

Benchmarking the state of Australia's diplomatic engagement with the PRC

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Key takeaways

- Diplomatic engagement provides a means for government ministers and officials to press Australia's interests. It is widely appreciated that part of the fallout from political tensions between Canberra and Beijing has been fewer opportunities for diplomatic interactions with counterparts in the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, the extent to which this has occurred and whether Australia is or isn't an outlier in this respect has not been systematically studied.
- This brief presents evidence that over the period January 2016 to August 2021 Australia had fewer diplomatic interactions with the PRC than 10 other countries that Canberra cites as being 'like-minded' or partners of regional significance. While not an outlier in 2016, by 2020 Australia was the singular exception in having zero interactions. The paucity of Australian diplomatic interactions applied irrespective of the seniority level of PRC counterpart.
- The state of diplomatic engagement is not the be all and end all of the bilateral relationship. Much valuable engagement continues in the business, arts and culture and people-to-people realms. Nonetheless, diplomatic estrangement brings costs and what is clear is that Australia cannot draw comfort from peers finding themselves in the same predicament. This fact might prompt reflection in Canberra on whether lessons can be drawn from how these peers manage their own relations with Beijing.

Introduction

In recent years local commentary has frequently emphasised that Canberra's tense political relationship with Beijing should not be viewed in isolation. In September 2020, for example, Rory Medcalf, the director of the National Security College at the Australian National University, argued that 'China [has] managed to alienate an extraordinary number [of countries], including Australia, India, Japan, Europe and much of Southeast Asia and the developing world'.¹ The implication, according to Medcalf, is that it is a myth to imagine 'the rest of the world is coerced, indifferent and mute'. Rather, '...Australia has never been less alone'.

Others such as Geoff Raby, a former Australian ambassador to the PRC, acknowledge that 'Australia is most certainly not alone in having important and complex challenges to address with a rising and assertive China'.² But he argues that stopping at this observation misses a critical point: these challenges are able to

¹ Rory Medcalf, 'Five dangerous myths in Australia's relations with China', *The Australian Financial Review*, September 11 2020 <<https://www.afr.com/world/asia/five-dangerous-myths-in-australia-s-relations-with-china-20200911-p55umy>>.

² Geoff Raby, 'Australia has made itself an outlier in its dealings with China', *The Australian Financial Review*, November 23 2020 <<https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/how-china-has-left-us-stranded-as-the-regional-outlier-20201123-p56gy6>>.

be managed. Yet unlike other countries, ‘we have not been able to walk and chew gum at the same time’. The consequence, according to Raby, is that ‘Australia has made itself an outlier in its dealings with China’.

It is widely appreciated that part of the fallout from bilateral political tensions has been fewer opportunities for Australian government ministers and officials to pursue diplomatic interactions with PRC counterparts.³ The last leader’s visit, for example, was when PRC Premier Li Keqiang came to Australia in March 2017. However, the extent to which diplomatic engagement has suffered and whether Australia is or isn’t an outlier in this respect has not been systematically studied.

To fill this gap in understanding, this brief quantitatively examines Australia’s diplomatic interactions with the PRC and compares this with other countries. The countries against which Australia’s interactions are benchmarked are those that Canberra regularly cites as being ‘like-minded’ or partners of regional significance, including Canada, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Philippines, South Korea, the UK, the US and Vietnam.

The state of Australia’s diplomatic engagement with the PRC is not the be all and end all of the bilateral relationship. Sometimes fallout from political tensions that takes the form of fewer opportunities to pursue diplomatic interactions might reasonably be judged a price worth paying. And even as ties between Canberra and Beijing have worsened, engagement in the business⁴, arts and culture⁵ and people-to-people realms have displayed impressive resilience. This reflects the fact that engagement in these realms is led by the two countries’ private sectors and non-government entities, and these groups and individuals have different perspectives and motivations to governments. Nonetheless, diplomatic engagement is a staple of effective foreign policy practice and fewer interactions with PRC counterparts mean fewer opportunities to press Australia’s interests. Thus, if Australia was unique in the paucity of its interactions, this would be a concerning state of affairs. Stressing Australia’s own, distinct foreign policy objectives, Allan Gyngell, a former director-general of the Office of National Assessments, has warned that diplomatic outsourcing incurs costs:

If the Americans are talking [to the Chinese] and the Australians are not, we’re in a much weaker position than we were. We don’t want the US to be our voice in Beijing; we want our own voice.⁶

Methodology and data

The data used in this report relates to diplomatic interactions – official visits, meetings, phone conversations or written correspondence – that are listed on the websites of the PRC government’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁷, Ministry of Commerce⁸ and Ministry for Agriculture⁹. In Australia’s case, this data was also cross-checked against the website of the Australian government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.¹⁰ While the above three Chinese ministries cover the most common touchpoints between the PRC and foreign countries, it is recognised that interactions involving other ministries will be missed. Further, not all interactions involving these three ministries will necessarily be listed on their websites. Accordingly, the interactions identified have been extracted and entered into a publically available online database to facilitate checking by interested readers and to serve as a point of reference for future research.¹¹

An interaction was recorded if it occurred between January 2016 and August 2021 and involved either Australia or one of the other 10 countries listed in the previous section. In total, 989 interactions were recorded. Among other contextual information, the seniority level of the representatives participating in these interactions on both sides was also captured when this was indicated. This ranges from members of the Politburo to vice-ministers. All, nonetheless, are above the level of ‘working level’ officials.

3 Jennifer Hewett, Michael Smith, Phillip Coorey, ‘China puts Malcolm Turnbull’s government into the deep freeze’, *The Australian Financial Review*, April 11 2018 <<https://www.afr.com/world/asia/chinas-big-chill-for-australia-20180411-h0ymwbb>>.

4 James Laurenceson, ‘Australia-China relations through the frame of trade’, in Greg McCarthy, Youzhong Sun, Xianlin Song, (eds) *Transcultural connections: Australia and China. Encounters between East and West (intercultural perspectives)*, Springer, Singapore, October <<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-16-5028-4>>.

5 Jing Han, ‘The importance of arts and cultural exchanges in Australia-PRC relations’, *Perspectives*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, November 30 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/importance-arts-and-cultural-exchanges-australia-prc-relations>>.

6 Andrew Clark, ‘Australia is vulnerable to China’s whims – even with Biden in office’, *The Australian Financial Review*, January 22 2021 <<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/australia-is-vulnerable-to-china-s-whims-even-with-biden-in-office-20210122-p56w2m>>.

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Policies and Activities’, August 11 2021 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/>.

8 Ministry of Commerce People’s Republic of China, ‘Significant News’, August 12 2021 <<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/newsrelease/>>.

9 Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘International Exchange’, August 13 2021 <http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/gjil/index_15.htm>.

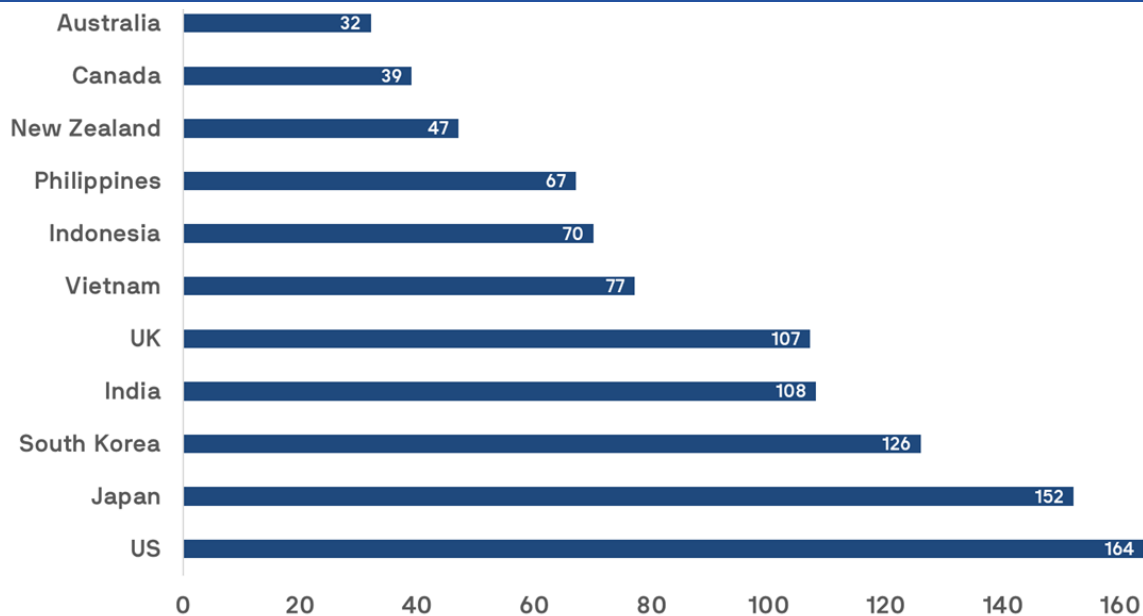
10 Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, ‘China country brief’, August 11 2021 <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/china/china-country-brief>>.

11 Google Sheets, ‘List of diplomatic interactions between PRC and 11 stakeholder countries from January 2016 to August 2021’ <<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1MiNxPnYUaemKM8HhHSPgyQhphNNBxeg7/edit#gid=181248648>>.

Findings

Figure 1 shows that the US led the way with 164 interactions over the full period of analysis. This is perhaps unsurprising given its great power status. The US was followed by Japan (152) and South Korea (126). In stark contrast, Australia had the least number of diplomatic interactions, at just 32. Australia significantly lagged behind even New Zealand (47), despite the latter having considerably less regional economic and strategic weight.

Figure 1. Total interactions with the PRC by country (January 2016 to August 2021)



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China and author calculations.^{12,13,14}

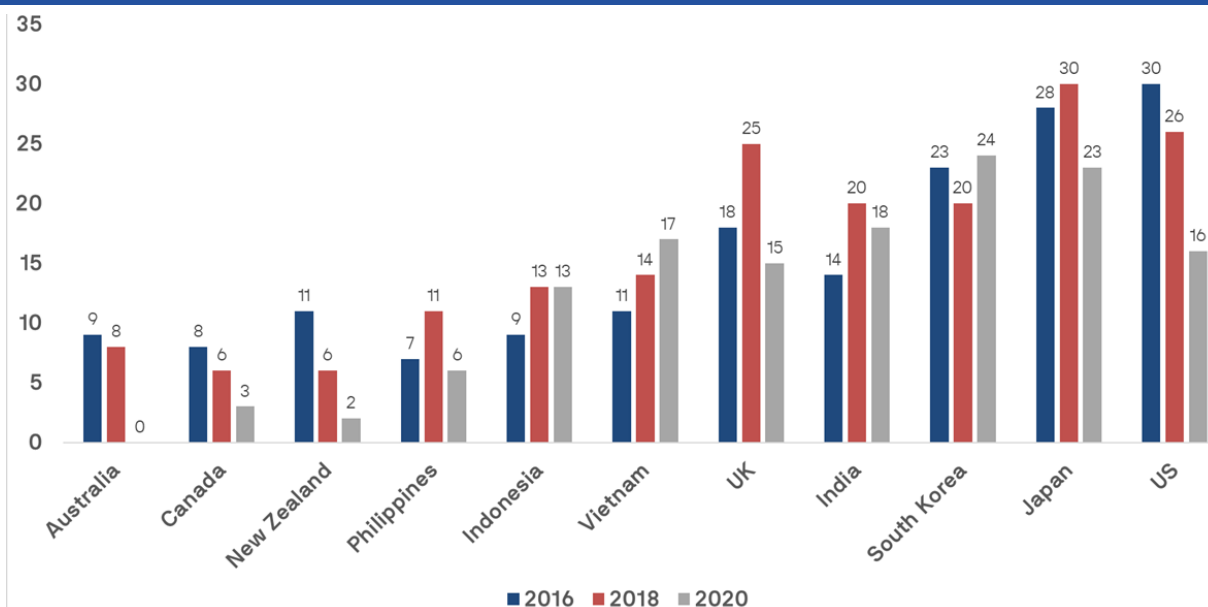
Figure 2 highlights a significant decline in the frequency of Australia's diplomatic interactions with the PRC over time. Australia was not alone in experiencing a decline but the extent to which this occurred was unique. Some peers, such as Vietnam, experienced an increase in interactions. In 2016, Australia's nine interactions were on par with New Zealand, Canada, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam. In 2020, the last full year for which data was available, Australia was the singular exception in having zero diplomatic interactions. The last recorded interaction was on November 3 2019 when Prime Minister Scott Morrison met with Premier Li on sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Bangkok. The data for 2021 only extends to August. In this eight month period Canada joined Australia in recording zero interactions. Whether the state of Canada's diplomatic engagement with China comes to the same prolonged, complete stop as Australia's has remains to be seen.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Policies and activities, August 11 2021 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/>.

¹³ Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China, Significant news, August 12 2021 <<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/newsrelease/>>.

¹⁴ Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China, International Exchange, August 13 2021 <http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/gjll/index_15.htm>.

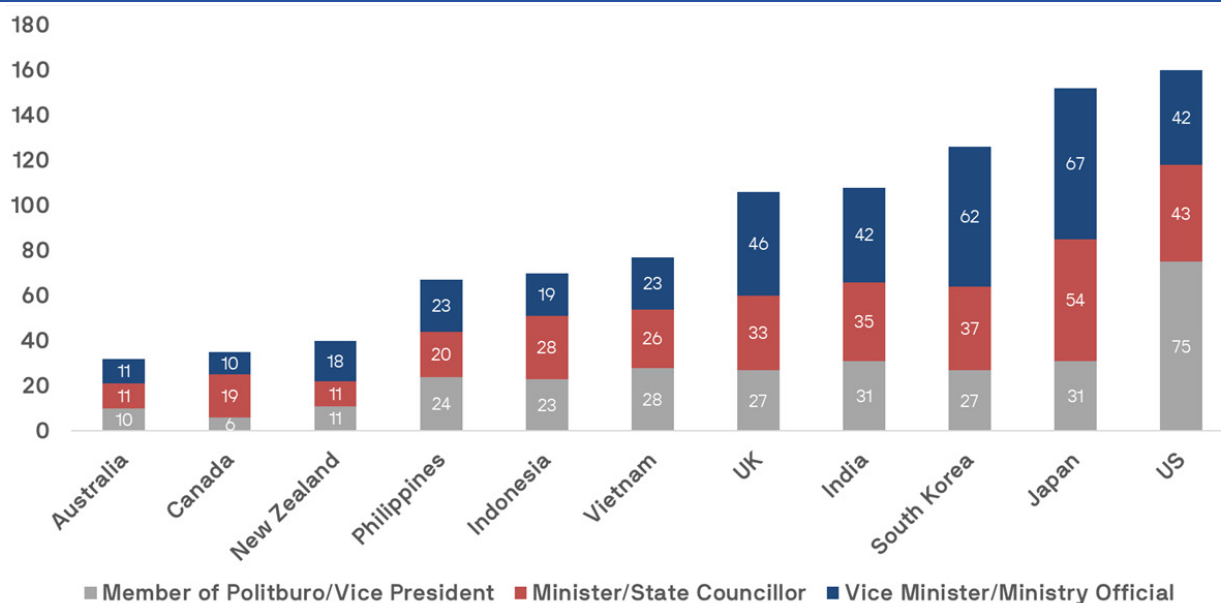
Figure 2. Interactions with the PRC by country in 2016, 2018 and 2020



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People’s Republic of China and author calculations.^{15,16,17}

Finally, Australia has performed relatively poorly in securing interactions with PRC counterparts, irrespective of their seniority level. At one end of the spectrum, over the entire period Australia recorded the second fewest interactions with the uppermost echelons of the PRC’s government – members of the Politburo. But the same is also the case for interactions involving lower-level representatives, such as vice-ministers (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Interactions of countries with the PRC by seniority level of PRC counterpart



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People’s Republic of China and author calculations.^{18,19,20}

Note: The sum for Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US in Figure 3 varies from Figure 1 because not all readouts of diplomatic interactions on the websites of the PRC’s Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Agriculture included a reference to the seniority level of the PRC government representative.

15 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Policies and activities, August 11 2021 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/>.
 16 Ministry of Commerce People’s Republic of China, Significant news, August 12 2021 <<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/newsrelease/>>.
 17 Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, International Exchange, August 13 2021 <http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/gjzl/index_15.htm>.
 18 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Policies and activities, August 11 2021 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/>.
 19 Ministry of Commerce People’s Republic of China, Significant news, August 12 2021 <<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/newsrelease/>>.
 20 Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, International Exchange, August 13 2021 <http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/gjzl/index_15.htm>.

All of the above is not to contend that there has been a complete breakdown of dialogue between Australia and the PRC. Rather, it is now limited to ‘working-level’ officials. In a November 2021 interview, Wang Xining, the Chargé d’Affaires at the PRC Embassy in Australia, responded to a question about frozen minister-level discussions by emphasising that ‘ministers are political leadership’ but ‘[w]e keep talking to each other at different levels between officials’.²¹

Conclusion

The results confirm Australia to be an outlier in the state of its diplomatic engagement with the PRC. This implies a reduced capacity for Australia to prosecute its interests with the PRC relative to other countries.

Providing an assessment of what led to this predicament is beyond the scope of this research brief. Reflecting on his time in office, former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull wrote last year that ‘Chinese strategy was to isolate Australia from its allies’.²² Similarly, Kurt Campbell, US President Joe Biden’s National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, claimed that the PRC’s actions spanning disrupted diplomatic and trade engagement aimed to ‘cut Australia out from the herd’.²³ If correct, this suggests an inevitability about Australia’s predicament and chimes with Prime Minister Morrison’s insistence that ‘Australia has done nothing to injure [the] partnership [with the PRC], nothing at all’.²⁴ Other commentators have proffered that singling Australia out serves a useful purpose for the PRC by sending a warning to other countries, particularly those in the region, that they should account for its preferences and accommodate them.²⁵

In contrast, Beijing argues that it has merely responded to provocations instigated by Canberra.²⁶ Very few Australian analysts accept the accuracy of this assessment. Many do, however, contend that great powers like the PRC – and the US – have a well-established capacity for belligerence. The task for middle powers like Australia then is to recognise this, and alongside measures judged as essential for protecting their interests, pursue rhetoric and other policy choices that emphasise a preponderance of broader shared interests and the scope for a positive partnership. It is here they contend that Canberra has often been found wanting.²⁷ It is also the case that the stop to diplomatic interactions lagged the escalation in bilateral political tensions by at least three years, raising questions about the extent to which the PRC was committed to a policy of singling Australia out and whether the outcome that eventuated was inevitable.²⁸

What is clear is that when it comes to the state of diplomatic engagement Australia cannot draw comfort from peers finding themselves in the same position. This fact might prompt reflection in Canberra on whether lessons can be drawn from how these peers manage their own relations with Beijing.²⁹

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