



John Howard on the South China Sea

The former Liberal Prime Minister lends support to a pragmatic and realist Australian policy on the South China Sea.

In an address to the Griffith Asia Institute on April 20 2016 former Australian Prime Minister John Howard said:

I think this issue should continue to be dealt with in the patient but firm manner thus far exhibited by both Australia and the United States...Principles should not be compromised, but likewise we should guard against overreaction...¹

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* on May 5 2016 Mr Howard asked, **“What is the alternative? To try and bring it to a head? No, I don’t think that is very smart...I just think we have to be patient. Don’t retreat, but be patient.”²**

Mr Howard observed:

China is exhibiting all of the tendencies of a new great power who has fairly recently arrived on the scene. They throw their weight around...[But] I don’t believe it is in China’s interest—and I think China believes this as well—to become involved in a major confrontation with the US.³

He went on to say, **“I think the Chinese are going to continue to do things their own way. But doing it their own way is sometimes making a lot of noise but in the end accepting reality.”⁴**

Mr Howard has suggested keeping the dispute in perspective, recalling the decades of conflict between China and Taiwan over the disputed Quemoy and Matsu islands. **“Conflict between the United States and China was feared on numerous occasions, yet it did not eventuate,”** he stated.⁵

He said the South China Sea standoff **“could go on for a long time without escalation”⁶** and although he accepted **“there could be a danger of a mistake”⁷** he pointed to the fact that the US and China have historically managed potential fallout from mistakes in a measured way. By way of example he cited the accidental US bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade in 1999.

Mr Howard is supportive of the concept of freedom of navigation but **“how you do it, and what constitutes a defence of freedom of navigation, is a matter of argument...”⁸**

He has also said Australia does not have to choose between the US and China: **“Those who argue that we face an inevitable choice do Australia a great disservice and fail to understand the true character of our national interest...Our goal can only be to maintain close links with both China and the United States whilst recognising that the respective partnerships will be different in character.”⁹**

¹ John Howard, Inaugural Asia Lecture, Griffith Asia Institute, April 20 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dM7_YuWm2Nk.

² John Howard quoted in David Feith, “China, Trump and the view from Down Under”, *Wall Street Journal*, May 5 2016 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-trump-and-the-view-from-down-under-1462464947>.

³ John Howard quoted in David Feith, “China, Trump and the view from Down Under”, *Wall Street Journal*, May 5 2016 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-trump-and-the-view-from-down-under-1462464947>.

⁴ John Howard quoted in David Feith, “China, Trump and the view from Down Under”, *Wall Street Journal*, May 5 2016 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-trump-and-the-view-from-down-under-1462464947>.

⁵ John Howard, Inaugural Asia Lecture, Griffith Asia Institute, April 20 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dM7_YuWm2Nk.

⁶ John Howard quoted in David Feith, “China, Trump and the view from Down Under”, *Wall Street Journal*, May 5 2016 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-trump-and-the-view-from-down-under-1462464947>.

⁷ John Howard quoted in David Feith, “China, Trump and the view from Down Under”, *Wall Street Journal*, May 5 2016 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-trump-and-the-view-from-down-under-1462464947>.

⁸ John Howard quoted in David Feith, “China, Trump and the view from Down Under”, *Wall Street Journal*, May 5 2016 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-trump-and-the-view-from-down-under-1462464947>.

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