

FOREWORD

Gareth Evans*

For Australia, navigating a course between China and the United States is not a task for the diplomatically or politically faint-hearted. The stakes could hardly be higher. We are hugely economically dependent on trade with China. We are highly vulnerable in security terms if drawn into any outright conflict with it. We are increasingly enmeshed in, and dependent upon, an alliance relationship with America the longevity and protective value of which can, in the age of Trump, no longer be assumed. And we have a domestic environment where these issues are increasingly salient, and have assumed an increasingly ideological and potentially divisive cast, not least for the 1.4 million Australians with Chinese ancestry whose political voice is increasingly being heard.

There has never been a greater need, under these circumstances, for informed, rational and measured debate about how we can best position ourselves to meet these challenges. The primary responsibility for conducting that debate, and steering the future national course, unquestionably lies with our political leadership, and in that context the election of the Albanese Government in 2022 has brought some welcome respite from the stridency and superficiality of its recent Coalition predecessors. Foreign Minister Penny Wong has been properly applauded for the calm, measured and thoughtful tone that she, with strong support from the Prime Minister and her key ministerial colleagues, has brought to stabilizing and rebuilding our relationship with China, as well as repairing fractured or fraught relationships in the Pacific and elsewhere around the region.

The new government, although not without its critics from both left and right, has also been reasonably successful in communicating to the wider Australian community what it is doing and why, perhaps most notably and comprehensively, at the time of this writing, with the Foreign Minister's widely-reported speech to the National Press Club in April 2023. She was clear-headed in saying that we should 'not waste energy with shock or outrage' at China using its great and growing strength and international influence to advance its national interests, but rather 'cooperate where we can, disagree where we must, [and] manage our differences wisely'. And equally right in being very explicit that Australia's national interest lay, above all, in our living in a *multipolar* region, one 'where no country dominates, and no country is dominated ... and all countries benefit from strategic equilibrium'.

Some of the force of that latter message was diluted, however, by the minister spelling out in detail China's various manifest challenges to that equilibrium, with its coercive trade behaviour, over-reach in the South China Sea, sabre-rattling over Taiwan and the like, but without also calling out specifically America's own contributions to putting that equilibrium at risk. Not least with its demand – supported publicly, if not always privately, across the political spectrum in Washington – for recognition of the continued *primacy* of the U.S. both regionally and globally. This may not have been a bad time to revisit a line from Bill Clinton that I have often quoted, in which he stated in my hearing soon after he left the presidency, off the record then and never subsequently on it, that the right choice for America was not to use its great and (then) unrivalled military power 'to try to stay top dog on the global block in perpetuity',

but rather ‘to create a world in which we will be comfortable living when no longer top dog on the global block’.

But even the most competent and principled Australian governments tend to be excessively nervous about doing or saying anything that we think might conceivably put at risk our long-standing alliance love affair with the United States, and the security insurance that we like to believe flows from it. Although I would argue that our record was less faint-hearted than most, I don’t exclude the Hawke-Keating governments from that assessment. Caution comes with the territory.

That is why it is so critical that the public debate about our foreign policy choices – and all the defence, trade, investment, industry, immigration, education and other international policy choices that impact upon our national interests – be not just left to government, and to the media barons who have always tried, with some success, to influence its decisions. It is critical that the wise and well-informed voices be heard of those who are leading scholars in the field, think-tank analysts and advocates with a long record of perspicacity, and highly-experienced former diplomatic and business practitioners. That is exactly the task that Jamie Reilly and Jingdong Yuan have performed in bringing together their stellar cast of contributors to this volume.

There is an aching long list of issues bearing on Australia’s engagement with China with which our policymakers are going to have to wrestle for decades to come, all of them here systematically addressed. They include how to strike a balance, with AUKUs, the Quad and all the rest, between military prudence and provocation; judging whether and when U.S. alliance demands, not least over Taiwan, will involve more risks than rewards; deciding how far to take the securitization of trade, investment, and technology transfer; determining the point at which legitimate risk mitigation in research collaboration descends into counterproductive paranoia; and determining how to turn on, not turn off, the massive contribution Chinese-Australians can make to the development of a safe and productive bilateral relationship.

All these issues are going to require clear-headed and decisive decision-making: upholding and advancing the universal values we embrace, including civil and political as well as economic and social rights; not being shy about using, as we have in the past, such creative middle power influence as we have to advance global and regional public goods; but also recognizing that for the most part we have to take the world – and our biggest neighbours – as we find them, not as we might like them to be, and have no choice but to balance our idealism with pragmatic realism.

That is the flavour of all the contributions to this admirably well-researched, well-argued and timely book. It is indeed, as the editors say, ‘a full-throated defence of engagement’ with China – but intelligent, principled engagement, not engagement at any cost. If Australian policymakers, now and into the future, carefully read and take to heart its analysis and prescriptions, our national interest will be well served indeed.

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