

The Coalition and Labor are dancing around China as an election issue

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The arrival of three Chinese warships conducting live-fire exercises in international waters close to Australia has sent [hawkish media](#), [defence commentators](#) and [political figures](#) into overdrive. This is despite Defence Minister Richard Marles' [advice](#) for everyone to 'take a deep breath', saying the Chinese have broken no laws and that 'there's actually a greater frequency of Australian navy vessels closer to China than there are Chinese vessels closer to Australia'.

Not all defence experts have been swept up in this frenzy. Maritime security expert [Jennifer Parker](#) called reactions to the Chinese warships 'off the mark' and 'extreme', while Admiral (Ret) [Chris Barrie](#) was even blunter, saying what the warships were doing is frankly 'none of our business'.

Despite the government's efforts to reassure the public, as well as these reality checks from defence experts, the Coalition has seen an opportunity for political point scoring. Peter Dutton wasted no time in zeroing in on the prime minister, [accusing](#) Anthony Albanese of 'ducking and weaving' and being unsure about when and who had been warned about the Chinese drills.

With the election drawing closer, the opposition leader has taken the opportunity to project himself as a strong man who can protect Australia, while sending the message that Labor is making the country vulnerable in the face of a national threat. In doing so, Dutton may help placate those who are strongly anti-China within the Coalition, and may also appeal to voters generally concerned about a possible China threat.

But pursuing this point-scoring also carries risks. Dutton is painfully aware of the key marginal seats the Coalition lost to Labor in the [last election](#). Many Chinese Australians, including some traditionally conservative voters, switched to Labor, having lived through growing incidents of [racism](#) and [Sinophobia](#). Much of this, they [believed](#), had been caused by the Coalition's and the media's anti-China rhetoric.

Since replacing Morrison as Liberal leader, Dutton has been careful not to directly criticise China, even trying to project an amiable image of himself to Chinese-Australian voters. He shocked radio audiences last year when he declared that he was in fact '[pro-China](#)'. This is the man who, when serving as defence minister, [compared](#) both China and Russia to Nazi Germany before World War II.

In terms of how to exploit the Chinese warship incident, the opposition leader seems to want it both ways: he wants to score points against Albanese and Labor as being weak on China, while still refraining from directly attacking China. But knowing what happened last election, Dutton clearly doesn't want to make China an election issue.

Instead, he seems to leave the tough China rhetoric to other members of his team, notably shadow home affairs minister [James Paterson](#) and shadow defence minister [Andrew Hastie](#), as well as former home affairs secretary [Mike Pezzulo](#).

A week since the arrival of the Chinese naval task unit, Labor is clearly growing tired of the opposition's rhetoric and has tried to get on the front foot. Evidence of Labor's strategic move can be found in Foreign Affairs Minister [Penny Wong](#)'s opening statement to a Senate estimates committee meeting last Thursday, referring to Team Dutton's recent performance:

What Australians don't want in the face of these circumstances is reckless political games from people who claim to be leaders. We've been reminded of that just this week. The same people who left a massive vacuum in the Pacific ... the same people who had no regard for the consequences for Australian exporters or for Chinese-Australian communities ... are at it again — trying to turn China into an election issue. We have been very clear that China is going to keep being China. Just as Mr Dutton isn't going to stop being Mr Dutton — the man who once said it was inconceivable we wouldn't go to war is going to keep beating the drums of war. The Labor government will be calm and consistent, not reckless and arrogant. And let me remind the Committee the mature and responsible way we have sought to Deal with China.

This statement is carefully worded to hit a few strategic targets.

First, Labor wants to remind people in the Australian [business sector](#) of the bad old days of the Morrison government, when Australia's beef, barley, wine and lobster could no longer be exported to China.

Second, Wong is sending a message to Chinese-Australian voters: the Coalition has no genuine concern for your well-being, and a return of the Liberals could once again risk making you a '[sacrifice](#) on the altar of geopolitical tensions'.

Third, Labor may also have a broad message aimed at moderate voters in the wider population. As beneficiaries of Australia's economic prosperity, they need to remember that the country's economic success depends on having a good bilateral trade relationship with China.

Finally, Labor may be trying to refocus Australia's attention by putting China back in the spotlight. After all, as Penny Wong's statement says, the government's 'calm, and consistent', 'not reckless and arrogant' approach has yielded tangible dividends for the nation. Labor has stabilised the bilateral relationship. Exports of Australian goods have gradually resumed since Labor came to power, and my conversations with some Chinese Australians suggest Chinese-Australian communities generally feel more recognised — both for their suffering and contributions by Labor. They also feel less suspected of spying or being [questioned](#) about their loyalty.

In fact, Labor's management of Australia-China relations is one of the few areas it can claim, with categorical credibility, to have changed things for the better. So, why not play that hand?

However, as always, there are risks in making China an election issue. Just as the Coalition has to walk a tightrope here, Labor must also weigh the pros and cons of going down that path. Even other players such as the Greens and teals must carefully assess how, if at all, to position themselves.

Even though Labor wants Australians to keep calm and carry on, our mainstream media simply cannot resist the temptation to amplify each of the Coalition's point-scoring moves, perpetuating the idea that Albanese is too weak to protect Australia's national security. After all, what could stoke more fear and anxiety than potentially hostile warships doing live-fire drills on our doorstep?

As Donald Trump's win tells us, some voters do prefer a strong man, and Dutton's relentless charge of a 'weak' Albanese could sway some voters who may see a calm and consistent approach as a sign of weakness, not strength.

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