

# Has Australia found the right answer to Chinese aggression?

Elena Collinson and James Curran  
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From the time Australia's relations with China began to deteriorate in late 2016, a pervasive view among many observers on both sides of the Pacific has been that Australia is a global role model for how to push back against a more assertive Beijing. This perspective comes both from Australia's particular circumstances in its relations with China and from a powerful stream in its foreign policy tradition.

The circumstances derive from a conviction in Canberra that successive conservative governments, in advance of Western allies, made crucial policy decisions relating to the protection of critical national infrastructure and curbing Chinese political interference in Australian domestic politics. The tradition holds that Australia often 'punches above its weight' in world affairs—that because of its innate capacity for plain speaking, it can acquire a status on the global stage it might otherwise not normally attain. Chinese assertiveness, according to the orthodoxy in Canberra, has given this middle power in the Pacific a new agency in broader western attempts to combat China's rise. News reports at one point even suggested that senior Australian diplomats in Europe were crisscrossing the continent briefing their counterparts on the most effective countermeasures to blunt spreading Chinese influence.

Putting the circumstances and the tradition together a view has taken hold in Canberra that it stands at the vanguard of the 'new cold war' between Washington and Beijing in Asia. In this narrative, Australia has become an antipodean colossus, an example to others—particularly in the US, Britain and Europe—as to how to respond to China's increasingly punitive international behaviour and bullying wolf warrior rhetoric.

Australia's status in this regard has been publicly confirmed by policymakers and journalists in both Australia and the United States. Thus, President Trump's former deputy national security adviser, Matt Pottinger, when speaking on the release of the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy, remarked that U.S. officialdom 'owed a lot to Australia' since 'they were the pioneers in standing up to Chinese coercion.' A year later, veteran Australian journalist Paul Kelly, summarizing the Morrison government's approach to foreign policy, concluded that 'for two years Australia's pushback against China has assumed global significance.' The Biden administration's new National Security Strategy itself seemed to lend further credence to this view by saying, 'Many of our allies and partners, especially in the Indo-Pacific, stand on the frontlines of the [People's Republic of China's] coercion and are rightly determined to seek to ensure their own autonomy, security, and prosperity.'

A more recent account of Australian politics in this era by two News Corp journalists has argued that the former prime minister played the leading role in alerting the West to Beijing's growing aggression during the Covid pandemic. Referring to the change in China's international behaviour under Xi, they suggest Morrison

felt Australia ‘was perhaps the first country to appreciate it, understand it and take action against it.’ Trump’s former national security advisor, John Bolton, in an interview with *The Australian* during a visit to Australia in August, agreed. The strategic approach of both the former Turnbull and Morrison governments had ‘helped the United States overcome its ‘blind’ spots in relation to China.’ An alternative, though similar take on this comes from the former head of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Peter Jennings, who has argued that ‘for several years now Australia has been the sand in Beijing’s gears, showing the world that appeasement, or ‘nuanced diplomacy’... is not the solution.’

But towards the end of Morrison’s prime ministership, an Australian national security official in Canberra added a touch of doubt to these conclusions. Speaking anonymously to a reporter, the official said, ‘other countries are going to reach a conclusion—either Australia is offering a successful template for other nations in defying China’s coercion or we become an example of what not to do.’

### Testing a new tone

The change of government in Australia in May this year, as well as a survey of how other regional countries have dealt with China’s rise, offers an opportunity to test this proposition. Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his national security ministers have not projected Australia to the region or the world as a model in standing up to China. Rather, they have sought consistently to stress a willingness to listen to and engage with Southeast Asian countries on the question of how to manage China’s rise. Indeed, pledges to respect and enhance ‘ASEAN centrality’ has become a new catch cry in Australian regional diplomacy. This has been accompanied by a consistent stress on the ‘Pacific family’ and Australia as their ‘security partner of choice’ in an environment where China has been attempting to increase its regional footprint.

Yet while Australia–China ministerial contact at the level of defence and foreign minister, frozen since 2019, has now cautiously resumed, the broad Australian China policy settings remain the same. Crucially, the economic coercive measures that Beijing applied to key Australian export industries, widely interpreted as a response to Australia going ‘out in front’ in terms of challenging a more assertive Chinese stance in world affairs, remain in place. That continuity has seen one member of the Morrison government’s national security staff, Justin Bassi, now claim that Canberra’s decision to draw a line with Beijing sooner rather than later effectively paved the way for a stabilization of relations under the new Labor government. Here the judgment is that because Australia resumed dialogue with Beijing ‘without compromising any policy settings,’ the Albanese government has ‘gained the upper hand diplomatically.’ For those advisers and commentators most closely linked with the previous government’s policy positions on China, the mood has never been so thick with patriotic self-congratulation. ‘It’s a matter of record,’ said the Australian National University’s Rory Medcalf, that ‘Canberra has independently shown the way for Washington and others in pushing back against Beijing.’

Yet on coming to office, the Labor government eschewed the more bellicose rhetoric of their predecessors. It announced it would re-energize Australian diplomacy and revitalize the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), an agency which has largely lost its influence on the making of China policy to Australia’s security and intelligence community. Certain members of the previous government appeared to relish its public prosecution of a ‘China threat’ narrative. Thus, former Defence Minister—now Leader of the Opposition—Peter Dutton warned in a major speech on Australia’s strategic outlook in late 2021 that ‘every major city in Australia, including *Hobart*, is within range of *China’s missiles*.’ Earlier that year, the Secretary of Australia’s Department of Home Affairs told staff that he thought he could hear the ‘drums of war beat.’ Those grim warnings were a particularly potent manifestation of the vigour in Australian domestic debate over how to respond to China’s new assertiveness at home and abroad. One former head of Australia’s domestic counter-intelligence agency even made the remarkable claim that the country might well wake up one day in the future to find decisions being made in its national parliament that were not in its national interest.

While that kind of language has disappeared from the official Australian government lexicon, Prime Minister Albanese now faces the same hard strategic realities as his predecessors. Speaking of China, Albanese has said ‘there’s a long way to go. It will be a problematic relationship.’ Asked when visiting Madrid for a NATO Summit in July if China, [given its designs on Taiwan](#), should take heed of the global response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, he warned that ‘attempts to impose change by force on a sovereign country meets

resistance.’ Presumably, Albanese buys the line that the West must defeat Putin in Ukraine so that it stands as a warning to Xi.

Rather more forthrightly, Defence Minister Richard Marles has called China Australia’s ‘biggest security anxiety’ and ruled out emphatically any concessions to reset the relationship with China. His answer to that very suggestion? ‘Absolutely not.’ And the new Foreign Minister Penny Wong, while calling for ‘calm, considered and disciplined’ language when dealing with Beijing, conceded that ‘we’ve got a long path to walk and both countries will have to choose to walk it.’

So, the new diplomatic tone that these ministers have struck in Southeast Asia, including calls from the Foreign Minister to ‘stabilize’ the China relationship and the Defence Minister’s endorsement of ‘reassuring statecraft’ as the pathway to regional peace have not changed the fundamental source of tension between Canberra and Beijing. Those tensions were reinforced when Canberra, having joined with Washington and Tokyo to condemn Beijing’s live firing exercises around Taiwan following the visit by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August, was subjected to another blast of official Chinese rhetorical fury. Indeed, Pelosi’s visit complicated both sides’ early efforts at ‘stabilization.’

## **Model makers**

The projection of Australia as global model for standing up to China is more an accident of circumstance than calculated policy design. It emerged largely via Canberra’s early moves in combating political interference in Australian domestic politics. This had its most explosive demonstration in 2017 when a Labor Senator was shown to have expressed views on Beijing’s power grab in the South China Sea—namely that this was a matter for China to determine—fundamentally at odds with the policy of both of his own party and the Turnbull government.

What followed was not only a rolling firestorm in the Australian media about the extent and reach of Chinese influence into Australian political life, but the first piece of legislation around the world specifically designed to counter Chinese infiltration into national political institutions and political parties. From this moment, the Australian government projected itself both to the United States, as well as Britain and Europe, as something of an exemplar in meeting the China challenge. In the words of a former advisor to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, John Garnaut, Australia was the ‘canary in the coalmine.’ Turnbull himself appeared to relish his government being on the front foot. When he introduced the legislation into the parliament, he drew on the alleged comments Mao made at the moment of Communist Party triumph in China’s Civil War; Australia, too, had now ‘stood up.’

Australia’s sense of grievance also became increasingly overt over China’s attempted interference in universities and the Chinese community in Australia of 1.2 million people. Concern at Chinese investment in critical infrastructure became acute. Even if ministerial and prime ministerial statements contained the occasional hedging statements—the remnants of Australia’s China policy from previous decades—the ultimate direction of the Australian debate was steadily rolling towards the casting of China as an enemy.

There was much more going on here, however, than the adoption of an early, forthright Australian policy stance on China. Australia’s position has a clear U.S. alliance calculation. Canberra was out to prove its mettle as a U.S. alliance partner in an era of strategic competition with Beijing. But it also emerges from an anxiety, not limited to Canberra amongst U.S. Asian allies, that Washington’s resolve to maintain its regional hegemony is slipping. These concerns were particularly acute during the Trump presidency, although the release of his administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, which still talked the language of the United States ‘prevailing’ in its strategic competition with China, went some way towards assuaging these concerns. Being the model in pushing back against China, in essence, was as much about getting Washington’s attention as it was showing Beijing that it couldn’t be bullied.

By late 2017 some policymakers in Canberra had clearly shed any doubts about China’s motivations, its influence operations in Australia and its ultimate strategic ambition. During a closed roundtable with French foreign ministry policy planners at a Sydney think tank late that year, two senior government officials, from DFAT and the Office of National Assessments, gave an aggressive, almost lurid presentation that revealed the general trend in the government’s thinking on China. The Foreign Affairs official explained to his French listeners that Australia was then in the process of trying to define the boundaries of its relationship with China.

Conscious of Beijing's economic retaliation towards Seoul over its decision to host a U.S. missile system in South Korea, the official conceded that Australia was expecting 'similar attention.' Accordingly, Canberra had to 'shape things and lay down markers.' This was especially pressing since the 'real Xi' was believed likely to emerge over the next decade. Canberra, then, had to be 'purposeful and deliberate ... only this way will China be really aware of us.'

Putting things more starkly, the Australian intelligence official asserted that 'China is out to cut the same deal with the Australian people that it cuts with its own: the doling out of economic benefits in exchange for political compliance.' Calling China out was held up as 'a way of threatening regime change in Beijing.' Here in the starkest language imaginable was the laying out of Australia's own settling point on China policy from 2017. It would call out China's behaviour in the most pungent, public way possible, exploit China's sensitivities in terms of outside powers combining to balance its rise, and bring the Australian public along on that narrative journey. Canberra was going to 'punch above its weight'—no alternative was considered.

Although no Australian prime minister or foreign minister ever talked of regime change in China, its appearance here showed the extraordinary impulses shaping some of the thinking in Canberra's security agencies. In the eyes of this official at least, the economic foundation of the relationship could not be allowed to compromise Australian political independence. The framework being sketched here revealed how far ahead some parts of Canberra's national security community was of Washington in its reaction to the more assertive China. Indeed, it would come to make the United States' publicly expressed China policy of 'strategic competition' look almost benign. What is not clear, however, is just how much thinking was going into how Australia would respond to China's reaction to this policy.

The Australian need to broadcast to Washington that it was leading the allied pack on pushing back against China subsequently became compulsive. In his last week in office in September 2018, the Turnbull government decided to block the Chinese telecommunications companies Huawei and ZTE from supplying equipment for the rollout of the 5G wireless network. And one of the first things Turnbull did after the National Security Committee of Cabinet had made its decision was to call President Trump and advise him of the move. Writing in his memoirs, Turnbull stressed that it was 'first formal ban of Huawei and ZTE in the world.' It was not an admission, he noted, that Huawei was then interfering in Australian telecommunication networks, but rather a 'hedge against a future threat: not the identification of a smoking gun but a loaded one.' All the more reason, it seemed, for the Australian government to once more go out in front on China. The president, Turnbull recalls, was 'both impressed and a little surprised that we'd taken this position.' But Trump should not have been surprised, since the decision had been a coordinated effort hatched by the Five Eyes intelligence chiefs at a meeting in Nova Scotia in July that year.

## **Punishment**

The prime ministership of Turnbull's successor, Scott Morrison, unfolded against the backdrop of Xi Jinping's attempt to make Australia another example of what can happen if a country decides to stand up to Chinese intimidation. Once again, the Australian media tended to portray this economic coercion of Australia in terms of national heroics—Australia being the global standard bearer facing the Chinese bully.

Beijing took particular offence not only to the Morrison government's call in April 2020 for an independent inquiry into the origins and spread of the coronavirus, but to the added suggestion from the prime minister that international investigators going into China be given the powers of weapons inspectors. In response to these and other Australian decisions involving China, Beijing meted out its punishment across multiple trade sectors, from tourism and education to agriculture and resources, with Chinese authorities advising both university students and tourists to resist travelling to Australia. In May that year China not only slapped an 80 percent tariff on Australian barley exports for a period of five years—affecting 50 percent of Australia's overall barley trade—it also **blacklisted** beef imports from four major Australian abattoirs, which on some estimates then comprised approximately 35 percent of total Australian beef exports to mainland China. Over the course of 2020-21, China's trade punishment continued, with tariffs of up to 212 percent placed on Australian wine, as well as informal restrictions on other goods such as thermal and coking coal, cotton, timber and lobsters. It also indefinitely suspended the China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue, one of the few remaining avenues for high-level diplomatic exchange. That the economic relationship with Australia was being wielded by Beijing as a tool to communicate political dissatisfaction was explicitly acknowledged by the Chinese

Foreign Ministry on 7 July 2021 when its spokesperson told a press conference, 'We will not allow any country to reap benefits from doing business with China while groundlessly accusing and smearing China.' Labelling Australia a 'cat's paw' for the United States, the spokesperson stated that 'it is the people that pay for misguided government policies.'

The nadir, however, was still to come. At the end of 2020, a Chinese embassy official in Canberra handed to a local journalist a list of fourteen grievances held by Beijing towards the Australian government. The issuing of that document was itself a curious affair: it was not an official aide-memoire, which has a particular diplomatic status, but rather a response to an Australian journalist who sought clarification of China's concerns. Even so, the document contained a series of demands that Canberra not only change certain policies affecting China but alter fundamental aspects of Australian democracy. It constituted the lowest point in the history of the formal diplomatic relationship since its beginnings in 1972. Morrison was subsequently to take this very list of grievances to the G7 meeting of in Cornwall in July 2021, to which Australia had been invited as an observer. And he not only spoke at length to other leaders about the demands, he distributed copies to them. He was using it as the documentary proof to confirm Australia's status as world leader in meeting the China challenge.

But here is where Australian claims to being a model have somewhat less credibility. As China has become stronger, economic coercion has become a more prominent part of its statecraft: tried against France, Britain, South Korea, Norway, Taiwan, and others, and, in some of those cases, before Xi's ascendancy. The results have been less than encouraging for China. As political scientist James Reilly has shown in a recent study of Beijing's international economic strategies, 'Chinese leaders have been unable to wrest significant policy concessions from the leaders of wealthy, stable democracies.' The difference this time is the breadth of tariffs imposed across so wide a range of Australian exports. Nevertheless, the action has served those pushing a 'China threat' narrative to present Australia as an abused victim in the relationship. The line that 'it is not Australia that changed, but China' has also been deployed to service this narrative, and Scott Morrison used it to present himself as a defender of Australian values against an authoritarian regime.

The picture becomes even more complicated because some of those Australian exports hit by Chinese tariffs were able to find markets elsewhere. Moreover, the crucial iron ore trade between Australia and China, the major source of Australian economic prospered in recent decades, has not only continued, but prospered. As one unnamed Australian mining executive colourfully put it, 'China and Australia are in a kind of multi-scrutum clutch on iron ore. They are not going to hurt us. We are not going to hurt them.' Nevertheless, it bears noting that the more vocal elements in Australia's China debate have interpreted Australia's ability to diversify its export markers as proof positive of its decision to take a stand against China. Seen in that light, it has only entrenched the belief that Australia's policy settings have proved correct.

## Regional differences

Another way of examining the proposition of Australia as a model is to look at how others in region have dealt with China. Australia has certainly had some success in attempts regionalize this bilateral challenge. It signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Japan in January 2021, an important step in the Australia-Japan quasi-alliance, and just signed a new declaration on defence cooperation. Canberra also played an enthusiastic role in elevating the Quad, a diplomatic network comprising the US, India and Japan, to leader-level talks two months later, and established a comprehensive strategic partnership with ASEAN in October 2021. At the end of that year, it inked an AU\$1 billion weapons deal with Seoul, reportedly Australia's largest defence contract with an Asian nation, and upgraded its relationship with South Korea to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Australia has also provided a blueprint of sorts for some countries in the region. In 2019, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, asked whether there was anything Singapore could learn from the Australian experience in passing legislation against foreign interference, responded, 'Our current thinking is broadly aligned with Australia's approach.' Two years later, the country passed similar laws. But while the Australian focus in passing the legislation was squarely on countering China, *The Straits Times* reported Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam in a speech during parliamentary debate over the bill saying that 'while international media regularly identifies Russia, China, Iran and North Korea as perpetrators, the United States and other Western countries have similar, or in the case of the US, even superior capabilities.'

Three months after Australia made the decision to exclude Huawei and ZTE from its 5G network, Japan's central government ministries and Self-Defence Forces received guidelines that, while not referring to any company by name, effectively prohibited them from purchasing telecommunications equipment from Huawei and other Chinese companies. India, while not officially banning the telcos, effectively locked them out in 2020 through an internal directive to all government ministries to exclude them from any tenders. This followed a visit to New Delhi in September 2019 by Australian cyber security officials, including Australian Signals Directorate representatives, who reportedly engaged in 'multiple discussions' about 'how the Turnbull government arrived at the decision to ban Huawei.' India also went on to block fifty-nine Chinese apps, including TikTok and WeChat, in 2021. Singapore quietly decided to go with alternative 5G suppliers in 2020, and while there has been no official government directive, Vietnam has not included the company in any of its 5G plans.

But the general regional tenor overall still appears to be one of caution, as hedging strategies continue to be embraced in these countries' navigation of tensions with China.

Asked what his advice for Australia would be on how to handle China, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during a press conference with Scott Morrison in June 2021 replied,

You need to work with the country ... You don't have to become like them, neither can you hope to make them become like you ... There will be rough spots... and you have to deal with that. But deal with them as issues in a partnership which you want to keep going and not issues, which add up to an adversary which you are trying to suppress.

In November, ahead of President Biden's Summit for Democracy, Prime Minister Lee told *Bloomberg*, 'We all want to work together with the US,' but, 'I think not very many countries would like to join a coalition against those who have been excluded, chief of whom would be China.' He continued this point in May this year, following the U.S. launch of the Indo-Pacific Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), telling a press conference in Tokyo that 'it is far better that China's economy be integrated into the region, than for it to operate on its own by a different set of rules.' He emphasized Singapore's position most recently on August 21, during a National Day Rally speech, 'Some countries will choose a side. Others, like Singapore, will try our best to avoid getting caught up in major power rivalry.'

India also continues to cleave to a policy of non-alignment against the backdrop of long-running border disputes that only two years ago resulted in the deaths of at least 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese soldiers. While India has gradually shown more enthusiasm towards the Quad, and re-invited Australia to its Malabar naval exercises with the U.S. and Japan in 2020, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in a September 2021 press conference, following the India-Australia 2+2 ministerial meeting, rejected the notion that the Quad was analogous to a NATO-style grouping: '[I]f you look at the kind of issues [the] Quad is focused on today... I can't see any relationship between such issues and NATO or any other kind of organisations like that.' And in describing the intentions of the Quad in February 2022 he said, 'We are for something, not against somebody.' Asked in June where India fits into the picture between the US-led West on the one hand and China as a potential axis on the hand, Minister Jaishankar was forceful in his response:

That is exactly where I disagree with you. This is the construct you are trying to impose on me. And I don't accept it. I don't think it is necessary for me to join this axis or not, and if I'm not joining this, I must be with the other one. ... I am entitled to have my own side, I am entitled to weigh my own interests, make my own choices.

Indeed, at the end of August, India joined China in participating in Russia's annual Vostok military exercises. Speaking of Australia's relationship with China on his most recent visit to Sydney, Jaishankar was emphatic that 'Shutting down talking, burning bridges ... I would not recommend it. At the end of the day, countries have to deal with each other and you have to find some way of keeping that going.'

South Korea is another that's walked the tightrope between the United States and China. During a press conference following the fifth Australia/Korea foreign and defence ministers 2+2 meeting in September 2021 a Korean journalist put to the ministers that the 'Korean government is ... trying to seek a balance between the U.S. and China, whereas Australia is more standing against China.' The characterization of the Korean approach was not rejected by then-Korean Foreign Minister, Chung Eui-Yong. And during his December

2021 visit to Australia, then-South Korean President Moon Jae-In made it a point to declare that his visit had ‘nothing to do with our position over China.’ He said further, ‘We need the constructive efforts of China to enable denuclearization of DPRK. Therefore, Korea is focused on the steadfast alliance with the U.S. and also with China. We want a harmonized relationship and we want to maintain such a relationship.’

South Korea’s current president, Yoon Suk-yeol, despite tough on China rhetoric on the campaign trail that led observers to believe that Seoul would gravitate more decisively toward the US, and his resumption of trilateral missile defence drills with the United States and Japan, refrained from naming China at the NATO summit in July even as NATO for the first time declared China a security challenge. He also declined to meet with U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi during her stop in Seoul immediately following her trip to Taiwan in August. South Korean and Chinese foreign ministers met in Qingdao on 9 August, while China was conducting live-fire drills around Taiwan. They pledged to accelerate Korea-China free trade negotiations and deepen cooperation on climate change, among other areas. Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin also proposed ‘consultations’ between the countries to ‘promote communication and cooperation at regional and global levels.’

Japan has become increasingly vocal about pushing back against China. Most recently, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida joined with his UK counterpart Liz Truss to label China a ‘strategic threat.’ However, it continues to ‘thread the needle.’ Former prime minister Abe Shinzo characterised Japan’s China policy under his leadership in the following terms:

I think China is a believer in power. At the same time China greatly values face. It is necessary to have diplomacy that has a mix of hard and soft. I personally have taken on the ‘hated role’ of applying pressure on China in the area of security while at the same time persuading anti-China hardliners within the party. On the other hand, I think it has gone well as a result of having had Mr [Toshihiro] Nikai and other cabinet ministers give face to the Chinese side, offering cooperation, mainly in the economic field.

Kishida thus far appears to be continuing Abe’s legacy on China. He selected former Defence Minister Nakatani Gen as a special adviser on human rights matters with China in mind, and appointed as his Foreign Minister, Hayashi Yoshimasa, who is the immediate past chair of the Japan-China Friendship Parliamentarians’ Union. It remains to be seen whether his pledge at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2022 to ‘set out a new National Security Strategy by the end of this year’ and his foreign policy vision of ‘realism diplomacy for a new era’ will change this calculus. At the end of the parliamentary session in June he said, ‘I will say to China the things that need to be said and strongly urge China to act responsibly, while at the same time building up our dialogue with China on various outstanding issues and cooperating on matters of common interest.’ This combination of straight-talking with cooperative endeavour has also been manifest in Defence Minister Kishi Nobuo’s June meeting with Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe. Defence Minister Kishi ‘stated that it is necessary to have candid communication especially when there are concerns about Japan-China relations.’ Both sides ‘agreed to continue dialogue and exchanges.’

Indonesia, with its long and complicated history with China, has forged closer relations with China over the last few years. The countries signed a currency swap agreement in 2020 that was extended in January this year and established an annual high-level dialogue in 2021. Indonesia also proposed the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) which, while unlikely to be operationalized, was an attempt to establish a regional initiative that included China. Huawei and ZTE are also major players in Indonesia’s telecommunications sector, with an unnamed senior Indonesian government official, quoted in July 2022, said, ‘If we’re constantly afraid, our development will stagnate.’ Indonesian President Joko Widodo has maintained a relatively close relationship with President Xi, reportedly referring to China as a ‘good friend and brother’ in an April 2021 phone call. The two leaders met in Beijing in July this year and pledged to strengthen trade ties and increase cooperation in agriculture, food security.

The case studies confirm that the Morrison government’s vocal approach was more outlier than model. But maintaining, as many of these countries are doing, a strategic middle ground will inevitably get more difficult as great power competition intensifies.

## Conclusion

Since his inauguration, President Biden and senior officials have made a clear attempt, despite being largely focused on the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and responding to Putin's invasion of Ukraine, to ensure that America's presence and role in the region continues. This has been most visibly manifested in the administration's announcement of an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, but also in the efforts to ensure that America's diplomatic presence, both at regional summits and in the establishment of new diplomatic posts in the Pacific. The United States has been keen to demonstrate that it is still, in the words of President Obama's 2011 speech in Canberra announcing the U.S. pivot to the region, 'here to stay.'

How then, to arrive at a judgment on the claims that Australia stands as a model for pushing back against Chinese new strategic aggression? On the one hand, Canberra's credentials as a loyal U.S. ally have only been enhanced. Australia's visibility in Washington is increased, and there can be no doubt that the punishment Australia has suffered on the trade front has bolstered calls from both Democrats and Republicans for a tougher U.S. stance towards Beijing. Outside wartime, allied solidarity has rarely been this strong. But Canberra has gained much more than undreamt of accolades in the American capital. Under the AUKUS agreement, announced in September last year, the Biden administration has agreed to extend some of its most sensitive nuclear technology with Canberra with a view to the achievement for Australia of a nuclear submarine capability. Only Britain, in 1958, has been accorded this access. If successfully implemented, it will constitute the biggest and most expensive defence acquisition in Australian history.

There are however limitations to the posture Australia has adopted. The first comes in the sizeable gap between some of the previous government's rhetoric about the coming of war with China and the level of its actual defence preparedness. In the event of any Sino-American conflict over Taiwan, for example, Australia could but offer only what it has always offered to its great power ally—a niche, and therefore largely symbolic military commitment. The second is that for all the preening Australian political leaders have engaged in on the world stage, they have until recently taken their eye off the region of most vital import for Australian security—the Pacific. The announcement during the federal election campaign earlier this year that the Solomon Islands government would sign a security deal with Beijing sent a shockwave through the strategic community here and in Washington. The Biden administration dispatched its Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell, to assess the situation. This cannot have gone down well in the U.S. policy community, who have long expected and actively encouraged Canberra to do the heavy lifting in the Pacific. The new Labor government, particularly under the energetic diplomacy of Foreign Minister Wong, has achieved considerable early success in re-establishing Australia's credibility in the eyes of its Pacific partners. Australia's readiness to be the most vociferous in pushing back against China has also had consequences in terms of its reputation in Southeast Asia. Some regional capitals, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia, have expressed concern over the implications of the AUKUS deal for a regional arms race and non-proliferation regimes. And as demonstrated above, the Australian approach has not necessarily provided the lodestar for other key Asian partners. Even more Chinese saber-rattling, however, could alter that dynamic.

The Albanese government, along with other key U.S. allies and partners, have a responsibility to try and assist Washington in re-establishing the guardrails in its relationship with China. Collectively, they must pour their diplomatic energies into ensuring that the voices of restraint in Washington resist what would surely be a catastrophic clash with China over Taiwan. If that were to take place, there will be little talk of 'models,' only the protracted period of postwar reconstruction in East Asia that would likely continue for the remainder of the century.

*Elena Collinson is a senior researcher at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney.*

*James Curran is Professor of Modern History at Sydney University. He has previously worked at the Office of National Assessments, and in the Departments of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Defence.*