Australian Ambassador Emphasizes the Importance of the Middle East in U.S. Ties to Asia

Cornell faculty, staff, and students filled 120 Physical Sciences Building on September 10, 2013 for a talk by the Honorable Kim Beazley, Australian Ambassador to the United States of America, entitled “Old Ally, New Challenge: Rebalancing in a World Clamoring for American Attention.” The talk was given as part of the Einaudi Center’s Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

According to Beazley, the core feature of Australia’s foreign policy has been to encourage U.S. engagement in the Pacific. As militaries in the region are evolving from being internal police forces towards force projection, the U.S. – Australian defense relationship is also evolving, and now a battalion of U.S. Marines is stationed in Australia. According to a recent speech by U.S. Secretary of Defense Hegel, the Pentagon’s three foci in coming years will be cyber and space defense, continuing to develop Special Forces capabilities,
and what he described as the “Indo-Pacific rebalance”. Beazley thinks the most significant change in the “rebalance” towards Asia is in these force structure changes or as he put it, “doctrine plus anticipation.”

According to Beazley, one thing the U.S. has going for it in Asia is that nobody in the region hates Americans. Australians like President Obama, and his popularity there soared after a November 2011 speech to Parliament. “Even in Vietnam, there is nothing visceral in their reaction to the U.S.,” he explained. Myanmar is an increasingly open society, and the Philippines want to get back some of the relationship they lost with the U.S. in the decades following their independence. Although the U.S. doesn’t usually sign agreements that would limit its power, the Obama administration has gotten the U.S. engaged in regional organizations with participation in the East Asian Summit and recent agreements in Southeast Asia and Malaysia. “The U.S. is chancing its arm in ways that are by and large successful,” Beazley said.

Beazley also felt that the U.S. is on the right track in treating China like it will need to be treated in 20 years, despite the concern that this causes allies such as Japan and Korea. “The prosperity of China is dependent on them getting on with the U.S.,” he said. Beazley went on to caution that there is always room for dissonance in foreign policy; for example, the People’s Liberation Army needs to promote policy that secures China’s borders, but the Communist Party needs open borders to boost China’s economy. He then stated that 20% of the global middle class is in Asia, and this will increase to 60% in the next 15 to 20 years. Asian economies now focusing on production and export will soon focus on consumption and investments. “The rest of Asia has to figure out what the change in relationship between the U.S. and China means,” Beazley said.

In addition to discussing the importance of the relationship between the U.S. and China to the rest of the region, Beazley also drew attention to the linkage between U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and perceptions of the U.S. in Asia. There is concern in Israel and the Middle East that the U.S. is shifting its focus towards Asia, and for this reason, said Beazley, there is currently a better chance of reaching a two-state solution than at any other time. The biggest Muslim powers are Asian, and the number of Muslims living in Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh dwarf the Muslim populations of the Middle East and Arab world. What happens to Muslims in the Middle East matters deeply to Muslims in Asia, as does the fact that the U.S. can affect change in the Middle East. Furthermore, the Asia Pacific region represents 70% of the Middle East oil market, and the U.S. is the only naval power that can sustain those trade routes. For these reasons, said Beazley, “The Middle East is a critical part of the Asia Pacific dialogue.” Beazley’s one recommendation for U.S. policy makers was that they need to factor more effectively into their narrative the importance of this linkage between Asia and the Middle East.

The **Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series** features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell University led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell’s outstanding resources in this area.