

Perspectives

The new/old benchmarks in Australia's PRC debate

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As both major parties prepare for a federal election next year, the Coalition's **'wolverine'** mentality on the People's Republic of China (PRC) appears to have leapt from its backbenches and crept into cabinet.

Speaking last week on morning television, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, unprompted and entirely without context, **accused** the Opposition Leader, Anthony Albanese, of having 'backed in the Chinese government'. This came a day after Defence Minister Peter Dutton had critiqued remarks by Paul Keating to the National Press Club, **dubbing** the former prime minister, 'former dear leader and Grand Appeaser Comrade Keating', who was 'talk[ing] down Australia (yet again)'.

This particular brand of base political rhetoric, equating the expression of views at odds with those of the government as effectively treasonous, was once confined to backbench posturing. For example, Assistant Minister for Defence Andrew Hastie in June **described** the Opposition Leader as 'a threat to national security' in response to a **speech** by Albanese in which he stated Australia needed 'more strategy and less politics' on the PRC. Another Liberal backbencher, Ted O'Brien, often **touted** by the **press** as the government's 'China expert', **labelled** Albanese a 'useful idiot' for this comment. Hastie had also **condemned** the head of the Australia-China Business Council for having 'a low estimation of our country' for stating that economic links needed to be taken into account when considering foreign policy. And last year Senator Eric Abetz **asked** Chinese-Australians appearing before an inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities 'whether they [were] willing to unconditionally condemn the Chinese Communist Party'.

The embrace of this framework appears to have trumped the Prime Minister's 2019 **pledge** to be 'measured [and] careful' in dealing with 'the complexity involved in our region and the challenges that we face in future.'

Instead, confronted with declining polling numbers and facing a barrage of domestic and international criticism for climate change inaction and diplomatic mismanagement of the AUKUS announcement, senior ministers have pivoted to a fear campaign, tapping into a rich vein of public unease over the PRC's recent behaviour and future intentions. One need only examine the general tenor of the results of the **Australia-China Relations Institute (UTS:ACRI)/Business Intelligence & Data Analytics (BIDA) Poll 2021** to see how anxieties about the PRC have gripped the Australian public consciousness. A majority of Australians are significantly troubled about many aspects of the Australia-PRC relationship (74 percent), are deeply mistrustful of Beijing (76 percent) and think that Australia may ultimately benefit from the adoption of a harder government line on the PRC (63 percent).

There is real substance to these concerns. Many Australians now have firsthand experience dealing with Beijing's **application of the economic thumbscrews**; two Australian citizens continue to be detained by the PRC government without any evidence or information presented about the charges of espionage levelled against them; and an increasing number of examples have come to the fore detailing attempts by Beijing to undermine **free speech and academic freedom** in Australian higher education, to name but a few examples.

Beyond Australian shores, Beijing continues to repress and persecute the Turkic Muslim population in Xinjiang, with surveillance and intimidation extending out to the [Uyghur diaspora](#); initiate aggressive unilateral moves in the South China Sea; undercut the rights and freedoms of Hong Kong's people; and rattle the sabre across the Taiwan strait. These, among other activities, present significant cause for anxiety, especially given there is little sign of course change in the near future as the [personality cult](#) of President Xi soars to [new heights](#).

But mud-slinging in domestic politics does nothing to address these matters. The application of a 'loyalty' test will only further toxify an already heated debate. And the language deployed by senior ministers have implications that go well beyond political grappling.

There are three dangers which immediately present themselves by setting the Australia-PRC relationship up to be viewed through this prism.

First, the charge of 'disloyalty' which is virtually slapped on anyone questioning the government line subverts an important pillar of Australian democracy - [implied freedom of political communication](#) is a crucial part of the system of representative and responsible government. For cabinet ministers to suggest otherwise sets a dangerous precedent.

Second, muzzling discourse, the promulgation of one perspective at the expense of all others, weakens policymaking. This debate is one that needs more voices, more allowances for flexibility in thinking and in action if the strongest policy settling point is to be reached. But this, perhaps, is too much to ask for with a government that is seemingly locked into its position on the PRC. Yet Australia's allies, partners and friends are allowing for precisely this type of flexibility. Thus both President Joe Biden and Vice President Harris have publicly [spoken out](#) against the vilification of Asian-Americans. And in terms of US PRC policy, US national security advisor Jake Sullivan explicitly rejected the Cold War framework in recent [remarks](#), the two great powers maintaining dialogue and [cooperating](#) in some respects while engaged in 'stiff competition'. Australia is once more an outlier.

Third, the specific type of epithets being used help pave the way for racial prejudice, [already on the rise](#), and further marginalisation of Chinese-Australians. The [UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2021](#) showed that about four in ten Australians believed that 'Australians of Chinese origin can be mobilised by the Chinese government to undermine Australia's interests and social cohesion'. This thinking extends out beyond grassroots perspectives. A former director of security intelligence in the Defence Department recently [lamented](#) in the context of the China challenge, 'Security vetting agencies are limited in what they can do to prevent people of any ethnic background from obtaining high-level security clearances if they are Australian citizens and have sufficient checkable background.'

The Prime Minister's eagerness to embrace an approach previously confined to his backbench may be politically expedient but it is a strategy best shelved in the longer-term interests of the country. He has now earned his own wolverine claw, but the potential for Australian social and cultural cohesion will be the poorer for it.

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She is editor of UTS:ACRI's commentary series, *Perspectives*. Her work has been published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Guardian*, the *South China Morning Post*, *The Diplomat*, *The Conversation*, *Australian Foreign Affairs*, the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter*, the Australian Institute of International Affairs' *Australian Outlook*, and the Council on Foreign Relations' *Asia Unbound* amongst other outlets, and she has contributed chapters to edited volumes. She is a lawyer admitted to the Supreme Court of New South Wales and has previously held research and project positions in Australian departmental, ministerial and Senate offices, at state and federal levels.