

The khaki election turned teal on China

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The federal election did not turn out to be quite as khaki-clad as some commentators [predicted](#), despite the efforts of Defence Minister Peter Dutton who, in the penultimate week of campaigning, [described](#) the entry of a Chinese surveillance vessel into Australia's exclusive economic zone as an 'aggressive act'. While Prime Minister Scott Morrison distanced himself from the Defence Minister's framing, [saying](#) that 'International law of the sea has not been breached,' he [noted](#) that the presence of the ship was not 'an act of bridge building or friendship'.

However, the course of the campaign has [confirmed](#) the [readiness](#) of [both sides](#) of politics to toss the China relationship into the barnyard of domestic politics and watch the feathers fly.

It was clear even before the start of the campaign that the Labor Party did not want to fight on China-focused terrain. Indeed, the opposition went to great lengths to emphasise policy bipartisanship. When asked in February whether Australia was overreacting to the 'China threat', Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese [said](#) that Australia's response had been 'appropriate, considered and measured'.

But while the campaign [consensus on China policy](#) remains in substance, the newly inked security agreement between the Solomon Islands and China has provided the Labor Party with an opening to attack the government on a policy failure, which they have seized on with alacrity. The timing of the agreement injected a new sense of urgency and immediacy to Australia's China debate. No other national security development, perhaps, could have been better calculated to roil what was already turning into a fierce and personalised political contest between the two leaders and the major parties. It has added intensity to their respective responses.

The Australian public is, for the moment at least, unmoved by the exchange of recriminations. A [survey](#) recently conducted by the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney found that while four in 10 Australians say that the Australian government's management of China policy is an issue that will have an impact on their vote in the upcoming election, the population is evenly split with respect to which political party is a better manager of Australia's China policy: 35.6 percent of those surveyed nominated the Coalition, while 35.4 percent selected the Australian Labor Party.

For a government that spent the last term trying to 'internationalise' its China policy, that is, spruiking its combination of resistance and confrontation of Beijing's hard-line tactics as a model for other countries to follow, the embarrassment at the sudden signature of the Solomons agreement, amid scenes of American officials arriving and departing empty-handed from Honiara, has been particularly acute. There has been some [dissembling](#), too, on how long Beijing's courting of the Solomon Islands has been going on, and how and why Australian policy settings in the Pacific were unable to arrest the momentum towards the

deal's finalisation. But the conclusion is inescapable: Australia lacks influence in the region closest to its own coastline, in contrast to the supposed 'global' lessons from how Australia manages an assertive and unsettling China.

The Labor Party has, in response to the Solomon Islands–China security agreement, laid out a [policy strategy for the Pacific](#) should it take office after May 21. It has also [pledged](#) an extension of policy commitments to Southeast Asia. Labor has consistently signalled it would emphasise diplomacy and restore traditional foreign policymaking structures in managing relations with China. Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong in June 2018 [said](#) that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) should be the 'lead department' for both management of the Australia–China relationship and a whole-of-government China strategy. The sentiment, while not expressed as forthrightly, appears to remain, with Ms Wong [asserting](#) in November 2021 that a Labor government would 'ensure a more central role for foreign policy in the content and implementation of strategy'; 'clearer political leadership' for DFAT, as well as a 'sharper understanding' of its role and responsibilities. She also encouraged the department, as well as the national security community, to 'take the opportunity to review their advice to government'.

While the Labor Party has laid out some strands of policy, it remains the case that neither party has set down an agenda for managing the broader China relationship over the short to medium term. The stasis that now defines Australian China policy — even though it derives largely from Beijing's continued unwillingness to deal with Australian leaders or ministers, from its continued punishment of Australian export industries, its arbitrary detention of Australian citizens, and its unreasonable list of 14 grievances — looks set to continue whoever wins government. Policy is hemmed in — both by the prevailing culture of neither party wanting to blink in the face of Chinese pressure, but also by the imperative to fall in behind American regional objectives. There are, then, powerful forces that, on the surface, mitigate against any fundamental reappraisal of Australian policy taking place.

But if, as Labor has promised, it seeks to re-energise Australian diplomacy, then it is surely an opportune time to step back and engage in a comprehensive, internal review of China policy. Renewed meaning will need to be given to the concept of 'whole of government' deliberation and policymaking. Looking to experiences of countries which have had, by sheer virtue of their geography, a longer history of navigating relations with China may also be instructive.

History provides few examples where a change of government has brought a stark alteration in the direction of Australian China policy. After the momentous diplomatic opening to China in 1972, policy was marked by continuity. Malcolm Fraser kept the Whitlam policy settings when he came to office in 1975, although let realpolitik have its head by suggesting that China could be used to help keep the Soviet bear caged. The Howard government's troubles in 1996 over the Taiwan Straits could not have been foreseen before it came to office, but it soon put a floor under the relationship to ensure that its economic health prospered. And Kevin Rudd, despite starting his term [telling](#) the Americans he would be a 'brutal realist on China', nevertheless ended up endorsing the Howard principles for relations between the two countries after a series of crises unsettled the relationship in 2008–09. While the strategic circumstances are now a world away from those times, whoever wins government still needs to deal with the reality of China. And that surely means a continuing evolution in policy for facing up to, and managing, that reality.

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