

Whitlam's birthday surprise: the US was shifting on China too

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Just days after Whitlam left China, news broke of US president Richard Nixon's pending visit, handing the Australian opposition leader a remarkable foreign policy win.

On July 11, 1971, five days after leaving China, then opposition leader Gough Whitlam was handed one of the most remarkable vindications of any politician's judgment in history.

For weeks Whitlam had been under attack from the government and the media in Australia for his [decision to visit China](#), ending decades of Australian policy to isolate the Communist regime.

Then, without warning, exactly on Whitlam's 55th birthday, president Richard Nixon announced that US national security adviser Henry Kissinger had been secretly in Beijing preparing for the president to visit. In a stroke, the world learned that the United States had changed its policy on China.

It is difficult to overstate the political courage that was required by Whitlam to visit China and announce that if Labor were to become the next federal government, Australia would recognise the People's Republic as the legitimate government of all China.

As Whitlam went to China, Australian troops were dying in Vietnam in support of US policy to defend the South Vietnamese government in its civil war with the Communist north.

The geopolitical objective, so the argument went, was to prevent South Vietnam from becoming another domino to fall to an advancing Communist China. If South Vietnam were to fall, so it was believed, the rest of south-east Asia, where

post-colonial communist insurgencies were active, would also fall to Chinese communism.

Australian society had become deeply divided over our involvement in the protracted war. Domestic political opposition was heightened over conscription of 18 year olds to serve in it. Opposition to the war saw massive public demonstrations in Western democracies, including Australia, even where the countries themselves were not involved. The Vietnam War was coming to be understood as immoral and illegal.

Good v evil

While the war was increasingly unpopular in Australia, broad public support remained. As we have seen time and time again, politicians supported by a conservative press rallied the population around the US flag – our alliance relationship and our friends in Washington.

The war was presented in starkly Manichaeian terms for the general public – good versus evil, the values of freedom and democracy versus communism and enslavement.

Our shared values with the US were so obvious that any questioning of the assumption was viewed as an act of disloyalty, a betrayal of our boys in uniform.

The sheer audacity of Whitlam's visit rallied the government and media into full attack, with the prime minister making a statement on it in Parliament and coming within a whisker of accusing Whitlam of treason.

Kissinger's visit, and the Nixon decision to shift US foreign policy, to reassess the purported China threat, did not occur overnight. It was the subject of extensive secret planning. None of this was shared with the US' long-standing, trusted allies, including those such as South Korea and Australia that had troops dying alongside their American allies in Vietnam.

The Great Power, in fact, took only Pakistan into its confidence over China, and for it to act as an intermediary.

Japan and other allies had so deeply based their foreign policies on the certainty of the US' continuing hostility towards Communist China that they felt deeply

betrayed by Nixon. Prime minister Eisaku Sato at the time is said to have burst into tears at the news.

The rift left permanent scars in how Japan, for example, would view the trustworthiness and reliability of the US as an alliance partner. At the very least, foreign policy would need implicitly to acknowledge and prepare for unpredictable actions by the US. Some hedging in strategy would henceforth be required.

Margaret MacMillan in her book *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World* records that Australia's head of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Sir Keith Waller, at the time wrote, "The proposition that the United States is Australia's best friend does not any longer command general support".

MacMillan says that British prime minister Edward Heath had invested so heavily in the "special relationship" with the US that his trust never recovered and he instead turned towards Europe.

For Taiwan, of course, it was shattering. In this single act it was cast aside in the sudden shift of Great Power relations, its future forever benighted by its new second-class status under the 1972 Shanghai communique between China and the US, signed during Nixon's first visit.

A more sophisticated view

This formalised US recognition of Beijing as the legitimate sole government of China. And, of course, in those days for the West and much of the developing world, where the US goes so goes the rest. To paraphrase Thucydides: great powers do what they want, the rest of us do what we can.

That the dramatic US realignment in its relations with China should have come as such a shock to conservative governments in Canberra, Seoul, Tokyo, London and Taipei is one of those interesting historical questions. It attests mainly to the grip the US can exert over foreign policymaking in such places.

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By that time, some governments in the West – UK, France, Canada – had recognised the People’s Republic of China. Many analysts, scholars and policy advisers challenged the Washington-derived view that China was hell bent on dominating East Asia and had to be stopped in Vietnam. A view Canberra soaked up.

It was also obvious to everyone except the most obdurate, of which there were plenty in Canberra policy circles in those days, that the US itself was increasingly desperate to find a way out of Vietnam. Any escape would inevitably involve China.

Whitlam and those around him had a much more sophisticated view than the Australian government of Great Power dynamics, the moral turpitude of the Vietnam War and Australia’s military involvement, and the increasingly narrowing choices faced there by the US.

He could see that Australia’s interests would be best served not by ideology or nostalgically following the US down every rabbit hole, but by adopting a pragmatic realist foreign policy based squarely on clear-eyed understanding of how Great Powers behave, and the myth of the China threat to East Asia, either because of its intent, or lack of capacity, or most likely both.

As a shrewd politician, he could feel the domestic mood in Australia change against the war and conscription. Opposition to the war and ending conscription were by the time of his China visit already cornerstone Labor policies. Any hope of nudging post-colonial East Asia towards peace and stability would require China’s involvement. Recognition of China would be the first step in that engagement.

Whitlam had a vision for an independent Australian foreign policy. He rather quaintly believed this to be in the best interests of Australia. His independent foreign policy, while always grounded in the primacy of the US security alliance, nevertheless upset the Nixon-Kissinger White House – despite having led the US on China – because it was independent.

While seemingly momentous at the time, when viewed with the benefit of hindsight, Whitlam’s visit now seems so obvious as to appear modest. But then it required courage, belief in Australia and self-confidence – in short, leadership of the sort that we have not seen in Australia for a very long time.

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