

## **Taking stock of Australia's asymmetrical relations with China: interdependence, tensions, and new dimensions**

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*This article deals with the asymmetrical relations between Australia and China and explores their interdependence, tensions, and societal outlooks. Both countries are dependent on one another for trade to different degrees but attempt to diversify their supply chains. While there is no united position on China in Australia, there has been a bipartisan support for the counter-interference legislation there. The newly established security pact of the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia – 'AUKUS' – has brought a new dimension into these tensions and will most likely lead to an arms race. The author explores how a so-called middle power such as Australia balances the related economic and strategic interests and priorities. Although Australia has been vulnerable in its asymmetric relationship with China, it has shown that it is not a passive and helpless actor when facing an economic coercion. The interdependence has become a moderating factor in this strategic stand-off. Additionally, Australia demonstrates its tendency to reinforce its traditional reliance on its previous more powerful allies, the UK and the US.*

*Keywords: China, Australia, Australia-China relations, asymmetry, interdependence*

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## 1. Introduction

One would expect that Australia, positioned as an island-continent, would feel secure; however, its sense of isolation mixed with its lack of sufficient capabilities and confidence to protect such a sizeable continent, and the fact that it has a small population, have made the Australian decision-makers feel vulnerable. Historically, they sought security protections from stronger and greater friends. Canberra has tended to rely on its colonial “parent”, the UK, and, after World War II, on the US. (Burke, 2001) Australia distanced itself from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and did not immediately grant it international recognition, while the UK decided to recognise the Communist China. Although Canberra was planning to follow the British suit, Prime Minister Menzies made it clear that the approval would only come when the time was appropriate and not in advance of the US. (Doran & Lee, 2012) It should be noted that although during the Vietnam War, the Australian government showed loyalty to the US and committed a battalion to the war, BHP continued to export steel to China. The American shift to pursuing a comprehensive review of the US China policy and relaxing the restrictions on China, followed by Henry Kissinger and Nixon’s visit to Beijing, also encouraged Canberra to support a more active politics towards China. Prime Minister Gough Whitlam ceased to have diplomatic relations with the Chinese Nationalist government in Taiwan and embraced collaboration with the PRC in 1972. He opposed Australia’s participation in the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation’s (SEATO) military exercises in the South China Sea, but he did not withdraw the Australian forces. (Curran, 2012)

Gradually, the Australia-China economic relationship has grown in importance. China’s fast economic expansion would not have happened at such a speed if it were not for its accessing of Australia’s resources. Equally, Australia benefited from the ongoing demand for its resources in China, which helped with a resource boom in the country, and provided protections to Australia so that it would better withstand the global economic crisis. In 2007, China became Australia’s single most important export market, after replacing Japan in this role. Since the Australian dollar is linked to commodity prices, with the increase in resource price movements, the value of the Australian dollar also increased. There was an impact on manufacturing as the competition abroad was able to provide lower labour costs. Impacts could also be felt in the educational sector and tourism. Ultimately, Australia’s dilemma was to distribute the accumulated revenue from the resource boom and manage the divisions over Chinese attempts to buy agricultural properties in Australia. (Beeson & Fujian, 2014) It is therefore a long-term concern for Australia that there could be a negative impact of resource prices and the appreciation of the Australian dollar.

Rather than focusing on the economic interdependence, Australia is more concerned with the national and regional security. For China, which is going through a systemic rivalry with the US, Australia having a very close relationship with Washington, is somewhat problematic. Australia’s prime ministers, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, sought a strategic balance between the US and China in the Defence White Papers, and by simply increasing the numbers of American troops stationed in Darwin. Gillard’s 2013 Defence White Paper clearly suggested that

Australia does not wish to choose between the two, which was well received by Beijing. (Mackerras, 2014)

The erosion of the view that Australia could successfully hedge between the US and China, getting benefits without choosing one over the other, started in 2016 and it has continued to grow with the changes in the public and elite opinion about China's overreach in Australia. To accuse China or Chinese nationals with alleged Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ties of unorthodox practices against the backdrop of Beijing's efforts to expand its reach beyond its traditional periphery through its 2013 vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) weakens the initiative. It also harms the image of 'harmony' that the Chinese leadership has been trying to portray externally and affects the goal of delivering the 'Chinese Dream' that President Xi Jinping has promised to his citizens.<sup>2</sup>

The Australian government, on the federal level, has not signed up for the BRI; however, the Government of Victoria and the National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China agreed to conclude an agreement on the BRI on October 8, 2018, which resulted in the Framework Agreement on October 23, 2019. But under the pressure from the federal government and in line with the newly adopted Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Agreements) Act 2020 (section 43), this agreement was cancelled on April 21, 2021, and is no longer in operation. (Vic gov, 2021)

In this context, this paper explores the nexus between asymmetry, interdependence and Changst to describe the evidence of Australia's vulnerability to and dependence on trade with China. It argues that Australia is not fully helpless in relation to China's economic coercion and uses its voice to push back, as well as using amendments in legislation to deal with cases of interference. There is, however, a strong dependence on the mutual trade exchange that brings benefits to both countries. This aspect has created a moderating force in their bilateral relationship. Australia has been balancing the economic and strategic priorities by engaging with China – economically – and pursuing defence and security agreements with the US.

The paper first describes the key theoretical concepts and applies them to specific examples. It then uses the empirical part to explore the interdependence and tension, explains China's view on Changst and generates conclusions about this. Although Australia has been vulnerable in the asymmetric relationship with China, it has shown that it is not a passive and helpless actor when facing an economic coercion. The interdependence has become a moderating factor in this strategic stand-off. Additionally, Australia demonstrates its tendency to reinforce its traditional reliance on its previous more powerful allies, the UK and the US.

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<sup>2</sup> Originally it was promoted as the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, but in response to enquiries from abroad about various 'silk roads' and 'belts', it changed its name to the BRI for the foreign audience in 2016. In China, the name OBOR is still used when discussing the vision.

## 2. Asymmetric Relationship-Interdependence-Changst

The *asymmetry* in the Australia-China relationship has been demonstrated by Beijing's exercise of *economic coercion* when it interrupted Australia's exports to China. Economic coercion is used by one state to impose economic costs on another to gain concessions. The latest research outputs focus not just on the effectiveness of this imposition but also on the use of specific coercive instruments and motivations of states. (McLean, 2021) Historically, China's economic coercion can be traced to some cases in 1905, when the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce called for a boycott of American goods after China learned of the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants and the restrictions of Chinese labor in the US. From 2010, China has primarily used unilateral coercive economic measures when its 'core interests', territorial claims or domestic political system were threatened. Beijing opts for restrictions in investments, exports or imports, or tourism; popular boycotts or informal pressure. In response, the other states push back and seek alternative markets or use diplomacy and concessions. (Harrell, Rosenberg & Saravalle, 2018) In the case of Australia, Beijing opted for popular boycotts and tourism restrictions in 2018. However, in the last two years, China, being a primary buyer of some valuable commodities, imposed import restrictions on Australia to deal with the allegations of a Chinese influence in Australia's politics. If China chose not to purchase Australia's iron ore, Australia would not have an alternative market to send it to. After Australia sent almost 800 million tons of iron ore to China in 2020, there were 460 million tonnes of it in the rest of the world. (Uren 2020)

In this article, the focus is on the *interdependence* between Australia and China, understood, in accordance with Keohane and Nye, as "asymmetries in interdependence" which "provide sources of influence for actors in their dealings with one another" (Keohane & Nye, 1987). There is an assumption that the actions of individual states will lead to costs for other members of the system. They can respond politically and ultimately the question remains about how states can benefit from these interactions and interdependencies without losing their autonomy. The outcome is not necessarily a mutual benefit. There could be negative consequences of being so connected in this relationship that both parties might wish to break the ties completely and not pursue any benefit that the interaction could have. (Baldwin, 1980) It can be argued that Australia and China each benefit from the economic exchange and thus not being interconnected through the resource trade would be costly for both countries.

In the backdrop of viewing this relationship as one of economic complementarity, there are signs of anxiety over China's influence and interference, the so-called China angst – *Changst*. The discourse of the China threat has been strongly led by the US and permeated various spheres. For example, there is the fear of the inflow of Chinese students into Australia or of investment bids by Chinese companies using dissimilar or non-conforming practices. (McCarthy & Song, 2018) Australia fluctuates between viewing China as an economic opportunity and fearing China. An explanation presents itself through accepting that there is a limited understanding of China and of Australia at all levels – elite and popular. (Davis, 2020) Subsequently, the Australia-China relationship has been under scrutiny due to tensions surrounding China's conduct in the security sphere and the area of human rights but also in the diplomatic and trade relations and investments. (Grieger, 2018; Lee, 2021) Australia has taken

actions to push back after the results of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's (ASIO) investigation into foreign influence operations revealed that party donations from Chinese businesses superseded those of other donors, and a Labor Party senator resigned due to being involved in giving counter-surveillance advice to China and declaring his support for China's position in the maritime claims in the South China Sea. In response, in 2018 the Australian Parliament reviewed *the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Interference) Bill* and introduced some new offences to it, such as providing misleading information in applications for security clearances, treason or violating political rights. (Hunter, 2017; Australian Government, 2018) The government feels supported by a bipartisan agreement on these changes and has been reassured by allies within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a renewed security collaboration with India, Japan and the United States (US). Moreover, an independent inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the Australian public to take a more critical view of China. As a result of the tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic, some Chinese Australians have been subjected to discrimination. In turn, Chinese diplomats and foreign policy spokespeople have accused Australia of "poisoning" the bilateral ties and political manipulation.

### **3. The Thin Line between the Interdependence and Tensions**

In the bilateral relations, the Australians have perceived China as an economic opportunity in trade and investments. China is Australia's largest two-way trading partner, accounting for approximately 31 per cent of the country's trade with the world, which totaled AUD 245 billion in 2020. As Australia was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive trade measures from Beijing, however, there has been a decline in this reported figure by 7 per cent from 2019. (DFAT, 2021) Nevertheless, in 2021, there are reported surpluses, which demonstrate that China does not target all vital parts of Australia's export portfolio, as it is also dependent on some imports of precious minerals.

Australia and China are mismatched when it comes to their economic and defence capabilities. While China responds from the position of a rising great power and a contender for the global superpower status, Australia has been simultaneously projecting two prominent foreign policy traditions: those of being a dependent ally, initially to the UK, and then to the US, and a middle power. Gaining an access to and promises of assistance from these powerful players gives Australia some sense of protection and military and technological benefits. The critics, however, have argued that hosting intelligence facilities or engaging in defence alliances has made Australia more vulnerable to attacks. (Taylor, 2020)

Canberra has increasingly diversified its partnerships within multilateral fora. As a rising middle power, Australia stood at the foundation of several multilateral organisations – such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum or the G20. It has contributed to initiatives encouraging the formation and preservation of a rules-based order in Asia and globally. China, on the other hand, has taken steps to suggest alternative initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB)

or the 16+1 platform in Europe that are not fully compatible with the existing regional and global order.

Canberra has sought to engage with China due to the complementariness of their economies and has provided raw materials, higher education, and financial services to China, while importing Chinese products. From 2014, the official description of the China-Australia relationship is a “comprehensive strategic partnership”, and the countries focus on their trade and economic complementarities. (DFAT, 2021) Unlike many countries, Australia concluded the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA), in force since 2015, to improve the opportunities for businesses that export to China or import Chinese goods for sale in Australia. Australia has pursued an active trade exchange with China, mainly as a supplier of nickel ore, timber, iron ore, wool, lobster, processed food, barley, and pharmaceuticals, with China’s shares of these exports being between 100 and 47 per cent (the products/resources are listed in declining order by the size of China’s share). It also holds a prominent role in Australia’s imports of lighting, toys, games, textiles, household equipment, computers and phones. (Uren, 2020) This dependency makes Australia more vulnerable should China decide not to buy specific minerals or produce or sell certain consumer goods.

In 2020, China imposed restrictions on Australian goods and placed tariffs of up to 200 per cent on Australian wine. Some would expect that this development would ruin the trade since Australia has been greatly dependent on exports of timber, coal and meat and dairy products. (BBC, 2020) Nevertheless, in July 2021, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported a trade surplus, which was driven by higher iron ore export receipts, and confirmed that there were record export months driven by both iron ore and, subsequently, metalliferous ores. (ABS, 2021) It appears that China decided not to scrutinise this export portfolio since the country is rather dependent on Australia’s mineral exports.<sup>3</sup> This strategy stands against the backdrop of a harsher reaction from Beijing in the area of other exports, namely its response to the canceled MOU and Framework Agreement with the Victorian state government under their BRI collaboration.

Further, there is a human and societal dimension to this relationship with a sizeable - over 1.2 million - Australian population with a Chinese background established in Australia. (ABS, 2018) There are an estimated 160 000 Chinese students enrolled in Australian universities (BBC, 2021b) and there is also an influx of Chinese tourists, who accounted for 27 per cent of the total international visitors during the pre-COVID period of 2018-2019. Their market share in spending was an equivalent of the total spending by the tourists from India, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. (TRA, 2020, p. 4) Australia relies on its income from these groups.

China’s behaviour has also been observed and examined in Australia’s backyard, where it has taken over the two-way trade in the Pacific region since 2013 (apart from Papua New

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<sup>3</sup> In Q1 2021, 59 per cent of China’s total iron ore imports by value came from Australia, followed by Brazil with 23 per cent and South Africa with 4 per cent.

Guinea). In the case of the Solomon Islands, the trade with China makes up 46 per cent of all their trade. Beijing is increasingly contributing grants and loans to the islands and has ranked as the third highest contributor to them between 2011 and 2017. (Lowy Institute, 2018a) However, in this space, there is an additional competition from the United States, which is among the top export partners of 6 out of 8 countries. (Dornan & Muller, 2018)

Table 1

*The Top Three Import and Export Partners for Pacific Countries*

Country	Top 3 export partners			Top 3 import partners		
Fiji	USA	Australia	New Zealand	Singapore	China	New Zealand
Palau	Japan	Guam	USA	USA	Singapore	Japan
Samoa	American Samoa	Australia	New Zealand	New Zealand	Singapore	China
Solomon Isds	China	Italy	Switzerland	Australia	China	Singapore
Kiribati	Malaysia	USA	Fiji	Australia	Fiji	China
Tonga	New Zealand	China	USA	New Zealand	Singapore	USA
Micronesia	Guam	N. Mariana Isds	USA	USA	China	Guam
Cook Islands	Japan	China	USA	New Zealand	Fiji	Australia

Source: Dornan & Muller, 2018.

*Note: PNG has been excluded due to data quality issues.*

China continues to maintain its high growth rates and is focused on a “new development stage” of shifting its focus from “getting rich” to “becoming strong”. President Xi Jinping has been consolidating his position and that of the CCP, which celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. (Hyerson, Petrova & Nyman, 2021) For this purpose, China has set up a network of collaborations around the globe under the BRI, which has generated a lot of interest. Apart from gaining access to markets and trade routes, it is a strategy to increase the Chinese influence. This recent positioning and reports on the “hidden debts” along the BRI, totaling \$385 billion and involving more than 40 countries whose debt exposure is greater than 10 per cent of their GDP (Wooley, 2021), raise alarms in Australia, which has avoided signing a Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI.

#### 4. The Changst and China’s View

To safeguard Australia’s interests and deal with the predatory behaviour of some foreign investors, the federal government re-regulated capital flows into Australia in 2020. This move was in contrast with Australia’s usual support for open markets since it depends on foreign capital. While there was no clear declaration that these measures were made against a particular country, it is believed that the move was directed at China.

A year later, the Chinese investment remained high at AUD 12.8 billion in comparison with the previous year’s figure of AUD 13.8 billion. Yet, China dropped to the position of the sixth largest source country from the fifth spot, and the amount it invested has decreased by half

from two years ago. No doubt there is an effect from the tensions on these investments. Fewer approvals were given to proposed investments in mining, but increases were noted in finance, the insurance sector, manufacturing, agriculture, fishing, forestry, the gas sector and real estate. Notably more deepening is taking place in the relations with Japan, which used to be the primary investor in Australia. The country stands out due to getting approvals for investments of AUD 22 billion in 2020 – a jump from less than AUD 5 billion two years ago. (Earl, 2021)

There is a tendency in Australia to view some foreign capital as “too foreign”, especially if the processes of investing do not comply with the established norms, as occurred in some cases involving Chinese companies. (Wong, 2012) There is a widespread view that these companies will not conform to the Australian business culture, and that the Chinese SOEs trying to invest in Australia are part of the Chinese state strategy of investing in strategic resources and interfering with the political sphere and cyberspace. McCarthy and Song (2018) labeled this fear as ‘Changst’. They explored this phenomenon through various case studies and concluded that it appears in some instances, such as those related to the fear of China investing in Australian companies, real estate, land and water, or defence (e.g. the lease of the Port of Darwin to the Chinese private company Landbridge by the Territory’s government) or the angst felt toward Chinese international students, who are depicted as Chinese agents. The angst was out of proportion and in some cases, China simply adopted the take-over practices of other international firms. (McDonald, Doran, & Green, 2015; Bexley & Vu, 2015)

In search for answers to the question of how China views Australia, the political reporter Jonathan Kearsley from the 9News network obtained a list of 14 Chinese grievances against Australia from a Chinese embassy official in Canberra in November 2020. (Kearsley, 2020) He later posted the content through his Twitter account (Table 2 below).



Table 2

*China's Grievances with Australia in 2020*

- foreign investment decisions, with acquisitions blocked on opaque national security grounds in contravention of ChAFTA/since 2018, more than 10 Chinese investment projects have been rejected by Australia citing ambiguous and unfounded "national security concerns" and putting restrictions in areas like infrastructure, agriculture and animal husbandry.
- the decision banning Huawei Technologies and ZTE from the 5G network, over unfounded national security concerns, doing the bidding of the US by lobbying other countries
- foreign interference legislation, viewed as targeting China and in the absence of any evidence.
- politicization and stigmatization of the normal exchanges and cooperation between China and Australia and creating barriers and imposing restrictions, including the revoke of visas for Chinese scholars.
- call for an international independent inquiry into the COVID-19 virus, acted as a political manipulation echoing the US attack on China
- the incessant wanton interference in China's Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan affairs; spearheading the crusade against China in certain multilateral forums
- the first non littoral country to make a statement on the South China Sea to the United Nations
- siding with the US' anti-China campaign and spreading disinformation imported from the US around China's efforts of containing COVID-19.
- the latest legislation to scrutinize agreements with a foreign government targeting towards China and aiming to torpedo the Victorian participation in B&R
- provided funding to anti-China think tank for spreading untrue reports, peddling lies around Xinjiang and so-called China infiltration aimed at manipulating public opinion against China
- the early dawn search and reckless seizure of Chinese journalists' homes and properties without any charges and giving any explanations
- thinly veiled allegations against China on cyber attacks without any evidence
- outrageous condemnation of the governing party of China by MPs and racist attacks against Chinese or Asian people.
- an unfriendly or antagonistic report on China by media, poisoning the atmosphere of bilateral relations

Source: Jonathan Kearsley, @jkearsley, Twitter, 18 November 2020

The Chinese diplomats and spokespeople for the Foreign Ministry confirmed these criticisms through statements on social media. They accused Australia of 'poisoning the atmosphere of bilateral relations' by making baseless accusations of an infiltration or intervention, and of 'political manipulation related to the pandemic'. They further encourage

boycotts of Australian good and services, as the Chinese Ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye asked, “Maybe ordinary people will say ‘why should we drink Australian wine? Eat Australian beef?’” (Sloane, 2020)

## **5. New Dimensions and Conclusions**

Parallel to this ‘war of words’, the Australian Trade and Investment Commission keeps routinely updating lists of opportunities for Australian exporters wanting to engage with China. They are not exhaustive lists, but lists of commercially viable suggestions based on the risk assessments at the time. At the time of finalising this paper, the suggested sectors were in food, beverages and agriculture, retail, health and medicine, energy resources and infrastructure and education. Previous updates strongly focused on technology and e-commerce. With China accounting for almost 40 per cent of e-commerce transactions and a billion netizens, it is an important market to access. These figures might even increase considering the shift to online sales during the pandemic. The main challenge might be adapting to the new e-commerce law from mid-March that regulates livestreamed sales and adjusts conditions with user data privacy. It is now required to have consent from users when working with their data, including their biometric data and health information, as well as financial accounts. (AUSTRADE, 2021)

Still, it is important that the pre-COVID-19 and pre-AUKUS plans for collaborating in strategic science, technology and innovation between China and Australia continue. Their aim is to support joint research centers and academic science symposia, but also the young scientist exchange program. It is important to keep track of the AI-driven surveillance that can impact citizens and find ways to deploy such technologies ethically.

With the latest changes in the national strategic thinking, under AUKUS, defence and deterrence capabilities will be strengthened. However, considering the financial burden that has been put on the government to support the unemployed and inactive businesses affected by lockdowns and pandemic restrictions, it is likely that the trade with China will continue as it provides a more steady income. They will also need to find ways to reenergise two vital sectors - tourism and education - since they bring in revenue and have greatly suffered under the prolonged interstate and international border closures and travel bans.

The rhetoric will possibly become even more assertive in the context of Australia working even more closely with the US. The EU will continue in implementing its own Indo-Pacific Strategy and as such will want to increase its partnerships with Australia, as well as Japan and South Korea. The further evolution of Australia-China ties might also depend on the future government after the 2022 parliamentary elections. For now, the opposition has suggested that they will honor the new pact with the US and the UK; however, there might be a more cooperative rhetoric between Beijing and Canberra since China is Australia’s top economic partner.

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