



# Diplomacy, not war games

China is our economic saviour but is it also a military threat? ANN KENT suggests finesse is needed in our relationship

Australia's foreign policy in the Asian region appears to be in a state of disarray and internal contradiction. The work of previous Labor prime ministers to build up an independent foreign policy while working with Asia is now threatened. Our economic policy is posited on the prosperity of the Chinese economy, and Australian commentators may regularly be heard anxiously interviewing Chinese economists and financial experts as to whether China is going to keep up the volume of its resources purchases in Australia in the face of a newly uncertain global future. By contrast, the new military agreement between Prime Minister Julia Gillard and President Obama anticipates China as the strategic enemy in the region. Why else would the two governments, without any public debate, decide to deepen their military relationship at this point in time, without any real evidence of impending threat? China, in other words, is seen as at once Australia's saviour and its nemesis.

In the last few days, commentators have observed that Australia is not the only country living with such contradictions. Other states in the region have strong trade ties with China while fearing it strategically.

But for this very reason, these states deal with the challenge much more astutely and subtly – with diplomacy – and do not, like Australia, choose to raise their heads above the parapet as possible targets when the two great powers in the region, the US and China, face off against each other. Because, while China may be a source of military concern, the main threat, as Hugh White has pointed out, is US-China great power conflict in our region. For this reason, Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr Marty Natalegawa has already expressed his grave reservations about the new Australian policy.

In yet another contradiction, Australia's newly proposed policy of selling uranium to India, a country which is not party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, not only goes against traditional Australian Labor Party policy to sell uranium only to states, such as China, which have ratified the NPT, but at the same time shows remarkable trust in China's preparedness to be internationally responsible at the very time when Western states are shedding their own international responsibilities. What, for instance, would stop China from making sales of materiel and nuclear technology to Pakistan, which is also not a member of the NPT, given the apparent loss of trust in such tried and true international treaties evinced by the very countries that set up these treaties in the first place? Doesn't this give an ironic twist to President Obama's injunction that China should "play by the same rules" as the rest of us? How can Australia be so short-sighted about its long-term interests and its historical reputation as a good international citizen?

It is not surprising to learn that the Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, was not consulted about this proposal beforehand, because it is not a policy that one would normally associate with his department.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry's immediate verbal reaction to these developments can be seen as relatively cautious, within the vast vocabulary of China's possible responses. What matters, however, is not China's words, but its actions. What matters is also the differing responses from the many factions and official actors in China's defence and foreign policy area. Beijing no longer speaks with one voice, and, given the jockeying for power occurring among China's political and official elite before the leadership handover in 2012,

nobody knows what policies it will eventually adopt.

Equally, China does not judge us by our words, but by our deeds. However much we deny that China is the target, in China's eyes we have just taken a formal decision to abandon our earlier policy of acting as a bridge between the US and China, and have instead hopped onto a US warship.

While we cannot allow China to determine our foreign policy, by the same token we should not take foolish, open-ended risks with our own national security, by putting all our eggs into one fragile basket.

Of course we have concerns with China. We are worried about China's recent behaviour in the South China Sea; about its military build-up; about the consequences for Australian sovereignty and energy and food security of the investment by China's state-owned enterprises in Australian property and resources industries; about China's impact on Australian manufacturing; and about its lack of a genuine rule of law which inhibits the relationship.

But this is no longer the Cold War era, when our contacts with China were limited and fears proliferated. Today, we can talk to China, we can negotiate. Contacts with China are multifarious, and in fact, in many senses China is already here. To that extent, it could be argued that, if there is a China threat, it is now an internal, rather than an external, one. So the answer to problems in Australia-China relations should not be the simplistic one of handing an apparently open cheque to a potential saviour who, with its eyes on its own self-interest, could possibly land us with serious military problems.

For instance, what leeway would Australia have in this deepened military relationship if in the next few years we found a Tea Party/Republican US president facing off against a

  
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more nationalistic Chinese leadership?

The answer for Australia to the new dilemmas of life with a rising China is to become much smarter in handling our internal problems with it by enacting new, nationally protective legislation, and to resolve our

external problems with clever, regionally negotiated agreements, enhanced self-defence and a general strengthening of ties with like-minded Asian neighbours. Only in these ways can we hope to maintain both our independence and security

while reconciling the different aspects of our China relationship.

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