



## What Does China Say About the Foreign Policy White Paper?

By Jackson Kwok, 28 November 2017

Contrary to some alarmist coverage by Australian media, the reaction from the state-owned media of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the release of Australia's foreign policy white paper last Thursday was on the whole rather measured.

The PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was primarily fixated on the paper's comments about the South China Sea. On the day the paper was launched, an MFA spokesperson [voiced 'grave concern'](#) about Australia's position concerning the territorial dispute which the PRC maintains must be resolved by claimant states alone. Beijing has regularly dismissed the Australian government's comments on the South China Sea as 'irresponsible' and 'hypocritical', and so this statement was neither surprising nor particularly inflammatory.

The MFA even [scaled back its remarks](#) the following day at the daily MFA press conference. No direct criticism of the paper was raised. A more magnanimous tone was expressed which emphasised Beijing's commitment to enhance mutual political trust with Canberra. The overall reaction from China's foreign ministry should therefore be considered rather measured.

The *People's Daily* (人民日报), mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China [raised concerns](#) about Australia's plan to deepen coordination with like-minded democracies in the region. One of Beijing's primary objections is that the white paper endorses a strategy to surround and shape the PRC. Recent discussions between Australia, Japan, India and the US to revive the Quadrilateral Dialogue – which Beijing views as an attempt at containment – have only exacerbated these concerns.

Unsurprisingly, the most emotionally-charged commentary came from the *Global Times* (环球时报), a popular nationalist tabloid. An editorial [claimed that the white paper](#) 'thoroughly exposes Australia's anxiety' and called on Beijing to prepare a 'cold shoulder' for Australia. The editorial ultimately dismissed Australia as an unimportant state on the PRC's periphery and a 'fake Asian country'.

Nevertheless, the editorial also realised that Australia reflects the anxiety of other regional states as the influence of the PRC grows. The author argued that the benefits of China's development to neighbouring countries will 'overwhelm their unease'. But this suggestion fails to take into account that economic overreliance and the fear of economic coercion is one of the underlying causes of Australia's 'China anxiety'.



It is noteworthy that Australia has been the subject of more *Global Times* editorials within the last 12 months than ever before. However, the *Global Times* is far from an authoritative outlet, and should not be misconstrued as representing Beijing's official position.

Although not explicitly mentioned in official commentary, policy-makers in Beijing are likely displeased that Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative, was mentioned only once in the entire document. Sections of the paper that warn of geo-economic rivalry between China and the US hint at Canberra's hesitation to partner with this gargantuan development strategy.

On the other hand, there is a distinct lack of discussion about the rules-based order within the PRC's state media. The term itself is scarcely mentioned. The white paper outlines that Australia will encourage China to 'play a leading role in a way that strengthens a regional order based on those principles', but this goal is ambitious, if not unrealistic.

Surely the Australian government understands that Beijing is dissatisfied with elements of this rules-based order, which, the white paper confesses, is underpinned by US military strength. Canberra's hope that Beijing uphold and strengthen the rules-based order is a worthy ideal; but it appears to be naïve. If it were a realistic goal, the PRC would be seriously discussing the rules-based order in its state media. So far, there is no indication of this.

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