

Why Dutton is flying in the face of the China hawks

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China hawks predictably attacked the Albanese government for being too soft on Beijing during Premier Li Qiang's visit to Australia last week.

After reiterating a commitment to 'stabilising' ties, Li and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced they had agreed to 'continue to grow the bilateral relationship' and 'navigate their differences wisely'.

Peter Jennings, the former director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), accused the government of having 'no substance' and 'no hint of backbone' in its approach to China.

ASPI's new director, Justin Bassi, said the government's performance 'looks awfully like dialogue without depth and without real purpose'.

Yet, while fondly remembering the former Morrison government's more abrasive handling of China relations, both appeared to miss that Opposition Leader Peter Dutton was busy distancing himself from it.

Dutton's new tone

Dutton's first response to the announcement that Li would visit was that he wanted 'to see an increase in our trading relationship with China'.

He then paid tribute to an 'incredible [Chinese] diaspora community', describing them as 'an integral, wonderful part of Australia'.

When pushed on whether he was 'pro-panda' like Albanese, Dutton replied that he was 'pro-China'.

That's quite a shift from just a few months before the last federal election when he compared the rise of China with Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

The day before Li arrived, Dutton toured the federal electorate of Bennelong alongside his party's Chinese-Australian candidate, Scott Yung. When the presser turned to Li's visit, he declared that building the relationship with China would be a 'very important part of the manifesto that we'll take to the next election'.

When Li finally touched down in Adelaide, Dutton was asked whether he would 'muscle up to China' and 'shirt-front' him. The inquirer might have been disappointed by his response: 'The short answer is no.'

In March, Trade Minister Don Farrell raised eyebrows when he floated the potential for two-way trade with China to grow from \$300 billion to \$400 billion.

But for the 2024 version of Dutton, this lacks ambition. He would ‘love to see the trading relationship [with China] increase two-fold’.

While Dutton’s break with the former government’s handling of China relations may have been particularly stark this past week, there were earlier signs a shift was under way.

In March, *The Australian Financial Review* reported that when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Paul Keating in Sydney that month, he told the former prime minister that ‘Dutton had turned up unannounced to his discussion with opposition foreign affairs spokesman Simon Birmingham, and that he made several positive comments about the relationship’.

This account was supported by a reference Dutton made last Sunday to his ‘great meeting with the Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, only a few months ago in Canberra’.

Moving on from Morrison

Outspoken critics of Beijing such as opposition home affairs spokesman James Paterson can give the impression the Coalition remains wedded to the Morrison approach.

It’s not only the leader who is charting a different course in the opposition.

Last November, Paterson accused the government of making an ‘important concession’ to Beijing after it struck a deal that involved suspending disputes with China at the World Trade Organisation involving barley and wine.

Yet three months earlier, opposition trade spokesman Kevin Hogan and foreign affairs spokesman Simon Birmingham had issued a statement supporting the government’s tactics.

Asked in April whether he stood by the statement, Hogan [said](#) he did and that ‘it was a very easy decision to support the government in’.

China no longer a wedge issue

It is unlikely Dutton has had a fundamental change of heart towards China and now assesses its rise and behaviour to be strategically benign. But domestic politics is clearly pushing him closer to Albanese’s approach.

In the lead-up to the 2022 election, the Morrison government had calculated that turning up the China threat dial to 11 would pay electoral dividends. Prime minister Scott Morrison labelled then deputy opposition leader Richard Marles as a ‘Manchurian candidate’.

The strategy backfired badly.

The Liberal Party’s post-election review highlighted a sharp swing against the government by Chinese-Australian voters and recommended that ‘rebuilding the party’s relationship with the Chinese community must be a priority’.

The broader Australian public was also unimpressed. In nationally representative polling released last year by the Australia-China Relations Institute, Labor had jumped to a 20-percentage point lead over the LNP as the party ‘best placed to handle Australia’s China policy’.

Interestingly, in this year’s poll edition, the gap has shrunk to just 6 percentage points as the opposition’s tone has moderated.

What all this means is that at the next election China is unlikely to be wheeled out as a wedge issue as it was in 2022.

And unlike in the US – where both sides of politics are trying to out-compete each other by being ‘tough on China’ – the bipartisan inclination in Australia is to calm things down.

That bodes well for the ‘stabilisation’ of Australia-China relations. Many Chinese-Australians and businesses will breathe a sigh of relief too.

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