

ACRI Opinion

Australia - China Relations Institute 澳大利亚-中国关系研究院

Loose lips on China have cost Australia dearly

Bob Carr

May 24 2018

The Sydney Morning Herald

This article appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on May 24 2018.

Angela Merkel is the leader of America's most important ally. The differences between democratic, US-aligned Germany and Communist-ruled China are real. China's cutting edge industries now challenge Germany's lead in manufacturing.

But today Angela Merkel is in China, to talk to its leaders in Beijing and to promote German innovation in Shenzhen.

All agree, however, that Australia-China relations are off the rails; on some evidence, more than any time since diplomatic relations began in 1972.

India is a partner of growing importance for the United States, but earlier this month it slammed the door on Australia joining it in military exercises that included the US and Japan. The reason? We are seen as the outlier among American allies, embodying the most extreme anti-China views, and India wants a working relationship with its neighbour.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held a trilateral summit this month with his Chinese and South Korean counterparts as Japan and China set aside differences over islands in the East China Sea. Faced with Trump's stand on trade and his improvisation on North Korea, both China and Japan have opted for rapprochement.

Australia stands off to the side.

If I were foreign affairs minister today my language on the South China Sea would be identical with Julie Bishop's. Namely, that Australia will exercise freedom of navigation pursuant to international law but that

we will not provoke an increase in tensions. I'd be stating that differences must be resolved peacefully, that all parties must respect international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and so on.

But the current freeze in relations is not due to difference of substance. We've lost our chance to press our case like Germany, India and Japan simply through loose talk, presumably to impress the Trump administration with our impeccable alliance credentials.

Australia's flamboyant rhetorical shift against China predated Malcolm Turnbull's introduction of anti-foreign influence legislation last December. Earlier in 2017, Julie Bishop, in a speech in Singapore, disputed China's right to leadership because it was not a democracy. Tom Switzer noted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* this was the first time since Billy McMahon that we were elevating differences over China's system of government as an issue in the bilateral relationship. Up till then under Coalition and Labor governments we'd set them to one side.

In June last year, the Prime Minister was calling for a bigger US military commitment in our region. It was Australia saying it wants a military build-up in Asia; effectively, to contain China. Hugh White identified this as going further than that of any other US ally, including Japan. And the US ignored it anyway.

Defending Chinese students in Australia from the baseless claims that they were promoting Communist Party policy on our campuses would have been an ideal opportunity for one of our leaders to have toned down the anti-China panic that took off in mid-2017 and introduce some nuance.

When the Prime Minister introduced his foreign interference legislation on December 7, he could have stuck to the departmental script and said it was aimed at no country in particular but simply protected Australian sovereignty. Instead, he parodied a line of Chairman Mao's delivered in 1949 and rendered it as, 'the Australian people stand up'.

What should have been a cool-headed speech became an entirely unnecessary taunting of a country which we have a valuable relationship.

No other US ally – not Japan or any of the Europeans – has thought it necessary to abandon diplomatic practice in the conduct of its China relationship. Nor have US partners like India or Singapore.

Early this year, the Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister seemed to be trying to rein things in. Then there was a new stridency let loose by colleagues. Then deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce said of China, 'any state that has the capacity to overrun you is always a greater threat'. A junior minister, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, took aim at China's aid program in the Pacific. Differences on aid could easily have been listed as a matter for dialogue not a public skirmish.

You can't say to the Chinese 'Oh, that's only Barnaby' or 'Fierravanti-Wells is only a junior minister'. It's easy to imagine the nationalist outrage if senior Chinese leaders had directed such rhetoric at Australia. We wouldn't accept comparable insults from any international partner. In foreign relations words are bullets.

At the very least we ought to be talking with one voice.

None of the above requires that Australia surrender positions on the South China Sea or the Chinese record on human rights. Nor should we surrender our vigilance about potential espionage or subversion.

But from Gough Whitlam to Tony Abbott we pursued a pragmatic, national interest-based China policy that in John Howard's words set differences to one side and worked on the things we could

agree on. Right now that would include defending the rules-based order in trade and working toward a denuclearised Korean Peninsula. Does China's rise and America's decline make that too hard? Ask Angela Merkel. She thinks diplomacy provides the key to being a US ally and a partner of the Chinese, and that includes tough talk when necessary.

It's called diplomacy. On China, from Whitlam to Abbott, we used to practise it and it seemed to work.

Bob Carr is Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney. He is a former foreign minister and the longest serving premier of New South Wales.