

‘China is a reality that is not going away’

Elena Collinson

September 9 2020

This article appeared in *The Guardian Australia* as part of the expert panel, ‘Prickly, proud, authoritarian: how should Australia deal with China now?’, on September 9 2020.

Lines of engagement between Australia and China have slowly but surely been redrawn, with 2017 ostensibly seeing the last gasp of ‘business as usual’ relations between the two countries.

To be sure, prime minister Scott Morrison and his senior ministers have continued to refrain from US-style antagonism in their China rhetoric, at pains to emphasise the well-worn, if amorphous, label, ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ to describe relations. On China’s part, there seemed to be some sort of a shift away from diplomatic posturing predicated on sound and fury towards an attempt at more cooperative rhetoric during a speech by China’s deputy head of mission in Australia last month. He’d said: ‘We don’t see Australia as a strategic threat. There is no fundamental conflict of interest or historical irritants to be healed’. But substantive actions by both countries have rendered these statements mere window dressing.

China’s increasingly heavy-handed actions – including, most recently, its apparently growing predilection for hostage diplomacy, as well as the sights its security agencies had set on two Australian journalists, forcing them out of the country – have only served to confirm Australian concerns about the character it has assumed under president Xi Jinping. They have also highlighted a pervasive insecurity about itself and its role on the world stage, rendering unpredictable how it will wield its power.

That said, it is imperative at this inflection point that Australia strives to keep lines of communications open and focus on de-escalation of tensions where possible, without sacrificing its own interests and values. China is a reality that is not going away. A sense of balance also needs to be maintained and knee-jerk overreaction avoided. Pursuit of dialogue and compromise ought not to be seen as weakness. It might be instructive, here, to hark back to John F. Kennedy’s advice: ‘Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate’.

Elena Collinson is a senior researcher at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney.