

# Can Morrison patch up Australia's troubled ties with China?

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December 10 2018

This article appeared in *World Politics Review* on December 10 2018.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has adopted a noticeably softer tone toward China since taking office in August, in contrast to his predecessor, Malcolm Turnbull. The relationship has improved considerably, with Foreign Minister Marise Payne traveling to China in November, the first such visit by an Australian foreign minister in over two years. But according to Simone van Nieuwenhuizen, a researcher at the University of Technology Sydney's Australia-China Relations Institute, the Australian government will still have to reckon with the challenges posed by Chinese influence operations and China's increasing investment in Pacific island nations, where Australia has historically enjoyed a powerful position. In an interview with WPR, she discusses the Morrison government's efforts to bring the China-Australia relationship out of the diplomatic chill of the Turnbull years.

*World Politics Review: How would you characterise Australia's approach to China under former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, and what led to the recent diplomatic chill?*

**Simone van Nieuwenhuizen:** There is some debate about this in Australia. Some have characterised the Turnbull government's China policy as one that deliberately and unnecessarily antagonised the Chinese government by singling it out as a potential threat. The most prominent example was Turnbull's use of the phrase 'the Australian people stand up' when he introduced foreign interference legislation in Parliament in December 2017. This was a reference to a likely apocryphal quote from Mao Zedong in 1949, when he declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China. This kind of rhetoric certainly didn't help the relationship.

The Chinese government itself has accused the Australian government under both Turnbull and Morrison of harbouring a 'Cold War mentality.' But, of course, it is more complex than that. There are genuine concerns in Australia, as in other countries, about the Chinese Communist Party's increasing use of covert means to exert influence over politicians and attempt to shape popular opinion about China. While Australia enjoys a strong economic relationship with China, the CCP's use of United Front organisations and individuals associated with them to attempt to change Australian political discourse is disconcerting. The United Front Work Department, which has been further centralised under President Xi Jinping, coordinates the Party's policies and activities related to ethnic and religious affairs and the Chinese diaspora, among other matters. For example, former

Labor Senator Sam Dastyari was recorded at a press conference for Chinese media in September 2016 expressing agreement with the Chinese government's South China Sea policy, contradicting his own party's position. This came after Dastyari's acceptance of a donation from Chinese businessman Huang Xiangmo's property company, Yuhu Group, to pay for some of his legal bills. At the time, Huang was head of the United Front-linked Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China.\* While this appears to have been a unique case, it demonstrates the potential for Chinese political influence.

Media coverage of this and other issues, such as the activities of the Chinese government-sponsored Chinese Students and Scholars Association on Australian university campuses, has prompted a re-think of Australia's relationship with China. Under Xi, the CCP has become more repressive of dissent within China, academic freedom has [deteriorated](#), and China's approach to foreign policy has arguably become more assertive. These factors also shaped Australia's China policy under Turnbull.

In August, Turnbull gave a [speech](#) that was seen to soften some of his government's rhetoric on China and pave the way for his successor to adopt a more pragmatic approach to China policy. Regardless of the softened tone, however, the fundamental challenge remains. Australia must maintain its valuable economic, trade and people-to-people relations with China, but it must also be wary of the sharper aspects of the CCP's power.

*WPR: What are the factors—domestic, regional or global—that are now prompting the two countries to attempt a reset of relations?*

**van Nieuwenhuizen:** In my opinion, the Australian government's softer tone does not amount to a 'reset.' The two countries have not simply hit a button and taken the relationship back to where it was two years ago. Rather, the Morrison government's slightly different approach reflects the latest stage in an overall evolution in bilateral relations, in which both Australia and China are coming to terms with the realities of changing power dynamics in the Indo/Asia-Pacific region. These include the 'new normal' of more confrontational U.S.-China relations amid uncertainty about the US commitment to the region.

Foreign Minister Marise Payne visited Beijing in early November for the Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue. That was the first visit to China by an Australian foreign minister in more than two years, and her visit was widely considered an indication of warmer relations. Payne [stated](#), 'The Australian Government is committed to a constructive relationship with China, founded on shared interests and mutual respect.' The government has nonetheless continued to acknowledge the challenges in the relationship.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges is China's increasing investment in Pacific island states, where Australia has historically enjoyed a powerful position despite an arguable lack of focused policy. As part of Australia's so-called Pacific pivot, Prime Minister Scott Morrison criticised 'unsustainable debt burdens' — a likely reference to China's infrastructure investment in the region — in a speech at the APEC summit in Papua New Guinea last month, and the Australian government announced a \$2 billion infrastructure investment fund for Pacific countries and Timor-Leste. Morrison [noted](#) that the fund could be used for joint projects with China if they were beneficial for the region. Australia also inked an agreement with the US to help Papua New Guinea refurbish Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island. At the same time, Morrison says that Australia should not feel the need to choose between the U.S. and China, instead simply understanding 'the differences in the nature of both relationships.'

Another challenge is investment in critical infrastructure. Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE have been blocked from participating in Australia's 5G network due to national security concerns. The Australian government has also, to Beijing's ire, expressed its concerns about human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including in a rare joint letter with 14 other Western governments [requesting an audience](#) with Xinjiang's party secretary, Chen Quanguo.

*WPR: Looking ahead, how do you expect Morrison to manage relations with China? What are some potential obstacles that could hamper efforts to improve ties?*

**van Nieuwenhuizen:** Morrison has told Australian media that he will continue to take a pragmatic approach toward China. Under his China policy, Australia will acknowledge its differences with China and manage legitimate threats while pursuing cooperation in areas of common interest.

The Morrison government has stated that it does not seek or encourage China's containment, nor does it see China as a threat, but will continue to protect Australia's interests. If more evidence were to emerge of a systematic and targeted campaign to influence Australian politics or foreign policy, this threat assessment would change. Other obstacles would include an escalation in tensions in the South China Sea and a continued refusal on the part of the Chinese government to adhere to international law in its territorial disputes.

*\* Editor's Note: The Australia-China Relations Institute was established at the University of Technology Sydney in 2014 with the assistance of a \$1.8 million gift from Huang Xiangmo. Mr Huang's financial support for the institute ended in 2016.*

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