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Opinion

What does ‘national interest’ mean when it comes to Labor’s China policy?

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There is one clear message from Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s recent visit to China: he wants to restore the legitimacy — even dignity — of economic prosperity as a trope. He’s telling Australians that businesspeople aiming to make a profit from doing business with China are acting in the national interest and are not, in the words of one journalist, ‘craven characters’ who risk the nation’s sovereignty.

The business community — particularly those in the beef, wine, barley, seafood and other export sectors — have suffered from the deteriorating relationship between Australia and China. Yet during the era of the Morrison government, the business sector’s criticisms of the China-threat narratives that dominated media and government pronouncements were mostly muted. Few dared to speak up, not wanting to be accused of putting economic interests above national security. Who wants to be cast as a ‘craven character’?

A study of the content of current affairs programs about China on the ABC and SBS between 2005 and 2008 suggests that Australian media coverage adopted two parallel but independent tropes: economic opportunity and geopolitical threat. In more recent years, however, these tropes have been yoked to form an overarching China-threat narrative, which, according to some international relations scholars, marks the ‘securitisation’ of Australia’s public discourse.

In other words, since 2015 or 2016, China has become a source of threat, not in spite of but precisely because of our overreliance on it for our economic prosperity. Opportunity has become a security liability.

Albanese stayed close to his script while talking to the media during his China visit. He repeated Labor’s new China policy mantra almost like a ritualistic incantation. The first part of the mantra — we will ‘cooperate where we can, disagree where we must’ — seems to suggest that Labor has finally figured out a one-size-fits-all formula for dealing with China. But the second part – ‘We will engage in the national interest’ — suggests that this is not the case.

This is because, despite the repeated utterances of these sentences by Labor leaders, there has never been a clear definition of what constitutes our national interest in relation to China.

Writing at the end of last year, Albanese said: ‘It is clearly in Australia’s best economic interests to be able to export our high-quality barley, wine, meat, seafood, resources and more to China.’ However, he went on to quote Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong as saying: ‘We can grow our bilateral relationship *alongside* [emphasis added] upholding our national interests if both countries navigate our differences wisely.’

The wording of the mantra changes slightly each time it is uttered. In her speech to the National Press Club, Wong said that the Albanese government will 'cooperate where we can, disagree where we must, manage our differences wisely, and above all else, engage in and vigorously pursue our own national interest'. Elsewhere, she is reported by various media outlets to have said that 'Labor would seek cooperation while fiercely protecting Australia's national interests'.

There are at least three ways of reading these statements. The first is that economic prosperity and national security are both essential components of our national interest. The second is that, while both national security and economic prosperity are essential, the former trumps the latter. The third is that trade with China is good because it's crucial to our economic prosperity, but such trade is not necessarily a part of Australia's national interest, and that we will not compromise on national security for the sake of economic gain.

One has to admit that the choice of words here is a clever manoeuvre: first, the rhetoric is acceptable to China; second, it placates Australia's China hawks; third, it shuts up the opposition. Moreover, the ambiguity in language leaves the government with plenty of wiggle room.

But the slippery language betrays an inability to resolve an underlying tension between economic prosperity and national security when it comes to dealing with China. And language, clever as it may be, is not the same as effective strategy, and certainly not the solution.

And this ambiguity means that tricky issues — such as Chinese investment in Australia, growing tech competition between the US and China, the issues of Taiwan and the South China Sea, AUKUS, cybersecurity, etc — which no doubt will come up repeatedly in future, will pose much the same challenges as before.

Perhaps the most contradictory aspect of the government's policy is encapsulated in another statement made by Albanese during his visit to China. He said trading with China helps us strengthen our economy, and a strong economy 'sets our nation up for a safe and a prosperous future'.

A positive interpretation of that would be to say that, unlike the Morrison government, Labor has found a way of walking a tightrope in dealing with its respective relationships with the US and China. By contrast, a cynical response would be to say — as a Sydney-based businessman did recently in a WeChat group dedicated to the discussion of Australian politics — that 'Australia can make money by trading with China, and then use this money to buy submarines from America, in case China invades'.

While duly reporting on Albanese's iteration of Labor's 'new' formula, few of the news stories on his visit to China took the opportunity to ask experts to comment on the implications and politics of the subtle shift in Labor's deployment of the 'national interest' rhetoric. Nor did they delve into the ongoing existential conundrum that this ambiguous language masks.

It seems the average Australian is most likely to be none the wiser about the key challenges lying ahead in Australia-China relations.

For instance, rather than asking experts whether they are pessimistic or optimistic about the future of the bilateral relationship, or whether they think the relationship will go 'back to normal', perhaps they could ask some more in-depth questions.

For instance: how will the differences between Labor's left and right factions in relation to the definition of 'national interest' be played out in future disagreements between Australia and China? Or perhaps: both Labor and the Coalition use 'the national interest' as a means of justifying their policies and actions in relation to China, so in what respects is Labor different from the Coalition in its geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis China, apart from adopting a quieter diplomacy posture and calmer rhetoric?

So it seems Labor's new mantra masks an existential conundrum.

'No,' you may retort. 'You're splitting hairs. It's all semantics.' But is it?

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