

Time to ground Australia's China fear in facts

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As December draws near, thoughts turn to annual anniversaries and remembrances. This December marks the 51st anniversary of one of the more bizarre events in Australia's political history. On December 17, 1967, then prime minister Harold Holt disappeared while swimming at Portsea beach. He was alone at the time and the surf was rough. He was a good swimmer and was familiar with conditions in the area. His body has never been found.

To lose even one prime minister like this would be considered by Oscar Wilde as carelessness. Many theories were advanced, but the wackiest of all gained some traction in the media. Australia was deeply involved in the disastrous Vietnam War, justified to prevent "dominos" falling to Chinese communism in East Asia. It was asserted that Holt may have been taken by a Chinese submarine. Many years later this idiocy was still being repeated.

When China was supposed to have sent a submarine all the way to Portsea to pinch the serving Australian prime minister, it was embarking on the destructive Cultural Revolution. Domestically absorbed by internal political struggles within the Communist Party and externally in grave fear of the Soviet Union.

In those days, China probably did not even have one functional submarine. If it did, it would have been incapable of such a long cruise. False news was not invented with Donald Trump. The Australian media has form in whipping up sensational stories that serve a larger purpose.

Last week, Professor James Laurenceson of UTS' Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) published a detailed and considered study probing Australia's latest bout of China Fear. The report, *Do the Claims Stack Up, Australia Talks China*, looks forensically at the evidence to support claims of China's purported growing influence over Australian politics and universities, the Chinese diaspora as agents of the Chinese Communist Party, China's attempts to undermine Australia's security and even the balance achieved in the Australia-China Free Trade Agreement.

After carefully weighing the evidence, Professor Laurenceson concludes that, "in each case, the evidence base is shown to be divorced from the claims found in

headlines, news reports and opinion pieces, revealing just how widespread has become the discourse of China Threat, China Angst and China Panic".

The study is a welcome attempt to ground Australia's China debate in facts. For too long in this discussion, self-aggrandising academics and think-tank commentators, journalists and politicians have been whipping up a climate of fear around China without serious challenge. Unfortunately, this has unsettled community relations with many of Australia's large ethnic Chinese population and potential Chinese investors in Australia beginning to wonder if they are still welcome in Australia's multicultural society.

Out of context

Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull took this to a new low when he said during the Bennelong election campaign last year, paraphrasing in Chinese a statement reputedly attributed to Mao Zedong, that "Australian people have stood up" against Chinese interference in Australian domestic politics.

Mao was supposedly to have said this in the context of the Chinese people having regained their sovereignty after two centuries of foreign occupation of Chinese sovereign territory. The proposed anti-foreign interference law was of course for all countries, not just China, but Turnbull framed it as being entirely about China. It was the crudest of dog whistles. It was a major factor in Beijing's decision to put its relations with Australia into the cold room and which continues until now.

Turnbull and more recently his successor have attempted to fix the damage with two important speeches in recent months on how Australia views the relationship. While acknowledging our substantial differences over issues of political and social organisation, human rights and a free media, they have chosen to stress our shared interests at many levels and have spoken of seeking a constructive and co-operative relationship. They have returned the discourse to where it had been under successive governments, both Labor and Liberal.

These speeches have disappointed the China Fear industry as will ACRI's latest report. ACRI has made a valuable contribution but it is likely to be met by those with an interest in promoting China Fear with innuendo and disdain, even while acknowledging claims made about the China challenge.

ACRI was established with the financial assistance of one of only two Chinese residents in Australia, about whom it has been asserted, without evidence, are in some way agents of the Chinese Communist Party. One of these is an Australian

citizen of 20 years. Its founding professor, former foreign minister Bob Carr, is also said by some to be too accommodating of China's authoritarian regime. China Fear is occurring in many western democracies and there can be no doubt the Chinese state seeks to interfere and influence politics and business by whatever means, old and new, including cyber. But many other states do so too and, as we have seen most recently in the Wentworth byelection, none more so and more effectively than Israel.

But in Australia, China Fear has been more virulent than anywhere else. It is not that China has been any more aggressive towards Australia, though some would like to think that we are important enough to have been singled out for special treatment, than in other countries.

In Australia our politicians and some sections of the media have not attempted to provide context and a sense of proportionality to the challenges.

In particular, they have not sought to reaffirm and reassure Australians as to the strength and resilience of Australia's institutions – the Parliament, judiciary and free media – in the face of challenges from any quarter. But if you can believe that a Chinese submarine stole an Australian prime minister 51 years ago, you can believe anything.

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