

Despite the diplomatic thaw, Australians still deeply mistrust China

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Chinese Premier Li Qiang's [visit](#) to Australia this week speaks to continuing efforts by both Beijing and Canberra to maintain a working relationship. But while political tensions have thawed since the trough in relations between 2016 and early 2022, Australian public opinion on China remains generally negative.

The results of the newly-released [UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2024](#) by the Australia-China Relations Institute and the Centre for Business Intelligence & Data Analytics at the University of Technology Sydney reveal just how deep Australians' mistrust of China continues to be.

Now in its fourth year, the poll surveyed 2,015 Australian adults across all states and territories on their views on various aspects of the Australia-China relationship, including overall views on the bilateral relationship, political communication, security, the triangular Australia-US-China relationship, trade and investment, society, university and research, relations with Southeast Asian nations and Pacific Island nations, and global and regional cooperation.

Seventy-one percent of Australians say that China is a security threat to Australia. This is not surprising: Australia's recent experience with China's campaign of economic coercion and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy can hardly be expected to be forgotten, even as Beijing's punitive tariffs on Australian exports are gradually released and dialogue has resumed at the leadership level.

A growing number of Australians believe that either the United States or China will force the country to choose between close relations with Washington or Beijing, but they are relatively evenly split on which of the great powers will force the issue, with 52 percent stating that such a choice will be forced by China and 47 percent nominating the US. Another Trump presidency is deemed likely to render that dilemma more acute, with just over two-thirds of Australians (67 percent) saying that the Australian government's balancing of its relationships with China and the US will be made more difficult if Donald Trump returns to the White House early next year.

That half of those polled believe a conflict with China is a 'serious possibility' in the next three years serves as testament to how deeply rooted the national anxiety about China is.

Such a sentiment is unlikely to dissipate as countries like Australia, and others, continue to wrestle with the nature of China's military power and its strategic intentions. There is a perception, though, that China's regional influence is slipping. Fifty-five percent of Australians say that China has more influence than the United States in Australia's regional neighborhood, which, while still relatively high, reflects a steady decrease in agreement with this view over the last four years, down from a high of 65 percent in 2021.

Although one-third of Australians (33 percent) believe the bilateral relationship may improve somewhat over coming years, more generally Australians continue to adopt a guarded stance toward relations with Beijing. They are still content to reap the benefits of the economic relationship and cultivate business ties – though even faith in these dimensions is diminishing. Nearly three-quarters of those polled see Australia as too economically reliant on China and the nexus between the relationship and underlying Australian economic prosperity shows mild signs of strain. This year, 54 percent of Australians said that without close economic engagement with China, Australia would not be as prosperous as it currently is, down nine points from a high of 63 percent in 2021.

Australians are also unsupportive of the Australian government's decision to allow Chinese-owned company Landbridge's lease of the Port of Darwin to continue. Only 26 percent of Australians said that the Australian government was right not to cancel or vary the 99-year lease, and just over six in 10 Australians (62 percent) said the Australian government should force Landbridge to sell the port back to the government.

Overall, Australians remain strongly wary of and concerned by Chinese leader Xi Jinping's more assertive foreign policy, particularly in the areas of foreign interference, espionage, and the use of social media and communications platforms such as TikTok and WeChat. About two-thirds of Australians identified espionage and foreign interference by China as a major problem, and six in 10 Australians (59 percent) support a nationwide ban on TikTok and WeChat. A majority (68 percent) continue to want sanctions on Chinese officials and entities involved in human rights violations.

Half of those polled support higher defense spending, even if that means budget cuts in other portfolios. Support for AUKUS – the alliance linking Australia, the US, and the United Kingdom – is inching up even as the Australia-China relationship is viewed as a net positive for regional stability and as support for a containment strategy slips.

And the number of those who believe Canberra should remain neutral in any military contingency over Taiwan in which the US is militarily engaged fell to 43 percent, down six points from 49 percent last year. Washington policymakers will be keenly watching that number now and into the future.

The poll does not necessarily award high marks to the governing Labor Party for its policy of 'stabilisation' of relations with China, though it does register relatively strong support for the two countries discussing their differences via traditional diplomacy, not by picking up the megaphone.

The gap that opened up in 2023 between support for the Australian Labor Party and support for the Liberal/National coalition as the best placed to handle Australia's China policy seems to be closing this year. Forty percent of Australians nominated the Australian Labor Party as the political party best placed to handle Australia's China policy, down from 49 percent in 2023. Thirty-four percent said the Liberal/National coalition is best placed to handle Australia's China policy, up from 29 percent last year. This perhaps indicates that the public wants a stronger government response, at least in some instances.

The public may well be registering that when it comes to the Albanese government's [formula](#) for the relationship – 'cooperate where we can, disagree where we must' – it is hearing much more the former than the latter from its political leaders.

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