

Australia-China monthly wrap-up

February and March 2022



This edition features:

- Summary and analysis of major developments in February and March 2022

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The Australian government in February went on the offensive with respect to the opposition Labor Party's record on national security, and, in particular, its approach to the People's Republic of China (PRC), resulting in an increasingly heated clash of views and political rhetoric. The Australian Labor Party (ALP), initially goaded into a like-for-like slanging match, subsequently cleaved to [repeatedly insisting](#) that bipartisanship on national security and foreign policy continues to be the order of the day.

Beyond domestic politicking, February and March saw concerning developments on the global stage which may ultimately have a significant impact on Australian strategic interests and necessitate an overhaul of its strategic thinking: what the Russia-PRC joint statement and the Russia-Ukraine crisis might portend, and a leaked draft security agreement between the PRC and the Solomon Islands throwing up the possibility of a PRC strategic foothold in the Pacific.

The PRC in domestic politics

Over the month of February, charges of '[appeasement](#)' were [repeatedly levelled](#) at the Australian Labor Party (ALP), with Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese being accused of being Beijing's '[pick](#)' in the upcoming election. Members of the Coalition government sought to establish their PRC policy as plainly more muscular. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, for example, on February 21 [stressed](#) the fact that he 'was the one who shut the borders to China at the start of the pandemic' and 'the one who called for there to be a fair dinkum investigation as to how this pandemic started' despite 'everyone attack[ing] me for doing it'. And Foreign Minister Marise Payne stated during a March 1 [speech](#):

There is sacrifice involved ... But as a nation, we have stood firm. And consistency is key. This has been the right decision – sometimes in the face of criticism from voices who have said we should make compromises to repair the relationship with China.

The Prime Minister on February 15 [told](#) talkback radio that 'those looking to threaten and coerce Australia have a one way bet on each way Albo'. A Liberal backbencher [asked](#), 'Is it still Labor policy to forge closer relations with the People's Liberation Army?', referring to a speech Deputy Opposition Leader Richard Marles had made during a trip to the PRC in 2019.

On February 21 the Prime Minister [rejected](#) the suggestion that 'there's so much bipartisan support on China', saying, '[W]e set a high bar for bipartisanship and Labor don't measure up to it'.

When pressed on what evidence substantiated Coalition government claims that Labor has been ‘soft’ on the PRC, the examples relied on with respect to differences in policies between the Coalition and the ALP have been minimal – [focusing](#) mostly on [defence spending](#), going back to Labor’s defence cuts in 2012-13, and [alleging](#) a ‘watering down’ of ‘every bit’ of national security legislation.

The politicisation of national security and PRC policy drew criticism from former members of both sides of politics, such as former foreign minister [Julie Bishop](#) and former prime ministers [Malcolm Turnbull](#) and [Kevin Rudd](#); and senior members of the intelligence and security communities, such as former Defence Secretary and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) head [Dennis Richardson](#) and current ASIO Director-General [Mike Burgess](#). Current Defence Secretary Greg Moriarty joined in with the cautious [comment](#) that ‘national resilience depends on national unity to a certain extent’.

The ALP was quick to respond in kind, at least initially, to Coalition attacks. A Labor backbencher [said](#), ‘Scott Morrison is now doing Beijing’s bidding’. The Opposition Leader [branded](#) the Prime Minister a ‘Manchurian candidate’, after the Prime Minister had used the same label in reference to the Deputy Opposition Leader. After this fiery start, the Labor Party shifted to defend itself instead by reference to its record of bipartisanship on PRC policy and national security.

The Opposition Leader in February [expressed](#) his support for Australia’s actions with respect to the PRC to date, rejecting the idea that Australia is ‘overreacting about the threat [of] China.’ He said:

I believe that our response has been appropriate, considered and measured.

In March, he said in a [newspaper interview](#):

Labor will be every bit as strong in defending Australian values against any push by China or any nation trying to undermine them.

(See UTS:ACRI report [The China consensus](#) for a more in-depth discussion on Coalition government and ALP policies on the PRC).

Russia-Ukraine and the PRC

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, Prime Minister Morrison expressed concern ‘at the lack of a strong response from China’, particularly its move to [lift restrictions](#) on Russian wheat imports on the same day as Russia launched its invasion. The Acting Foreign Minister at the time, Simon Birmingham, [said](#) of the PRC’s ‘relief...to Russia’s wheat industry’:

[Beijing] appear[s] to be both making excuses for Russia’s action and in part facilitating or underpinning it by giving economic relief.

Opposition Leader Albanese also [criticised](#) the PRC over its decision, saying Beijing was showing it was not serious ‘about global peace and security’. Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong [stated](#) that the winding back of trade restrictions ‘is rightly seen as enabling Russia’s actions, enabling Russia’s aggression at a time when the world should be united in imposing a cost on Russia.’

While both senior members of the Coalition government and the ALP have focused on the PRC for its refusal to condemn the invasion of Ukraine, maintaining throughout February and March an attempt to pressure Beijing to adopt a stronger stance against Moscow, the Defence Minister went further, stating on several occasions that the PRC was the sole outlier on the world stage in its refusal to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. He said that the ‘world [stands as one](#) to condemn the actions of President Putin, except for the Chinese government tragically’, that ‘China has essentially [encouraged](#) Russia’.

Mixed messaging? Views on the PRC versus views on India

Both parties have made it a point to differentiate their views on the PRC’s position from their views on India’s position (the country has also refused to condemn the invasion, has been [buying](#) discounted oil from Russia and [exploring](#) a rupee-rouble exchange) on the Ukraine crisis, which has resulted in some mixed messaging on Australia’s overall stance. The Prime Minister on February 24 [stated](#), ‘I certainly wouldn’t refer to them

in the same context that I've made remarks about China,' going to say, 'All countries have different levels of engagement with Russia...And so I'm respectful of that.'

The Shadow Foreign Minister in a February 27 interview [said](#), 'I understand from public reports that Prime Minister Modi has ... urged for Russia to discontinue or to withdraw from Ukraine and respect Ukraine's territorial integrity. As I said, countries do make their own decisions about how they adhere to these principles [sovereignty and territorial integrity].'

On March 4, the Prime Minister [reasoned](#) that he 'wouldn't put [India] in the same category as China', saying 'we've got to work patiently with our, with our partners who work for the same objectives as we do in the Indo-Pacific'. The Defence Minister on March 25 [described](#) India's stance on Russia as in India's 'national interest', saying that 'there has been a relationship between India and Russia over a long period of time because they see it as a countermeasure to the influence of China and the threat of China to India'.

'Arc of autocracy'

Referring to the PRC and Russia, the Prime Minister in a March 7 speech warned that a new '[arc of autocracy](#)' was emerging 'to challenge and reset the world order in their own image'. This was new language to formally describe the Prime Minister's shift towards a worldview grounded in ideology, first substantively flagged in June 2021 when he signalled a swing towards a framing he had [previously warned against](#), [exhorting](#) liberal democracies to '[step] up with coordinated action', and 'show that liberal democracies work for all'.

The possibility of sanctions on the PRC

Following [comments](#) by Jake Sullivan, President Joe Biden's national security adviser, on March 13 that 'there will absolutely be consequences [for Beijing] for large-scale sanctions evasion efforts or support to Russia to backfill them', both the [Prime Minister](#) and the [Opposition Leader](#) indicated openness to Australian sanctions on the PRC, noting that Australia would act in concert on this front with allies and partners.

Solomon Islands-PRC draft security agreement

The draft text of a security agreement between the PRC and the Solomon Islands was leaked on social media on March 24. Of particular concern to Canberra were provisions in the [document](#) which could allow Beijing to deploy forces to 'protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands', as well as allow the PRC to 'make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands'.

Members of the [Australian government](#), the [Leader of the Opposition](#) and his [ministers](#) and the Australian [defence](#) and [diplomatic](#) community quickly expressed concern about the arrangement's potential to provide the PRC with a military foothold in the Pacific. Such a development would have a marked impact on Australia's strategic calculus, rendering it a pressing anxiety. However, concern from some quarters was vocalised in terms that could be construed as paternalistic, unhelpful in the competition for influence.

Trade Minister Dan Tehan [spoke of](#) the government's concern that the agreement would not be in the Solomon Islands' national interest, that it could undermine the nation's sovereignty. Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews [said](#), 'This is our backyard. This is our neighbourhood and we are very concerned of any activity that is taking place in the Pacific Islands'. The Defence Minister [declared](#), 'I don't think it's consistent with the values that we share with the Solomon Islands...We don't want unsettling influences, and we don't want pressure and exertion that we're seeing from China continue to roll out in the region.'

Referring to the criticism of the draft agreement, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare in [remarks](#) to parliament on March 29 said it was 'insulting...to be branded as unfit to manage our sovereign affairs'. He said that the Solomon Islands had not been 'pressured in any way' and that 'there is no intention whatsoever to ask China to build a military base'. Prime Minister Sogavare also advised that the deal was 'ready for signing'. The Solomon Islands government in a March 31 [media release](#) said that 'elements' of the agreement had been 'initialled' and that the draft 'will be cleaned up and await signatures'.

Asked whether there would be ‘any response from Australia’ to the draft security pact, Prime Minister Morrison responded, ‘we will see how this progresses’.

Foreign interference

Delivering the ASIO [annual threat assessment](#) on February 9, ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess said that ‘espionage and foreign interference has supplanted terrorism as our principal security concern,’ with the threat being ‘pervasive and multifaceted’. The Director-General made it a point to emphasise that espionage and foreign interference threats came from multiple countries of origin. On espionage he said, ‘Multiple countries are seeking to conduct espionage against us – and not just those countries that might be considered our traditional adversaries. In some instances, espionage is conducted by countries we consider friends’. On foreign interference: ‘Attempts at political interference are not confined to one side of politics, and you’d be surprised by the range of countries involved.’

However in detailing a recent operation undertaken by ASIO, the focus was squarely on the PRC. The Director-General stated that ASIO had ‘recently detected and disrupted a foreign interference plot in the lead-up to an election in Australia’, involving a wealthy...puppeteer’ who sought to support potential political candidates. While the Director-General did not identify the country involved, nor the political party it had unsuccessfully targeted, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* subsequently [reported](#) that ‘multiple security sources who are not authorised to speak publicly have confirmed...that a Chinese intelligence service was behind the plot and that it involved Labor.’

The late Labor Senator Kimberley Kitching on February 14 used parliamentary privilege during a Senate Estimates hearing to [put to](#) the Director-General that the ‘the puppeteer mentioned in [his] annual threat assessment last week is [Chinese-Australian businessperson] Chau Chak Wing.’ Mr Burgess neither confirmed nor denied the accusation, saying it was ‘unfair’ of the Senator to ask that question in public. Mr Chau, who has made sizeable donations to both sides of politics and to universities, [denied](#) the charge in a statement, and the matter has not been publicly pursued since.

While foreign interference has been a subject of heightened focus in Australia over the last few years, with \$87.8 million in funding for the Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce [announced](#) in 2019, having recourse to domestic foreign interference legislation remains relatively new territory. There is [one case](#) before the courts while [another](#) is under continuing investigation. The individuals at the centre of both are accused of working on behalf of Beijing. Deportation under visa legislation is more commonly relied upon, for example in the recent [expulsion](#) of property developer Zheng Jiefu, an Australian resident, accused by ASIO of engaging in foreign interference on behalf of the PRC.

The Quad

The Quad’s momentum has been sustained in terms of regular meetings, with the fourth [Quad Foreign Ministers Meeting](#) held in Melbourne on February 11. The [joint statement](#) following the meeting for the first time expressed the group’s opposition to economic coercion:

We reaffirm our commitment to upholding and strengthening the rules-based multilateral trading system, with the World Trade Organization at its core. We oppose coercive economic policies and practices that run counter to this system and will work collectively to foster global economic resilience against such actions.

This reflects a stronger stance on the matter than previously assumed by India. Asked in an [interview](#) with the *Sydney Morning Herald* whether Beijing’s actions against Australia constituted economic coercion, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar replied, ‘You know that bit – if it looks like a duck and it walks like a duck ...’. ‘We were all very clear [in the Quad ministers’ meeting that] we all believe politics should not be conducted by coercion at any time.’ Yet India remains cautious. Foreign Minister Jaishankar in describing the intentions of the Quad at a [press conference](#) following the meeting said, ‘[W]e are for something, not against somebody.’ This followed [criticism](#) the same day from a PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson of the Quad as ‘essentially a tool for containing and besieging China to maintain US hegemony.’

An emergency leaders-level meeting of the Quad was convened on March 4 in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. India's press release after the meeting emphasised that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had 'underlined that the Quad must remain focused on its core objective of promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.' This limits the intent expressed in the [joint statement](#) by Quad leaders on March 12 2021 which outlined a commitment to 'counter[ing] threats in the Indo-Pacific and beyond'.

In a [media statement](#) following the meeting, Prime Minister Morrison in a clear message to the PRC said, '[W]e cannot allow what is happening in Ukraine now to ever happen in the Indo-Pacific'.

AUKUS

On February 10 the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) said it had [dedicated](#) more resources to the AUKUS initiative. This included the deployment of staff to the Australian permanent mission in Vienna, which represents Australia in the International Atomic Energy Agency, and 'beefing up legal and diplomatic teams in Canberra which have been tasked with tackling the project's legal, regulatory and political repercussions internationally'. The foreign ministers of AUKUS countries [met](#) on the margins of the Munich Security Conference on February 19 and 'discussed progress made in implementing initiatives' within the AUKUS partnership. At the beginning of April, it was [announced](#) that the AUKUS pact had been extended to the development of hypersonic missiles.

The PRC continues to [vocalise](#) its opposition to Australia's proposed acquisition of nuclear submarines through the partnership. Indeed, the Russia-PRC [joint statement](#) released on February 4 expressed 'serious concern' about AUKUS, 'in particular their decision to initiate cooperation in the field of nuclear-powered submarines.' In response to the announcement regarding hypersonic missiles, the PRC Foreign Ministry [said](#) it believed the move was 'exploiting the Ukraine crisis', with AUKUS' 'ultimate goal' as building 'a NATO replica in the Asia-Pacific'.

In February, France [removed](#) Australia from its list of key partners in its updated Indo-Pacific strategy document, stating that 'Australia's decision in September 2021 without prior consultation or warning' to end its submarine contact with France in favour of procuring nuclear submarines under AUKUS, 'led to a re-evaluation of the past strategic partnership' and 'pursue bilateral cooperation with Australia on [a] case-by-case basis'.

Switch in rhetorical gears at the PRC Embassy in Australia

There has been a noticeable switch in gears in public dealings by the PRC Embassy in Australia with its new Ambassador continuing the more conciliatory tone established upon his arrival. While the softer tone does not represent any shift in policy, and while the PRC Foreign Ministry continues on with its strident rhetoric against Australia, it might contribute to allowing for some meaningful exchange.

Ambassador Xiao Qian [presented](#) his credentials to the Governor-General of Australia. David Hurley, on February 10.

On February 24, the Ambassador during a [speech](#) during a ceremony honouring NSW Senior Constable Kelly Foster, who lost her life attempting to rescue an international student from the PRC in 2021, said, 'China is willing to work with Australia to meet each other halfway, review the past and look into the future, adhere to the principle of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit, and make joint efforts to push forward China-Australia relations along the right track.'

He [told](#) Australian media, 'The diplomatic channel is open.'

This builds on the [statement](#) he issued on arrival to Australia in January, pledging to 'jointly push the China-Australia relations[hip] back to the right track.'

Foreign Minister Payne declined to state whether she 'place[d] any significance on that statement', [saying](#) only, 'I will meet with him ... and we'll have discussions.'

The Foreign Minister met with the Ambassador on March 9, after which the PRC Embassy published the following [readout](#):

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Australia. It is hoped that the two sides will work together to review the past and look into the future, adhere to the principle of mutual respect equality and mutual benefit, and make joint efforts to push forward China-Australia relations along the right track.

While the Foreign Minister [termed](#) the meeting ‘important’, the Australian government [readout](#) of the meeting was notably more muted by comparison, stating that the Foreign Minister had ‘set out frankly Australia’s position on a range of issues’. The Foreign Minister then [said](#) on March 24 that the meeting ‘should not be read as an indication that Australia would in any way, shape or form compromise the principles that underpin our national interests and our national security.’

Shadow Foreign Minister Wong, who [met](#) with the Ambassador on March 16, had [said](#) of the Ambassador’s reaching out, ‘It is a good thing the ambassador has sought a meeting with the foreign minister regardless of difference, engagement is important. Neither country is going away’.

Ambassador Xiao had also sought a meeting with the Prime Minister, a request which was declined. The Prime Minister [outlined](#) reasons for the decision in a press conference on March 26: ‘Australians would think it would be very inappropriate of me to engage in dialogue with an ambassador’ so long as Beijing continues to block ministerial dialogue. He went on to say that ‘that would be a demonstration of weakness on our part’ which is the ‘last message’ he would ‘ever [send] to China.’ The Opposition Leader [expressed](#) his ‘respect and support [for] the Prime Minister’s decision’ on this matter.

PLA-N laser pointed at RAAF aircraft

On February 19 the Department of Defence issued a [statement](#) detailing an incident in which a People’s Liberation Army – Navy (PLA-N) warship pointed a laser at a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) surveillance aircraft which had been monitoring two PLA-N ships that had entered the Arafura Sea. The PLA-N vessel that directed the laser at the aircraft was within Australia’s exclusive economic zone.

A PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson initially limited discussion of the details of the incident from its perspective to an [assertion](#) that ‘the information released by the Australian side is untrue’, then the next day [stated](#) the PLA-N vessel had been forced to take defensive measures after the Australian plane had flown too close to the ship – ‘with the closest range of only four kilometres’ – and allegedly dropped sonobuoys near it. Prime Minister Morrison, asked to confirm how close the Australian plane was flying to the vessel [said](#) only that the aircraft was ‘exactly where it was allowed to be’. The Department of Defence [confirmed](#) the plane had flown four kilometres away from the vessel, but that that was ‘a standard flight profile for RAAF maritime patrol aircraft for a visual investigation of a surface vessel.’

Senior Australian ministers and the opposition condemned the act. The Prime Minister [characterised](#) it as an ‘act of intimidation’, a ‘dangerous’ and ‘reckless and irresponsible’ act; the Foreign Minister [described](#) it as ‘completely inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour’; and the Opposition Leader [said](#) it was ‘an outrageous act of aggression that should be condemned.’

The Defence Minister went further, [describing](#) it as a ‘deliberate, aggressive act’, declaring there had ‘obviously’ been ‘coordination between Russia and China on the timing’, the PRC acting in parallel to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. No evidence has publicly been proffered to support this claim.

A journalist during a February 21 [press conference](#) held by the Prime Minister pointed out that ‘[i]n the past the government’s been reluctant to publicly name China when laser attacks have occurred,’ asking, ‘What’s changed?’. The Prime Minister did not offer a reason for the shift, saying, ‘[I]t happened, and it is indisputable... we disclosed it because this needs to be called out.’

Port of Darwin

The future of PRC company Landbridge's 99-year-lease of the Port of Darwin remains uncertain. The Defence Minister in a February 18 interview [said](#) that the government was still in the process of looking at the findings of a Department of Defence review commissioned by the National Security Committee, and that that was 'partway through its process'. He stated an announcement would be made 'in due course'. On the same day, [asked](#) whether a Labor government would 'tear up' the agreement, the Opposition Leader opted not to respond directly, only saying that 'I think that there's a case for strategic assets to be in the national interest, to remain in Australian hands.'

The Home Affairs Minister during an [interview](#) on March 16 said that the government would be seeking to pass legislation relating to critical infrastructure which would give them 'additional powers to deal with systems of national significance, which could well include the Port of Darwin. And what that means is that we can put significant terms and conditions on these systems of national significance, which will give enhanced reporting requirements.'

The Australian government [flagged](#) \$1.5 billion for new port infrastructure in the area on March 29, but the precise use of the new facilities are presently unclear. During a [Budget Estimates hearing](#) on March 31 Finance Minister Simon Birmingham stated that the infrastructure was for 'economic development' but said, 'It may also have benefits for defence, and they're not to be discounted.'

Cheng Lei

On March 26 the Australian government [stated](#) it had been notified by PRC authorities that Australian citizen Cheng Lei, a former TV presenter for PRC state broadcaster China Global Television Network (CGTN), would face trial on March 31. Ms Cheng was first detained in August 2020 and formally arrested on the charge of the supply of state secrets to a foreign entity in February 2021.

As with last year's trial of Australian author Yang Hengjun on charges of espionage, proceedings were conducted behind closed doors, with the Australian Ambassador to the PRC [denied entry](#). Ambassador Graham Fletcher [told](#) the press, 'We can have no confidence in the validity of a process which is conducted in secret', pointing out that 'Our consular agreement says that we ought to be able to attend trials.' Article 11(f) of the [agreement](#) provides for this.

The approximately three-hour long proceedings ended with a [deferred verdict](#), with no indication as to when a verdict would be announced. Under PRC law, the charge of supplying state secrets to a foreign entity carries a [sentence](#) of five years to life imprisonment.

The Australian government has not as yet characterised Ms Cheng's case as arbitrary detention, as the [Foreign Minister](#) and [Ambassador](#) did with Mr Yang's case on the day of his trial.

Dual national detained in Hong Kong

[News](#) broke this in February that an Australian-Chinese dual national had been arrested in Hong Kong in January 2021 and charged with 'subversion' under its broad national security laws. While DFAT has not confirmed the individual's identity, the *South China Morning Post* [reported](#) that the man was one of the 47 activists and politicians detained on January 6.

Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam last year [said](#) that dual nationals 'are regarded as Chinese nationals in Hong Kong. So likewise they will not be eligible for consular protection, including consular visits'.

The Foreign Minister [said](#) that Australia has been 'denied consular access despite multiple attempts because the individual concerned is deemed to be a Chinese citizen under China's citizenship laws'.

The Foreign Minister, along with Canadian, UK and US counterparts had on January 10 issued a [joint statement](#) underscoring their 'serious concern' at the mass arrests, saying '[i]t is clear that the National Security Law is being used to eliminate dissent and opposing political views.'

China Eastern flight MU5735

The crash of China Eastern Airlines flight 5735 into a mountainside in the Guangxi region, killing all 132 people on board, on March 21 elicited messages of sympathy from world leaders including Indian Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#), Canadian Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#) and UK Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#). Taiwan's President [Tsai Ing-Wen](#) also expressed her condolences. While Shadow Foreign Minister Wong [tweeted](#) her sympathies, there has as yet been no comment or statement, or reference to the tragedy, from the Australian government.

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)

After having been asked by then-Trade Minister Simon Birmingham on October 20 2020 to [inquire](#) into expanding membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade tabled its [report](#) on February 10.

On the PRC's [application](#) to join the CPTPP, submitted on September 16 2021, the committee recommended the government 'work with other CPTPP members to encourage China to re-establish full trading relations, including ending its coercive measures and reengaging in ministerial dialogue' and to 'demonstrate an ability and willingness to commit to the CPTPP's high standards' before supporting accession.

The Prime Minister [made it plain](#) at the end of last year that consideration of the PRC's bid would only follow the cessation of Beijing's trade punishment against Australia. The Trade Minister had also [stated](#) that for the PRC to join the CPTPP, ministerial engagement between the countries would have to resume.

On Taiwan's [application](#) to join the CPTPP, submitted on September 22 2021, the committee recommended the government 'encourage and facilitate the accession of Taiwan to the CPTPP' as well as consider in parallel the negotiation of an Australia-Taiwan free trade agreement.

Prime Minister Morrison's WeChat account

On February 7 Department of Home Affairs officials [advised](#) the ALP, following a request for a briefing from Senator Kristina Keneally, that there was no evidence to establish foreign interference with the transfer of ownership and rebranding of the Prime Minister's WeChat account (discussed in the [December 2021/January 2022 monthly wrap-up](#)). The following day, the Prime Minister [told](#) an online briefing of Chinese-language media that he had been 'censored', stating the opportunity to communicate on the platform 'is not being afforded to me as the Prime Minister of the country, but I notice it's being afforded to my political opponents, but people can read into that what they like.'

NSW Labor and the PRC

During the course of defending taking a trip to Hong Kong and the PRC in 2015 funded by property developer and political donor Huang Xiangmo, who had his visa [revoked](#) in 2019 after ASIO concluded he could undertake 'acts of foreign interference', NSW Labor Opposition Leader Chris Minns apologised for [recommending](#) in his maiden speech in 2015 that Parliament 'mandate the teaching of Mandarin to all New South Wales school children from kindy to year 12'. The proposal was praised at the time by then-Premier Mike Baird. He [said](#) on February 22: 'It was a mistake on my part, one I regret.'

Taiwan

While there has been increasing rhetorical support for Taiwan from both major parties (see, e.g., 'CPTPP' section), neither the government nor the ALP has talked of abandoning the commitment to the one-China policy. The Foreign Minister [reaffirmed](#) the government's policy on Taiwan in a press conference on February 9 2022:

Australia remains committed to our one-China policy.

On February 13, the Prime Minister was [asked](#) whether he was ‘concerned that [the PRC] might take advantage of any military action in the Ukraine to move on Taiwan?’ He responded, ‘I wouldn’t go that far’. He emphasised this again later in the month, [telling](#) a press conference on February 24, ‘I think it’s important to separate these issues’, and in an interview on the same day, ‘I’d caution about drawing too many strong parallels between those situations. They are quite different.’ He [expanded](#) on the reasoning on March 4:

I wouldn’t conflate the issues of Taiwan and Ukraine. I think they’re very different issues. I mean, Ukraine is not a member of NATO, and there’s a clear red line when it comes to if Russia was to cross over into a NATO country, I think they’d know exactly what happens. So I wouldn’t equate Ukraine with Taiwan. There’s also, I think, a very clear understanding of what the implications would be if China were to seek to realise its ambitions for Taiwan.

The Defence Minister, however, drew a direct link to the Ukraine crisis and the PRC’s calculations on Taiwan in an [interview](#):

My assessment is that the Chinese Government will be watching very closely the world’s reaction to President Putin, whether there is a significant and tangible price that Russia’s going to have to pay for this invasion into Ukraine, and they will be sucking up all of that intelligence, all of that information, and that will allow them to factor that into their own decisions as to what they want to do with Taiwan or elsewhere in the years ahead.

He went on to say that it ‘may be in [Xi’s] calculation’ that, as the interviewer put it, ‘now is the right time to go for Taiwan.’

Shadow Foreign Minister Wong, asked on February 22 whether ‘a Labor government [would] commit troops to defend Taiwan’, [replied](#) that Labor would adhere to the principle of strategic ambiguity, in line with the US position:

[R]ather than talking up the drums of war, the adult and responsible thing to do is to continue to assert, as the Taiwanese have done to China, that any resolution across the Taiwan Straits must occur peacefully, and to speak very clearly, against any unilateral changes to the status quo.

The Shadow Foreign Minister did not communicate a [view](#) on whether the Beijing might be ‘spurred into its own military aggression’ in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, emphasising instead that ‘peace is best kept by ensuring countries recognise and respect the status quo’. [Asked](#) on February 27, ‘[W]hat should Australia do if China did try to seize Taiwan?’, she responded, ‘I won’t get into those hypotheticals.’

Trade and investment

Imports from tenth Australian meat processing facility suspended

The government is facing renewed pressure from some Australian business sectors on continuing tensions with Beijing. Following the PRC’s suspension of imports from a tenth Australian meat processing facility, Teys Naracoorte, the Australian Meat Industry Council [called](#) for ‘a better relationship with China’, saying, ‘Because we don’t have a dialogue with China at the moment that we had in 2019, when these issues occur we don’t know about it until it goes onto their general administrations’ customs website.’ While the Trade Minister pointed to the increased access for Australian meat into the UK market under the free trade agreement signed with the UK last year, the Council said new markets did not make up for the loss of access into the PRC.

WTO disputes

On February 28 a World Trade Organization (WTO) panel was [established](#) to examine Australia’s anti-dumping and countervailing measures on stainless steel sinks, railway wheels and wind towers from the PRC. The PRC’s first request to establish a panel had been blocked by Australia in January. On March 1 the Trade Minister [said](#) that Australia would ‘robustly defend this matter’ at the WTO.

On March 9, the Trade Minister welcomed the news that the WTO had [appointed](#) panellists to adjudicate Australia’s challenge to the PRC’s anti-dumping duties on Australian bottled wine. The next step in the matter will be the filing of written submissions by both countries.

US support for Australia

In an [interview](#) published on February 11 US Secretary of State Blinken said Australia had ‘set an incredibly powerful example’ for the world in its dealings with Beijing, praising ‘the good and very effective work Australia...and Australian companies have done in terms of diversifying markets and supply chains’. However, ‘Asked whether there was a more effective way that countries could deal with Beijing’s trade coercion, Mr Blinken had no direct solution to offer,’ an indication that support for Australia remained confined to the rhetorical domain.

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