

Shrill, ignorant voices are hijacking Australia's approach to China

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Imagine a world in which the dominant power, with which Australia has firmly aligned itself, is displaying characteristics of a failed state, with the highest absolute number of deaths in the world, a collapsing health system and insufficient supplies of medical equipment. Where the poor are dying at faster rates than the rich. And where cities are being torched nightly as the black underclass protests extrajudicial murder by white police officers.

Imagine, too, that the ascendant power has been able to manage its way through the crisis, that its businesses are returning to work, that it is using the crisis to seek strategic advantage and further submit its peripheral areas to its central control. This ascendant power does not share the values of the dominant power and its allies. It views such things as human rights as second-order considerations on the road to a great national rejuvenation. And despite its lack of the rule of law and its technological prowess being directed in part to the surveillance of its citizens and censorship, its population, which accounts for one-fifth of humanity, by and large supports the system or acquiesces happily enough.

Imagine that the ascendant power now feels strong enough to be impervious to international criticism, certainly able to brush off challenges from the dominant power's allies. And that it knows it can cut deals with the dominant power regardless of these irritating allies. The ascendant power may also feel it is in its interests to keep propping up the dominant power for an indefinite time to benefit from the public goods, especially regional security, that are provided by that power at great expense. Imagine what Australia's policymakers might do in this -dystopian world.

In this world of heightened risks and uncertainty, Australian foreign policy has become weaponised with respect to China. As Australia's intelligence, security and military establishment has taken control of Australia's foreign policy towards China, legitimate domestic policy discussion is cast increasingly in terms of being for or against the national interest and supporting or undermining Australia's security. Business proponents of improved bilateral relations with China are criticised as putting personal greed above national security. In this way, the huge economic interests Australia has in maintaining good relations with China are delegitimised. Politicians who argue for

greater balance in Australia's policies towards China are attacked as somehow being unpatriotic. A senior government senator has said, "We have Labor people willing to be basically apologists or ventriloquist dolls for the communist regime in China." The Opposition has become so wedged over China that it has been silenced.

China's bad behaviours, both within Australia and towards its regional neighbours, have reinforced each other to create a powerful narrative that China must be resisted at every turn. It was once a no-brainer that good relations with China were valuable for Australia — not as an end in itself, but as necessary to advance Australia's national interests, including but not limited to economic interests. This is no longer the case, and even hard-edged realist arguments for engagement with China are now dismissed as a new form of appeasement. It has never been explained why it is legitimate for major US arms manufacturers to fund the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which is a leading proponent of the China "threat", but not for Australian resource companies to support China -Matters, which seeks to promote informed discussion of China within Australia.

Australia needs to find its way to a shared understanding of its long-term interests and from that maintain a disciplined and consistent foreign policy that is premised on Australia finding security in its region — be it defined as East Asia or the Indo-Pacific — and not from the region, as Paul Keating has said.

Australia has an abundance of soft power and needs to show its attractiveness to the world. It has some strategic weight with resources, but iron ore is one of the most plentiful minerals on earth and China will eventually diversify away from Australia for security reasons, if nothing else, while China's steel-intensive growth will fall over time. Australia's great attractiveness lies in a successful and open multicultural society that draws in students and tourists — people voting with their feet. Australia needs to project this to the world through ramped-up -cultural diplomacy programs, at the same time avoiding divisive and racially tinged public discussion of security and foreign policy. It needs to emphasise individual rights and freedoms, and avoid identity politics that elevate subgroup interests above those of the individual and hence the community at large. Above all, Australians need to be confident in the strength of their institutions — the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, accountability of security agencies to parliament, and independence of the media. Australia faces threats from all major powers in the new order, perhaps none more so than China, but it also has the resilience to resist and overcome. Political leaders in Australia should be building confidence among the public in the country's institutional strengths, not spreading fear.

An activist, imaginative, smart and modest foreign policy needs to be well resourced. Diplomacy, after all, is the only instrument realistically available to ensure Australia's

security. Australia itself can never fund the military defence of the continent, nor can Australia confidently rely on other states to protect us. In the new world order, the safest premise on which to build security policy is that we are on our own. Diplomacy therefore should not be seen as a cost but as an investment in Australia's future security.

Geoff Raby was Australia's Ambassador to China, 2007–11. He is also an Associate of China Matters. This is an edited extract from China's Grand Strategy and Australia's Future in the New Global Order, published by MUP this Tuesday.