ACRI Opinion
Australia-China Relations Institute 澳大利亚-中国关系研究院

Why has Australia declared rhetorical war on China?

Bob Carr

September 22 2017

South China Morning Post INTERNATIONAL EDITION

This article appeared in the *South China Morning Post* on September 22 2017.

This year, Australia declared rhetorical war on China. The words being used by Australian leaders are the harshest any time since diplomatic relations commenced in 1972, with the exception of comments at the time of the Tiananmen crackdown. The tone is harsher than that of any other US ally, including Japan.

Ironically, the pronounced shift occurs in the six months in which Australian exports to China reached a record high, exceeding levels in the 2003-2012 resources boom and at a time when, according to one poll, 42 percent of Australians think Donald Trump's presidency is a 'critical threat' to Australia's vital interests.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop gave two speeches at the start of the year calling on the US to become more involved in Asia to counter China: 'Most nations wish to see more United States leadership, not less, and have no desire to see powers other than the US calling the shots.'

To academic Hugh White, from the Australian National University, this sounded like a hankering for the old days when the US was the only power in Asia that mattered to Australia. It risks sounding like a call for containment, which up until now has not been indulged by Australian leaders.

On March 13, Bishop went further, stating that China needs to become a democracy if it is to reach its economic potential. Leave aside the fact China's 6.9 percent growth and seamless transition to a services economy contradicts the thesis, Australian leaders up until now have generally refrained from lecturing China's Communist leaders about the merits of democracy.

As retired Australian diplomat Peter Varghese recently pointed out, values 'should define who we are, not what we insist others become'.

On June 2, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull cited fears of China's imposition of a 'latter day Monroe Doctrine on this hemisphere in order to dominate the region' and emphasised Australia's – and its Asian partners' – 'determination and capability to assert and defend [their] own interests' in the wake of China's rise. Rhetorically, no regional leader – not even Japan's Shinzo Abe – has ever gone this far, according to Hugh White.

Here, the timing as well as the tone seemed ill-judged: in the past year, all Southeast Asian states opted to negotiate one-on-one with China, with the arguable exception of Vietnam. And at the start of the year, Angus Houston, former head of the Australian Defence Force, said it was 'too late' to stop the Chinese programme in the South China Sea.

Defence Minister Marise Payne supports a quadrilateral security dialogue between Australia, the US, Japan and India. This notion looks quixotic. India has declined, unwilling to sacrifice its own policy options with China to appease Australian anxieties.

There is speculation about the reasons behind the Australian shift.

One view is Australia's policymaking has been wrenched away from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and towards the defence and security agencies. One former Australian ambassador to China, Geoff Raby, said in June that the foreign affairs department was 'turning into an implementation body'. Of the defence and security agencies he said, while 'they might be experienced in the global landscape, they might not...know China well'.

It's no secret the US embassy in Canberra was agitated about the sale of the Port of Darwin in 2015 to the Chinese company Landbridge. It was even raised by then US president Barack Obama in talks with Prime Minister Turnbull.

The then secretary of the Defence Department, Dennis Richardson, was emphatic that the sale of the port had no security implications. But America's nagging might have made the government want to burnish its China-bashing credentials.

Taking a different tack from his line on Darwin, Richardson said in a retirement speech on May 12 that 'China is very active in intelligence activities directed at us'. This might be a hint that the government has uncovered what it believes to be serious Chinese espionage, the details of which it cannot share publicly.

It would need to be stronger than the material produced earlier this year in anti-China panic in the Australian media. After the expenditure of a great quantity of words, the revelations were thin. The only example of Chinese espionage was a single Australian public servant who might have kept official papers in his home and had a Chinese wife. In two years, there have been no charges laid against him.

And despite headlines about Chinese cash buying influence in Australian politics, only two donations were uncovered and one was from a businessman who had been an Australian citizen for 20 years. Two donations – and with 300 Chinese companies in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Reality fell a long way short of the promise of headlines – like, for example, 'Australian sovereignty under threat from influence of China's Communist Party'.

Opinion polls provide one clue why stalwarts of the US alliance are patrolling the ramparts. According to a Lowy Institute poll, when participants were asked which they believed was Australia's most important relationship, 45 percent said the US and 43 percent China. In rating their feelings towards different countries, Australians rated China 59 on a scale of 100, only 10 points behind the 69 awarded to the US.

Earlier Australian leaders have been more successful at steering between an alliance with the US and a partnership with China. The arch-conservative John Howard told China's leaders Australia would remain a close ally of the US but that nothing Australia would do as a US ally would be directed against China. That satisfied Beijing. It is a formula available today to allow Australia to straddle both relationships. Isn't that the point of diplomacy? Or has diplomacy become too hard for the current generation of Australian leaders?

Professor Bob Carr, former foreign minister and NSW premier, is Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney.