

# Labor must learn China is not going away

by **Geoff Raby**

*Australian Financial Review*, 13 July 2022

Link: <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/labor-must-learn-china-is-not-going-away-20220712-p5b132>

*Penny Wong is professional and diligent, but Prime Minister Anthony Albanese needs to change his advisers on China.*

One of the toughest challenges for new governments is foreign policy. Stuff happens from the day of the election and the prime minister and new ministers are forced to respond.

Unlike domestic issues, governments can exercise little or no control over external events.

Both the new Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong have been busy. Not that they have had to deal with crises so far – Russian invaded Ukraine five months ago – nor unexpected events, [China's embrace of the western Pacific has been years in the making](#), but a raft of scheduled international meetings has put a spotlight on foreign policy.

Wong has begun well. Her approach is considered, calm, thoughtful and workman-like.

Importantly, she has deliberately eschewed exaggerated rhetoric. She has also introduced a new concept into foreign policy.

In her first speech as minister she said that Australian foreign policy should be based on Australia's Indigenous heritage and its multicultural society. This has not received the attention it deserves. It provides a foundation for defining over time a more independent foreign policy than governments have pursued since Paul Keating.

Wong has had years to prepare for this role in opposition. It shows to good effect.

Coming to this job, which requires nuance, careful preparation, and a particular temperament, is not easy. The minister needs to be able to think about the issues for herself, or himself. It is not enough just to regurgitate departmental talking points, as her predecessor did, and not very well at that.

Not so for Albanese. Understandably, he shows little preparation or independence of thought from his advisers. He was busy thinking about getting elected.

Labor's strategy was not to have a crack of light between it and the government on foreign and security policy, so no need to think about these things. [Close your eyes and adjust the accent slightly and you hear Scott Morrison](#). For Albanese, there was no need for his advisers to re-type the page, and they didn't.

Fortunately, the Prime Minister's Morrisonian intoning in Tokyo and Madrid about China's threat to our values and that China had changed, not Australia (as if we both hadn't), did not derail – as it easily could have – last week's meeting between Wong and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Wong's debriefing of the media afterwards was first class. As was her assessment of where to from here in the bilateral relationship.

Finally, after years of no contact, a senior Australian minister was able to raise the [plight of Australian detainees in Chinese prisons](#).

Diplomatic engagement with other countries is about much more than trade or the state of bilateral exchanges, or co-ordination on regional and multilateral issues. It is also critical with countries such as China to protect and defend the welfare of Australian citizens that become consular cases.

Australian foreign policy of the past decade can now be seen to have been wanting. It has been left in the dust of great power rivalry.

Morrison had made Australia an outlier in relations with China. Even Canada maintained high-level official contact, which eventually led to the release from Chinese prisons of two detainees. At this stage, the meeting should not raise hopes for the Australians, but it is much better than nothing.

The fawning attention given in the Australian media to all the diplomatic activity over the past two weeks seems to have deflected attention from some other important events with potentially significant implications for Australia.

Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He and US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen met to discuss the removal of US tariffs. While doing little to tame US inflationary pressures, removal of the unilaterally imposed tariffs would provide a potential face-saving way back towards more constructive relations.

This was followed by a five-hour meeting of China's Foreign Minister and US Secretary of State in Bali at the weekend.

[The tempo of engagement at senior levels between the US and China is ramping up.](#) Strategic competition won't disappear, but the relationship might become less fractious, more co-operative.

Other than a potential nuclear war, the US has no choice but to share East Asia hegemony with China.

The Indo-Pacific as a security system has proved as vacuous as its name implies.

[India put an end to that when it refused to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine.](#) It then went on to continue its arms, energy and agricultural trade, while helping Russia find ways of circumventing Western financial sanctions. India merrily participated in the China-led BRICs summit, along with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Australian foreign policy of the past decade can now be seen to have been wanting. It has been left in the dust of great power rivalry.

Australia's bit-part in the drama has damaged the country, while not ensuring US continued hegemony in our region. China's presence in the western Pacific is a monument to this failure. We have not been able to exert influence in the region in which we most aspire to do so.

This is not about the micro detail of aid programs, or how many times an Australian prime minister or foreign minister visited the region, or our policies on climate change. It is about great power rivalry.

Our bet has been entirely on the US which, with multiple global distractions, a deeply divided politics, and flagging will, has been unable to compete in the region of closest strategic interest to Australia.

This is not to welcome the changes, but to recognise the reality. China is not going away.

China does not threaten the security of the US mainland, or indeed the Western Hemisphere, although it has outplayed the US diplomatically in the US's own sphere of influence for years. Little support was garnered in Central and Latin America to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In Madrid, the country of Cervantes, we had the spectacle of Don Quixote and his squire Sancho Panza tilting at windmills, trying to convince others that the world is not cast as it is.

At the same time, we had the prime ministers of Belgium and the Netherlands warning that China is not an enemy of Europe. And warning that equating China with Russia, as Morrison did, was not only a mistake, but potentially harmful.

Until Albanese changes the advisers who have taken Australia into these policy dead ends, he will continue to cut a quixotic figure on the world stage.

Worse, he will run the risk that as China and the US recalibrate their relations, Australia will be left like a shag on a rock, and our security seriously unattended.

*Geoff Raby was Australia's ambassador to the People's Republic of China from 2007-11 and is the author of China's Grand Strategy and Australia's Future in the New Global Order. He is also an Associate of China Matters*