono's presidency, Indonesia has been an almost model partner for Australia. There is intimate cooperation with Australia in regional disaster response, education, counter-terrorism, efforts to combat people smuggling and a host of other areas. A democratic Indonesia has negotiated a security agreement with a democratic Australia.

Most importantly, Indonesia is socially stable, strongly committed to combatting terrorism, militarily calm and is increasingly itself giving voice to democratic values in its own foreign policy, and in its natural leadership of ASEAN policy.

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This is all overwhelmingly in Australia's national interest and is recognised as such on a bipartisan basis in Australian politics. Here is one case where the triumph of democracy in Asia is an uncompromised blessing for Australia.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that even under undemocratic Suharto there were many years of stability and cooperation in the bilateral relationship. Further, while Yudhoyono's orientation has been firmly pro-Australian, or his orientation has at least allowed him to find vast common interests with Australia, this is not a guaranteed outcome of a democratic Indonesia. The more democracy is consolidated in Indonesia the better that is for Australia. But a democratic Indonesia could still easily turn anti-Australian. It is not difficult to construct plausible scenarios. Consider the possibilities if there were a more insecure and populist leader than Yudhoyono, if conflict flared in Papua, if Australians were executed in the Indonesian judicial system and so on. Democracy in Indonesia is a great benefit to Australia, but it does not relieve Australia of the complex task of forming an effective, many sided policy of engagement with Indonesia.

This brief survey accepts the proposition that democracy in Asia is good for Australia. But it equally accepts that critically important and successful Asian nations, such as China and Vietnam, have shown little interest in moving towards democracy. The triumph of democracy in Asia is by no means assured and Australia needs to relate intelligently to both democratic and non-democratic states. Moreover, even when democracy is established in a given Asian country, this can bring its own new layer of complexities and challenges for Australian policy. Democracy is a core value for Australia. But it is only one strand of our

identity, and one element of our national interests. We should never be apologetic about our own democracy, or timid in helping democracy where we can, though we should understand that our influence on the internal political culture of any of our Asian neighbours is likely to be slight.

History has not ended in Asia. The region has not experienced convergence. The most important changes for Australia in Asian democracy over the last 15 years have been the emergence of India as a key player in Asia, and the embrace of democracy in a stable Indonesia. But this is a story with no ending. History has one overwhelming lesson – it is on no-one's side.

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