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Can Australia overcome its China fears to manage its balancing act in the western Pacific?



- Asian neighbours admire Australia and are grateful for its aid over the years, but they also get turned off by its smug sense of superiority
- Some don't tremble at the mere mention of China and even admire the rise of a Chinese/Asian superpower

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China's aircraft carrier Liaoning (centre) takes part in a People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy drill in the western Pacific Ocean, in April 2018. The pitch that China should be a national security worry for everyone in the region seems unconvincing. Pacific island nations are not eager to be played as pawns by Canberra or Beijing. Photo: Reuters

Australia has a China problem, and it's not clear that anyone can help it out of the box it's in.

Yes, it's a China box: the ground underneath the Asia-Pacific is starting to shake, and the incipient foreign-policy shakeout Down Under may well tell those of us "Up Top" how the rest of the region will settle politically in coming decades. Is Beijing the demon driver of the problem?

China, of course, does have a problem with Australia that can perhaps be illustrated this way. At a conference on US-Australian relations some time ago in Los Angeles, someone asked an Australian government official how his otherwise intelligent country, with its advanced economy and educated citizenry, could have lined up like a sheep behind the unthinking US government of George W Bush and thrown its troops into the horrible Iraq war.

The rejoinder was that this is what reliable allies and friends are all about – there when you need them, without a whole lot of grumpy questions being asked.

Perhaps, but good friends are also for warning their good mates how to avoid stupidity. Yet Australia, or so it might seem, has hardly ever met an American war it didn't like.

And this, from Beijing's perspective, is its main problem: Canberra may be geographically farther from the United States than Mongolia, but Beijing grades it as a more intimate and willing Washington clone than Canada across the border.

Beijing assumes Washington and Canberra seek to frustrate its ambition to rule the Pacific waves; for its part, the US Pacific Command in Honolulu is indeed under no doubt that China aims to prove that, once thought of as an Aussie-American lake, western Pacific waters will soon bubble with Chinese characteristics.

The amount of foreign aid from Beijing to small, vulnerable nations of the West Pacific edges up every year and is now in the same league as Australia's own substantial aid programme. Its naval build-up proceeds steady-as-you-go. The game is on.

Neighbours, from Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, to Narau, the smallest island country, tend to admire modern Australia for its achievements and its helpful development aid over the years – but they get turned off by its smug sense of superiority.

Once a colony of England, it strikes neighbours as having evolved its own look-down-on-others mentality.

This is perhaps a waning impression, as more than a million ethnic Chinese reside in Australia, many of whom happily praise its advanced metropolises, especially Sydney and Melbourne – rare with unpleasant events or psychologies of personal fear. Australian residents of Chinese ancestry rose to 5.2 per cent by 2016.

But with or without evidence, it is often assumed that whites are anything but colour-blind.

Perhaps Asia's vast experience of colonisation from Europe unduly lingers, but such optics, fair or not, are of considerable diplomatic utility to Beijing.

Whatever works – economically (increasing gobs of aid/investment) or psychologically (talking up the odious "white man's burden" theme) goes into the Beijing playbook for its western Pacific charm offensive.

Australia's regional foreign policy dilemma is thus dangerously complicated. Its past has been more or less defined simply by its alliance with the US.

Its future will undoubtedly be increasingly shaped by its relationship with neighbouring states that either do not tremble at the mere mention of the People's Republic of China and even in some sense admire the rise of a Chinese/Asian superpower.

Australia, writes Sarah Teo of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, "must be careful not to overplay its hand [as a US ally] and become perceived as working to curtail China's rise or of being dismissive of the smaller states in the region ... [if it wants] to achieve closer relations with its Asian neighbours".

Teo's essay, "Can Australia Be One of Us?", appeared in a recent edition of *Australian Foreign Affairs*.

So the pitch that China should be a national security worry for everyone in the region seems unconvincing, hollow and even a bit callous.

Pacific island nations are not eager to be played as pawns by Canberra or Beijing, but at the same time are anything but averse to shaking both aid piggy-banks up and down for whatever they can get. Who can blame them?

And so, right in the vortex of the roiling centre of the grand Asia-Pacific reshuffle does good old Australia now find itself.

Even troubles as far away as Hong Kong (seemingly caught up in continuing crisis) blow across the seas to this vast underpopulated country-continent: last week, scuffles broke out between students from Hong Kong and mainland China during a pro-democracy sit-in at a university in Brisbane in support of the protests in Hong Kong.

The Asian-Chinese diaspora, it seems, is neither simple-minded nor single-minded. Australian cultural studies professor Len Ang, author of the book *On Not Speaking Chinese*, frames the identity question this way: "If I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics."

Not all pro-Beijing sentiment comes from the People's Republic of China propaganda mill – some come from the heart and spirit of Chinese, wherever they are, sometimes even from those not enamoured with the ways of Mr Xi Jinping's central government.

The Trump administration's default into a kind of binary bust-up with China is as misconceived as was the US Iraq invasion.

A monochromatic view of what it means to be Chinese or what it means to be an ally or what it takes to work with other peoples will always take you down the wrong road of history.

Alas, whichever way you look at it, no matter how far Down Under they are, the Aussies are under immense heat these days from a creeping global warming of the ugly geopolitical sort.

Tom Plate, a professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles who has been writing about Asia since 1996, is the author of the "Giants of Asia" book series