

# Australians believe AUKUS will protect them from China. What's the media's role?

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Around half (48 percent) of Australians surveyed in a new poll believe the AUKUS deal will help keep Australia safe from Chinese military threats. The [annual survey](#) from the Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) at the University of Technology Sydney provides insights into how Australians approach 'Australia's toughest foreign policy challenge': the Australia-China relationship.

So, why do so many Australians believe that the eye-wateringly high level of defence expenditure is justified, despite ongoing issues about the cost of living crisis?

Naturally, some may say this is because — as our politicians keep [telling](#) us — 'China has changed'. Indeed, China *has* changed.

## A rising nation

Apart from its ongoing issues regarding human rights, the Chinese government's '[going global](#)' initiative in the early 2010s, aimed at shifting the West's perception of China, has given succour to fear and anxiety about an increasingly powerful nation. This has only been amplified by China's attempts to influence the diaspora through its '[united front](#)' network, its practice of [wolf-warrior](#) diplomacy a few years ago, its activities in the [South China Sea](#), and President Xi Jinping's constantly tough [rhetoric](#) on Taiwan.

But some foreign policy commentators believe there are additional reasons. Jenny Gordon describes a tendency in domestic politics to use '[the China alibi](#)' to distract the public from pressing issues in policy debates. As for our media, she believes 'Australian attitudes are shaped by much of the Australian media that reflects US views on China', and may not represent Australia's national interests.

The ACRI-UTS poll also finds the majority of Australians (71 percent) mistrust the Chinese government, and the same percentage see China as a security threat to Australia. More than half of those surveyed (51 percent) say military conflict with China within three years is possible, and nearly half (48 percent) say the AUKUS deal will help keep Australia secure from military threats from China.

But how do Chinese people see us, you may ask. While the feeling of dislike certainly seems mutual between America and China, it's unclear whether Australia's hostility towards China is fully reciprocated. A [poll](#) of Chinese citizens from a security think tank in Beijing found the vast majority of respondents saw the US as having the greatest impact on China's security. More than half had a 'very unfavourable' (37 percent) or 'somewhat unfavourable' (22 percent) impression of the US, with another 29 percent reporting 'neutral' attitudes towards the US. The poll covered Chinese respondents' views of the US, Japan, India, South Korea, the EU, Russia and Southeast Asia, but did not include Australia.

Interestingly, a Canada-based [poll](#) of Chinese citizens suggests that in contrast to our media's hype about the likelihood of Australia going to war with China, only 8 percent of Chinese citizens surveyed saw Australia as a military threat, and 73 percent thought a war with Australia was unlikely.

This suggests mainland Chinese public opinion of Australia is not always in tune with the Chinese media, which, in response to the China threat rhetoric in Australia, has been critical of Australia at times, especially the *Global Times*. Nor does public opinion seem always aligned with the Chinese government, which, in response to the previous Coalition government's rhetoric and actions, imposed [punitive measures](#) against Australian businesses in relation to a wide range of products including barley, beef, wine and lobster, [some](#) of which are now being gradually wound back.

The Canada poll shows that Australia, along with other Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as many EU members, remain favourite destinations for Chinese tourists, students and migrants.

### A 'turning point'

In comparison with China, there appears to be a closer alignment between our media's China reporting, our China policy and public opinion about China. Why this is the case deserves careful analysis.

A detailed [study](#) of a certain sequence of events throughout the 2010s by international relations scholar Andrew Chubb pinpoints a crucial moment in 2017. Chubb thoroughly examines a series of developments that year, including [statements](#) on China by [Malcolm Turnbull](#); an episode of the ABC's *Four Corners* titled '[Power and Influence](#)'; and a number of remarks made by political and security elites.

The study demonstrates a 'turning point' when intelligence officials, political elites and our national media were somehow aligned in creating a dominant discourse of 'securitisation', which ultimately [paved the way](#) for the eventual passage of foreign interference [laws](#) in Australia.

Like Chubb, David Brophy, author of *China Panic*, also attributes much damage to the *Four Corners* episode, seeing this as an example of our media having great power but no responsibility. He observes that from that point onwards, 'the China panic has given journalists carte blanche to lob sensational stories into the public domain without anyone ever going back and checking to see if they stood up'. Gradually but surely, the idea of a China threat became well and truly lodged in the public consciousness.

The ABC has since [taken down](#) the *Four Corners* episode, after having lost two defamation cases involving [Dr Chau Chak Wing](#) and a Canberra-based student, [Miss Lu](#). The episode has been widely [criticised](#) for its [sensationalism](#), [claims](#) based on speculation rather than evidence, and its selective framing to push a China threat [agenda](#).

The program is so controversial that it even became the fodder for a [spoof](#), which would have been hilarious if not for the serious damage the program has done. Apart from setting a problematic agenda for media narratives and the passage of foreign interference laws, the program, as Brophy argues, has also subsequently played an important role in triggering a series of anti-Chinese — even racist — views among the Australian public.

### Drums of war

The foreign interference scheme has in recent years been criticised for being '[heavy-handed](#)' and 'doing more harm than good', and an '[abject failure](#)' — even [Turnbull](#) admitted 'the scheme has failed'.

As we entered the current decade, the China threat narrative has evolved to include a new refrain in our media: the '[drums of war](#)'. These media stories, with breathlessly alarming [headlines](#), have created a nervous nation with a worried public facing an uncertain future.

This has led to a curious and paradoxical situation: although Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong has urged the media to ‘[lower the heat](#)’ about any potential conflict with China over Taiwan, Defence Minister Richard Marles may have found such media rhetoric helpful, given it helps shore up public support for AUKUS. In other words, the ‘heat’ created by the media has created a favourable public opinion environment for Labor to sell its AUKUS pact to Australian taxpayers.

A new [study](#) of how the British media shaped the UK’s China policy and public opinion about China suggests that individuals who have had no personal experience or contact with a foreign country, or its citizens or migrants, rely heavily on the media to form their opinions.

There is no reason to believe Australia is an exception. It is somewhat ironic that Chinese citizens are generally not easily persuaded by anti-Australian narratives in China’s state media, whereas many Australians seem to be mostly unquestioning about what they read about China in our mainstream media.

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