

# ACRI OPINION

AUSTRALIA-CHINA RELATIONS INSTITUTE 澳大利亚-中国关系研究院

## If Australia listened to our hawks on China, we'd have been hung out to dry

**Bob Carr**  
**May 23 2017**

**The Sydney Morning Herald**

This article appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on May 23 2017.

It was like a meeting with an Old Testament prophet. Towering and rock-hewn, Malcolm Fraser was grave, telling me – Australia's new foreign minister – that America was capable of being drawn into a land war with China.

'Going to war with China and losing it. And then withdrawing from Asia.'

In this nightmare, Australia would have been recruited to join America and then left high and dry, all alone in a region that China dominated.

A dystopian vision and a long way from current realities. But on a more modest scale, Australia would be stranded right now if, after the election of Donald Trump, we'd taken the advice of our own hawks about China policy.

Consider the South China Sea.

In November Peter Jennings, the director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, said Australia should expect an early phone call from Trump asking us to run patrols in the South China Sea to challenge China. He argued we would have to agree.

Andrew Shearer is another Australian inclined to view China through a Washington lens. With periods at Washington think-tanks he was Tony Abbott's national security advisor, but was quickly replaced by Malcolm Turnbull. He re-entered the debate on January 16 saying Australia's hesitation to run patrols that challenged China 'has been noticed in Washington'.

Noticed in Washington? An early phone call from Trump urging us to start patrolling? Nothing of the sort. On the contrary, the US decided it needed China's support over North Korea.

It weighed the importance of its own relationship with China and it put on hold its own freedom of navigation patrols.

So since Trump's inauguration on January 20, the US has ceased to run the very patrols that US admirals on three occasions since 2016 suggested Australia should run – and that Australian hawks excitedly backed.

If Australia had jumped with alacrity at their advice we would have been the only American friend to have done so.

Australia has an annual dialogue on defence and strategy with China. The last one was in October 2016. According to Australian participants, the Chinese were explicit there would be economic retaliation if Australia ran patrols. Whether this has been the reason or not, the Turnbull government, like the Abbott government, declined to fly the flag.

If we had taken the other course, the US would have pulled the rug from us.

After performing like a loyal little deputy, we would have been shocked to hear Susan Thornton, the assistant secretary of state for East Asian Affairs, saying at a March 13 press conference that the Obama administration's pivot to Asia was over. The much-vaunted pivot, on which so many words of alliance piety were spilt: over.

Now Southeast Asian nations are in one-on-one negotiations with the Chinese over their territorial disputes.

On May 18 China and ASEAN agreed on a framework for a code of conduct in the South China Sea, which will 'promote maritime cooperation'.

Just a day later, the Philippines conducted direct bilateral negotiations with China for the first time, in a step towards resolving their differences.

Last November Malaysia signed an agreement on naval co-operation with China during Prime Minister Najib Razak's visit to Beijing. On January 3, a Chinese Navy submarine made a historic call to Malaysia's South China Sea-facing Kota Kinabalu Port.

A joint communique between China and Vietnam signed on May 15 declared both sides will 'manage and properly control maritime disputes ... and maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea'.

We could have trashed our relationship with China by having our navy challenge Chinese claims. Yet even Labor had toyed with the concept in 2016 (although later dropped it) and Kim Beazley had endorsed it.

Now the US President has relegated the issue. Vice President Pence may even have communicated during his Asia tour that Northeast Asia and not Southeast Asia was the US priority – certainly Chinese sources believe that was his message. Meanwhile, President Trump says he has a special relationship with Xi Jinping and has boasted in the Wall Street Journal of their 'very good relationship' and 'great chemistry'.

His commerce secretary Wilbur Ross also boasts about the new sheen on US-China relations. He calls the recent 10-point agreement on trade a 'herculean accomplishment'.

Canberra's cool-headedness in response to American admirals and its own hawks has been vindicated.

Some Americans may entertain the notion of containing China's return to great power status. Australian cold warriors will persist in urging us to join the containment project. But their problem is that America – not just the current president – can be impetuous, swinging between bursts of foreign policy activism and periods of retrenchment.

If allies such as Australia sign up for a burst of crusading zeal, they are liable to be hung out to dry when America changes direction. No other American ally is as dependent on China for its economic future. If the Turnbull government had been persuaded by the hawks, right now that would be our position: out to dry.

*Professor the Hon. Bob Carr is Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney.*