

Remembering Professor Desmond Ball (1947-2016) by
Brendan Taylor

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Des Ball managed to pack the equivalent of several academic careers into his 69 years, in a life recently cut all too short by the cancer he battled so courageously for the better part of a decade.

Ball's work on the strategic nuclear balance made his name internationally known during the 1970s, attracting the attention and admiration of none other than President Jimmy Carter. Ball was one of only a handful of Australians of this era who routinely rubbed shoulders with such luminaries as Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Brent Scowcroft, and Condoleezza Rice, to name just a few. As Brad Glosserman and Ralph Cossa have written, his was "an extraordinary career that took Des to every high church in the nuclear priesthood."

Back home, this "wild colonial boy" – as the acerbic International Relations Professor Hedley Bull once famously described him – from the small country town of Timboon rose to national notoriety during the 1980s by highlighting how Canberra's support for joint United States-Australian intelligence and communications facilities exposed his country to the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Ball's first forays into the Asia-Pacific also occurred during the 1980s. He had certainly been aware of this region prior to that time as a prominent opponent of conscription in the context of the Vietnam War. But his work with longstanding colleague and mentor Professor Bob O'Neill – supported by Ford Foundation funding – saw Ball involved in setting up Strategic Studies institutes in various Southeast Asian locales throughout the 1980s. Ball's work on Soviet Signals Intelligence also took him to Soviet diplomatic establishments in Bangkok, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore during this period.

As with so many scholars of his generation, however, the ending of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union required Ball to largely reinvent himself. Asia-Pacific strategic and security developments became a major focus of his attention and remained so over the following quarter of a century.

Post-Cold War strategic commentary characterized the Asia-Pacific as a region that was "ripe for rivalry" and one likely to become "the cockpit of great power conflict." Ball challenged these assumptions, taking specific issue with arguments that Asia was in the throes of an emerging arms race. Yet Ball's analysis was never dogmatic and his method was, above all, one of following the facts. In the later years of

his career Ball was thus entirely comfortable with revising this position, arguing to the contrary that contemporary Northeast Asia now exhibited many of the characteristics of a 'complex' arms race.

Ball had little time for esoteric or arcane theoretical debates, however, concerning himself much more with the practice of strategy and security in the Asia-Pacific. He was a founding member during the early 1990s of the multilateral grouping known as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). CSCAP was, in Ball's own words, "an experiment in liberal institution building being undertaken by realists" at a time when little in the way of multilateral security architecture existed in the Asia-Pacific. His pioneering role in this process, coupled with his voluminous writings on Asian multilateralism, confidence-building measures, and defense dialogue, rightly earned him membership of what the Canadian scholar Brian Job has dubbed the "Asia-Pacific Track 2 elite."

When Ball during the late 1990s turned his attention so passionately to the study of Thai-Burma border security developments it was a cause of consternation for some, who saw this as a retreat from his traditional focus on "more important" global and regional strategic issues. Yet Ball saw the six-decade long Civil War in Eastern Burma as being far from inconsequential. In an interview conducted as part of an Australian National University 'Mentors' series in 2011, he described it as "a real blight on the region" and one that "most security analysts had been turning a blind eye to." Ball was simply unable to ignore the egregious human rights abuses being inflicted upon minority groups in that conflict putting aside, by his own admission, "academic objectivity and becom[ing] very very sympathetic to their political causes." He used his formidable Strategic Studies expertise to provide advice to ethnic armed groups on the battlefield, while at the same time employing his political sway back home to assist refugees fleeing the conflict to settle in Australia.

Ball's concern for the individual extended to the innumerable doctoral students he mentored who today occupy prominent positions in Strategic Studies institutions across the Asia-Pacific. Beyond the voluminous body of work he produced across a diverse range of research areas, that is perhaps the greatest legacy Des Ball leaves to strategy and security in this part of the world.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.