

Australia needs to draw a line between policy and posturing on China

by John McCarthy

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The past few weeks have confirmed that the strategic parameters of our regional policy are basically sound. However the hubristic self-righteousness of some of our actions demonstrate overreach inconsistent with the national interest.

The government is doing the right thing by our country on the American alliance.

If Australia does not adhere to its tenets, we cannot complain if American commitment to the Indo-Pacific region beyond Guam diminishes.

We have shown public confidence in the Biden administration, which as an ally we owe it, and thus far Joe Biden has justified that confidence. He has set out his policy on China. Allowing for permissible cant, his language has been sensible.

The [Alaska meeting between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi](#), was unfriendly but at least amounted to a measure of engagement. The US administration has been firm in defence of Taiwan. It has reinforced alliances.

With the first in-person summit for President Biden being with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, to be followed shortly by a visit to Washington by South Korea's President Moon Jae-in, a signal was sent that the administration's geopolitical priority is now the Indo-Pacific region.

[The Quad, on which Australia has placed emphasis](#), does not have the structural integrity that its most ardent advocates claim. But as a policy vehicle it is at least working. We seem to be realising, although not enough, that south-east Asia is the ground on which Sino-American rivalries will have the most resonance.

Our problem remains that through sheer bad judgment, or a view that being David against Goliath attracts the punters, we continue to cross the barrier between cogent policy and posturing, thereby engaging in self-harm.

Let us accept that our decision on Huawei was justifiable, that it is prudent to carefully vet Chinese investment applications, that the Chinese government is authoritarian and often cruel, and that its strategic ambitions require judicious pushback.

But it is unnecessary to refer to the government of China as the Chinese Communist Party, as if it somehow lacks legitimacy. We do not refer to the Vietnamese government, also communist, in the same terms.

Our initiative on an investigation on the origins of COVID-19 in Wuhan, which catalysed our current trade issues with China, is widely accepted as ill-judged.

We publicly proselytise against China with other countries – for example, on Huawei.

The recent implementation of the Foreign Relations Act by negating the Victorian Belt and Road Initiative agreement and three other archaic memorandums of understanding was silly. After all, the examination of 1000 MoUs only resulted in four pallid negative outcomes. There can't have been much of a problem. Why the fuss?

We have sought to expand the role of the Five Eyes intelligence group into a policy platform – a bad idea, grist for the mill of Chinese propagandists seeking to show our Association of Southeast Asian Nations friends the perfidy of the ex-imperial powers and the former white dominions.

New Zealand, causing wailing and gnashing of teeth in some parts of Canberra, got things right by largely avoiding any new aspects of [Five Eyes activity](#).

To these comments, some will exclaim that we are standing up for our sovereignty, values and a mystifying new notion, the “balance of freedoms”.

Well, yes, all right, but beyond the obvious point that some of our actions are costing us money and jobs, sensibly run countries do not burn their bridges and, where necessary, they hedge. Not good chest beating material. But smarter.

After the recent Biden-Suga summit, there was comment that Japan was moving closer to the United States on China policy. This view largely emanated from language in the communique acknowledging the “importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait”.

These words did matter. It was the first time Taiwan had been mentioned in a joint US-Japan summit communique since 1969. Some in Kasumigaseki, Tokyo’s Whitehall, had reportedly resisted it.

But then the Taiwan issue is probably as serious as it has ever been, the language is hardly a call to arms and a US-Japan foreign and defence ministers’ meeting a few weeks earlier had used the formula. In short, the Japanese were prepared to push the envelope, but carefully and not far.

Vietnam – a country with more at stake in its dealings with China than any other – is building its relationship with the United States in peace with the same vigour as 50 years ago it defeated it in war. Yet every issue with China is considered in detail and with caution. Many causes for justifiable complaint go through to the keeper.

The response here in Australia to arguments about what others do is that we do things “the Australian way”. Come off it!

At the moment things are going well. Biden is infinitely better than Donald Trump. The Europeans, with varying degrees of commitment and skill, are aligning more with our perspectives on China. But times change, which is one reason why nations hedge.

There was no good time for the United States troop withdrawal from Afghanistan but, like the withdrawal from Vietnam, it had to happen. If, again like Vietnam, after a “decent interval” Afghanistan goes bad, American credibility will suffer another punishing blow. This would have a ripple effect beyond the wider Middle East.

And if the Americans are challenged over Taiwan, will a country tired of unsuccessful wars want to risk another one? On this, the view from New York, Iowa or Oregon may be different from that in the Pentagon or the admirals in Honolulu.

In these uncertain times, our actions on China should be guided by a genuine national security interest and, where necessary, proportionate response. We also need to think ahead.

In our corridors of power is thought being given to the “what ifs”? In a fast-moving world, that is not as easy as it sounds. But we should at least avoid digging ourselves into deeper holes, employ agile footwork and never lead with the chin.

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