

# Crying wolf: How to stop talk of war with China

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*How might it be possible to stop talk of war with China? Are our civil and military leaders, and their loyal press simply "crying wolf"? Or is there a real and present threat that might justify war talk?*

In Aesop's fable, a shepherd boy keeps tricking local villagers, telling them that a wolf is attacking his sheep. Time after time he is proved to be telling lies, so that, in the end, when the real wolf appears, they refuse to believe him.

There are three parties in this tale. There is the wolf — I will come back to the wolf later. Then there is the boy — the common expression, "to cry wolf" refers to him. Finally, there are the villagers — they are also important, as pointed out by Samuel Croxall, who translated Aesop into English in the mid-18th century.

He said, "When we are alarmed with imaginary dangers in respect of the public, 'til the cry grows quite stale and threadbare, how can it be expected we should know when to guard ourselves against real ones?"

We are the villagers in this fable and we hear a lot of crying wolf going on.

Already last year Major-General Adam Findlay briefed special services forces that war with China was highly likely. In April this year, former minister for defence Christopher Pyne said that the chances of an Indo-Pacific war were rising. Our present Minister for Defence Peter Dutton said on April 24 that the risk of conflict over Taiwan could not be discounted.

Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs Mike Pezzullo gave the same warning to staff in his Anzac Day message, referring to Chinese activities in the South China Sea.

His words were: "Today, as free nations again hear the beating drums and watch worryingly the militarisation of issues that we had, until recent years, thought unlikely to be catalysts for war, let us continue to search unceasingly for the chance for peace while bracing again, yet again, for the curse of war."

ANU Professor Paul Dibb, in the [ASPI Strategist of July 26](#), called on the Australian government to seek assurances from the United States that it would help defend us from a Chinese missile attack

More recently, Dutton, [addressing the American Chamber of Commerce in Australia](#) on September 8, said, referring to China, “The boundaries between conflict and competition are becoming increasingly blurred. The cyber realm, economics, trade, resources, and digital media are ... being used as coercive battering rams – or indeed, being weaponised in new ways. So consequently, the arenas of tension have expanded, making the prospect of military conflict sadly less remote than in the past – especially as a result of miscalculation or indeed misunderstanding.”

Last week, the [AUSMIN](#) ministerial-level consultation with the US for the first time referred to regional “adversaries” — which in my book is equivalent to “enemies”. This week, the first in-person meeting of the leaders of the Quad (Australia, Japan, India and the United States) will discuss how to counter “Chinese coercion”.

Everyone knows we have a problematic, deteriorating relationship with China. There are trade disputes. We have called out China’s substantive human rights issues. Our new security laws are designed to suppress Chinese influence in Australia, which is claimed to threaten our democratic system. None of these issues, however, individually or collectively, constitutes grounds for war. We have similar problems with other countries (this week, we have gravely offended France). In every case, we have been able to resolve disputes through diplomatic channels and dialogue.

With China, trade disputes should be resolvable through established rules at the World Trade Organization, except that it was destroyed by the US Trump administration, so that appeal to international law has been rendered impossible. The over-riding issue that is determining policy in Canberra is our concern that China has emerged as a major power in the region and is seen by the US, our ANZUS partner, as challenging it for supremacy.

Now, the AUSMIN statement that I mentioned earlier talks about Taiwan. The US has established commitments to Taiwan, to provide weapons for its use in self-defence and to support its capacity to resist external threats. Its *Taiwan Relations Act* does not however guarantee that America would intervene militarily, and a number of international relations experts have disagreed as to whether ANZUS treaty obligations would oblige Australia to support our ally if it were threatened by China, as it certainly would be if it were to declare war in support of Taiwan.

Aesop's fable does not elaborate on why the shepherd boy repeatedly cried wolf. Maybe he was bored and just did it for fun; maybe he wanted an excuse to leave the flock and get back to the village; maybe he saw some shadows in the night; maybe the wolf was really hanging around but disappeared when people went out to check. Before dismissing Dutton and Pezullo, Scott Morrison and his American pals for crying wolf, we should turn our attention to the wolf's intentions.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who himself has been called a "wolf warrior", said at a regular [press briefing on July 22](#) this year that Chinese trade sanctions had not been retaliation for Australian actions. Earlier, [Zhao also said](#), with regard to bilateral relations, that the ball was in Australia's court, that it was Australia that was trying to undermine Chinese interests, and that China's policies were for stability and peace in the region. In other words, this wolf was not threatening to eat up the Australian flock.

There is plenty more evidence that China's ultimate interest is to maintain the regional status quo and to adhere to its treaty obligations. For instance, in a phone hook-up with US President Joe Biden on September 10, [PRC President Xi said](#) that they would continue engagement and dialogue "on the basis of respecting each other's core concerns and properly managing differences."

Biden responded saying that it was "the responsibility of both sides to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict" and, speaking yesterday at the UN General Assembly, he said that he was not seeking another Cold War.

You will say that it is irrelevant to ask the wolf about his intentions, because if he were intent on attack, he would naturally deny it. What material evidence is there that might prove China's aggressive intent?

First, as Pezzullo mentioned, China has staked its claims to large parts of the South China Sea. It has built military bases on artificially constructed islands and sent coast guards and militia to disrupt other countries' fishing fleets in the area. This has encroached on territory claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia, but those countries have not responded by talking about war.

Rather it is they who have expressed concern over the newly announced AUKUS arrangement that will give Australia nuclear-powered submarines. They fear this will spark a regional arms race.

The South China Sea issue should be resolvable by UNCLOS (the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), and the AUSMIN statement refers to this. Unfortunately, the US has still not ratified that treaty.

In any case, the 2016 UNCLOS ruling on China's claim was not accepted by China or by Taiwan, which also adheres to the "nine dash line". The question remains therefore whether this is legal proof of wolfish behaviour.

I doubt also whether China's increased military expenditure, on land as well as on sea, proves its aggression. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in 2019 this amounted to approximately 1.9 per cent of its GDP, the same as Australia, compared with 2.4 per cent in India or 3.4 per cent in the US.

China's defence spending this year is forecast to increase 6.8 percent, but this is in line with the overall economic growth forecast. So even though there is a military build-up, the threat should not be exaggerated.

Regarding Taiwan, in July this year, President Xi Jinping said that solving "the Taiwan question" and reunification were an "unswerving historical task." This has been interpreted by some foreign observers as a blatant threat, but the statement must be seen in its historic and political context.

The island of Taiwan had been occupied by Japan for decades before being returned to China — then, the Republic of China — at the end of World War II. Both the Communist Party and the Nationalist (Kuomintang) Party, which relocated there from the mainland in 1949, regard Taiwan as part of China's national territory.

Australia acknowledged this in our joint communique when we established diplomatic relations with the PRC 50 years ago. Since then, we have not recognised the Republic of China (Taiwan) as a sovereign state or regarded the authorities in Taiwan as a national government. Relations between Beijing and Taipei are internal domestic matters and should not become a cause for war.

Xi Jinping has also tightened central control over Hong Kong, reining in its incompetent administration and imposing harsh security laws. No less than Taiwan, Hong Kong is indubitably part of China. Hong Kong affairs are not a threat to Australia any more than Taiwan.

Finally, some claim that China's aggressive intent is evident in its deployment of soft power, seeking to undermine our economy with trade sanctions, cyber-attacks, spreading Covid, subverting our neighbours with tied aid and "Belt and Road" projects, controlling public discussion through a compliant Chinese language media, shutting down academic debate, and damaging our political system through the corrupt use of personal connections, particularly the substantial ethnic Chinese diaspora. It is a spectacular list.

If China really intended to make Australia a vassal state in this way, so far it has been spectacularly unsuccessful. Our democracy remains intact. There have been some casualties in business and our ethnic Chinese community has been hassled and falsely accused, but if there indeed was such a campaign, Beijing has little success to show for all its efforts. The villagers' sheep are safe.

Former prime minister Paul Keating has a way with words. Prompted by the new defence arrangement with the US and the UK, AUKUS, he writes in *The Sydney Morning Herald* this week:

*"The notion that Australia is in a state of military apprehension about China, or needs to be, is a distortion and lie of the worst and more grievous proportions. By its propagation, Australia is determinedly casting China as an enemy – and in the doing of it, actually creating an enemy where none exists. So poisonous are the Liberals towards China they are prepared for Australia to lose its way in the neighbourhood of Asia, in search of Australia's security from Asia, by submission to yet another strategic guarantor."*

I should have convinced you by now that there are no material grounds for talking of war with China, no direct threat to this nation and no treaty obligation that might lead us to engage in military conflict between China and the US or others.

Talk of war, crying wolf, nevertheless continues, for political reasons.

Sadly therefore, it is always possible that war could break out, if not deliberately, then by accident. Recently there have been US flights over Taiwan, and US, British and Australian ships through the Taiwan Strait. Any of these could provoke retaliation. Other neighbours of China, including Quad members Japan and India, as well as Vietnam and Korea, have disputes that could escalate.

Rather than talk of war, we must exert more efforts to broker peace, to find middle ground, to strengthen dialogue and use formal and informal diplomacy.

Surely differences and difficulties can be resolved through dialogue. It is unfortunate that in recent years Canberra has given lower priority to diplomacy than to defence and security. Defence spending was boosted in this year's budget, while now more than ever there is a need to build up the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's strengths and to engage China more widely in international forums, through all diplomatic missions, and through second tier discussions on topics of shared and urgent concern such as climate change and pandemic prevention and control.

These are the real wolves threatening the flock.

This speech was given in an online panel on Law, Justice and Diplomacy on September 22 as part of the Raising Peace Festival. The panel was recorded and will be made available on the Festival website [Raisingpeace.org.au](https://raisingpeace.org.au).

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