

## Hard line on China

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Illustration: Craig Stephens, *South China Morning Post*

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is in Washington, able to tell Americans that in 12 months he has positioned Australia as the most anti-Chinese of all America's allies. In fact, he can boast that, under his leadership, Australia has jettisoned a consensus on China policy that stretched from diplomatic recognition in 1972 to the decision to join the [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank](#) in 2015.

A hard ideological edge now shapes policy. It was signalled last year when Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said China would never reach its economic potential until it became a democracy. This was

the first time an Australian leader had elevated the issue of China's political system.

The tone continued throughout 2017, and on December 7 the Prime Minister stood on the floor of Parliament and taunted China in language the leader of no Western country would be likely to use. He chose the words, attributed to Mao in his opening address at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in 1949, that ['the Chinese people have stood up'](#). He repeated it and said, that in respect to China, '...the Australian people stand up and assert their sovereignty in our nation'.

That is, through new anti-espionage laws that he implied were directed at China. No minister has intervened to defend 130,000 Chinese students in Australia from [a burst of demonisation](#) that saw John Garnaut, once adviser to the prime minister, accuse them of espousing ‘racial chauvinism’ without the remotest evidentiary base.

In fact, Chinese students in Australia are conspicuously uninterested in politics and focused on studies. Despite a year-long campaign to demonise them, a survey by the think tank I head confirmed that there have been a mere four instances of Chinese students registering protests about teaching material, and in none of these cases had they sought to bully or intimidate. In one instance they had made a point to their lecturer about ‘one China’ that accords with not only China’s, but Australia’s, diplomatic stance.

Last month, the US released a [National Defence Strategy](#) that called China a ‘revisionist power’ and ‘strategic competitor’. Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne quickly endorsed it. Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce went further, and in an astonishing abandonment of diplomatic language, said China had the capacity to ‘overrun’ Australia. Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop was forced to say this wasn’t the government’s view.

A still more gratuitous attack on China came on January 10 from International Development Minister Concetta Fierravanti-Wells. In an interview with *The Australian*, [she slammed China’s overseas development assistance in the Pacific](#), and said that the Chinese were funding ‘white elephants’ and ‘building a road to nowhere’. Former Australian diplomats remarked it might have been better for any Australian criticism of China’s aid profile to be listed for discussion at the next meeting of foreign ministers.

With the support of the Prime Minister, the Australia Security Intelligence Organisation briefed Australian media about what its officers saw as the China threat. One story sourced to a security agent had appeared in the *Australian Financial Review* on September 3, 2016, claiming that Chinese tourists in Australia were security threats. The only hint of Chinese espionage was a reference to an investigation into an Australian public servant about the removal of government

files that had occurred over two years earlier, and had resulted in no prosecution.

Many Australian businesses are asking why, under Turnbull, Australia has abandoned 45 years of pragmatic engagement with China in which differences were set aside and the countries worked on positive agendas. From Prime Minister Gough Whitlam (1972–75) on, there has been a relationship in which Australia made clear its status as a continuing US ally, and told China that the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty was not directed at it. China accepted Australia’s alliance status with the US and elevated its relationship with Australia to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Why the recent tilt? Perhaps it’s as simple as China’s rise being so sudden, especially in Southeast Asia, and the Australian security and defence establishment being traumatised. Even if this were the case, it’s not clear what the burst of adversarial commentary would achieve – as opposed to more vigorous diplomatic engagement with China about behaviour in the [South China Sea](#), or a human rights agenda.



Photo: AP

Others believe the shift in policy is a result of pressure from American security agencies, indignant that Australia allowed a Chinese company to [lease the Port of Darwin](#) and [campaign contributions](#) by two Chinese-born businessmen to Australian political parties. One of these businessmen has been an Australian citizen for 20 years. Of the 300 Chinese companies in the China Chamber of Commerce in Australia, none appears to be a donor. Hardly a pattern here.

Canberra may hold to a naive notion that because Washington looks so wobbly under Donald Trump, Australia must become more frenzied in alliance loyalty. 'Whither you go, I goest' would be the Biblical expression of this sentiment. If so, it has reached extremes, with the front page of the *Australian Financial Review* on February 16 declaring: 'Trump's Australian envoy digs in for China war', a summary of comments by [Admiral Harry Harris](#), head of the US Pacific Command, now the new US ambassador to Australia.

When a headline in a serious paper casually suggests Australia wants to be recruited for war against China, maybe it's time for the government to show that someone in Canberra is actually in charge of China policy. Many Australians would like a return to a national-interest-based policy of engagement with China. They look forward to a policy correction. Or is Turnbull happy with the impression Australia is the only US ally enlisted for a cold war?

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