

Where have all the grown-ups gone on China policy?

by Geoff Raby

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"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing," opined the 18th century British philosopher Edmund Burke. The recent media and talking-heads' frenzy in Australia over China calls to mind Burke's injunction not to remain silent.

For some time, the China threat chant has been building, reaching a crescendo with the recent ABC *Four Corners* program on China's alleged "agents of influence" in Australia.

In *The Australian Financial Review*, Angus Grigg and Lisa Murray have chronicled the Australian Prime Minister's personal journey in office from "panda hugger" to speeches on China he doubtless regards as more clear-eyed and hard-headed.

In the hackneyed phrase, direct from the Washington neo-cons' lexicon, Malcolm Turnbull has now "joined the adults in the room". The implication of this phrase for those who do not join the pack in taking a hard line on China is clear.

The *Four Corners* program did not attempt much balance. I was interviewed for 50 minutes by *Four Corners*, of which less than two minutes went to air, compared with many times that for those who had tales of dark webs being spun in Australia by the Chinese Communist Party.

The journalists had begun with their conclusions and worked back to find those comments that would best fit their preconceived story. The views of an informed observer, providing context and a degree of balance, were left on the ABC's cutting-room floor.

Absurd speeches

In the current febrile climate, to introduce a degree of balance into discussions on China one risks being branded a "panda hugger", misty-eyed, naive, China lover, or any other number of derogative terms which have become a staple of high-level policy discourse in Canberra. Only one view can be accommodated by the "adults".

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is cowed. Their minister uses an outsider to write absurd speeches on China, arguing that it can never be a regional leader while not a democracy. The intelligence and security establishment is on a China threat roll, which plays well to their bureaucratic interests and budgets.

It is perfectly proper for the media to warn of Chinese agents of influence, to out politicians who so willingly compromise themselves accepting largesse, and to expose the role of China's diplomatic missions in monitoring Chinese students on campus. Of course, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation too has a proper role to alert Australian politicians of the possible risks of being compromised by ill-intended donations from Chinese and other community groups trying to influence Australian foreign policy. After all, we must seem a soft touch: Australia maintains an expensive and under-utilised embassy in Malta because of the influence of the tiny Malta lobby.

Having a China threat at home provides a handy context for those advocating a hard line against China in foreign policy. We have an enemy within and without. It creates an atmosphere where the Prime Minister can casually refer to China as our "frenemy". In the eyes of the China hawks quoted by Grigg and Murray, the Prime Minister's childish remark qualifies him as an "adult".

For treating Australia's international relations in such a cavalier way, the opposition should be describing the Prime Minister as the "frenemy" of the Australian people. But it won't because it has its own embarrassments over China and, like the government, no obvious policy on how we should manage our relations with a dominant China in our region.

Basis of trust

As former prime minister Paul Keating has frequently said, Australia needs a foreign policy, especially for the new order being created with the rise of China. Australia can either be part of that, working with China on the basis of trust, and with our neighbours in the region, or we can be out of it, looking back towards a fast disappearing order of US hegemony.

So far, we seem to be doing the latter, and the China threat hysteria in Australia at present is making it much harder to have an informed, urgent, national debate about how we best engage with China and the neighbourhood.

Instead it seems that we have decided that US President Donald Trump and his less confrontational position on China are merely an aberration. Australia then

needs to hold the line against China until the US administration comes to its senses or is replaced. The old order can then be at least partly restored.

In doing so, we are making ourselves increasingly irrelevant to China and within the region. As in so many things, former prime minister Kevin Rudd was intellectually astute when he said our approach to China should be to "engage and hedge". Pity that when in government he was so poor at execution.

This government seems to be doing neither. With its "frenemy" mentality, encouraged by our renewed China phobia, it is turning away from serious engagement with China while doing little to work with our neighbours to hedge.

Japan is an important ally for Australia but it also deepens China's mistrust of our motives. India carries no strategic weight in east Asia. The "Indo-Pacific" shibboleth is confected: our primary area of strategic interest is still east Asia. Talk of quadrilateral alliances of democracies serves to divide the region into ideological camps. China draws the not unreasonable conclusion that this is about containment. It views Australia's advocacy of this as a hostile act.

Regional diplomacy

The Prime Minister's initiative to hold an ASEAN Summit in Australia next year was a bold and welcomed move. One meeting, however, does not make a hedging strategy. The half-heartedness of our regional diplomacy can be seen by the infrequency of prime ministerial travel to near neighbours, apart from Indonesia and Singapore. It is more than a decade, for example, since an Australian Prime Minister made a purely bilateral visit to Thailand.

It should not be news to anyone that China remains a one-party, authoritarian state; that the party-state seeks to exert influence abroad, including in certain ways that the Australian community finds unacceptable; that its human rights record continues to be disturbing; and that it is increasingly asserting itself internationally by fair means and foul. China is also of preponderant importance to Australia's future wellbeing.

The challenge is to have a mature national discussion on how our foreign policy should be framed – free of glib quips about "frenemies" and the China threat hysteria in the media and security circles – so as to secure our interests in the evolving order by having an impact on the shape of it. It is time for adults to return the room.

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