

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Online Event

**“A Conversation with Arthur Sinodinos, Outgoing
Australian Ambassador to the United States”**

DATE

Thursday, March 2, 2023 at 4:00 p.m. ET

FEATURING

Arthur Sinodinos

Australia’s Ambassador to the United States

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By

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Charles Edel: Hello. Good afternoon, if you're watching here from the United States and good day if you're tuning in from Australia. I'm Charles Edel, senior advisor and Australia Chair here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And I'm thrilled to welcome all of you into this conversation with Arthur Sinodinos, Australia's outgoing ambassador to the United States.

For the past three years, Ambassador Sinodinos has served as Australia's ambassador to the U.S., leading the embassy through a period of significant change. His tenure in Washington has included a global pandemic, a U.S. presidential election, the announcement of AUKUS, and a change of government in Canberra, all underscored by a period of tremendous growth in the U.S.-Australian alliance. Before he leaves Washington, which is soon but not too soon, I had asked him to join us for a conversation reflecting back on his three years in Washington and discussing what lies ahead for the U.S.-Australia alliance. I'm honored that he's agreed to join us here today.

Just a quick word of introduction for those of you who might know of the ambassador's extraordinary career as a civil servant, a political advisor, a banker, a senator, and a Cabinet minister. Arthur Sinodinos is currently Australia's ambassador to the U.S., having taken up that position in February of 2020. He previously was Australia's minister for industry, innovation and science, and was a senator for New South Wales from 2011 to 2019. During his parliamentary career, he also held other key roles in and outside of the Cabinet, including Cabinet secretary and assistant treasurer. He's also worked in the private sector, served as a political advisor, including working as Prime Minister John Howard's chief of staff, for almost a decade, and started his career as a public servant working in Australia's Department of the Treasury.

Let me just note that for those who are tuning in, if you have a question for the ambassador you can check on our event page and we'll get in as many as possible. Ambassador, Sinodinos, welcome. You've really had an extraordinarily busy three years. So if you don't mind, I'd like to dive right now, because we have a lot of questions. Thank you. Look, when we move back from being abroad, you get really overly broad questions. Like, China, how was that? Australia, how was that? So let me just ask you off the top, when people ask you, America, how was that, what's your response?

Ambassador
Arthur
Sinodinos: I guess my off the top of the head response is always: This place feels like it's in technicolor, and that people paint with very broad strokes. There's just a sense of bigness – bigness about ideas, bigness about aspirations, about getting things done. I mean, I used to watch some of

the presidential inaugural addresses, and it often came through that, you know, this is America. We can do anything.

And it's funny, you come here and there is that sense. And you see it at all levels of society because this is, you know, a multicultural country in many ways. People have come here from all parts of the world because they have that aspiration, and they see America as a place to do that – something which I think Australians identify with, given we are also a multicultural country and we have people from all parts of the world.

So that sense of optimism, forward momentum, we can do anything if we put our mind to it, really came through to me. And, look, I saw it during COVID with the way that the U.S. pivoted on vaccines, Operation Warp Speed. Just didn't take, you know, sort of the pandemic lying down and say, well, we've just got to shelter in place, and that's the end of it. People made the decision we've got to do something about this and threw the resources to get it done. And that's where the vaccinations – the mRNA vaccines came from. And I've seen it since in the way that the U.S. has thrown resources under the Biden administration into the Indo-Pacific in a way that I wouldn't have expected in my lifetime.

Some of my colleagues at the embassy we talk about this a bit and I remember one of them saying that, you know, we'll look back and we'll think of this administration as one of the most consequential ever in terms of the Indo-Pacific.

And so, for me, having been here through COVID and managing the embassy through COVID, having the experience then of working with the U.S. as it further pivoted and consolidated its pivot into the Indo-Pacific, and then to have something like AUKUS on top of that has been a great experience.

And, of course, the other thing that came through – my final point on this – that struck me is the diversity of the country. This is a very diverse country. You go to different parts of the country – in fact, part of my mission statement when I got here is I wanted to understand some parts of the country better because I was one of those who got the 2016 election wrong.

Looking at it from the outside, I was one of those people who thought, oh, Donald Trump said this, he said that. How could he possibly get elected? And yet he was elected, and I think it was an indication of the sort of forces that were roiling below the surface here, and one of the things that I made my mission when I got here was to try and

understand the politics of the U.S. better and that really goes to the diversity of the country.

So I leave this place actually having learned a lot, I think. Everything in life must be a learning experience. I've learned a lot about geopolitics and geoeconomics in this job. But I've also learned to be very optimistic about the future because I've seen the way that the U.S. sometimes goes to the brink and then shifts back, and we saw that in the midterms the way the country was potentially going one way and then it shifted back.

And here I'm not making a partisan comment. I'm really sort of remarking on the fact that there's a lot of premature extrapolation in this country. People take current trends and think because it's looking like this this is how it'll always be. The midterms were a reminder that issues arise, new coalitions come together and take shape, and that goes to the dynamism of this country.

So I leave actually quite optimistic about the future of the U.S. and about the future of the U.S. role in the world.

Dr. Edel: Well, you know, I understand, although you came here just as COVID was taking off so getting around the country, certainly, at the outset was quite challenging. But before we get to everything that you've just laid out – AUKUS, how you thought about different parts of the country – when you came here what were you hoping to accomplish?

I mean, what were your marching orders from Canberra when you arrived here in February of 2020?

Amb. Sinodinos: Well, the context for me, having dealt with the U.S. since the '90s, was that, you know, I was aware of the strong links between the two countries and so, therefore, the first injunction in one sense was to do no harm. Don't stuff up the relationship.

But on top of that, I came into the job at a time when the U.S. and Australia were cooperating on more and more areas including around force posture and all the rest of it, and I thought at the time that my main focus would be on better understanding how the innovation and science system works in the U.S. and one of the lessons from that that Australia can take – what are the transferrable lessons – as I mentioned before, I also had in my mind I'd better understand, say, the Midwest better and how that plays into politics.

Now, in the first year that was a bit hard. I managed to get more of that sort of travel done later. So I came here with a couple of issues that were

in my mind that I should pursue but not a grand plan. I wasn't coming here to revamp the FTA or create a new alliance, for example. But what happened in the time I've been in this job – leave aside COVID – was that the geostrategic circumstances, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, were bringing us closer and closer together.

We were seeing this happen under the Trump administration but I believe it accelerated under the Biden administration and was given more form and shape, particularly through initiatives like the Quad being elevated to the leaders level has really turbocharged the Quad agenda, groupings like AUKUS coming along and partners in the Blue Pacific is now taking shape in terms of the U.S. working with us and others in the Pacific to promote, I think, a free and open not only Indo-Pacific but actually free and open Pacific Islands.

So I didn't have the grand strategy but circumstances dictated ways in which we would need to work together better. And I think the thing going forward for this relationship will be how do we continue that process of working better together, and not because we're in some way a lackey of the U.S. but because fundamentally our national interest dictates that we do this.

Dr. Edel: Yeah. No, I mean, I take the point, right, that one, make sure that you understand the landscape here so you can give policy advice at home and political advice too, but without kind of the grand strategy at the outset. It seems like there really was one, because the objective was how we can work better together specifically and particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

Amb. Sinodinos: Yeah.

Dr. Edel: But if we talked about that you had come here in the kind of run-up to a U.S. election, there was also an election in Australia this past May and a different government, Labor, in power for the first time in nearly a decade. I'm curious if the general mission that you've now outlined about working better together in the Indo-Pacific, in what ways did that change? How did your kind of marching orders, such as they were, change when you had a new government in Canberra?

Amb. Sinodinos: Well, this may be an odd thing for me to say, because I'm a political appointee. I was appointed out of the Morrison government. But, you know, for me, changes of government, changes of administration, also create opportunity.

Dr. Edel: Yeah.

Amb. Sinodinos: So that whole climate piece, we were able to really move on that decisively in a way that I think the U.S. was very gratified about as they sought to persuade other countries, particularly large emitters, that they should move further. So that's provided a great – another avenue of cooperation, potentially a third pillar of the alliance, as Prime Minister Albanese mentioned.

So that was important. It was important – that change of government was important in cementing all of that and making also climate a major pillar of our efforts in Southeast Asia, but particularly in the Pacific, where, if you can't talk to the Pacific about climate, you're not going to get them to have other conversations. So I think that's worked very well.

So from my point of view, the change of government was an opportunity to do more together on these. And since then, with the Inflation Reduction Act, which has laid out all these incentives for electric vehicles, critical minerals and whatever, providing another great, fruitful line of activity for us to follow, given some of the initiatives that this government, on top of the previous government, is pursuing in that space.

I think the other thing that's happened, and it maybe doesn't get remarked as much at the headline level, is that some of the work that the new government has initiated around diversity and inclusion also allows us to have very fruit dialogues with the Biden administration. I'm thinking here of Deb Haaland, the interior secretary, who was just in Australia; fantastic trip. She had an opportunity to visit with indigenous people and understand our approach to indigenous issues and how we can work together. And here in the States during my time, I've encouraged our indigenous policy agenda, including a trade agenda, taking people from Native American tribes to Australia to promote trade and investment, how we work together on indigenous issues in multilateral fora.

So, yeah, it's opened up a number of lines of effort that I think are very fruitful, because as an ambassador, part of my job is to find new ways in which we engage with our host country, right.

Dr. Edel: Yeah.

Amb. Sinodinos: And all of this has helped, I think, in that cause.

Dr. Edel: Well, one of the things that you've laid out too is that when you ask many Australians, I would say, about the alliance, security; values come

up to mind. But as we're discussing, it's a much broader set of issues and values where we cohere. I'm going to spin some of those out.

Let me pause on climate change for a second and actually stay on the political side of things for a second, because we talked about the change of government in Canberra. But, of course, you were here during a change in U.S. administrations, right; both the election, the aftermath of the election, and, of course, January 6th. And I'm curious, when you were talking with Canberra, how did you describe the election? And just as importantly, how did you talk about January 6th, about what was happening here?

Amb. Sinodinos: Well, I remember having a – and I've mentioned this publicly before – having a discussion with the National Security Committee about what would happen in the election.

Dr. Edel: The Australian National Security Committee.

Amb. Sinodinos: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And telling them that I thought President Biden would win that election based on what we'd seen around the country. And even though we'd been limited in how much we could go out and about, we had our consulates providing intel and all the rest of it and we built up a picture.

And I think in the runup to that election, we did a good job of informing the government and others back home about the forces that were actually at work in this country, and why President Biden might win the election. And from my point of view, as I said before, changes of administration, of government, are very useful. They allow you to turn the page on issues. In my case, as a new – relatively new ambassador, I was able to develop my own set of relationships with senior people. And we had briefed some of those people before the election. So we were ready to go.

In describing January 6th back home, look, we took a fairly straight down the line approach. We tried to add value to what was in the public domain by getting insights from people on both sides about what had happened and why it happened. But we also tried to put it in perspective to make the point that, look, the system is being stress tested. But look what happened. Pence did not give way. Ultimately the congressmen and -women came back that night, finished the Electoral College vote, and then it was over.

So our theme back home was: The system's been stress tested. The Constitution's been tested. But they've come through. It was just to

make the point that there's a resilience in the system. And I think that was an important point to make to Canberra, because sometimes when you see what's on TV you get the impression that the world is going to hell in handbasket. And we just had to put our perspective on that.

And one final point on this, the other point I think I've made to people back home is the reverence for the Constitution here, and the way the Constitution influences so much of what goes on, and the fact that the Constitution has real-world impacts – whether it's the First Amendment on free speech, the Second Amendment on guns – making the point that, you know, it's a very live document which has ongoing influence in how America behaves and how America constitutes itself.

Dr. Edel: Yeah. You know, on some of the interviews you're now giving – not that you're not always candid – but, you know, in your final couple of weeks here one of the things that you said, describing the differences between dealing with the Trump administration and the incoming Biden team, was that when the Biden administration came in, they immediately focused on shoring up alliances and partnerships. Easy to say, sometimes harder to do. What did that mean in practice? Did that just mean that you were in many more meetings at the White House? What were the practical effects of that?

Amb. Sinodinos: Well, from our perspective, it was incredibly important that alliances and partnerships as a whole were being shored up because, ultimately, we see ourselves – and this is my description. It's not necessarily the government's description. We see ourselves as part of the liberal democratic West. And if other alliances and partnerships were being made more difficult, were deteriorating, or whatever, that had an impact on all of us. Australia did relatively well under the Trump administration. We weren't as much a target for some of the measures. We run a trade deficit with the U.S., so that probably helped.

But my point being, that even if we were being better treated, if other allies and partners were not being well-treated that impacted on the effectiveness of all of us working together. And that, I think, is something that the Biden administration was very mindful of. They moved very quickly after they came in to shore up those alliances and partnerships. In the case of the Indo-Pacific, having secretary of defense and secretary of state go out there and visit various allies and partners, that was a visible reminder of that – or a visible sort of encapsulation of that.

And then once they had done that in the Indo-Pacific, they then turned to have the initial meeting with China. But they did it from a basis of

reminding the Chinese that we want to work with you, but don't forget one of our characteristics is that we have a strong network of allies and partners. And we're all in this together. No one's left on the field, if I can put it like that. And Australia was mentioned specifically in that context.

Dr. Edel:

Yeah, at the risk of oversimplifying things in Washington, there are one of two ways of thinking about the Indo-Pacific region. You either start with China and then you move outwards, or America starts with its allies and partners and then begins to approach some of the common challenges that we have dealing with China. I take from your comments very much you feel the effect with the Biden administration of the latter.

Now on this administration, this current administration, highlighting from the beginning climate change. I said we'd talk a little bit more about this. And you mentioned that Prime Minister Albanese has talked about this potentially becoming, climate work, a third pillar of the alliance. I'm trying to think about what that means. Does that mean Australia does its thing, America does its thing? Is there – is there room for us working jointly together? Is it because of the massive legislation that's been put forward both in Australia and the U.S.? What is working together on climate mean in this context?

Amb. Sinodinos:

Look, my vision of what a climate leaders statement would be like is that it would provide a framework for not only how we keep each other honest on climate change, if I can put it like that, but also on how we work better together and more effectively, particularly in our own region.

Let me give you an example. We're both putting money into Indonesia around climate-related initiatives. The issue there is it would be more effective in situations like that that we find ways to work together, not just making the funding go further but also because, in our case – Australia's case – the knowledge we have of Indonesia as a place to do business and to invest, I think, is a useful further value add. So I'm really thinking it's a mixture of both what we do together to make sure we're living up to our commitments, but also using this leaders statement as a framework for joint cooperation in places like Southeast Asia, for example.

I think it's going to be important on climate change that – everybody has made all the right commitments, but we've now got some pretty big numbers in terms of what we need to do capital-wise and whatever. And so now we're really into a strong implementation phase, and the agreements the leaders make should be ways to turbocharge the implementation.

Dr. Edel: Yeah, no, start with getting the definition of the problem defined and then move on out.

Which is a perfect segue. We want to talk about China. We have to talk about China here because we've seen a change of policy approach over the last several years coming out of Canberra, coming out of Washington, coming out of Tokyo, elsewhere. But Australia and the United States are different countries, and so they approach a similar challenge of dealing with an increasingly assertive Xi Jinping differently.

You were talking earlier in the conversation about what you've learned here in the U.S. but I – you know, this is a two-way question about learning from each other as allies.

First of all, what does the Australian experience dealing with an increasingly assertive China under Xi Jinping actually have to offer the United States in terms of what Australia has done?

And kind of taking the flip of that question as well, we don't do things, as you said, by half measures. It's in Technicolor here. And having observed the shift to a much more competitive approach to China across almost all spectrums of competition, I'm curious what you take out of that as what are things worth holding onto and kind of explaining at home.

Amb. Sinodinos: Look, I think the first thing to say is that I start from a proposition that a strong and prosperous China is in everybody's interest. I mean, the development of China is probably the greatest poverty-reduction initiative in history, and it's important that that be consolidated because it's one-quarter of mankind.

I think the Clinton administration – people go back and try and debate this – I think they were right to try and integrate China more into the global economy. Yes, we made some suppositions, maybe, about whether that meant that, ultimately – and I was one of those – that China would grow to be some form of Singapore or Taiwan on steroids. And clearly, as China has grown, the old strategy of Deng Xiaoping of hide and bide has evolved, as you say, and now China is asserting itself and its power.

And so I think the reaction for us has to be: How do we allies and partners in the region persuade China that rather than seeking to upend the global order and reorder it in its own image, that it adapt to that world order not to be some permanent number two to the U.S., but

because the global rules-based order that's evolved since the Second World War that has underwritten our peace and prosperity is worth preserving, and that's the best guarantee for countries to be able to exercise their sovereignty. And the underwriter of that global rules-based order has been the U.S. And China, being a productive member of that global rules-based order, is an important thing.

And so where there have been situations where we feel our national interest in some way has been impacted by actions that other countries like China have taken, our attitude has been they may be our number-one trading partner, but we have to stand up for our own sovereignty. And we've done that in a number of situations. And I think what's happened in recent times, with the thawing in the relationship under the new Australian government, that in part it's a recognition in China that for Australia there are some red lines in terms of our sovereignty; that it's not so much a case that we're prepared to cede part of our sovereignty because we have a strong trading relationship or anything like that.

And I think that message has gotten through, and I think we've garnered respect, if not affection, in China for that. And I think in the U.S., when I got here, I noticed on both sides of politics and in the then-administration and in the new administration there was a recognition that Australia had played a leadership role in standing up for its national interest, its national sovereignty.

I don't buy the argument that, you know, there's a group of Australians who are just rah-rah for the American alliance and therefore willing to give China a black eye to please the Americans. What we do fundamentally, and the reason fundamentally we align on values and interests in many ways with the U.S., is because our national interest, notwithstanding our historical links – they're there and they're important, you know, and there's a lot of sentimentality in the relationship – but it's our clear national interest, particularly in the global rules-based order that the U.S. has underwritten, which means that us working together to persuade other countries to be part of that order remains first-order business.

Dr. Edel:

Yeah. Let me follow up on that about some of the kind of internal and domestic critics. I want to start bringing some other questioners, not just me, into the conversation too.

So this question comes in from Lavina Lee, a friend of ours who is a nonresident here at CSIS and also a professor at Macquarie University in Sydney. And she asks this. Paul Keating, former Prime Minister Paul

Keating, recently wrote in an op-ed in The Australian that, quote, the national foreign-policy debate in Australia is now heavily populated by an army of, quote-unquote, little Americans who cannot see past the U.S. and its interests. Now, Lavina asks, the assumption within that quote that Keating has given us is that Australia is necessarily, inevitably, and always a follower in the alliance. I guess her question to you is, is that accurate? And to what extent has Australia actually led thinking within the alliance on collective responses to China?

Amb. Sinodinos: Well, on issues like economic and trade coercion, where we were very visibly in the doghouse for a number of years, as I mentioned before, I think countries like the U.S. and others noticed and I think admired the way we had stood up for our national interest. And they noticed the way we put measures in place on Huawei and the 5G rollout. They noticed the measures we took to deter foreign influence in our political parties and in our democratic process to counter foreign interference in our universities and to stop piracy when it came to intellectual property, including university research.

We actually took a number of measures that were leading the way for other countries to follow. In fact, here in the U.S. I get a lot of questions these days about some of our countering-foreign-interference regimes, particularly in areas like universities and the like. So I think we led because our national interest dictated that we take certain measures at the time that we took them.

In the case of AUKUS, no one rang us up. You know, Kurt Campbell didn't pick up the phone and say, you know, you Aussies have got to do AUKUS or anything like this.

Dr. Edel: And would you like our nuclear-propelled submarines?

Amb. Sinodinos: Yeah. In fact, quite the reverse. It was very much an Australian idea. It was born out of the particular circumstances at the time under the then-government, which this new government has embraced. And we were the ones that pressed the Brits and then the Americans about doing this. And it wouldn't have occurred to the Americans, because, you know, they've taken a very strong view about their crown jewels and their nuclear technology. But in that sense, we led the alliance into a new direction, a capability pact which is going to lead to all sorts of other interesting potential consequences.

Dr. Edel: Well, now that you've broached AUKUS, as we get closer to an announcement in mid-March, lots of questions about AUKUS. In fact, I

had to screen out the questions because everyone just wanted to know all the particulars on AUKUS.

But let's just start with something very basic. So AUKUS – of course, everyone who's watching this doesn't need to know, but the Australia, United Kingdom, and U.S. – pact to add capabilities to Australia and share innovative technologies. But when we say AUKUS, because we say it for shorthand, what exactly is it? How do you explain it when you're talking to people about AUKUS?

Amb. Sinodinos: Look, you can explain it in a narrow way and say it's a capability pact with two pillars. One is the pillar around getting nuclear-powered submarines. The second pillar is working together to deliver advanced capabilities, whether it's in AI, machine learning, cyber, quantum, undersea warfare other than subs, electronic warfare, hypersonics.

Dr. Edel: Counter-hypersonics, you forgot that one. (Laughs.) Sorry.

Amb. Sinodinos: Thank you very much. Always get the list slightly wrong.

That's at the narrow level. But then if you – if you take more of a helicopter view, it'll involve information sharing. It'll involve greater scientific and technical cooperation. And then if you go further up, it instills habits of cooperation of how we work together better. And that will involve greater interchangeability, integration of our industrial bases, all the things we talk about in terms of reorienting supply chains among trusted allies and partners. AUKUS is, if you like, a test bed for that.

And when we do pillar one, the announcement's in mid-March, as you say, people will see there's been genuine trilateral solution around the sort of capability we're talking under that pillar. And I think people will see that the habits of cooperation, sharing information, interchangeable industrial bases, are going to be a very sort of substantial long-term benefit of going down this route. So if you like, AUKUS becomes almost like a state of mind. It's about how we work together, how we think together, and how we cooperate better, and how we're stronger together.

Dr. Edel: I like this. I'm a New Yorker, so, you know, there's some favorite songs, like a "New York State of Mind." I guess we now have an AUKUS state of mind. But, look, you know, part of what's exciting about this, I think, certainly how the story is being told, is the extraordinary secrecy under which the initial negotiations were conducted. We know that we're going to get an announcement soon. We don't know exactly when. We

don't know exactly what. Can you walk us through a bit its evolution – the secrecy of how it was negotiated, any teasers or previews that you can lay out for us about what might be coming, what to look for in it?

Amb. Sinodinos: On the first issue, on the secrecy, the reason it was able to be kept secret is because the prime minister was personally authorizing who was in the AUKUS bubble. So each of us knew that if there was a leak, it was quite a small circle of people who might be the leaker. Here in Washington, initially one or two of our navy people were in the loop, and then a little bit after that I was brought in the loop, once they were wanting to broaden out from discussions with the nuclear navy. Because what happened is initially the thought was we might go down the route of doing something with the British. But that would involve a nuclear technology that belongs to the Americans. So the Americans had to be brought into the picture.

The nuclear navy itself, Hyman Rickover did a very good job of instilling in them the very highest standards of safety and performance. His view was: One mistake, and the nuclear navy is gone. And so their attitude initially was, does Australia understand the full extent of the meaning of nuclear stewardship in this context? And is the nation up to this? And that was a fair question. But then over time what happened is as us strategists were brought into the picture, there was a recognition here that actually the announcement effect of this alone would be very significant. And then the binding effect, because this is a multidecadal commitment, equally important. That this was really institutionalizing the cooperation and taking it to a whole new level, those kicked in.

And then when I got to the president – and the president spent quite a bit of time thinking about this, because he had his own nuclear nonproliferation credentials to think about. But once he satisfied himself that the strategic stakes justified doing this, he was all in. And then it was go. And then September 2021, we had the announcement. So gradually over time, of course, the secrecy, although there was continuing to be secrecy, but we brought more and more people into it. But I think all along there was just a feeling that, you know, we shouldn't spoil this by anybody leaking this because this is such a big thing that no one is expecting.

During the last decade, Australia a couple of times looked at different submarine options. But really, what drove AUKUS was a recognition that our circumstances had changed so substantially the trends we had identified even five and six years ago were accelerating in the region, and that we as Australia had to do more for ourselves.

And I remember we had a foretaste of the reaction here when we did the Defence Strategic Update in 2020 and I went around selling it to people here. And I think what they liked was the fact that Australia was prepared to stand up and put its money where its mouth is. Well, I tell you what, we're about to stand up and put our money where our mouth is in a huge way when we make the announcement. There are interim capability steps which are important in helping to give credibility to the endpoint, when we finally get submarines coming in – the final optimal pathway, as we call it.

And the way I've described it to American and British colleagues is that, for Australia, this is a moonshot. This is a whole-of-nation effort to get the people, the resources, the technology to do this. A former industry minister, one of the big benefits I see from this is the spillover effects into the rest of advanced manufacturing and other parts of the economy.

So this is – this is going to be a real driver. I mean, and the U.S., I think, now as we get closer – when Jake Sullivan said to Richard Marles when he was here on his last visit, when Richard came through, he said: We want to make AUKUS a smashing success. And they are really working up to that.

Dr. Edel: One of the questions that pops up all the time is also the extraordinary cost that will be part of the effort to drive this forward. So we know that we have an announcement coming in the next couple of weeks. We know that this is part of a larger effort on Australian strategic thinking. We know the Defense Strategic Review is kind of hovering somewhere in the background, and that will come out. But then we also know that the budget comes out in May.

So I guess one question that I have is: Can you give us a read on – you know, taking us outside of Canberra for a second about where the Australian public might be on this idea that there are going to be more costs to pay for national defense?

Amb. Sinodinos: The reaction when AUKUS was announced in September of 2021 in Australia was very strongly positive. I mean, some, particularly Greens on the left, were not so happy, but a high majority of the public were very supportive of doing this. And I think the new government has knuckled down and worked its way through the costs and is, to its credit, willing to really put the case to the public as to why the cost is justified by what we're doing.

And I think if – when it comes to security issues, the Australian public always believe that we should do what is required to be done. And I

think you'll see that come out in the context of the AUKUS announcement.

The Defense Strategic Review, obviously, is an opportunity to look at force structure, our force posture across the board. And, look, I'm not going to speculate on what's in that, but budgets are not sort of infinite. You do have to make choices, and it will reflect those choices. But sitting at the center of those choices is what we're doing with AUKUS.

Dr. Edel:

I mean, I think you're amongst friends both here in the U.S., in the White House, and here with the Australia Chair on wanting AUKUS to be a smashing success, but there are, of course, challenges inherent in it. The two that come up I think most frequently are those about export controls that would enable some of the sharing but isn't yet kind of wedded into the American system and questions about sovereignty. So a couple of questions, if you don't mind, about that.

So the first one, this is from Stephen Dziedzic at ABC, but he's not the only "Journo," by the way, for our American friends, is short for journalist, just so you know. He's not the only one.

Mike Cherney of Wall Street Journal asked the same question, too. But they were both curious to hear your thoughts on ITAR restrictions. And the groundwork that you have already done with Congress. Let me get specific about his question. What guarantees have you sought or received that they – some of these restrictions about sharing controls would be wound back for Australia? Would this be done on a case-by-case basis, or is there a capacity to get a broader exemption for Australia?

Amb. Sinodinos:

I think the first thing to say is that there has been in the last six months a lot of movement around ITAR – International Trafficking Arms Regulation – and export control issues within the administration.

What I'm talking about here is not just admiring the problem but various organizations within the administration thinking about, well, what are the tools at the working level that we can sort of adopt that will actually make it easier for us to work together and get that seamless transfer of technology we're talking about.

That work is underway. It's not finished. But it's – compared with, say, six months ago the work is getting done and I pay tribute to people like Abe Denmark in the Pentagon, who's an advisor in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He has driven this himself and he has the full support of the secretary in doing that.

The attitude we've taken is we want to push the administration process as far as possible. We're keeping the Congress informed. The Congress want to help. The Congress are looking at ways in which, for example, they might use the National Defense Authorization Act every year as a way of continuing to progress some of this.

But I think it's fair to say at the moment that the Congress also waiting to see how far the administration is prepared to go and are there areas where cooperation is OK but not enough to get the full job done and then what legislative options potentially come into play.

But I think our view is if the administration, particularly with the bottom-up approach they're taking, develops the sort of tools we're talking about then people in the system have ownership and this is what we've been always sort of trying to do is get the frozen middle, if you like, to start to thaw and start to think in terms of a trilateral way that, you know, U.S., U.K., and Australia can work together in this.

We've assured Americans and shown them the sort of protection of information measures that we take to make sure they understand that their technology is safe in terms of leakage to third parties and all the rest of it. So we're getting there.

But I think people – I won't prejudge the outcome. People should wait for the announcement and then see what's happened to that point. But, certainly, that point means there'll be further momentum to get this done because the very fact that the Americans are prepared to share their crown jewels with us implies that there will have to be progress on the seamless transfer of technology. None of us want this to be bogged down, and I think that state of mind has now permeated through various levels of the administration.

Dr. Edel:

Well, that's an interesting way to put it, right, because it means in some ways that the United States is giving up what it is, is a form of its sovereignty in order to progress this to. And I say that because there are lots of questions about Australian sovereignty kind of floating around in the mix and the debate. But maybe that's a narrow way of thinking about this.

And let me bring in this question from a friend, Arzan Tarapore out at Stanford University, and he writes in that you've presided over a phase of the alliance that's got unprecedentedly close. See AUKUS amongst everything else. So close, in fact, that some have argued that it might suborn Australian sovereignty.

Now, the deputy prime minister, Richard Marles, celebrates that the Australian-American militaries are headed past interoperability and towards integration in some ways. I guess his question here is does this new age of competition, this increasingly degraded security environment that you've spoken about, require countries like Australia and the United States to think of new ideas of what integration might look like and some of the tradeoffs that it might involve?

Amb. Sinodinos: One of the revolutions in American attitudes is that – you don't necessarily see it written down on paper but you see it in practice – is the recognition that America cannot do it alone and that its – one of its advantages is its unique network of allies and partners, and I think now there's a much greater predisposition to look at how we work together.

And, look, you hit the nail on the head before. Whenever you enter into an alliance you're potentially giving up a bit of your sovereignty over here to, potentially, get a greater leap in sovereignty over here because you're more effective and stronger together. And in the – and he also writes to say in the case of the U.S. they are sharing this technology with us. Sure, under controlled circumstances and all the rest of it, but they are sharing part of this already with us, and vice versa.

Well, we rely, you know, for about 60 percent or so of our capability on the U.S. So, clearly, there are elements of our national sovereignty which are dependent on having a strong relationship with the U.S. But it works both ways is my point, and to some extent the sovereignty argument has become a bit of a – it's a red herring in a way. We enter into these alliances and partnerships so we can be stronger together.

Dr. Edel: Yeah. You mentioned a second ago about kind of your impressions about Australia's perception here, but let me just get your assessment about how bipartisan here in Washington and how broad maybe beyond Washington the support for Australia is in the U.S.

Amb. Sinodinos: Look, at the historical, sentimental sort of level – and I saw this when I first got here, the brush fires were raging in Australia. Everybody here was asking me about that. They were really concerned. There's just such a great sense of goodwill towards Australia. But what I found in the decision-making corridors in Washington, both under the previous administration and this one and in the Congress, a very strong bipartisan sense that Australia was standing up, exercising its sovereignty, and in a way that was admirable and that they felt they could take lessons from.

So there's a – there's a strong sense here, I think, of goodwill for Australia, and a sense that, you know, we stand up. And we understand what our values and our interests are. And we're prepared to put our money where our mouth is. And we're not allowing, as someone would say, someone else to carry our water.

Dr. Edel: Gotcha. What about the reverse? I mean, you've taken multiple trips home to Australia while you've been here.

Amb. Sinodinos: Well, I've only had one trip back to Australia since being here.

Dr. Edel: So multiple trips being one, not multiple. (Laughter.) But you're at least on the phone all the time. You're giving interviews there, so a virtual sort of presence if not an actual one. And when you talk about the United States and the alliance, what do you hear back? How broad is the support both in Canberra and then beyond Canberra for the United States and the alliance?

Amb. Sinodinos: I think it – the relative standing of the U.S. has gone back up in recent years, no doubt about that. I think in Australia there's always a strong sense that America being in the world, and engaged in the world, is a good thing. If America is not engaged in the world, bad things happen. And frankly, from an Australian perspective, because there's such a confluence of values and interests, for many Australians when they see the U.S. behaving well, it's a huge relief, if I can put it like that. Because they put a lot of store by how the world is.

We're very – you know, we're very externally focused as a country, for a whole variety of reasons. Trade reasons. We got people from all parts of the world. And what happens in the U.S. is something that we take a lot of notice of. In fact, I think there was some stat that in one of the last elections there were more Australians watching the outcomes of the U.S. election than watching the outcomes of the Australian election. Now, I don't know whether that's an urban myth, but it goes to the fact that we see what happens here as being quite consequential.

Dr. Edel: You know, one of the things that we talk about all the time is we have this hundred years of mate-ship. America and Australia have fought side-by-side in every war. We trust each other. That trust runs fairly deep. You know, we love each other. Great. But one of the questions becomes, and maybe you hinted at this a little bit in your last question about when America seemingly is more inward focused and less externally focused, where are Australia and the United States not as aligned? And kind of, as you play with this, I would ask you too, where

does that matter significantly? And where does it actually not matter maybe so much?

Amb. Sinodinos: In the trade space, it'd be true to say that we've been very keen for the U.S. to reconsider the Trans-Pacific Partnership, to get back into market access agreements. We've seen the way the U.S. system has gone in recent years around trade policy, both under the Trump administration and the Biden administration. And we've been prepared to work with the construct that the Biden administration have come up with, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. But we feel that framework would have been stronger if it had market access in it. Now, we realize the politics might make it difficult, although my own view is you talk to the Congress you find a lot of people in the Congress who are quite interested in what might be possible on trade. But I recognize that it can quickly become a political issue here.

But my point is, on trade, Australia, because of our size, we want as open an international trade system as possible. We want the World Trade Organization to be operating as effectively as possible. One of the things we've engaged the U.S. on is reform of the World Trade Organization. We've been very keen for the U.S. to do more on this. They're starting to do more in Geneva on this. But it's an area where we think – I mean, we see the WTO as part of the global rules-based order, right? And we think that an ineffective WTO is not a good thing. Now, we recognize there are challenges for the trade rules in dealing with centrally planned economies, for want of a better description, and distortions that come from nonmarket economies. And we're working with the U.S. and others about how you best counter that.

But certainly on the WTO, we are very keen to see a reformed WTO, to have an appellate body to help with adjudicating trade disputes. That's been an area where I think we've been keen for the U.S. to do more. Now, we're not Robinson Crusoe. Every time a Japanese prime minister talks to an American president these days, they raise the Trans-Pacific Partnership. I know Rahm Emanuel, the American ambassador in Tokyo, is banging the table on this. That's an area – it's not an area of unfriendliness, but it's an area where I think we do bring our own perspective and we think that's important.

One other area on language. When we talk about how we work in the Southeast Asia together, we in Australia don't necessarily go as strongly on the values argument as maybe the U.S. can from its perspective because of its size. And the reason we don't do this is because, you know, there are a mixture of systems in the region. At the end of the day, we're seeking to appeal to the region on the basis that having a strong

U.S. presence, particularly economic and trade engagement – that’s why we want market access to be on the table – is important in providing a sense of equilibrium in the region. Countries in the region want that, but they don’t want to be in the middle of a superpower sort of competition.

But – so the way we really pitch it to the region is that what we’re doing is to help strengthen your capacity to exercise your independence and your national sovereignty and go on those sorts of interest arguments, if you like, as opposed to values arguments. I mean, that’s more about the language we sometimes deploy compared to you. But that’s the sort of advice we often given the U.S. about how it conducts itself in the region.

Dr. Edel:

I mean, really just the last couple of years, even the last year, even the last six months, even the last two months, have really seen some rapid movement on the U.S. position within Southeast Asia, which is a whole other conversation. But, you know, staying on this for a second about kind of, you know, differences, I guess, you know, the way that kind of our different countries express differences is we ask questions about each other.

And, you know, an American – a totally uneducated American who hasn’t gone to Australia 15 times, you know, has a certain image of an Australian in his head. And he looks a lot like Crocodile Dundee, for lack of a better term. But that’s not what Australia is today.

And I guess one of the questions that I have for you is about questions, right. What question, when you’re touring around the U.S., do you get asked most frequently about Australia by Americans?

Amb. Sinodinos:

Americans seem to have a bit of a sense of the geography of Australia and the wildlife. So I often get questions about koalas or kangaroos or about Uluru; it used to be called Ayers Rock. I often get a lot of those sorts of questions. I don’t get too many serious geopolitical questions in that sense when you’re among everyday Americans, when you’re out and about. But as I mentioned when we’re talking about bushfires, they have – I think they have a bit of a romantic view of the country which goes to a bit of a view Americans have of their own country and its history when they think about things like the cowboy myth, the frontier or whatever. And they have a bit of a sense that we’re a bit like that. And that’s why I think they relate to something like Crocodile Dundee, the idea of the self-sufficient person who’s going out there, knows how to handle themselves in all sorts of difficult situations with all these dangerous animals.

One of the things I do get is a lot of questions about how many dangerous animals there are in Australia, because they've heard that nine of the 10 most venomous spiders in the world live in Australia, right, and all this sort of thing. So I tell them stories about crocodiles and how you can see crocodiles on the beaches in northern Australia. And they love that.

Dr. Edel: Yeah. You know, I have to say this is our experience too before we moved to Australia and the school that our children were about to go to. We got their newsletter, and there was an image on the cover of a boy facedown with a mother hovering over him, and the caption read, "Vijay, as treated by his mother, Dr. Varapnu, modeling how to treat venomous snake and spider bites."

So Americans are terrified of Australia even if we like it, too. (Laughter.)

But we should say, too, that every Aussie I encounter seemingly and totally incomprehensibly is terrified by American bears. I hear this all the time, but: You've got bears.

Amb. Sinodinos: That's right. I suspect –

Dr. Edel: That wasn't a question. You can respond if you want. (Laughs.)

Amb. Sinodinos: No, no. I suspect that movie "Cocaine Bear" – (laughter) – which is just taking off here, that will have a big viewership in Australia.

Dr. Edel: Yeah, no one will come from Australia any more to see this.

Look, let me actually ask you, then, the question that you're not getting, you know, on interactions sometimes, but actually a little bit more geopolitical or really just politically focused about questions that crop up all the time in Australia.

This one comes in from Peter Hartcher at the Sydney Morning Herald, but it's a pervasive question.

And he asks: How politically reliable is the United States as an ally not in general, but in a future crisis? He points to former Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull's memoirs, where he said that one of the reasons he didn't want to sail within 12 nautical miles of any of the features in the South China Sea is because he thought that if the Chinese confronted an Australian vessel he didn't trust the U.S. to support Australia.

Amb. Sinodinos: I mean, this question comes up a bit and I understand the context, as people throw forward to 2024. The thing I would say is that what I have noticed in the way U.S. politics has evolved over the last few years I've been here is that on a bipartisan basis the focus on China, for example, is very strong. In fact, if anything it's become a bit of a competition as to who is the toughest.

It's a bit like, you know, you may not remember – I'm older than you, so I remember this – there were those debates about who lost China, remember, post-1949.

Dr. Edel: Yes.

Amb. Sinodinos: It's a bit like that, like who's going to be the toughest on China. And of course, in the new House of Representatives with Speaker McCarthy we have a China – Standing Committee on China that's been set up under Mike Gallagher, who's the co-chair of the Friends of Australia Caucus and is a terrific guy, understands geopolitics really well.

My point is this: Compared to even a few years ago, circumstances in the region have accelerated in a way that – the trend was expected, but it's happened a lot more quickly. And that means that I think any administration coming in will have to think very clearly about the geopolitics of the situation and how they confront that. And in that context, one of the things that may not be remarked upon very much is there's a remarkable continuity, in many ways, between policy under the Trump administration and the Biden administration when it comes to issues around China. So if you're thinking about the issue that preoccupies this place, there's actually a remarkable degree of bipartisanship around it. And that, I think, will be a factor going forward.

The thing to remember under the Trump administration that while on one level President Trump was mainly focused on trade imbalances, bilateral trade imbalances, and wanted to punish China for that, the foreign policy establishment under him, right, was starting to move policy in the direction that's been consolidated and extended by the Biden administration.

Dr. Edel: In fact, in the very first China hearing of the new commission we had Matt Pottinger and H.R. McMaster giving testimony on the scope of the challenge, not all of whose suggestions look all that different from what has been taken up.

Look, just one or two more questions because you've been really generous with your time here. And for those who know this and are

tracking this, your tenure is winding down. We don't know exactly when it will end, but you'll be here for a little while, or?

Amb. Sinodinos: Soon.

Dr. Edel: Soon. And we have former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd coming in as the new Australian ambassador to the United States. Matt Cranston at AFR asks, you know – you know, I don't know if you write a letter or not, but what advice or warnings or encouragements would you offer to him as he comes in?

Amb. Sinodinos: Yeah. No, that's a good question. And to Matt's point, Joe Hockey left me a letter in the desk when I came, and that – and that was great. I'm not sure I'll quite give a letter to Kevin. I mean, I've sat down and had a discussion with him.

I think the thing to do is to say: Look, we're held in remarkably high stead here. This is an opportunity to, obviously, further sort of deepen the relationship. And there are various initiatives afoot to do that. But we should not be afraid to have more ambition about what that means and where we take the relationship. And I think Kevin is a big thinker. And I think he's the sort of person who is well-suited to doing that.

The other point I would make is we actually bring a lot to the table. Leverage all the advantages we bring to the table. And I'm thinking here, you know, for example, we have a very strong intelligence and information-sharing relationship, both bilaterally and in the Five Eyes. Leverage the full value of what we bring through all of that to the table. I think that really works well in helping to shape perceptions here. I think the final element of this is that – and we started to do this work – we initiated a survey of opinionmakers here in Washington, because we were wanting to move on from the makeshift paradigm.

And this is going forward to reinforce the fact that, you know, you've got this modern, multicultural country the size of the continental U.S., with the resources to be part of, you know, the renewable energy revolution, to be a renewable energy superpower, to provide critical minerals, to provide capacity for advanced manufacturing as we go forward, leveraging AUKUS and other things, leveraging our innovation. We punch above our weight when it comes to innovation. Our biggest challenge in Australia remains commercialization.

How do you leverage all of those contemporary advantages of Australia in a way that adds value to this relationship and other plurilateral and multilateral relationships? And I think, you know, look, when I was

thinking about – I don't think much about potential successes, but actually I was genuinely excited that someone like Kevin got the job because of his status, his knowledge – particularly of issues in our own region. Of course, a big emphasis on China, but a great understanding of the region. So he brings a huge amount to the table. And that, in itself, needs to be leveraged.

Dr. Edel: Absolutely. And his ability to reach right into Cabinet, which is, of course, what every country wants.

Amb. Sinodinos: Absolutely. And have the ear of the prime minister. That's always important.

Dr. Edel: That's right. Look, final question for you – and I think you've actually maybe implicitly answered it already, but I've listened to ambassadors on both sides – American ambassadors to Australia, Australian ambassadors to America – talk about the fact that this is a forward-looking alliance. And therefore, I can't be one that's going to be just wrapped around nostalgia, or that just pitches itself for what we did 70 years ago together. And therefore, you know, thinking about renewing the alliance to a younger generation that – I don't know if they're more skeptical – but just have more questions about it. How do you calibrate that talk? How do we make sure that the – forget about the alliance – the relationship between our two countries is one that is understood and that makes sense to people at all levels of where they're coming from?

Amb. Sinodinos: Look, I think particularly with younger people, being able to have the conversation on climate is important, because it's so important to young people. Being able to leverage the diversity and inclusion piece, because that's important to young people in particular. And to show that the sort of values that we sort of stand for or believe are actually the values that allow a lot of the good things in the world to happen, including in areas like diversity and inclusion where, you know, it's about the sanctity of the individual, right?

And I think that's fair – to me, it seems you've got to appeal to their values. And those values are quite consistent with the values that underpin the global rules-based order. Now, you don't necessarily put it in that sort of verbiage that I just did, but that's what it's about. It's about the values. I think ultimately that's what will appeal to people. And so my final word on all this is, to go back to where I started, I'm very optimistic about the future, very optimistic about America's place in the world, and very optimistic about what we and the U.S. can do together. And I think the alliance going forward will broaden out, not just the climate piece that we talked about but also on science and

technology and innovation, which is an area which I'm really interested in. We can do so much more together.

Dr. Edel: Well, look, you've been extraordinarily generous with your time. I know your time is at a premium now, because everyone wants to talk to you, as you head for the exits, at least here in the U.S. But thank you. Congratulations on a very successful run here. And we look forward to having you on again at some point in the future too. So thanks so much, Ambassador.

Amb. Sinodinos: Thanks, mate.

(END)