

Securitisation challenges stabilisation in both China and Australia

By Yun Jiang

Asia Society, October 2023

Link:

<https://asiasociety.org/australia/securitisation-challenges-stabilisation-both-china-and-australia>

Stabilisation – a low ambition word – describes the Albanese Government’s general approach to Australia’s relationship with China. It comes after five years of deteriorating bilateral ties under the previous Coalition governments.

In China, most experts also have a low expectation for the long-term outlook of the bilateral relationship, with the avoidance of conflict and major frictions rather than significant progress as the main aim.

Both governments having low expectations is not the worst outcome. Indeed, it avoids any misunderstanding, which could have occurred if China were to expect the Australian government to change its strategic direction after the election.

Aiming for higher ambition in the bilateral relationship is challenging due to expanding securitisation in both countries.

As US-China competition intensifies, China’s top leaders believe the US is leading a push to contain and suppress China. This makes the country, and especially its government, feel cornered and threatened. Under President Xi’s leadership, there is an increased focus on national security and a renewed drive for self-sufficiency.

This focus on national security and self-sufficiency is going to be a long-term phenomenon. It will affect all aspects of the country, especially China's links with the outside world, such as trade and people-to-people exchanges.

For the Chinese government, over-reliance on imports as well as technology controlled by others is seen as a source of risk. For example, recent propaganda on the Beijing Subway featured prominently an egg producer lamenting about past reliance on foreign seed stock. The producer becomes teary as she describes how her company overcame the challenges and developed their own seed stock to ensure self-sufficiency in egg supply for the country. Food security is paramount in the mind of the central government.

How to overcome chokepoints imposed by other countries has become a central preoccupation of the government, in food security, advanced technology, and beyond.

This sense of external threats is actively promoted by the government to the population at large. While the state-controlled media has always pushed a narrative of chaos and disorder in other countries, xenophobia has kicked up a notch since COVID.

Disinformation around wastewater release from the Fukushima nuclear power plant, and the resulting panic in China is an example. Even factual scientific articles have been censored. Chinese people are becoming increasingly fearful and suspicious of the outside.

Only one view is allowed to be heard on issues deemed sensitive. And the boundary of what is sensitive is ever expanding.

The fear and suspicion of the outside has damaged existing people-to-people links China has with others. In addition, censorship and stricter controls on official narratives and people movements also make genuine academic exchanges more difficult.

Australia has not avoided the securitisation trend. Unlike China, the Australian government does not see all issues through a national security lens. Yet on matters to do with China, national security is paramount.

There is a similar concern about over-reliance on trade with China, and thus the call for diversification in both exports and imports. Diversification is only used in relation to diversifying away from China, not with any other country. The debate around importing technology, including solar panels from China, is like the story on the subway of China's egg feed stock. As Australia is a lot smaller, friend-shoring instead of onshoring has been promoted as the answer.

Unlike China, where there is deepening suspicion of people with all foreign links, in Australia the focus is mainly on people who have links with China. Such suspicions have harmed people-to-people links between the two countries. The story earlier this year of a Chinese academic raided by ASIO (and who had his phone and laptop taken away) has made both Chinese and Australian academics more cautious about travelling. The two Chinese academics whose visas were inexplicably cancelled in 2020 are still unable to enter Australia.

We now live in a world where national security is becoming more and more important compared to economics. When people and governments feel insecure, they are willing to forego possible economic benefits and see the unknown as more threat than opportunity.

In such a world, Australia will become less and less important to China. And just stabilising the bilateral relationship might be ambitious enough.

Yun Jiang is the inaugural AIIA China Matters Fellow.