

# Australia has normalised relations with a China-led future

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The Australia-China relationship is almost back to normal. The speed at which it has recovered has surprised. It has taken two statesman-like speeches by the former prime minister and his successor, and the appointment of a new foreign minister as previously suggested in this column. The anticipated imminent visit by Prime Minister Scott Morrison to Beijing will complete the process.

Importantly, restoration of normalcy to the bilateral relationship has not involved Australia compromising any core interests or principles. Neither has it required obsequiousness nor quiescence, as we are so often warned it will by the more ideologically disposed commentators.

It has involved little more than a return to the realist and pragmatic diplomacy in managing the China relationship which prevailed for much of the past half century. Australia lost its way over the past two years as the intelligence, security, defence establishment took the lead on Australia-China relations.

After nearly two years of downturn in bilateral relations, exemplified by the failure of the then Australian foreign minister to visit China during that entire period, former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull made a significant speech on the Australia-China relationship just 10 days before his ouster. This was a major public event at the University of NSW replete with symbolism, including the presence of China's ambassador to Australia.

Morrison's speech, though made at a curiously more low-key event at a local Australia-Chinese community meeting, continued the themes of mutual interest and respect, and the opportunities for co-operation. It is noteworthy that Morrison's speech, which attracted almost no attention in Australia, was immediately posted on the Australian Embassy website in Beijing and given widespread publicity in China. Of late, an unusually deft act of diplomacy.

## **Ideologically strident statements**

Together, these speeches marked the end of the past two years of ideologically strident statements from Australia about China and underlined Australia's interest in having a constructive, co-operative relationship.

Following a genuinely positive bilateral meeting between China's Foreign Minister and the new Australian Foreign Minister, on the margins of the UN General Assembly meeting, an invitation was issued to visit Beijing and resume the foreign and strategic dialogue, returning the relationship to better order. At this stage in Australia's history, it reveals the immaturity of our foreign policy discussion that it is still necessary to state that China is unambiguously of such overwhelming importance to Australia that to allow the bilateral relationship to fall into the disrepair of the past two years is not just carelessness but wilful indifference towards Australia's national interests.

Importantly, through the two prime ministerial speeches, and presumably the Foreign Minister's meetings, Australia has reaffirmed that China is not a strategic competitor, that we have a wide range of mutually beneficial interests to advance, that we seek co-operation and not confrontation, and that in the region and globally there is a big and urgent agenda on which Australia and China can work together.

All the while we are continuing to stress that we will approach the relationship based on core principles – rule of law, human rights, freedom of expression – which may at times lead to disagreements on specific issues. These disagreements, however, are to be managed pragmatically. In short, we are seeing a much-welcomed return of diplomacy to the management of the bilateral relationship with China.

It is to be hoped that we will not again find ourselves in such an ideological entanglement as we did over membership of the China-promoted Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), when we lost early-mover advantage to have influence inside the body. Or to publicly condemn China's Pacific aid program, offending not just China but also Pacific Island states whose goodwill we seek.

## **What diplomacy is about**

On China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Australia should be saying that it is willing to discuss all activities with an open mind and evaluate those with which we wish to be associated. Australia should now join the many BRI forums that

attract 60-plus countries and most of the relevant international organisations, such as the IMF and WIPO.

It is not necessary to reject the BRI virtually out of hand as Australia has done until now, but rather find ways to welcome it but at the same time ensure it is not inimical to our interests. That is what diplomacy is about. At that same time, standing apart from these developments, as we have seen over again, will not prevent them gathering strength internationally.

In effect, BRI has gone well beyond being a vehicle to recycle China's abundant foreign exchange reserves and provide a vent for its excess infrastructure capacity, to become an emerging and significant new part of the international architecture. That the Victorian government wishes to be on the inside of such a body is not surprising. It is also what can be expected to happen when the federal government creates a policy vacuum through being unable to keep up with changing realities.

With the restoration of normal relations with China, it is now unlikely that the Australian government will join the vacuous but potentially dangerous US policy shift towards China, as set out in Vice-President Pence's speech last month, from engagement with China to strategic containment.

Australia faces a different reality when dealing with China than does the United States, notwithstanding Australia and the US are close allies. Australia has no option but to work co-operatively, constructively and creatively with China. Australia needs to do this in a world in which the Old Order has gone, and in which China is both a principal cause of the order having changed and a principal architect of a newly emerging one. Returning our relationship with China to a more normal footing is good start.

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