

Australia resolves China contradictions at last

By **Geoff Raby**

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The Morrison government is making it clear that because Beijing is the enemy, national security will now take priority over trade.

Scott Morrison's tearing up of Australia's extradition treaty with Hong Kong and offer to grant Hong Kong nationals with skilled and graduate temporary visas in Australia an immediate five-year visa extension is another sign that, at last, the contradictions at the heart of Australian foreign and security policy towards China for the past four years are being resolved.

This follows a series of important announcements that have made it clear that the Australian government now regards China as a strategic competitor and a revisionist power that must be resisted.

Over the past several weeks, Canberra has begun to implement what seems to be a well-co-ordinated and thought-through plan to try to inflict pain on China in retaliation for Beijing's measures against Australia on beef, barley, students, tourists, and "wolf-warrior" diplomacy.

A series of statements by the Prime Minister covering foreign investment, cyber threats, new counter-cyber-attack measures, and an Australian-initiated meeting of Five Eyes finance ministers, as well as last week's Defence Strategic Update are all directed towards China.

Although China is not mentioned, of course, it is the threat to which the government is responding, and groomed members of the media have been well backgrounded by ministerial staffers.

More pointedly, Foreign Minister Marise Payne has criticised Beijing for its human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Morrison and Payne have also criticised Beijing for the new national security law applied to Hong Kong.

But, apparently having learnt from the unfortunate experience of his unilateral call for an [inquiry into the origins of COVID-19](#), the Prime Minister is now keen to ensure that we do these things in good company.

Morrison has also followed Britain in holding open the possibility that Australia would welcome [refugees fleeing Hong Kong](#). Apart from Australia – unlike Britain, which negotiated the city's handover to China – having no obvious moral obligation to do so, it is an irony that won't be lost on Beijing that this is being discussed by a government that [turns around refugee boats](#) from other places. This realist policy amplifies the message that Canberra is sending to Beijing.

So does Australia's recent [embrace of Vietnam](#) as a part of its new balancing strategy towards China. While Canberra goes on endlessly about differences in our values with China and its political system, it conveniently overlooks the fact that Vietnam is also an authoritarian state run by a Communist Party, with its own poor human rights record.

Australia has limited means by which to punish China for its bad behaviour and its more aggressive regional diplomacy. In addition to what it can do against China bilaterally, Australia has also been reinforcing its regional diplomacy. For some time Canberra has been [seeking to draw closer to India](#), in what is likely to be a largely unrewarding effort to enlist it in helping balance China, alongside its [Pacific Step-up](#), and earlier this year participating in a [Quad-plus](#) initiated by the US, incorporating Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand.

This is the new normal in Australia's relations with China. Retaliating against China would have been virtually unthinkable only a few years ago in view of Australia's massive trade dependency. To get to this point politically, it was first necessary to delegitimise business interests in the relationship. This has been effective to the point where now [business](#) and [universities](#) are largely silent, too cowed to comment, lest their calls for improved relations with China are seen as putting commercial interests above the national interest and national security, and money ahead of values.

China's behaviour has crossed a number of lines that many states would regard as unacceptable. But it is unlikely to be troubled much by what Australia and others may do in response. Beijing has two objectives in its grand strategy: preserving territorial integrity and maintaining the rule of the Communist Party. Only the United States threatens these.

Over the past few years, the US has declared China to be a strategic competitor. Both Vice-President [Mike Pence](#) and Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) effectively

seek regime change the way that our Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton does when he freelances on foreign policy, by making much of the distinction between the Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party.

Australia's 2017 foreign policy white paper was redundant before it was released. Australia had already joined the US in regarding China as a strategic competitor to be resisted, and acting as such, despite the white paper's emphasis on working co-operatively with China in areas of common interest.

This has been the persistent contradiction in Australia's foreign and security policies. No one can now doubt who Australia's enemy is. Of course, if China is treated as an enemy, it most certainly will become one.

The singular importance of the Prime Minister's defence statement last week lies not in budgets and kit, however material they may be, but in its recognition that Australia will need to mind its own security in the new world order, which is no longer led by the US, and in which Australia until recently felt so comfortable and secure.

Unlike our neighbours, we have followed the US to this point – only, it would seem, to discover that we are alone in the world, and that Australia needs to account for its own security in a dystopic future. The Prime Minister is attempting to rouse Australia from its strategic torpor.

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