

Despite the apparent thaw, Australia's core China policy remains hardline

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October 10 2022

Note: This article appeared in the South China Morning Post on October 10 2022.

The speeches and talking points of Australian leaders no longer throb to the beating 'drums of war' but they have not turned the page on the deep-seated fears of Chinese power, which continue to trouble policymakers and pundits alike.

There has, to be sure, been important surface-level change. Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi met recently on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, their second meeting in 12 weeks. Both nations cautiously welcomed the resumption of more regular high-level exchanges.

Both sides have also revived the use of 'comprehensive strategic partnership' to describe the relationship, a label effectively shelved during the previous Scott Morrison government.

There are rumblings, too, of the possibility of a meeting between Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Bali next month, which Albanese has indicated he would welcome.

This thaw is largely attributable to remodulated Australian government rhetoric and reinvigorated diplomacy, as well as perhaps a realisation on Beijing's part that the course it has pursued since 2020 was not leading anywhere useful.

Wong has outlined her aim to bring the previously sidelined Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade back to the forefront on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles has emphasised that the government is committed to changing its tone on China, forsaking provocation for moderation and restraint.

However, the bedrock hardline core of Australia's China policy remains the same. The real weight of this government has been to stress its loyalty to the US alliance, its commitment to delivering on the Aukus security pact (with the UK and the US), its commitment to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (with the US, India and Japan), and its belief that the Australia-China relationship will be problematic for some time.

There has been no departure from the strategic fundamentals of its predecessor. Last month, Albanese nominated strategic competition with a 'forward-leaning' China as one of the three biggest challenges he felt he would face as prime minister.

At her July meeting with Wang, Wong said she made the point that 'the government of Australia has changed but our national interests and sovereign choices have not'. Pat Conroy, minister for international development

and the Pacific, confirmed that the Albanese government's views on China are 'essentially the same' as those of the Morrison administration.

In June, Marles, who is also defence minister, called China Australia's 'biggest security anxiety' and described the fast-tracking of the acquisition of nuclear submarines as the top defence priority. The government has also commissioned a defence strategic review, an expansion of a pre-election commitment. Its primary author, Angus Houston, a former Australian Defence Force chief, declared the current strategic circumstances 'the worst I have ever seen in my career and lifetime'.

On Taiwan, Australia's profession of adherence to the status quo as the US appears to move away from it, while significant, cannot hide that Australia's defence minister has committed to moving from interoperability to the 'interchangeability' of Australian and American forces. Marles also recently told the Australian American Leadership Dialogue that the alliance 'now feels even more important in the future than it has been in the past'.

On the economic front, while Trade Minister Don Farrell has prioritised the reinvigoration of Australia's economic relationship with China, he also acknowledged 'we've had too many of our eggs in the China basket' – an endorsement of Hillary Clinton's reproving observation about Australia-China trade in 2014.

Opposition leader Peter Dutton has endorsed the Labor government's approach, agreeing that it has been 'strong enough' in its response to China's 'bad behaviour'.

This is not to underestimate the importance of Canberra's shift in tack and the stabilising effect it has had. But it will not alter fundamentally the deep-set suspicion within Australia's political culture about what China's new assertiveness represents.

Australia is in a new period of a familiar cycle of cautious attempts to stabilise relations as deep unease lurks.

In many ways, this is characteristic of the relationship over time. An Australian government cabinet minute from 1980 relating to the coming visit of China's then vice-premier Li Xiannian, for example, referred to 'apprehension about long-term Chinese intentions' and 'continuing concern that closer relations with China might damage our relations with other countries or harm our strategic interests' as it welcomed in the same breath the further development of 'a close and cooperative bilateral relationship'.

This pattern was repeated at the end of the 1980s following Tiananmen Square, in the mid-1990s post-Taiwan Strait crisis, and also after the 2008 *annus horribilis*. Repair jobs were undertaken.

But the circumstances now are different. That is, the essential continuity between this government and the last shows that fear of China remains the tectonic force in the Australian strategic imagination.

This government has had to face the vast gulf between hot talk of war and capability. And, as we head into 2023, when Australia is due to host the Quad summit, make its initial announcements about the delivery of nuclear submarines, receive recommendations from its defence strategic review and participate in the next Australia-US Ministerial Consultations, where Labor will no doubt be keen to make a significant announcement on the alliance, it can only be expected that the hardline fundamentals of Australia's China policy will be reinforced.

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