

Perspectives

AUKUS, the China threat and Chinese-Australian communities

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The recent election of Donald Trump to the US presidency has cast further [doubt](#) on the feasibility of the AUKUS trilateral security partnership, particularly Australia's acquisition of nuclear submarines under [Pillar I](#). Yet the AUKUS trilateral security partnership has become a fait accompli without the Australian public having expressed much in the way of opposition, or even a desire for more information about the program [forecast](#) to cost up to \$368 billion, despite a lack of debate or public consultation by successive Australian governments.

Two data points from the [UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2024](#) may be useful in understanding why this is the case. One, nearly three-quarters of Australians (71 percent) said they believed that 'China is a security threat to Australia' reflecting a continuation of views from [2023](#) and [2022](#). This figure indicates that there is a significant and persistent anxiety about the People's Republic of China (PRC) among the Australian public. Two, nearly half of Australians (48 percent) agreed that the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS 'will help keep Australia secure from a military threat from China'. This represents a four-point increase from when the view was first [measured](#) in 2023 (44 percent), indicating that AUKUS is receiving increasing buy-in from the public.

These data points are corroborated by the [Lowy Poll 2024](#), which showed that two-thirds (65 percent) of Australians were in favour of Australia acquiring nuclear-powered submarines. More than half (59 percent) of Australians saw a military conflict between the US and China over Taiwan as a 'critical threat' to Australia's vital interests. In April this year, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell had [suggested](#) that Australian nuclear-powered submarines could be deployed against the PRC in military conflict over Taiwan.

That said, when presented with the cost to acquire these submarines, more Australians had second thoughts. In the [Lowy Poll 2023](#), respondents were asked whether the total cost of the AUKUS program was worth paying for the additional capability nuclear-powered submarines provide. Almost half (47 percent) said 'no' and only 27 percent said 'yes'. UTS:ACRI/BIDA polling since 2022 has also shown a steady drop in agreement with the view that the Australian government 'is right to increase defence spending, to balance, among other considerations, China's growing military might'.

The question remains, therefore, as to how the Australian government has been able to proceed with AUKUS with little fear of electoral cost.

Here, two factors need to be considered, both of which having already led to serious consequences, especially for Chinese-Australian communities.

First, over recent years Australia has been witnessing the formation of what Lancaster University academic Andrew Chubb dubs a '[coalition of securitisers](#)', comprising politicians, intelligence officials and journalists.

The work of this coalition has significantly primed public opinion, making it easier to render the AUKUS agreement palatable to the public by actively promoting a narrative of the ‘China threat’.

Second, we are also witnessing the return of a journalistic mindset established during the Cold War. University of Pennsylvania Professor of Communication and former journalist Barbie Zelizer [defines](#) the key benchmarks of the Cold War-era journalistic mindset as:

- assuming the ‘unseen dimensions’ of a war, even though the war may be an invisible or an imaginary one;
- adopting a particular view of geopolitical reality that relies on accepting certain strategic notions of enemy formation;
- reinforcing certain understandings of who constitutes ‘us’ (the free world) and who constitutes ‘them’ (the authoritarian, the terrorist, the communist nation); and
- reporting on tension and conflict – the ‘imaginary war’ – by portraying the enemy through discursive strategies such as ‘stereotypy, black-and-white thinking, polarisation, simplification, and demonisation’.

Since [late 2016/early 2017](#), most of the major Australian English-language news outlets’ reportage on the PRC, particularly news media’s adoption of the China threat narrative, have met these benchmarks.

A key aspect of the China threat narrative is the questioning of the role of Chinese-Australians, especially first-generation migrants from the PRC, in Australian society. While Beijing’s actions have been a source of significant public concern, not least in its deployment of coercive trade practices, the ‘coalition of securitisers’ that have promoted the China threat narrative have not only compounded these anxieties among the Australian public but have also made the public more distrustful of Chinese-Australians.

For example, the [UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2024](#) found that four in 10 Australians believe that Chinese-Australians could be ‘mobilised’ by Beijing ‘to undermine Australia’s interests and social cohesion’. What is somewhat alarming is the fact this figure has stayed more or less the same every for three years in a row, despite a change in federal government and despite the fact that the current Labor government has engaged in more restrained rhetoric in public statements and remarks on the PRC.

This distrust has been felt by sections of Chinese-Australian communities. The author’s survey of nearly 700 first-generation PRC migrants in Australia, published in the UTS:ACRI report, [First generation PRC migrants and social cohesion: Views on news about the PRC and Chinese-Australians](#), showed that seven in 10 (70 percent) of respondents believed that Australia’s English-language media tended to portray them as objects of suspicion and risks to national security. Despite the diverse range of opinions and political views within this cohort, these figures, when combined with interview data in the same report, pointed to a widespread feeling among respondents that their community is substantially more likely to be mistrusted, misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Australian English-language media now than in the past.

There was also a widespread perception among respondents that Australian English-language media reporting on PRC-related issues had led to a low level of acceptance of their community by the Australian public. About six in 10 (63 percent) respondents self-reported feelings of emotional and mental anguish and helplessness in response to the media’s perceived ‘othering’ rhetoric in their reporting of most matters Chinese.

An overwhelming majority (91 percent) of respondents said they were ‘extremely concerned’ or ‘quite concerned’ about what may happen to them in the event of a war with the PRC.

Against this backdrop, in contrast to the high level of support for AUKUS among the broader Australian public, a [Chinese-Australian community forum](#) held in Sydney earlier this year on AUKUS conducted an informal poll of its audience about their views on the security agreement and found that only 15 percent supported it and 22 percent were undecided, with the rest expressing opposition to it.

The Australian national interest can be [understood](#) as consisting of three key components: national security, economic prosperity and social cohesion. The above figures indicate that social cohesion currently ranks lowest on the priority list. Indeed, it has too often been put on the backburner. The recent [Multicultural Framework Review](#) has not meaningfully addressed it.

In working towards addressing this shortfall, it would be useful for those operating in the Australia-PRC relations space to more closely engage with China Studies scholars in Australia when talking about AUKUS. The discussion about AUKUS is inevitably premised on the idea of the China threat, Beijing's intentions regarding Taiwan and the PRC's assertive, and at times aggressive, behaviour. In order to more clearly ascertain which aspect of the China threat is real, and which may be imagined, more input and the addition of more dimensions to the discussion, not less, is needed.

This piece is adapted from a [presentation](#) delivered by Professor Sun at the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia's August 15-16 2024 symposium [AUKUS: Assumptions and implications](#), during a session on 'What does AUKUS say about how we see ourselves?'

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