

Morrison has misread China

by **Hugh White**

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The Prime Minister thinks he can set the terms with Beijing. But hard choices and compromises are required to manage our region's ruthless great power.

We should not be surprised that Australia is finding it hard to get our relations with [China right](#), because we have never encountered a country like this before.

China today is a ruthless country determined to use its growing power to expand its influence and reshape our region to suit its interests, with little if any regard for the interests of others. But it is also a country that we must learn to work with, and not just because no other country will offer anything like the same export opportunities in the years and decades ahead.

As our region's strongest state by far, it will do more than any other country to shape Asia diplomatically and strategically, with huge consequences for our future security and influence.

That means China is more important to us in more ways than any country has ever been, except for our great allies Britain and America, and China is not in any sense an ally, let alone a "mate". There will never be any sentimental ballast in this relationship, from either side – just the cold, hard calculus of advantage.

Managing this relationship will be the most difficult as well as the most important diplomatic challenge we have faced. We will need to be clever, finding ways to achieve our aims in ways that cause the least ructions in Beijing. And we have to make compromises, giving way on some issues to make progress on others.

Sometimes it won't be pretty, but that is the way international politics works when you are dealing with great powers.

It is not clear that Scott Morrison has understood this. He seems to think that Australia can set the terms of the relationship unilaterally. Again and again over the past few months, as things have plunged to new lows, he has told Australians that there is simply no choice but to defy Beijing the way he has done. Anything else, he says, would betray Australia's interests and impugn our sovereignty.

This absurd oversimplification of such a complex and important issue is, frankly, an insult to our intelligence.

But we know why he does it. In the age of Brexit and Trump, Morrison is alive to the popular appeal of a leader seen to be standing firm in defence of our national independence and identity from interfering foreigners.

Morrison has been happy to defy Beijing to present himself in this light. He has found plenty of flag-waving jingoists to encourage him. But now he finds that it is bad politics as well as bad government to trash this most important relationship for short-term applause.

The reality is that international relationships, like any other kind, always require a good deal of accommodation and compromise. Our national interests do not all lie on one side of the issue, and we need to balance competing interests that pull us different ways.

It is simply not true to say that doing this undermines our sovereignty or threatens our democracy. It is what we have to do as a sovereign nation to get the best outcome we can in a world where we cannot have everything our own way.

That means we are going to have to make some hard choices and some nuanced judgments. We do need to guard against Chinese interference in our politics, but we might talk less about how we are doing it. We do need to keep an eye on Chinese investments, but we should not exaggerate the risks they pose. And sometimes we will have to accept risks to avoid unacceptable costs.

This is what our neighbours are doing. Morrison's trip to Japan last week was [designed to show that we can deal with China by teaming up with other regional countries to isolate it](#). He brandished the low-level defence administrative agreement which he signed as evidence that Tokyo was on board for this.

But that is not so. This week, hard on Morrison's heels, China's Foreign Minister went to Tokyo to plan a state visit by President Xi Jinping. That is possible because Japan has been able to build better relations with Beijing without compromising its core interests. That shows how different Japan's approach to China is from ours, despite the much more serious differences between them.

In a ham-fisted attempt to mend things with Beijing, Morrison in a [major speech](#) this week, and in these pages on Wednesday, distanced himself from Washington by saying Australia was not taking America's side against China. He stressed that Australia does not see China as a strategic rival the way America does.

But he also said that Australia is "absolutely committed" to its alliance with the United States. How can that be so, if we do not share America's strategic aims? Do we support America against China or not? If not, how can we claim we are committed to the alliance, given that containing China is America's highest strategic priority – and will remain so under Biden?

The answer seems to be that Scott Morrison still hopes the rivalry between America and China is a passing phase. He thinks Australia won't have to choose between them, because things will go back to the way they were in John Howard's day.

Back then, China accepted American leadership and America welcomed China's rise, and Australia had no hard choices to make. But those days are past because China is different now, and we must learn to live with it.

Hugh White is Emeritus Professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra. He is also an Advisory Council member of China Matters.