

Albanese's hot mic moment in Tonga lights up China's WeChat groups, and they're not happy

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Most Australians would probably not have heard of the [Pacific Policing Initiative](#) (PPI) if our media hadn't reported on the prime minister's 'hot mic' moment.

This 'moment' refers to a private [conversation](#) between Anthony Albanese and Kurt Campbell — the US deputy secretary of state — on the sidelines of the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Tonga. Campbell was caught on film by a New Zealand journalist saying to Albanese that America had 'given ... the lane' to Australia to implement the new Pacific-wide policing arrangement, to which Albanese responded 'you can go us halves on the cost if you like.'

Two years ago, the Solomon Islands [signed a security deal](#) with China, but in the same year, other Pacific leaders [rejected a Chinese proposal](#) for a comprehensive treaty. Now, with a price tag of \$400 million attached to this new policing program, Australia can be seen to have secured its status as the [partner of choice](#) in combatting the increasing threat of transnational crime in Pacific nations.

Like Basil in *Fawlty Towers* trying hard not to mention 'the war' in anticipation of the arrival of some German guests, China was the elephant in the room whose name was not to be mentioned at the forum. Everyone — the Chinese, the Americans, the Australians and the Pacific Islanders — knows that the PPI is about countering China's influence in the Pacific.

China's official response to the PPI has been 'mild', with its foreign ministry [spokesperson](#) Lin Jian simply saying that China supported 'all parties to make joint efforts for the development and revitalisation of Pacific Island countries'. Semi-official voices were critical, but also relatively restrained. The *Global Times*, a nationalistic Chinese newspaper, quoted a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry as saying that 'the Pacific Islands are not the backyard of any country, and China has no interest in competing with any country for influence or seeking a so-called geostrategic presence or sphere of influence.'

But it was the hot mic exchange between Albanese and Campbell that animated China's WeChat groups and blogosphere: the video of their conversation has been doing the rounds in both China-based and Australia-based WeChat groups.

In China, public opinion of world affairs is increasingly being shaped by commentary in two arenas — one inhabited by international studies scholars and intellectual elites who write mainly in reputable journals, the other by bloggers whose populist writings tend to be the most widely posted and read online. Some of these bloggers, using a pen name, work for state media for their day jobs, while others are in some cases

uncredentialed writers who have a small amount of knowledge but plenty of passion. To attract eyeballs, these writers tend to use more colourful, folksy language, and appeal to the lowest common denominator.

The most frequently reposted criticisms on China's social media following the hot-mic incident seemed to come from *Guancha* (*The Observer*), a Shanghai-based commercial online media digest known for its nationalist bent. [A Guancha reporter](#) argued that the exchange between Albanese and Campbell was evidence that the United States intended to patrol the Pacific, and that Australia was willing to play second fiddle in this plan. However, rather than relying on official Chinese responses to the incident, the reporter pursued the argument by citing critical voices from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific.

To a blogger with the pen name [NiuTanQing](#), who trends very well online, the hot mic incident sheeted home three things:

First, she saw this as evidence of the West's 'double-standard':

When China seeks to cooperate with the Pacific nations to combat crime, the West sees it as China's attempt at military infiltration, and thinks it will harm [the West's] interests. But when Australia does the same thing at the behest of the US, this is described as routine policing cooperation.

Second, the blogger thought the incident revealed the true colours of the politicians involved:

To be honest, we used to regard Albanese as a decent man, diplomatic with words and flexible in attitudes, and he has contributed to the improvement of China-Australia relations. But having seen a few video clips of him recently, we see a different side of the man.

Third, this writer remarked that if Australia wants to play the game, it must be prepared to pay the price:

Australia wants the US to share half of the cost, but will the Americans pay anything? It seems Australia is prepared to take a hit *for* the US, but may end up being hit *by* the US.

Judging by the comments at the end of [NiuTanQing's](#) article, it seems most readers agree with her, although one person saw this incident as proof that the Western media are superior to the Chinese media:

How come our own journalists could never uncover the US' dirty laundry in this way, and instead rely on Western journalists to expose such wheeling and dealing?

Another blogger called [youli-youmian](#), who also attracts much traffic online, used more plain language to make sense of the hot-mic exchange:

The reason Australia was so anxious to secure the policing deal was because 'big brother' USA was getting concerned that the Pacific nations were beginning to go their own ways instead of listening to the US, and feared these nations might become closer to China, and therefore might threaten the US' strategic security arrangements.

Again, while the blog post attracted some agreement from readers, one reader offered an implicit criticism about the lack of freedom in the Chinese media, saying, 'I'm really impressed that their media dared to broadcast this.'

While the assumed closeness between the US and Australia is clearly valid, neither blogger seems to realise that Australia was not merely doing the bidding of the US, and that as a Pacific nation itself, Australia is motivated by its own security agenda.

This being said, Australia's security agenda has for so long been shaped by its alliance with the US that it is almost impossible to form a clear sense of what Australia's own long-term security interests actually are — especially in light of our leaders' ever-growing commitment to AUKUS. It seems unlikely our nation will make

any serious attempt to detox itself from this entrenched codependency, but arguably the current, rapidly evolving geopolitical climate provides a clear incentive to do so.

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