

# Australia must get better at picking its fights with China

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*Power is still the essence of international relations. That is the reality Canberra must learn to manage in the new Asia.*

Everyone loves a David and Goliath story. That is why we have all been cheering plucky little [Canberra for standing up to the big bullies](#) in Beijing. But how does the story end? In the Bible, David strides triumphant over the humbled Goliath. In reality it is much more likely that David gets a sharp lesson in the realities of raw power.

But it is too late to back out now. China's crude threats of economic retaliation have made it impossible for the Coalition government to abandon its proposal for an independent international enquiry. That would make it look pathetic.

Nonetheless, we need to ask how [Australia found itself in a stoush with China](#) that we cannot abandon and cannot win, and try to learn some lessons for the future. Because we are going to face this kind of problem again, often, in the new Asia of the 21st century.

The first lesson is to not needlessly antagonise China, especially when we need their co-operation. However good it may make us feel, Australia's bold defiance of Beijing has been spectacularly counterproductive.

Our goal is to ensure that the world learns all it can about how this pandemic began, which makes perfect sense. But [the Morrison government framed its call](#) for an independent enquiry as an investigation of Beijing's culpability for the outbreak. That was a major blunder, because it absolutely guaranteed that China would reject the idea out of hand. And without China's co-operation, we will never learn what really happened in Wuhan in November and December last year.

It is probably true that China deserves blame for mismanaging the outbreak when the virus first appeared. But that's not the point. Effective diplomacy is not about saying what you think is true. It is about saying what you need to say – and *not* saying what you *don't* need to say – to get a result. By saying what they

did, our government made sure they wouldn't get the enquiry they were after. And that really hurts the world's ability to manage the next pandemic better.

Why did our government make such an obvious blunder? Until now Scott Morrison has been very careful in his dealings with Beijing, trying to make sure that the tense 'deep freeze' he inherited from his predecessor doesn't get any worse. It is strange that he chose this moment to turn confrontational when the pandemic so obviously calls for cooperation.

The most likely explanation is that he did it to please Washington. The Trump administration is plainly determined to talk up China's responsibility for the pandemic, both to deflect domestic criticism of its own woeful and at times farcical mismanagement of the crisis, and to score points against Beijing in their escalating geopolitical contest for influence in Asia and globally.

It is easy to imagine the White House urging Canberra to help out by joining their chorus of accusations against Beijing. Agreeing to do so would certainly accord with the call last week from our new ambassador in Washington, Arthur Sinodinos, to do whatever we can to help America 'push back' against China.

But that is only sensible if Washington is acting wisely, with a credible strategy that serves Australia's interests. That means managing China's assertiveness without unnecessarily exacerbating tensions or precluding cooperation where it is needed. Alas, there is no evidence of that from the Trump White House, or anywhere else in Washington. On the contrary, the pandemic has further stoked the rising anger towards China across the political spectrum in America - mirrored by rising Chinese animosity towards America.

### **Step out of US footsteps**

All this is making it harder and harder to see how this all-important relationship can be managed in future. Indeed the risk of a catastrophic US-China conflict is increasing sharply. Washington shares the blame for this, and so do we if we encourage them and echo their messages. So the second lesson we should learn from the current crisis in our relations with Beijing is not to allow our policy on China to be dictated from Washington.

And the third lesson? We need to wake up to the new realities of power in Asia and learn how to navigate them. Alas, contrary to our fond hopes, the so-called 'rules-based global order' has not replaced the exercise of raw power in international affairs. And the power is now in new hands.

For the first time in our history the most powerful country in Asia, and the most important country in the world to us, is not an ally, nor even a friend. It is a country that views us coolly, at best. Nothing in our experience has taught us how to deal with a country like this.

And let's not delude ourselves that China has blundered by threatening us. Of course, it hasn't made us like it, but that is not what it wants. They want to display their power by showing us, and others, that they can impose big costs on us at low cost to themselves. That is the essence of power in international relations, and the Chinese have it in abundance.

So, whether we like it or not, we now face hard choices whenever we want to oppose China. As a sovereign state, we have the right to do as we wish, but we must accept the consequences of our choices. It is our sovereign right to criticize China, and China's sovereign right to retaliate. No one likes to be pushed around, especially by a known bully, but power has its own logic which cannot be denied. So we need to learn to pick our fights.

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