

The China consensus

A pre-election survey of Coalition government
and Australian Labor Party policies on the
People's Republic of China

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Executive Summary

- As Australia moves closer to a federal election, national security has emerged as a major Coalition government campaign pillar, with the People's Republic of China (PRC) cast as the primary strategic challenge facing the nation. The government has gone on the offensive with respect to the opposition Australian Labor Party's (ALP) record on national security and, in particular, its approach to the PRC, an increasingly heated clash of views and political rhetoric.
- There is divergence between the major parties with respect to how policy should be effected, with the ALP stressing the need for a greater emphasis on diplomatic tone and conduct, but what are the differences between the parties on policy substance? This detailed study demonstrates that the incumbent Coalition government and the opposition Labor Party broadly coalesce on national security and, in particular, their respective approaches towards PRC policy. This agreement is unsurprising in the face of a PRC that has adopted a more aggressive posture on the world stage, not least in its adoption of coercive economic measures against a wide range of Australian export industries. The period from late 2016, after all, has witnessed a fundamental reassessment in both parties of the PRC relationship.

THE POLICIES

- **Responding to the PRC's trade sanctions**

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties have labelled Beijing's trade sanctions against Australia 'economic coercion', starting to do so from the first half of 2020, and have been continuously vocal in expressing concerns about the PRC's economic punishment of Australian industries. Both support the diversification of the country's exports away from exposure to the PRC, while maintaining constructive business and commercial relationships with the PRC. The ALP has indicated that any movement towards improving Australia's relationship with the PRC under a Labor government will be reliant on the 'removal of all of the economic pressures and effective sanctions against Australia and Australian products and exports.'

- **Defence spending**

IN AGREEMENT

The government's commitment, announced in July 2020, of \$270 billion to the Department of Defence over 10 years, an increase of \$70 billion, is a commitment the Labor Party has pledged to uphold. In March 2022, the ALP indicated support for a 'further increase in investment in defence' in view of 'the way things were heading' on the global landscape, pledging to spend more than two percent of GDP on defence budgets. Both parties have also signalled that strengthening the domestic defence industry is a priority.

- **AUKUS**

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP has indicated strong support for the substance of the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS), though criticising what it termed a lack of 'diplomatic legwork' in managing the announcement. The ALP has also raised questions over the roll-out of nuclear submarines, focusing on costs, jobs, capability and capacity, and has pledged to ensure the government commits to nuclear non-proliferation obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

- **Taiwan**

- **IN AGREEMENT**

While the Defence Minister had been unequivocal during the second half of 2021 about the application of the ANZUS Treaty to any military conflict between the US and the PRC over Taiwan, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister have refrained from endorsing this view. Indeed, in March 2022, the Defence Minister appeared to assume a more cautious position on the matter. There has been increasing rhetorical support for Taiwan from both major parties, yet neither the government nor the ALP has talked of abandoning the commitment to the one-China policy. The ALP has been explicit about continuing strategic ambiguity and the maintenance of the status quo in line with the US position. Although President Joe Biden has made remarks in the affirmative committing the US to the defence of Taiwan in the event of military conflict with the PRC, White House officials have subsequently stated there is no change in US policy, which remains guided by the *Taiwan Relations Act*, and the Biden administration has maintained this position in substance.

- **The Quad**

- **IN AGREEMENT**

The ALP has maintained continuous support for the Quad comprising Australia, the US, Japan and India since its revival in 2017, undertaking to continue to engage with the Quad should they win office.

- **Expansion of autonomous sanctions legislation**

- **IN AGREEMENT**

The ALP has been supportive of the expansion of Australia's sanctions legislation, having pledged commitment to Magnitsky-style legislation for Australia earlier than the government.

- **Foreign Relations Act**

- **IN AGREEMENT**

The ALP supported the legislation (*Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act 2020*) despite the bulk of its proposed amendments not being agreed to. The ALP had criticised the bill for being 'announced in haste before it was ready', and without proper consultation, calling on the government to 'rewrite the legislation'.

- **Belt and Road Initiative**

- **IN AGREEMENT**

Both parties have ruled out Australian participation in the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The ALP did not obstruct the federal government's cancellation of the state of Victoria's BRI agreements with the PRC, indicating that they had expected this decision once the *Foreign Relations Act* had passed with their support. The cancellation of the agreements followed a review process implemented under Australia's Foreign Arrangements Scheme, established by the *Foreign Relations Act*.

- **Port of Darwin 99-year lease**

- **IN BROAD AGREEMENT**

Since 2015 the ALP has flagged its opposition to the lease of the Port of Darwin and supported a 2021 Defence review into the asset instigated by the government. The government has not as yet made a decision as to whether to intervene and cancel the contract despite the review, according to press reports in December 2021, finding there 'were no national security grounds sufficient to recommend government intervention', while the ALP has refrained from assuming a public stance on what they believe the government ought to do.

- **South China Sea**

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP supports the stronger stance assumed by the government on the South China Sea from 2020, that is, that under the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) there is no legal basis to many of Beijing's claims. Both parties have also consistently called for the July 2016 decision on a dispute between the Philippines and the PRC over territorial claims in the South China Sea handed down by an international arbitral tribunal to be abided by. The government has thus far refrained from participating in US-style freedom of navigation operations within the 12 nautical mile zone of maritime features claimed by Beijing in the South China Sea, despite calls to do so from the Obama and Trump administrations, and the ALP has obliquely supported Coalition government policy by stating that any decision to join such operations is a 'matter for the government of the day'.

- **Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region**

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties have continuously and consistently registered concern over human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang but have stopped short of defining the actions against the population as 'genocide'.

- **The PRC's bid to enter the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership**

IN AGREEMENT

Consideration of the bid by either party will only follow the cessation of Beijing's trade punishment against Australia.

- **Diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics**

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties supported a diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics given concerns about human rights abuses in the PRC. Before the announcement of the boycott, the ALP indicated its willingness to work with the government 'to agree a bipartisan, national position on the level of Australia's diplomatic representation'.

- **Cybersecurity**

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP has been supportive of the Australian government's actions with respect to the PRC and state-sponsored cyber-attacks, including publicly directly attributing attacks to Beijing.

- **Huawei / ZTE and 5G**

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties supported the exclusion of Huawei and ZTE from the rollout of Australia's 5G network, with the ALP ruling out any reconsideration of the decision.

- **Foreign interference legislation**

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP agreed to support the foreign interference bill introduced in 2017 after the Turnbull government accepted 60 amendments recommended by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security.

CONCLUSIONS

- The use of national security as a political weapon to create the appearance of division on the cusp of an election plays to longstanding claims that the Coalition is better at managing Australia's foreign and defence policy, particularly during moments of international turbulence.
- Both parties have historically been emphatic about the need to maintain the international rules-based order and, at the same time, stand up for Australian values. Bipartisanship on this central international question endured until the middle of last year, when Prime Minister Morrison began to frame the Australian government's view of the world in stark ideological terms, as something best understood through the prism of liberal democracies versus authoritarianism, crescendoing in his warning in March 2022 that a new 'arc of autocracy' was emerging 'to challenge and reset the world order in their own image.'
- The fundamental concurrence between the Coalition and the ALP on PRC policy is challenged by a number of figures in both parties who are pushing for an even tougher line towards Beijing. The government that takes office following the May election will inevitably face issues and challenges that will make the management of Australia's PRC policy different to what has existed in recent years: the Russia-Ukraine crisis clearly demonstrates this. Exactly what the PRC-Russia joint statement portends is not yet known, as is the ultimate aftermath of the war in Ukraine. These developments will bring other, troubling dimensions to the challenge the Australian government will face as it manages relations with the PRC.
- The Coalition-ALP China consensus has, in recent years, led to policy convergence on the need to push back against Beijing whenever its actions are bullying or coercive. This convergence, however, has resulted in policy stasis, one which, given the fluidity and unpredictability of current circumstances, any future government will need to confront and perhaps move beyond.

1. Introduction

As Australia moves closer to a federal election, national security has emerged as a major Coalition government campaign pillar, with the People's Republic of China (PRC) cast as the primary strategic challenge facing the nation. The government has gone on the offensive with respect to the opposition Australian Labor Party's (ALP) record on national security and, in particular, its approach to the PRC, an increasingly heated clash of views and political rhetoric.¹

That national security, including PRC policy, would be a government campaign pillar was telegraphed in September last year when Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that 'the Labor Party wants to have an each way bet on national security',² repeating the charge in November.³

This is not a time where Australia can afford weakness. This is not a time when Australia can afford people having an each way bet on national security.

Echoing the Prime Minister's attacks, senior government ministers described the ALP as having 'gone weak at the knees',⁴ of having 'a weak approach',⁵ with the Opposition Leader needing to 'shake off' the 'obvious tag of him being weak on national security'.⁶

On February 17 2022, the Prime Minister provided the following assessment of government and opposition positioning on national security and the PRC:⁷

I wish there was the level of bipartisanship on these issues. I wish there was. But, I will not set a low bar for that. Our government is setting a high bar when it comes to national security ... I wish it were true that there was stronger bipartisanship, but for that to happen the Labor Party have to lift their game on national security. They have to show the same strength and resolve that this government has faced and this government has shown in standing up to those who would seek to coerce us and bully us, not to have an each-way bet on it ...

When expanding on these standards, Mr Morrison pointed to the funding of defence forces and intelligence agencies, the enactment of Australia's foreign relations legislation in 2020 and, relying on its provisions, the subsequent cancellation of the Victorian government's agreements with the PRC on the Belt and Road Initiative. He also emphasised working with Australian allies and partners, particularly through the Australia-UK-US trilateral partnership, the rejuvenation of the Quad and the conclusion of defence arrangements with Japan in the form of the Reciprocal Access Agreement.⁸



The ALP has over the years been vocal about its support for bipartisanship with respect to Australia's approach to relations with the PRC. In September 2019 Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong said:⁹

The national interest is best served by a bipartisan approach to the relationship. This does not mean uncritical support for the government's approach. Rather, it means having a sensible, calm and mature discussion without seeking to exploit complexities in the China relationship for political advantage.

In August 2020 Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese stated that the PRC had become 'more assertive' and 'that requires a response by the Australian government in the national interest. This isn't a partisan issue.'¹⁰

This year, on January 25, he said:¹¹

It is China that has changed, not Australia that has changed ... I don't blame the government, and never have, for the current circumstances.

Over the month of February 2022, Mr Albanese took numerous opportunities to emphasise Labor's bipartisan approach to a range of foreign policy issues: Hong Kong, Taiwan, the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the issue of the South China Sea, issues of foreign interference and cybersecurity issues.¹²

Asked on February 20, 'Do you think Australia is overreacting about the threat [of] China?' Mr Albanese said Australia's response had been 'appropriate, considered and measured.'¹³

A week later, during a television interview, Shadow Foreign Minister Wong stated that 'bipartisanship is a national asset when it comes to dealing with a more assertive and more aggressive China.'¹⁴

In parallel with the opposition's articulation of support for government policies on the PRC, it has, since at least 2019, been consistently critical of muscular language in government rhetoric and the government's conduct of diplomacy.

On August 8 2019, Ms Wong had stated:¹⁵

This government has a history of its members making ill-advised and unnecessarily inflammatory statements ... Mr Morrison must ensure the government is taking a disciplined and consistent approach to the management of Australia's relationship with China.

In an interview on May 19 2021, acknowledging that there were 'structural differences' in Australia's relationship with the PRC and declaring that 'no matter who is in government here in Australia, our position will not change,' Ms Wong added:¹⁶

[W]e have a government who appears to be willing to stoke anxiety, to fuel anxiety about conflict, about war and that I do not think it is in our national interests for there to be talk of the 'drums of war'.

More recently, on February 22 2022, Shadow Defence Minister Brendan O'Connor argued that 'temperate language' was needed 'in order to maintain peace and stability in the region. That's not for a moment to suggest we do not call out acts of aggression or coercion.'¹⁷

In June 2021, when asked what Labor would do differently with respect to Australia's relationship with the PRC, Mr Albanese said that it would 'engage, consistent with the position of the Biden administration that speaks about competition without catastrophe and a return to diplomacy'.¹⁸

Ms Wong has also indicated that a Labor government would place greater emphasis on the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), saying that 'DFAT needs clearer political leadership and a sharper understanding of its role, responsibilities, and its potential'. She has also pledged that Labor would appoint an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) special envoy 'to complement our diplomatic network, and forge close relationships with capitals.'¹⁹

There is, it is clear, divergence between the major parties on how policy should be effected, as demonstrated by the ALP's call for a change in diplomatic tone and conduct. What are the

differences between the parties on substantive policy issues?

This report examines government and opposition approaches to national security and Australia's relations with the PRC, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence, and, in the process, discerning some subtle differences between their policies. Each issue is given a classification as to whether the parties are in agreement (identical positions), in broad agreement (predominantly identical positions) or in disagreement (diverging positions).

2. Responding to the PRC's trade sanctions

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties have labelled Beijing's trade sanctions against Australia 'economic coercion', starting to do so from the first half of 2020, and have been continuously vocal in expressing concerns about the PRC's economic punishment of Australian industries. Both support the diversification of the country's exports away from exposure to the PRC, while maintaining constructive business and commercial relationships with the PRC. The ALP has indicated that any movement towards improving Australia's relationship with the PRC under a Labor government will be reliant on the 'removal of all of the economic pressures and effective sanctions against Australia and Australian products and exports.'

Coalition

Economic coercion

The Prime Minister first labelled Beijing's trade sanctions against Australia 'economic coercion' in June 2020, senior ministers having already used the term in the months immediately prior.²⁰ He said:²¹

We are an open-trade nation but I am never going to trade our values in response to coercion from wherever it comes.

The 'economic coercion' descriptor became a central rhetorical phrase, continuing to be used in 2022.²²

Trade diversification and continued economic engagement with the PRC

On September 6 2021, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg encouraged Australian businesses to adopt a 'China plus' strategy' in order to 'prepare for and manage' heightened strategic competition. While acknowledging that '[m]any [Australian businesses] have worked hard to access the lucrative Chinese market', that '[t]his has brought great benefits to them and Australia overall', and noting that 'they should continue to pursue these opportunities where they can', the Treasurer also stated, '[T]here will be times when we must pay a 'premium' to protect our economy and ensure our long-term economic resilience'.²³

As Trade Minister Dan Tehan pursues closer trade ties with other countries, including India²⁴ and the UK,²⁵ he has continued to maintain the need for continuing economic engagement with the PRC, in line with his predecessor Simon Birmingham's record.²⁶ Mr Tehan said on August 9 2021:²⁷

[A]s far as the Australian government is concerned we want to make sure that we have constructive engagement with the Chinese government, but we want to make sure the business and commercial relationship continues to prosper.

He repeated this point on November 18 2021:²⁸

We want to be able to work through our differences and our issues [with the PRC] because we understand how important, especially, our economic relationship is.

Australian Labor Party

Economic coercion

The opposition adopted the descriptor 'economic coercion' around the time the government began to use the term. Shadow Foreign Minister Wong said in a May 13 2020 interview:²⁹

[W]e agree with the government, any form of economic coercion is not something Australia can accept and it's not something that's conducive to strong relationships

and it's not something that leading powers should engage in.

ALP shadow ministers and the Opposition Leader have used the term consistently. On November 24 2021, Ms Wong said:³⁰

Australia and other countries have been subjected to what can only be described as economic coercion and China's non-observance or flouting of agreements that it has made, through the World Trade Organization or the China Free Trade Agreement. And those are not the behaviours of a responsible global power.

On November 6 2020, Ms Wong, Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Resources Joel Fitzgibbon and Shadow Trade Minister Madeleine King issued a media statement calling on the Prime Minister to 'stand up for Australian exporters':³¹

Labor is deeply concerned by reports that Chinese authorities are planning to halt imports of Australian wine, lobsters, sugar, coal, copper, barley and timber.

Scott Morrison must stand up for Australian exporters. If any country, including China, unreasonably blocks our exports we must call them out.

On February 27 2022 Ms Wong indicated that any movement towards improving the

relationship with the PRC under a Labor government will be reliant on 'the removal of all of the economic pressures and effective sanctions against Australia and Australian products and exports.'³²

Trade diversification and continued economic engagement with the PRC

On December 6 2020, Ms Wong called on the government to reduce Australia's economic dependency on the PRC and pursue export diversification:³³

[W]e are the country that is most economically dependent on China. So, I think it is legitimate to say where is the government's strategy for diversifying our exports?

She went on to outline the ALP's plan to address the issue:³⁴

What would Labor's strategy be? First, we would be calm and strategic in our response - I think that is very important. Secondly, as I said, we should work with other nations, allied nations, aligned nations, to support the rules of the road, including on trade. Third, we do have to work with our exporters to diversify our markets, to enable them to make sure we have more diversified opportunities, instead of what has happened which is a greater reliance on China. And



ANU TV / Wikimedia Commons

finally, if we were in government, we would be focusing on the national interest.

Ms Wong articulated the opposition's support for the government's push for trade diversification on April 22 2021:³⁵

Trade diversification is important, and it should have been a greater priority and will need to be a greater priority going forward given the circumstances that we find ourselves in in terms of the relationship with China.

This was repeated by the Opposition Leader on May 27 2021, who also underscored the need to 'engage in a mature way ... with China, because so many jobs are dependent upon our trade':³⁶

[W]e need also to be able to engage in a mature way, as we've been able to under the Howard government and the Rudd and Gillard governments and under the Abbott government, with China, because so many jobs are dependent upon our trade. We need to make sure we diversify our trading partners and not be dependent on any one partner ... Clearly, diversification is in our interest. But we need to make decisions about Defence and other issues based upon our own values and our own interests.

3. Defence spending

IN AGREEMENT

The government's commitment, announced in July 2020, of \$270 billion to the Department of Defence over 10 years, an increase of \$70 billion, is a commitment the Labor Party has pledged to uphold. In March 2022, the ALP indicated support for a 'further increase in investment in defence' in view of 'the way things were heading' on the global landscape, pledging to spend more than two percent of GDP on defence budgets. Both parties have also signalled that strengthening the domestic defence industry is a priority.

Coalition

On July 1 2020, as a key response to the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, the Prime Minister announced an investment of '\$270 billion over the next 10 years to upgrade the capability and potency of the Australian Defence Force'.³⁷ This figure incorporated an increase of \$70 billion to defence.³⁸

In his 2021-2022 budget speech, Treasurer Frydenberg highlighted the \$270 billion funding for defence. 'We ... need to prepare for a world that is less stable and more contested.'³⁹



Alex Cimbali / Shutterstock

In a press release the following day, Defence Industry Minister Melissa Price stated that the spending increase for defence would also create ‘a generation of jobs for Australians and new skill sets in the workforce’.⁴⁰

The funding commitment in the 2016 Defence White Paper to increase Australia’s defence budget to two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2020–21 was met by the government, with defence funding reaching 2.06 percent of GDP in 2020.⁴¹ In October 2021 Defence Minister Peter Dutton noted that Australia’s plan to acquire nuclear submarines under the Australia-UK-US trilateral security partnership ‘in all likelihood’ may push defence spending past 2.5 percent of GDP although acknowledged this was dependent on other budget variables.⁴²

Australian Labor Party

The ALP’s National Platform 2021 committed Labor to ‘ensuring defence spending reflects our country’s strategic circumstances and accords with the international benchmark of two percent of GDP’ and to ‘local jobs and local content in Australia’s defence procurement and sustainment projects’.⁴³ The ALP’s commitment to spend two percent of GDP on defence had been made by then-Opposition Leader Bill Shorten in October 2018.⁴⁴

On July 1 2020, the day the Prime Minister announced the commitment of \$270 billion over 10 years to the defence budget, the Opposition Leader was asked whether the increase in funding was ‘needed’. Mr Albanese replied:⁴⁵

Well, it is a substantial increase. The point is, are we getting value for money? And one of the questions ... is with the rollout of the submarine program. There are major questions to be asked about the Australian contribution, about the amount of jobs that will be created here and about the value from that program. So, that remains outstanding. But in general, we are certainly supportive of the direction that says we need to concentrate more on our region.

In his budget reply speech on October 8 2020 Mr Albanese acknowledged that ‘over the next decade, there is \$270 billion of defence

spending on the books,’ going on to say, ‘These investments in national security should also deliver a dividend for national skills, training, research and manufacturing.’⁴⁶

The emphasis on ensuring the \$270 billion investment pipeline has a domestic focus has been repeated by Mr Albanese in multiple fora.⁴⁷

Shadow Defence Minister O’Connor on March 6 2022 outlined Labor’s support for ‘a further increase’ in defence spending in view of ‘the way things are heading’ on the global landscape – this was confirmed by the Opposition Leader who in a March 10 speech pledged to spend more than two percent of GDP on defence budgets: ‘Labor will ensure that Defence has the resources it needs to defend Australia and deter potential aggressors’.⁴⁸

4. AUKUS

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP has indicated strong support for the substance of the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) though criticising what it termed a lack of ‘diplomatic legwork’ in managing the announcement. The ALP has also raised questions over the roll-out of nuclear submarines, focusing on costs, jobs, capability and capacity, and has pledged to ensure the government commits to nuclear non-proliferation obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Coalition

On September 16 2021, the Australian government announced a trilateral security partnership with the US and the UK – AUKUS – whose first major initiative would be the Australian acquisition of at least eight nuclear-powered submarines using US and UK technology.⁴⁹

The three governments committed to an 18-month consultation period to ‘identify the optimal pathway’ for submarine delivery, with Australia establishing a Nuclear Powered Submarine Taskforce in the Department of Defence to lead the project.⁵⁰ Work over

this period would include the examination of ‘whether the British or American submarine is the best option, along with workforce, shipyard and training needs.’⁵¹

In a letter to the Opposition Leader dated October 8 2021, tabled in the House some months later, on February 17 2022, the Prime Minister wrote:⁵²

I thank you and your frontbench for support of AUKUS and the government’s decision to acquire nuclear powered submarines ... Once again, I thank you for the bipartisan approach the opposition has taken in this vital national endeavour.

A month later, however, on November 23 2021, Defence Minister Dutton claimed that the ALP was ‘crab walking away from AUKUS’.⁵³ This assertion followed a speech by Shadow Foreign Minister Wong which argued that more regional engagement was needed in concert with engagement with traditional partners.⁵⁴

Inaugural meetings of the AUKUS Trilateral Joint Steering Groups were held on December 9 and 14 2021.⁵⁵

Australian Labor Party

On September 16 2021, the day of the Prime Minister’s AUKUS announcement, the Opposition Leader, the Shadow Foreign Minister

and the Shadow Defence Minister issued a joint statement which began:⁵⁶

Labor looks forward to strengthened cooperation with our close allies, through the AUKUS partnership announced today.

This affirms what Labor has been calling for; deeper partnerships with allied and aligned nations ...

Regarding the acquisition of nuclear submarines, the statement read: ‘We accept that this technology [the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines] is now the best option for Australia’s capability ...’ and listed a number of questions around detail not covered by the Prime Minister’s announcement, including costs, timelines, capabilities and impacts on local jobs and businesses. The statement also expressed the ALP’s pledge to ensure the government did not breach Australia’s nuclear non-proliferation obligations.^{57 58}

Over the final weeks of September and into October the opposition frequently pointed to the ‘lack of diplomatic legwork’ in the lead-up to and immediately following the announcement of the AUKUS partnership.⁵⁹ French President Emmanuel Macron told press that he had been lied to by Prime Minister Morrison over Australia’s cancellation of its submarine building contract with the French,⁶⁰ while US President Joe Biden conceded management of the announcement had been



The Mariner 4201 / Shutterstock

‘clumsy’.⁶¹ The announcement had been cautiously welcomed by, for example, India and Japan, but other nations, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, expressed reservations about the acquisition of nuclear submarines and what it meant for regional stability.⁶²

In Parliament on November 23 2021, Mr Albanese rejected Mr Dutton’s accusation that the ALP was ‘crab walking away from AUKUS’:

Today, during question time, the Minister for Defence said that I did not support the AUKUS arrangement with the UK and the US. This is not true.

At a press conference on February 11 2022, discussing details of a meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Mr Albanese said he had ‘confirmed Labor’s strong support for AUKUS, including the shift towards nuclear propelled submarines as a result of the advice that is there from Defence going forward.’⁶³

5. Taiwan

IN AGREEMENT

While the Defence Minister had been unequivocal during the second half of 2021 about the application of the ANZUS Treaty to any military conflict between the US and the PRC over Taiwan, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister have refrained from endorsing this view. Indeed, in March 2022, the Defence Minister appeared to assume a more cautious position on the matter. There has been increasing rhetorical support for Taiwan from both major parties, yet neither the government nor the ALP has talked of abandoning the commitment to the one-China policy. The ALP has been explicit about continuing strategic ambiguity and the maintenance of the status quo in line with the US position. Although President Joe Biden has made remarks in the affirmative committing the US to the defence of Taiwan in the event of military conflict with the PRC, White House officials have subsequently stated there is no change in US policy, which remains guided by the *Taiwan Relations Act*, and the Biden administration has maintained this position in substance.

Coalition

In May 2021, the Prime Minister gave every indication that he did not understand Australia’s longstanding and bipartisan one-China policy. His assertion on May 6 that the government had ‘always understood’ the ‘one country, two systems’ arrangement and would ‘continue to follow our policies there’⁶⁴ was termed an ‘accidental endorsement’ of Beijing’s formulation by one commentator.⁶⁵ A week later, however, Mr Morrison defended his stance.⁶⁶

During Senate Estimates on June 3 2021, a DFAT official confirmed Australia ‘acknowledges [the] PRC’s position in relation to one-China ... There has been no change in our position on Taiwan.’⁶⁷

Foreign Minister Payne succinctly reaffirmed the government’s policy on Taiwan in a press conference on February 9 2022.⁶⁸

Australia remains committed to our one-China policy.

On April 25 2021, Defence Minister Dutton said that he did not think a military conflict over Taiwan ‘should be discounted’.⁶⁹ On the same day the Department of Home Affairs Secretary Michael Pezzullo, in an Anzac Day message to departmental staff, observed that ‘the drums of war beat’.⁷⁰

On April 30 2021, when asked, ‘[W]e’ve heard warnings out of Canberra about the drums of war beating ... But is that kind of talk helpful?’, the Prime Minister replied, ‘Well, that’s not what I’ve been saying.’⁷¹ In an interview on May 6, Mr Morrison said that the Home Affairs Secretary’s message had not received ministerial authorisation.⁷²

On October 7 2021, Foreign Minister Payne stated that:⁷³

[O]ur very strong position is that resolution of differences over Taiwan must be achieved peacefully, through dialogue and without the threat or the use of force or coercion.

A month later, in an interview with *The Australian*, Defence Minister Dutton said it would be ‘inconceivable’ that Australia would

not join the US in any conflict with the PRC over Taiwan,⁷⁴ having put forward this view in a more oblique fashion two months earlier.⁷⁵

Two days later, in a press conference on November 18, when asked about Mr Dutton's assessment of Australia's obligations regarding military involvement, the Prime Minister opted not to answer directly.⁷⁶ At a Senate Estimates hearing on October 28, Foreign Minister Payne had refused 'to engage in a hypothetical discussion on the circumstances in which the ANZUS Treaty might apply.' She went on to say, 'Our role ... is absolutely focused on avoiding conflict.'⁷⁷

More recently, on March 6 2022, Mr Dutton appeared to temper his position when asked to restate his position on Australian support for the US in an action over Taiwan:⁷⁸

If it's in our national interest to protect our homeland and our allies, then we would take that decision at that time as to what was in our country's best interests.

He left open the possibility of arming Taiwan, saying, 'I think we do whatever we can to deter China from acts of aggression in our region.'⁷⁹

Australian Labor Party

Opposition Leader Albanese reaffirmed Labor's position on the one-China policy on October 6 2021:⁸⁰

There is a bipartisan commitment to a one-China policy. That's been in place for a long period of time. And that's the basis for our dealings with China.

He repeated this the following day:⁸¹

Labor and the Coalition both have the same policy, a policy of one-China, a policy that recognises China, in terms of Beijing, in terms of our diplomatic, formal relationships.

Following the comments by the Defence Minister and the Home Affairs Secretary (referred to in the 'Coalition' section immediately above) regarding the prospect of war with Taiwan, on May 18 2021, Shadow Foreign Minister Wong outlined Labor's commitment to 'strategic ambiguity', in line with the US, stating:⁸²

It is worth remembering that the Biden-Harris Administration is very deliberately sticking to its policy of 'strategic ambiguity' as the best way to maintain the status quo, while consolidating its diplomacy across the region to promote peace and security.

Ms Wong described the government, in view of the Defence Minister's remarks, as 'sprinting ahead of that longstanding US position'.⁸³

It should be noted here that, while President Biden has made remarks in the affirmative committing the US to the defence of Taiwan in the event of military conflict with the PRC,



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White House officials have subsequently stated there is no change in US policy – it remains guided by the *Taiwan Relations Act*.⁸⁴

Throughout October and November 2021 Ms Wong repeatedly called for the maintenance of the status quo, invoking the same call made by the President of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, during her 2021 National Day Address.⁸⁵ Ms Wong emphasised the need to focus on disincentives for conflict and for a peaceful resolution of differences over Taiwan.⁸⁶

In another major speech, on November 23 2021, Ms Wong again criticised Mr Dutton. This followed the Defence Minister’s apparent move away from strategic ambiguity, expressed in his November 13 interview (see ‘Coalition’ section above):⁸⁷

[W]hen Peter Dutton talks about it being ‘inconceivable’ that Australian would not ‘join’ a war over Taiwan, he is wildly out of step with the strategy long adopted by Australia and our principal ally.

On November 29, the Opposition Leader said of the Defence Minister’s stance:⁸⁸

[Y]ou look at the position of the Biden administration, it’s very different from the rhetorical position that Peter Dutton has put forward. We maintain the same position as the United States. And we think that is sensible. That is support for the status quo.

Asked on January 31 2022, ‘Do you stand with Taiwan against the increasing military threat from China?’, Mr Albanese responded, ‘Yes’. He went on to say:⁸⁹

Taiwan’s position needs to be respected. It’s not in the interests of the international community to talk up conflict, of course. But I’ve visited Taiwan and I’ve met with their democratically-elected leadership. And that democracy should be respected.

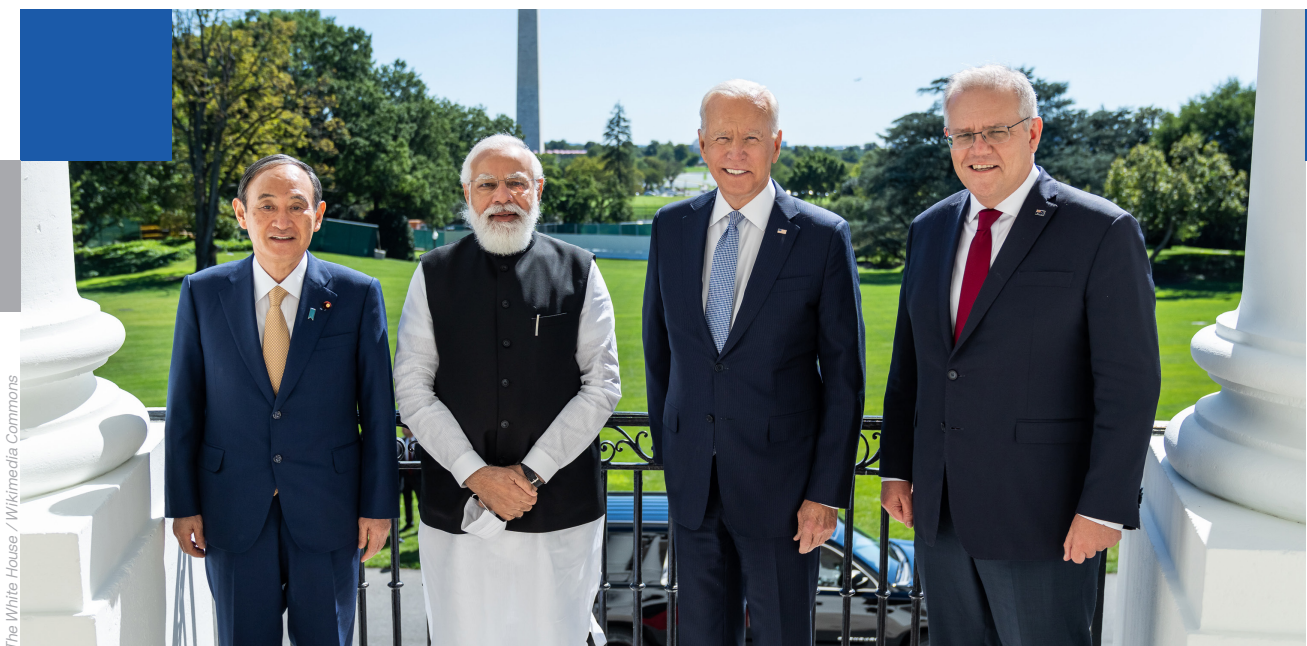
On February 27 2022, Ms Wong was asked, ‘What should Australia do if China did try to seize Taiwan?’ She replied:⁹⁰

I won’t get into those hypotheticals. I would just simply say this: it is the principle of the region, of Taiwan, the United States and Australia that the status quo in relation to Taiwan can only be resolved peacefully, can only be altered peacefully and that there should be no unilateral changes to the status quo.

6. The Quad

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP has maintained continuous support for the Quad comprising Australia, the US, Japan and India since its revival in 2017, undertaking to continue to engage with the Quad should they win office.



The White House / Wikimedia Commons

Coalition

The Quad grouping was revived⁹¹ in late 2017 under the prime ministership of Malcolm Turnbull,⁹² and elevated under Scott Morrison to leader-level talks via an online summit on March 13 2021, with the first in-person meeting on September 24 2021.⁹³

Following the in-person leaders' meeting, Prime Minister Morrison told an online briefing of Indian media:⁹⁴

Our objective working together is to ensure that we promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, and everybody who wants to participate in that, including China, is a welcome partner in that cause.

We're not in the containment club when it comes to China.

Later in the briefing Mr Morrison stated:

[T]he Quad is not an alliance, it's not a formal alliance, it's not designed to be an alliance.

Australian Labor Party

In a joint article for *The Australian Financial Review* in 2018, Shadow Foreign Minister Wong and then-Shadow Defence Minister Richard Marles affirmed the Labor Party's support for the Quad as a fixture in Australia's diplomatic architecture:⁹⁵

[The Quad] makes a space for four like-minded trading democracies to share their thoughts on regional security. The high-level discussions add another layer of cooperation to the intersecting bilateral and multilateral activities in place across the region.

In February 2021, the Shadow Foreign Minister welcomed plans for the first leader-level meeting of the Quad as 'a positive step', pushing for more intensive engagement between Australia and its partners:⁹⁶

Australia should be seeking to maximise the Quad's effectiveness to support our shared pandemic recoveries and shape the region to be stable, prosperous and respectful of sovereignty.

At a press conference in Melbourne on February 11 this year, the day of the fourth Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the Opposition Leader made it clear that a Labor government would continue to maintain strong engagement with the Quad.⁹⁷

Two days later, in an interview on Sky News, when asked whether he supported the Quad, Mr Albanese said, 'I support it very strongly,' undertaking to continue to commit to it, in view of the fact that '[a] different China means that we have different regional circumstances.'⁹⁸

7. Expansion of autonomous sanctions legislation

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP has been supportive of the expansion of Australia's sanctions legislation, having pledged commitment to Magnitsky-style legislation for Australia earlier than the government.

Coalition

On December 3 2019, Foreign Minister Payne requested the Human Rights Sub-committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to inquire into the use of targeted sanctions to address human rights abuses, looking to the United States' *Magnitsky Act* as a possible model.⁹⁹

On July 7 2020, it was reported that the government was undecided on expanded sanctions legislation:¹⁰⁰

Senior government sources said a definitive position has not yet [been] settled on and the government is awaiting the joint standing committee on foreign affairs, defence and trade's final report.

The Committee's report was tabled in Parliament in December 2020.

On August 5 2021, Ms Payne announced the Australian government's intent to introduce amendments to the *Autonomous Sanctions Act 2011* by the end of the year to 'enable the imposition of targeted financial sanctions

and travel bans against the perpetrators of egregious acts of international concern'.¹⁰¹

On December 2 2021, Ms Payne announced that Parliament had passed the *Autonomous Sanctions Amendment (Magnitsky-style and Other Thematic Sanctions) Bill 2021*, expanding Australia's sanctions legislation 'to enable the establishment of Magnitsky-style and other thematic sanctions' which will allow Australia 'to sanction individuals and entities responsible for, or complicit in, egregious conduct, including malicious cyber activity, serious human rights abuses and violations, and serious corruption', both independently and 'with like-minded partners'.¹⁰² The Act commenced on December 8.

Australian Labor Party

On July 7 2020, the day after the UK established a global human rights sanctions regime, Shadow Foreign Minister Wong confirmed the ALP's support for an Australian *Magnitsky Act* 'to send a strong signal to those committing human rights abuses abroad and to defend our democratic institutions'.¹⁰³

During a speech on human rights in foreign policy on April 19 2021, Ms Wong called on the government 'to consider targeted sanctions on foreign companies officials and other entities

... directly profiting from Uyghur forced labour' and repeated Labor's pledge to 'introduce Magnitsky-style sanctions legislation ... to augment our existing sanctions regime'.¹⁰⁴

On December 2 2021, Shadow Defence Minister O'Connor stated during the second reading of the *Autonomous Sanctions Amendment (Magnitsky-style and Other Thematic Sanctions) Bill 2021*.¹⁰⁵

We support this bill. It is overdue and there is more to be done, but it is important that we see this bill pass today and proclaimed in law so we can do better to deal with serious human rights abuses and prevent the ability of individuals to exploit circumstances where we see time and time again fundamental human rights being affected adversely and broken.

8. Foreign Relations Act

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP supported the legislation (*Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act 2020*) despite the bulk of its proposed amendments not being agreed to. The ALP had criticised the bill for being 'announced in haste before it was ready', and



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without proper consultation, calling on the government to ‘rewrite the legislation’.

Coalition

On December 8 2020, Foreign Minister Payne announced that Parliament had passed legislation conferring power on the Foreign Minister ‘to prevent prospective foreign arrangements from proceeding, or to cancel existing arrangements, where that arrangement is not consistent with Australia’s foreign policy or adversely affects Australia’s foreign relations.’¹⁰⁶

Liberal backbencher Senator James Paterson had said during the second reading of the bill:¹⁰⁷

I want to place on the record my appreciation for the offer of bipartisan support for these bills that opposition senators have made.

Australian Labor Party

In a statement released on November 10 2020, Shadow Foreign Minister Wong said:¹⁰⁸

Since the Morrison government announced the *Foreign Relations Bill*, Labor has made it clear we support its objectives. Australia should speak with one voice internationally.

The statement went on to say, however, that the bill was ‘sloppy’ and ‘announced in haste before it was ready’ without proper consultation, and called on the government to ‘rewrite the legislation ... instead of just grabbing headlines.’ Ms Wong said that ‘if the government refuses to do this, Labor will do what it can to amend the bill’.

It was reported later the same day that the the ALP had indicated the legislation would be backed even if its amendments did not succeed.¹⁰⁹ Of the amendments sought by the Labor Party,¹¹⁰ only one was accepted: a requirement of an annual report to the parliament by the Foreign Minister on decisions made under the legislation.

9. Belt and Road Initiative

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties have ruled out Australian participation in the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The ALP did not obstruct the federal government’s cancellation of the state of Victoria’s BRI agreements with the PRC, indicating that they had expected this decision once the *Foreign Relations Act* had passed with their support. The cancellation of the agreements followed a review process implemented under Australia’s Foreign Arrangements Scheme, established by the *Foreign Relations Act*.

Coalition

Australia’s participation in the BRI

In June 2020, the Prime Minister ruled out any Australian government participation in the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative, stating it was at odds with Australian foreign policy:¹¹¹

It is a program that the Australian foreign policy doesn’t recognise ... because we don’t believe it is consistent with Australia’s national interest ... It is not a program that the Australian government has signed up to, it is not the Australian government’s foreign policy.

The Foreign Arrangements Scheme and the cancellation of Victoria’s BRI-related agreements

On April 21 2021, Foreign Minister Payne announced the Australian government’s decision to cancel two agreements between the Victorian government and the PRC: the memorandum of understanding on BRI cooperation signed on October 8 2018 and the framework agreement on BRI promotion signed on October 23 2019.¹¹² These cancellations followed a review process implemented under Australia’s Foreign Arrangements Scheme which had commenced on December 10 2020.¹¹³ The government’s intention to cancel these agreements had been signalled from the inception of the Scheme.¹¹⁴

Australian Labor Party

Australia's participation in the BRI

On May 26 2020, the Opposition Leader unequivocally stated that a Labor government would not participate in the BRI:¹¹⁵

A government I lead would not be signing up to the Belt and Road Initiative.

He repeated this commitment on August 27 2020:¹¹⁶

I have expressed it publicly that the government I lead would not participate in the scheme.

Labor's commitment was reiterated by Shadow Foreign Minister Wong on April 22 2021:¹¹⁷

Anthony Albanese has made clear that a future Labor government wouldn't sign up to the BRI.

The Foreign Arrangements Scheme and the cancellation of Victoria's BRI-related agreements

On August 27 2020, Mr Albanese expressed support for the government's proposed Foreign Arrangements Scheme:¹¹⁸

[T]he idea that the national interest should be looked after by the federal government when it comes to foreign policy is something that we're very supportive of. I would regard [it] as completely unremarkable.

Earlier in 2020 he had stated, 'I didn't do that [support the Victorian BRI agreements].',¹¹⁹ and continued to maintain distance between federal Labor and the Victorian government as the year progressed.¹²⁰

On April 22 2021, Ms Wong confirmed that the opposition expected the Foreign Arrangements Scheme would be used to invalidate the Victorian agreements and backed the move:¹²¹

[A]s soon as that legislation was passed with our support, I think it was pretty clear that this was where the Federal Government was heading.

On the same day Defence Minister Dutton acknowledged Labor's support for the government's decision to cancel Victoria's agreements with the PRC:¹²²

The message of the Australian Government in relation to foreign matters is solely an issue for the Commonwealth Government and the federal Labor Party has pointed that out as well.



Australian Embassy Jakarta / Wikimedia Commons

10. Port of Darwin 99-year lease

IN BROAD AGREEMENT

Since 2015 the ALP has flagged its opposition to the lease of the Port of Darwin and supported a 2021 Defence review into the asset instigated by the government. The government has not as yet made a decision as to whether to intervene and cancel the contract despite the review, according to press reports in December 2021, finding there ‘were no national security grounds sufficient to recommend government intervention’, while the ALP has refrained from assuming a public stance on what they believe the government ought to do.

Coalition

In May 2021 it was reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the government had instructed the Department of Defence to conduct a review of the Northern Territory government’s 99-year lease of the Port of Darwin to PRC company Landbridge. Defence Minister Dutton confirmed in the same report that the National Security of Cabinet had directed his department to ‘come back with some advice, so that work is already underway.’¹²³ The review was completed around October 2021,¹²⁴ reportedly finding that there ‘were no national security grounds sufficient to recommend government intervention’.¹²⁵ The findings await a final government response.

The Prime Minister had previously undertaken only to act on departmental advice with respect to the lease.¹²⁶

Australian Labor Party

The ALP has flagged its opposition to the lease of the Port of Darwin since 2015.¹²⁷ In May 2021, the Opposition Leader said, ‘I can’t think of a more strategic national asset than the Port of Darwin.’¹²⁸ The ALP has, however, refrained from directly responding to questions regarding what a Labor government would do with the 99-year lease should they be elected, choosing to place emphasis instead on their opposition to the initial deal.

On December 29 2021, when asked whether a Labor government would ‘tear up the Port of Darwin lease’, Mr Albanese responded, ‘Well, we wouldn’t have sold it.’¹²⁹ In the same doorstep interview, in response to the question, ‘If [the Defence Minister] decides to step in and overturn the lease, despite this defence review, would you support him?’, Shadow Foreign Minister Wong replied that ‘there’s a lot of hypotheticals in that question’.¹³⁰ On the same day, Shadow Defence Minister O’Connor said:¹³¹

If the government acts unilaterally beyond Defence’s advice and intervenes on the Port of Darwin contract, the associated costs and fallout are on the Prime Minister’s lap.



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11. South China Sea

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP supports the stronger stance assumed by the government on the South China Sea from 2020, that is, that under the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) there is no legal basis to many of Beijing's claims. Both parties have also consistently called for the July 2016 decision on a dispute between the Philippines and the PRC over territorial claims in the South China Sea handed down by an international arbitral tribunal to be abided by. The government has thus far refrained from participating in US-style freedom of navigation operations within the 12 nautical mile zone of maritime features claimed by Beijing in the South China Sea, despite calls to do so from the Obama and Trump administrations, and the ALP has obliquely supported Coalition government policy by stating that such a decision is a 'matter for the government of the day'.

Coalition

On July 23 2020 Australia sent a note verbale to the United Nations laying out in more exact terms the legal position which the country believed applied to the South China Sea.¹³² While Australia has long articulated support for the application of the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), specifically which provisions it relied upon and which it believed the PRC had contravened had not been particularly clear. The note verbale read:

There is no legal basis for China to draw straight baselines connecting the outermost points of maritime features or 'island groups' in the South China Sea, including around the 'Four Sha' or 'continental' or 'outlying' archipelagos.

Despite calls from Washington – first during Barack Obama's presidency then Donald Trump's administration¹³³ – the Australian government has continued to abstain from engaging in US-style freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.¹³⁴

In marking the fifth anniversary of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's decision on

the South China Sea arbitration between the Philippines and the PRC on July 12 2021, Foreign Minister Payne issued a statement which repeated the Australian government's position, maintained since 2016, that:¹³⁵

The Australian government has consistently called on the parties to the arbitration to abide by the Tribunal's decision, which is final and binding on both China and the Philippines.

Australian Labor Party

The shift in Australia's position on the South China Sea embodied in the July 23 2020 submission to the United Nations was supported by the Opposition Leader, who said on July 25:¹³⁶

Australia needs to defend the Australian national interest, and we also need to stand up for international law.

The Shadow Foreign Minister, asked on July 29 2020, '[D]o you think Australia should or should not join freedom of navigation exercises?', responded:¹³⁷

Ultimately a decision on freedom of navigation operations in the technical sense is a matter for the government of the day.

A resolution in the ALP's 2021 National Platform maintained continuity in Labor Party policy, including a 'call on all countries in the region to refrain from unilateral acts, militarisation' and a 'call on all parties ... to abide by the decision concerning the South China Sea which was handed down on 12 July 2016 by the UN-appointed international arbitration tribunal in the Hague'.¹³⁸

In a speech on May 19 2021, Ms Wong stated that '[in] pressing its interests, China is more assertive. This should come as no surprise. All great powers will come to assert their interest. But assertion has often transmuted into aggression. The militarisation of disputed features of the South China Sea, flouting international law, and the 'cabbage leaf' and 'swarming' actions there that sought to intimidate Indonesia, the Philippines and

Vietnam – all part of Beijing’s grey zone tactics.¹³⁹

12. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region¹⁴⁰

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties have continuously and consistently registered concern over human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang but have stopped short of defining the actions against the population as ‘genocide’.

Coalition

Foreign Minister Payne, asked on March 1 2021 whether the PRC’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang constituted genocide, said:¹⁴¹

We have a slightly different approach to that turn of phrase, and I don’t mean this in a pedantic or a semantic way. But both the UK and Canada have different mechanisms to make such a declaration, as indeed does the United States. But it’s something which we are examining closely.

On March 22 2021, the US, the UK, Canada and the European Union (EU) together applied sanctions on PRC officials and entities involved in the internment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.¹⁴² Australia and New Zealand issued a

joint statement of support for the measures the next day.¹⁴³

During an interview on April 8 2021, Ms Payne said:¹⁴⁴

We have been very clear about our deeply held concerns about the human rights situation in Xinjiang. Particularly as it relates to forced labour, to re-education, to restrictions on freedom of religion, potential restrictions on reproductive rights including forced sterilisations, and also very credible reports of the systematic abuse and torture of women.

The Australian government joined over 40 other countries in statements by the UN Human Rights Council (June 22 2021)¹⁴⁵ and the UN General Assembly (October 21 2021)¹⁴⁶ expressing concern about the human rights situation in Xinjiang.

Australian Labor Party

In September 2018, in response to the question, ‘What should the government be doing that it is not [regarding Xinjiang]?’ Shadow Foreign Minister Wong said:¹⁴⁷

I am not going to make a partisan point over this ... What we would ask the government to do, and I noted that Minister Payne has made comments in this regard, [is] continue to raise those concerns, and we should do so



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bilaterally. I do think the government could look at doing more through its membership of the Human Rights Council.

In March 2021, the ALP's National Conference passed a resolution 'strongly condemn[ing] the human rights violations against the Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang and across China.'¹⁴⁸

While the conference resolution noted that 'the US government and the parliaments of Canada and the Netherlands have labelled the human rights violations in Xinjiang as genocide', it stopped short of endorsing the assessment.¹⁴⁹

In an April 19 2021 speech, Ms Wong called on the government to consider 'targeted sanctions on foreign companies, officials and other entities known to be directly profiting from Uyghur forced labour and other human rights abuses.'¹⁵⁰

In the same speech, Ms Wong sought clarification from the government as to whether abuses in Xinjiang should be regarded as genocide.¹⁵¹

We call on the Morrison government to provide its assessment of what is happening in Xinjiang – based on all the information available to its agencies – and what it is doing to address the situation.

13. The PRC's bid to enter the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

IN AGREEMENT

Consideration of the bid by either party will only follow the cessation of Beijing's trade punishment against Australia.

Coalition

Regarding the PRC's bid to enter the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), in November 2021, Prime Minister Morrison said:¹⁵²

The CPTPP sets a very high benchmark on what people have to be able to achieve, and so it's important that those who are seeking to become part of an arrangement like that wouldn't want to have a track record of coercing other trade partners.

Australian Labor Party

When asked in an interview in September 2021 whether it was Labor's view that 'Australia should engage constructively with China's bid to enter the [CPTPP]', Shadow Foreign Minister Wong said:¹⁵³

The first priority for Australia with the CPTPP ... is for the US to engage. [...] In relation to China, what I would say is we want China, and all parties, to respect the rules-based order, to respect trade rules. We retain deep concerns, as does the government, as to China's behaviour in relation to Australia's exports. And we would want to see those resolved.

14. Diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties supported a diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics given concerns about human rights abuses in the PRC. Before the announcement of the boycott, the ALP indicated its willingness to work with the government 'to agree a bipartisan, national position on the level of Australia's diplomatic representation'.

Coalition

On December 8 2021, the Prime Minister announced that Australia would not be sending any official representatives to the Games, citing Beijing's unwillingness to meet with Australia to discuss a range of concerns, including human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.¹⁵⁴

Australian Labor Party

As the Prime Minister considered whether Australia would mount a diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics,¹⁵⁵ the Shadow Foreign

Minister on December 3 2021 signalled that such a move would have Labor's backing.¹⁵⁶

The case of [tennis player] Peng Shuai raises serious concerns about athlete safety. In light of this and ongoing concerns about the human rights situation in China, Labor is willing to work with the government to agree a bipartisan, national position on the level of Australia's diplomatic representation at the Winter Olympics.

On December 8, following the Prime Minister's announcement of a boycott, Ms Wong and Shadow Minister for Sport and Tourism Don Farrell released the following statement welcoming the decision:¹⁵⁷

Labor supports the decision not to send officials and dignitaries to the Beijing Winter Olympics in February.

We hold deep concerns about ongoing human rights abuses in China, including towards Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities, and about athlete safety given questions about the treatment of tennis player Peng Shuai.

This decision, alongside other countries' diplomatic boycotts, sends a strong signal that these are not the behaviours of a responsible global power.

On December 9 2021, during a doorstep interview, the Opposition Leader repeated Labor's endorsement of the decision:¹⁵⁸

We do support the call by the national Government to have a diplomatic boycott. The fact is that China's human rights record, particularly its treatment of Uyghurs, but other issues as well, including Hong Kong, not respecting the agreements that were made in Hong Kong, mean that it is appropriate that a commensurate action be taken to send a message about human rights ... [and] that decision is appropriate. It has bipartisan support.

15. Cybersecurity

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP has been supportive of the Australian government's actions with respect to the PRC and state-sponsored cyber-attacks to date, including publicly directly attributing attacks to Beijing.

Coalition

On July 19 2021, the Australian government, in coordination with about 38 other countries including the US, the UK, the EU, Canada, Japan and New Zealand, released a statement 'expressing serious concerns about malicious cyber activities by China's Ministry of State Security ... [and] reports from our international partners that China's Ministry of State Security is engaging contract hackers who have carried out cyber-enabled intellectual property theft for personal gain and to provide commercial advantage to the Chinese government'.¹⁵⁹

Australian Labor Party

On July 20 2021, asked whether Australia was 'risking retribution from China by joining other countries in condemning China for its cyber crimes', the Opposition Leader responded:¹⁶⁰

We're right to call out attacks on Australia whether they'd be cyber crimes or other activities that are inappropriate against a sovereign nation ... You have a responsibility to call out these issues. What's more, we have a responsibility to draw attention in Australia to the threat that cybersecurity issues have.

16. Huawei / ZTE and 5G

IN AGREEMENT

Both parties supported the exclusion of Huawei and ZTE from the rollout of Australia's 5G network, with the ALP ruling out any reconsideration of the decision.

Coalition

On August 23 2018, then-Treasurer Scott Morrison during a short stint as Acting Home

Affairs Minister, effectively announced the ban of Huawei and ZTE's participation in Australia's 5G network.¹⁶¹

The ban was communicated obliquely through a press release outlining the Australian government's security directions on 5G. Under Australia's Telecommunications Sector Security Reforms, which came into effect on September 18 2018, the government could direct a carrier, carriage service provider or carriage service intermediary 'to do, or not do, a specified thing that is reasonably necessary to protect networks and facilities from national security risks.'¹⁶²

The press release read:¹⁶³

The government considers that the involvement of vendors who are likely to be subject to extrajudicial directions from a foreign government that conflict with Australian law, may risk failure by the carrier to adequately protect a 5G network from unauthorised access or interference.

The release carefully did not specify any particular country or company targeted by the government direction.

Shortly after the publication of the release, however, Huawei Australia announced via Twitter that they had 'been informed by the Govt [sic] that Huawei & ZTE have been banned from providing 5G technology to Australia.'¹⁶⁴

Australian Labor Party

Following the decision to exclude Huawei and ZTE, the opposition requested a security briefing.¹⁶⁵ Then-Shadow Communications Minister Michelle Rowland said on August 28 2018:

On matters of infrastructure security, Labor will always take the advice of our security agencies – and that has been a long-established bipartisan position.

In the lead-up to the May 2019 election, it was reported on April 18 2019 that 'Labor sources, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive policy matters, said the advice from security agencies is unequivocal and there was no appetite to review the ban.'¹⁶⁶

17. Foreign interference legislation

IN AGREEMENT

The ALP agreed to support the foreign interference bill introduced in 2017 after the Turnbull government accepted 60 amendments recommended by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security.

Coalition

On December 7 2017, then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull introduced the *National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage*



and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017 ‘to counter the threat of foreign states exerting improper influence over our system of government and our political landscape.’¹⁶⁷ In introducing the legislation, he made reference to an utterance popularly attributed to Mao, saying:¹⁶⁸

Our relationship with China is far too important to put at risk by failing to clearly set the terms of healthy and sustainable engagement. Modern China was founded by the statement that Chinese people have stood up. And today, and every day, the Australian people stand up and assert their sovereignty in our nation, with our parliament and with our laws.

In February 2018, then-Attorney-General Christian Porter, in the face of criticism of the bill by the Labor Party and other stakeholders, said: ‘I think there are some areas where obvious improvements could potentially be made to the drafting.’¹⁶⁹ Mr Porter proposed government amendments to the bill on March 5 2018.

On June 7 2018, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security released its consensus report on the bill which laid out 60 recommended amendments.¹⁷⁰

The government indicated all would be accepted,¹⁷¹ with the amended bill passing on June 28 2018.

Australian Labor Party

In February 2018 then-Opposition Leader Bill Shorten stated the foreign interference bill would not have Labor Party support until provisions targeting journalists were removed.¹⁷²

Speaking to journalists, Shadow Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus said:¹⁷³

Labor will support this Bill provided that the changes set out in the 60 recommendations of this report are agreed to by the government. We have got every reason to think that the government will in fact support those recommendations because we have worked very constructively with the government over the last several months.

Shadow Foreign Minister Wong during the debate prior to the passage of the bill said:¹⁷⁴

This legislation, at its heart, declares that this Parliament will not allow interference in our elections or in our democratic processes. This legislation, at its heart, declares that this Parliament will not allow interference in our elections or in our democratic processes. We will not allow these to be subject to foreign interference, and we will not allow the covert subversion of our politics by foreign interests.’

18. Conclusion

There has not been a federal poll fought predominantly on issues of foreign affairs since 1966. This detailed study demonstrates that the incumbent Coalition government and the opposition Labor Party broadly coalesce on national security and in particular their respective approaches towards PRC policy. This is unsurprising in the face of a Beijing that has adopted a more aggressive posture on the world stage, not least in its adoption of coercive economic measures against a wide range of Australian export industries. There has been a fundamental reassessment by both parties of Australia’s relationship with the PRC since late 2016.

The use of national security as a political weapon to create the appearance of division on the cusp of an election plays to longstanding claims that the Coalition is historically better at managing Australia’s foreign and defence policy, particularly during moments of international turbulence. The 9/11 attacks and the Iraq war were, for example, used to great effect against Labor in 2004. At that time, the Coalition attacked Labor’s perceived threat to the US alliance, in the period leading to the May 2022 election it is the opposition’s alleged weakness ‘in the face of a PRC that has adopted a more aggressive posture on the world stage, not least in its adoption of coercive economic measures against a wide range of Australian export industries.

Both parties have historically been emphatic about the need to maintain the international rules-based order and, at the same time, stand up for Australian values. Bipartisanship

on this central international question endured until the middle of last year, when Prime Minister Morrison began to frame the Australian government's view of the world in stark ideological terms, as one understood through the prism of liberal democracies versus authoritarianism.

Taking his cue in part from the new US Democrat President Joe Biden's division of the nations of the world into autocracies and democracies, the Australian leader dispensed with the more qualified rhetoric with which he had formerly approached the PRC question. It is illuminating, here, to compare two statements by Mr Morrison, one from 2019 and one from 2021. In October 2019, he declared, '[I]f you look at this [the rise of China] as some great ideological struggle between two world-views, well that can take you to a very dangerous end, and I don't subscribe to that analysis. I don't think it's in Australia's interests'.¹⁷⁵ In June 2021, in a speech entitled 'A world order that favours freedom', Mr Morrison signalled a swing towards the framing he had previously warned against, exhorting liberal democracies to '[step] up with coordinated action', and 'show that liberal democracies work for all'.¹⁷⁶ Subsequent speeches¹⁷⁷ have confirmed the embrace of this worldview despite some initial mixed messaging,¹⁷⁸ crescendoing with a warning on March 7 2022 that a new 'arc of autocracy' was emerging 'to challenge and reset the world order in their own image'.¹⁷⁹

While the ALP has not taken up these ideological cudgels, if it forms government at the forthcoming election it will need to with some alacrity give clearer shape to its foreign policy vision and where its approach to the PRC fits within its wider approach to the world. It is likely, initially at least, that Labor will want to show its snug alignment with Washington's definition of the world situation.

The fundamental concurrence between the Coalition and the ALP on PRC policy is challenged by a number of figures in both parties who are pushing for an even tougher line towards Beijing. Whichever party takes office following the May election will inevitably face issues and challenges that will make the management of Australia's PRC policy different to what has existed in recent years:

the Russia-Ukraine crisis clearly demonstrates this. Exactly what the PRC-Russia joint statement¹⁸⁰ portends is not yet known, as is the ultimate aftermath of the war in Ukraine. These developments will bring other, troubling dimensions to the challenge the Australian government will face as it manages relations with the PRC.

The Coalition-ALP PRC consensus has, in recent years, led to policy convergence on the need to push back against Beijing whenever its actions are bullying or coercive. This convergence, however, has resulted in policy stasis, one which, given the fluidity and unpredictability of current circumstances, any future government will need to confront and perhaps move beyond.

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