

## **China and the Australia-U.S. Relationship A Historical Perspective**

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COLIN MACKERRAS

## China and the Australia-U.S. Relationship

### *A Historical Perspective*

#### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes China's impact on Australia-U.S. relations from 1949 to 1996, including how far Australia's China policy followed the American lead. The conclusion: American influence was dominant, but Australia's own initiative was enough to belie the suggestion that it was no more than a blind follower.

**KEYWORDS:** trilateralism, Australian foreign policy, China, United States, bilateralism

#### INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Professor Hugh White of the Australian National University proposed a theory of "power shift." He meant that power in the Pacific was moving toward China, with resultant rising Sino-American tensions. He suggested a "concert of Asia" in which regional powers, especially China and the United States, would recognize each other's legitimacy. Australia, White said, should try to persuade the powers, especially the U.S., to support this new arrangement.

White's proposal is discussed in much more detail elsewhere in this special issue. The present paper provides historical analysis from the time Australia signed a security treaty with the U.S., when both countries were hostile to China, to the end of the twentieth century, with a brief update to 2013. It shows that trilateral relations between Australia, China, and the U.S. were extremely important well before the Hugh White debate and the circumstances that form the core of this special issue.

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This paper thus aims to provide essential historical background for other papers in this issue. It does so through analysis of the impact of the China factor on Australia's relations with the U.S. from 1949 until 1996. We begin as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in China and the Liberal Party leader Robert Gordon Menzies defeated Australian Labor Party (ALP) leader Ben Chifley to become prime minister in Australia (1949–66). We end when John Howard defeated the ALP's Paul Keating as prime minister. In particular, the paper aims to provide background through analysis of one highly relevant issue, the extent to which Australia's China policy followed the American lead and whether there was any degree of independence.

Chronologically, the paper will split the period in 1972, when ALP Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's government (1972–75) established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). This event marks such an important turning point in the bilateral relationship that no other year can sensibly divide the period. Topics covered include the recognition of China, several major world strategic factors involving the Cold War and great-power politics, as well as trade and economic relations.

The paper highlights the relevance of the historical background to current debates. It concludes that in most ways, American influence was dominant, but at certain crucial points and in some important respects Australia did indeed demonstrate enough initiative to belie the suggestion that it was no more than a blind follower of the American lead. In some periods, the China factor exercised a negative effect on Australia-U.S. relations, but this was rarely serious.

The paper's focus is the relationship of bilateralism and trilateralism. The bilateral relations of concern are those between Australia and the U.S., Australia and China, and China and the U.S., the first and second being here more important than the third. The trilateral relationship is, of course, that between Australia, the U.S., and China.

The methodology is textual analysis. The literature forming the basis for the analysis is mainly existing secondary material. Most of this comes either from Australia or the U.S., but some derives from China and represents Chinese scholarship. There is also quite a bit of reference to Australian archival materials. In particular, the twenty-first century has seen the publication of

some formerly confidential government documents that bear heavily on this topic for the period up to 1972.<sup>1</sup>

The structure is chronological. It takes the Australian political scene and governments as the basis, but necessarily includes reference to historical periods and trends in the other two relevant countries and elsewhere. However, there is also a topical focus, based on the issues raised by the particular bilateral relations discussed in the article, as well as the whole question of trilateralism.

In 1949, the three countries were considerably more uneven in power and influence than in 1996. In 1949, Australia was a country that had subordinated itself first to Britain and then to the U.S. Britain was the “mother country,” but the situation during World War Two, and specifically the comparatively low priority Britain gave to the Pacific theater during the War, convinced Australia to revise its policy. ALP Prime Minister John Curtin (1941–45) stated in October 1941 that Australia would turn to the U.S. for support “free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> The U.S. came out of World War Two the undisputed leader of the Western bloc; it was far more powerful in virtually all ways than the Marxist-Leninist superpower, the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, China had a new regime that had just come to power after a long period of war and civil war. It saw its first task as consolidation of power, especially because the U.S. had not long before declared China to be hardly more than a puppet of the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong was also keen to carry out the revolutionary program he had announced.

By 1996, China had risen significantly. Although it had been through further turmoil, it was economically, politically, and socially incomparably more advanced than half a century earlier. Both Australia and the U.S. had also progressed and changed. Indeed, the U.S. was internationally even more dominant than it had been in 1949 because the Soviet Union had collapsed at

1. Stuart Doran and David Lee, eds., *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, Australia, and Recognition of the People's Republic of China, 1949–1972* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2002).

2. Quoted in Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957), p. 183.

3. In his “Letter of Transmittal” with the *China White Paper* of July 30, 1949, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated that the CCP was “ruthlessly” exploiting a large part of the Chinese people “in the interest of a foreign imperialism,” by which he meant the Soviet Union. See Roderick MacFarquhar, *Sino-American Relations, 1949–71* (Newton Abbot, U.K.: David & Charles, 1972), p. 69.

the end of 1991, leaving the U.S. as the only remaining superpower. However, the overall balance of power had tilted to some degree in China's favor. This was especially the case because the collapse that some in the West expected following Beijing's crackdown on the student movement in June 1989 did not eventuate. Instead, China experienced very rapid economic and other progress. This strategic rise was so pronounced that some Western writers were predicting possible war between the U.S. and China.<sup>4</sup>

Not only was there a shift in power relations between 1949 and 1996, but there were also changes in the attitudes of China toward the other two countries and vice versa. In 1949, the Cold War between liberal democracy and Marxist-Leninist socialism was in its early days; it was becoming clearer and more Manichaeic. To the displeasure of the U.S., China had changed direction because of the success of the revolution led by Mao Zedong and the CCP. Australia was a bit slower to condemn and reject China than was the U.S., but the Korean War (1950–53) changed this situation radically. Australia sent troops to take part under the banner of the United Nations troops, which were in fact under U.S. leadership, while China entered the war in support of the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Though no war was ever declared, the fact that troops from Australia and the U.S. fought on one side, while Chinese forces were on the other, shaped a very hostile relationship for a generation.

By 1996, the China side of the interrelationships had changed radically, and China was happy to deal with the West. As one Chinese scholar notes, after Deng Xiaoping's reform policies were introduced in the late 1970s, the two main drivers of China's foreign relations were opposition to the Soviet Union, known as "anti-hegemonism," and opening up for economic development. "The two came together in shaping relations with advanced capitalist countries, making possible on the one hand an anti-hegemonist coalition and on the other hand privileging the West as the main external support for China's modernization program."<sup>5</sup>

By the mid-1990s, Australia and the U.S. still had an extremely friendly relationship, while Australia-China relations had improved dramatically. One scholar saw the establishment of diplomatic relations as "the tyranny

4. E.g., Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

5. Hou Minyue, *The Impact of China's Modernisation on Relations with Australia* (Shanghai: Shanghai Yiwu Press, 2005), p. 22.

of distance replaced by the advantage of proximity.”<sup>6</sup> Just as in China, economics was a major driver in Australian foreign relations: “The key to Australian politics in the 1980s and 1990s is the deliberate attempt to further open the economy and society to the rest of the world.”<sup>7</sup> This could only help Australia develop better relations with China, as well as with the U.S. Although China-U.S. relations were somewhat unstable, and subject to far more challenges stemming from the differing interests of two major powers, they were no longer the relations of countries that regarded each other as enemies.

In essence, trilateral relations in 1949 were those between a very large and powerful country together with a small and weak one, against an exceedingly poor state with a new revolutionary regime. By 1996, the trilateral relationship was far less antagonistic and, though still uneven, was much less so. The U.S. exerted incomparably more influence over both China and Australia than vice versa, but the world had become much more globalized and interconnected.

This paper acknowledges the profound impact of the U.S. over Australia, including in its foreign policy and attitudes toward China. In September 1951, the Menzies government signed the Australia New Zealand United States (ANZUS) Treaty, in essence a major security pact with the U.S. aimed largely against China. This treaty remains the cornerstone of Australia’s foreign relations to this day. However, the present paper argues that Australia was far from being at all times the faithful follower of the U.S., let alone its cat’s-paw. Chinese statements sometimes described Australia in such terms in the 1950s and 1960s, although nowadays Chinese scholars, including those represented here, are much more nuanced. We select a range of incidents, events, and trends in chronological order showing divergence between Australian and American policy toward China. None of them fundamentally altered the nature of Australia-U.S. foreign policy, but they nevertheless did produce an impact, in some cases significant.

## RELATIONS AT GOVERNMENT LEVEL, 1949–72

When the PRC was established on October 1, 1949, Australia had an ALP government led by Prime Minister Ben Chifley (1945–49). He was left-wing

6. Timothy Kendall, *Ways of Seeing China from Yellow Peril to Shangri-la* (Fremantle, Western Australia: Curtin University Books, 2005), p. 170.

7. Owen E. Hughes and Hugh V. Emy, *Australian Politics*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 1.

in sympathy, but in the middle of the year had sent troops in to break up an enormous coal strike. He had to face an election by the end of the year, and the Opposition leader Robert Gordon Menzies was running a strong campaign based on anti-communism.

Chifley planned to recognize the new Chinese government and, according to his main biographer, even got to the stage of selecting a tentative site for an embassy in Beijing.<sup>8</sup> However, he decided to postpone any decision until after the election, fearing electoral backlash and because so important a decision should not be made by what was in effect only a caretaker government. There were various other reasons for his decision. The U.S. had signalled opposition to early recognition,<sup>9</sup> and the New Zealand prime minister, who also faced an election, requested him “to do nothing about China until the New Zealand election was over.”<sup>10</sup>

Chifley lost the December 1949 election, and Menzies began what was to prove the longest prime ministership in Australian history, retiring only in January 1966. His Liberal Party governed together with the rurally based conservative Country Party, which by 1982 had been renamed National Party in all jurisdictions. In Australia, Coalition governments are those in which the Liberal and Country/National Parties administer together.

Menzies was rather pro-British in his thinking and behavior, which meant that for him Britain’s recognition of China (in January 1950) was a reason to do the same. Even after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Menzies remained unsure about the necessity of securing Taiwan or of keeping the PRC out of the U.N. In a cablegram dated January 5, 1951, he told his External Affairs Minister Percy Spender and Deputy Prime Minister Arthur Fadden that at a meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers he had advocated “[a]dmission of China to [the] United Nations on the footing that obligations of the Charter will be accepted by China.”<sup>11</sup> As one writer has suggested, it is very likely that Menzies thought a collective Commonwealth vote in favor of admission would be “followed by acts of recognition by

8. L. F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley: A Biography* (London: Longmans, 1961), p. 294.

9. Henry S. Albinski, *Australian Policies and Attitudes toward China* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 31–32.

10. C. P. FitzGerald, “Australia and Asia,” in *Australia in World Affairs, 1950–55*, ed. by Gordon Greenwood and Norman Harper (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1957), p. 206.

11. Doran and Lee, eds., *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy*, p. 47.

Australia and other Commonwealth countries.”<sup>12</sup> However, strong opposition from the U.S. and the condemnation of China for aggression in Korea put paid to any such proposals for the indefinite future.

Between 1951 and 1954, the Menzies government moved decisively toward the U.S. On September 1, 1951, the Menzies government signed the ANZUS Treaty with the U.S. and New Zealand, signaling increased American influence on Australian foreign policy and on Australian society as a whole. One scholar has noted that “the very creation of ANZUS itself focused anti-Chinese thinking” and allowed the Americans “to keep Australia and New Zealand in line with them on China.”<sup>13</sup> By 1954, the Australian attitude on Taiwan “had hardened to the point where, with the Americans, it was believed that the island was strategically vital.”<sup>14</sup>

Menzies’s minister of external affairs from April 1951 to February 1960 was Richard Casey. Even after 1954, Casey continued to be doubtful about the hard line on China policy. One scholar claims he had “formed a favorable impression of Zhou Enlai in a meeting during the Geneva Conference” of 1954.<sup>15</sup> In a secret personal letter to Menzies dated August 16, 1955, Casey argued that Australia should recognize the PRC’s government as that of China but also continue recognition of Taiwan.<sup>16</sup> In the end, this policy found no favor with the U.S.; Menzies decided it was simply not worth pursuing because American opposition would ensure its failure.

As one authority has written:

The Liberal-Country Party [Coalition] did not move beyond Casey’s proposals of 1955. It is possible to see now that the Minister’s initiatives had, in essence, defined the limits of compromise with China: having set the parameters of Australian policy—that United States reactions to any moves on China were of critical importance to Australia, and that Formosa [Taiwan] must be protected—the Australian Government could offer no more than recognition on a “two Chinas” basis and this, in turn, made recognition impossible in light of American and Chinese attitudes.<sup>17</sup>

12. Stuart Doran, “Introduction,” in *ibid.*, p. xxi.

13. E. M. Andrews, *Australia and China: The Ambiguous Relationship* (Carlton, Vic., Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1985), p. 163.

14. Doran, “Introduction,” p. xxii.

15. Garry Woodard, “Australia and China,” in *Australia and Asia*, ed. by Mark McGillivray and Gary Smith (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 141.

16. See Doran and Lee, eds., *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy*, pp. 124–27.

17. Doran, “Introduction,” p. xxiii.



There is no doubt that Australian policy on China and Asian communism tended strongly to follow an American lead, especially from this time on. Australia adopted the policy of forward defense, the intention behind which was to keep any conflict involved in meeting the threat posed by China “as far away from Australia’s shores as possible.”<sup>18</sup> When the Vietnam War broke out, Australia decided to send troops to an Asian war yet again. Like the Korean War, this one was an American-led attempt to prevent the spread of communism. In contrast, however, Britain did not send troops, and the war eventually provoked massive protests in the Western countries, including the U.S. and Australia. It was U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ, 1963–69) who first sent ground troops to fight in Vietnam. Liberal Party leader Harold Holt (1966–67), who succeeded Menzies as Australia’s prime minister, was a personal friend and ardent follower of Johnson’s. During a visit to Washington in June 1966, he even coined the phrase “all the way with LBJ,” showing his enthusiastic support for American policy toward Vietnam and on Asian communism in general. The Vietnam War was the dominant foreign policy factor during Holt’s tenure in office, which lasted only until his disappearance by drowning at the end of 1967;<sup>19</sup> the war intensified Australia’s fear of Asian communism. In particular, the Cultural Revolution in China, which started in 1966, led the Australian government to believe that the Chinese leadership was not only dangerous but mad as well. Fear of China pushed Australia closer to the U.S., because it increased the need for a “great and powerful friend” with the potential to support Australia, should it be invaded. Australia’s bilateral relationship with the PRC reached a low point, but with the U.S., relations were better than ever.

Despite this American dominance over Australian policy and the fact that Australia from the mid-1950s gave up any thought of recognizing China, the Menzies government did retain some slight independence from the U.S., even into the 1960s. I note here just two more examples involving the 1960s that lead to this conclusion.

18. J. A. Camilleri, *An Introduction to Australian Foreign Policy* (Milton, Qld., Australia: Jacaranda Press, 1973), p. 25.

19. Holt’s body was never found. One of several theories about his disappearance averred that he had been a Chinese spy and was picked up by a Chinese vessel and taken to China. See Anthony Grey, *The Prime Minister Was a Spy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983). In 2003 the Victoria police formally reopened enquiries in pre-1985 cases in which drowning was suspected but no body ever found. In September 2005, the coroner announced the finding that Holt had drowned in accidental circumstances.

The first is the Menzies government's failure to establish an embassy in the capital of the Republic of China (ROC) in Taipei. Although the Australian government agreed with the U.S. policy recognizing the Chinese representative in the U.N. as the one appointed by the ROC, Australia for years stationed no embassy in Taiwan. With the CCP taking control in the mainland in 1949, the ROC embassy remained in Canberra, but its Australian counterpart in China withdrew from the then capital Nanjing, without moving to Taipei. In 1966, the ROC ambassador in Australia, Chen Chih-mai (Chen Zhimai), a distinguished Chinese diplomat who had been minister-counsellor in the ROC embassy in Washington from 1950–55, persuaded Holt's wife Zara of the anomaly. Only then did the prime minister act to establish a formal embassy in Taipei. Meanwhile, the U.S. had signed a defense treaty with the ROC in December 1954, which was not cancelled until 1980.

The final example of Menzies's disagreement with the U.S. centered on Australian trade with China, especially in wheat. Although existing in the 1950s, the wheat trade saw a major increase in December 1960, when a large order arrived from China amid severe famine. This represented about one-quarter of Australia's total wheat sales. Ideology on both sides took a back seat to pragmatics. At the time, the U.S. government was so strongly opposed to any economic dealings with China that it would not allow the import of goods purchased in Hong Kong without a certificate that they did not originate in the Chinese mainland. Curiously enough, Menzies was the first Asian Pacific leader to visit the White House after John F. Kennedy's inauguration in January 1961, and told the new president that he was under pressure at home to relax restrictions on trade with China. He got no sympathy at all from Kennedy for this position.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding American opposition, the wheat trade continued after the famine ended, and expanded during the 1966–76 Cultural Revolution.

China became a particularly strong factor in Australia-U.S. relations in 1971. But this time, Australia's policy was only partly in line with the U.S. This time it was Australia, not the U.S., which showed reluctance to move toward normalization of relations with China. By the 1970s, the international community was moving in the direction of recognition of China, symbolized by Italy's and Canada's decisions of 1970 to establish diplomatic relations.

20. See Robert Garson, *The United States and China Since 1949: A Troubled Affair* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), p. 81.

The U.S. had been moving in a similar direction, the 1969 lifting of the ban on economic dealings being a major sign. The big surprise came in mid-July 1971, when Richard Nixon announced that he would visit China before May the next year. His National Security Advisor Dr. Henry Kissinger had made a visit to China and held talks with Zhou Enlai from July 9 to 11, completely disappearing from public view while on a visit to Pakistan. The visit had remained secret until Nixon's shock announcement.

What was remarkable was that the ALP's Gough Whitlam, who had become Leader of the Opposition in 1967, was leading a delegation of his party to China from July 2–14, 1971; in other words, he was actually in China when Kissinger made his secret visit. Whitlam's ALP delegation met with Premier Zhou Enlai, assuring Zhou that the ALP would switch recognition of China from Taipei to Beijing as soon as it was returned to government. An election was due late in 1972, and polling suggested the ALP had a good chance of victory. Whitlam's China delegation included several people who were later to exercise significant influence on Australia's relations with China, including Tom Burns, later the deputy premier of Queensland, and Dr. Stephen FitzGerald, an academic with excellent contacts in China who was a good friend of Whitlam's and was to be the first Australian ambassador to the PRC.<sup>21</sup>

It is one of the ironies of history that Whitlam and Kissinger were in Beijing at the same time, although Whitlam's visit was somewhat longer. Both were on a mission involving Zhou and were pushing for a thaw in relations, including establishment of diplomatic ties. But the total secrecy of Kissinger's visit meant that Whitlam knew nothing about it,<sup>22</sup> at least not until after he left China and arrived in Tokyo. The implication is that Whitlam's actions were not directly influenced by the U.S. Whitlam had been moving toward rapprochement far longer than the U.S. had, and he had taken independent action toward effecting his goal. When he returned to Australia, Liberal Prime Minister William McMahon (1971–72) condemned him for going to Beijing, only to find that the great American ally had independently done the same.

21. See Stephen FitzGerald, *Talking with China: The Australian Labor Party Visit and Peking's Foreign Policy* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972).

22. Kissinger's detailed account of his secret 1971 visit makes no mention of Whitlam or Australia. See Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011), pp. 236–55.

In Australia itself, the Coalition government led by McMahon had begun to seek an accommodation with what it called “Continental China.” But the government had no intention of breaking with the ROC, thereby dimming any chance of diplomatic ties with Beijing. As one authority puts it, the Australian government “was caught flat-footed”<sup>23</sup> by Whitlam’s upstaging it through his visit to China. McMahon, before finding out that Kissinger had also undertaken a visit, observed that “China has been a political asset to [McMahon’s] Liberal Party in the past, and is likely to remain one in the future” because popular support had earlier favored following the American line on China.<sup>24</sup> Whitlam’s visit made this comment about the future seem mere wishful thinking, because public feeling was clearly moving toward accommodation with China. McMahon and his government felt humiliated by Kissinger’s and Nixon’s moves, especially over the American failure to inform them in advance, though actually this put them in the same position as more or less everybody else. It was crystal clear that China would *not* be an asset to the Liberal Party in the future, even if it had been so in the past.

Membership of the U.N. was a major issue at this time, because more and more nations, especially those of Africa and Asia, had come to support PRC membership. Votes for China were approaching the two-thirds majority required to overcome the “important question” resolution that the U.S. had gotten accepted in the early 1960s. The reasonable proposition that switching China’s U.N. membership from Taipei to Beijing was an important question had the effect of keeping the PRC out of the U.N. From mid-1971, the McMahon government began “frenetic efforts . . . to defend the ROC’s membership of the United Nations in a year that appeared bound to bring the PRC into both the [General] Assembly and the Security Council.”<sup>25</sup> Australia co-sponsored a desperate effort by the U.S. to maintain the status quo, which failed when the “important question” was voted down, and the PRC replaced the ROC as the China representative in the U.N. in October 1971. Thus, the Nixon administration moved toward accommodation with the PRC at exactly the same time it was making a last-ditch effort to keep the ROC in the U.N. Australia adopted an anti-PRC posture on both major

23. Norman Harper, *A Great and Powerful Friend: A Study of Australian American Relations between 1900 and 1975* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987), p. 291.

24. Stephen FitzGerald, *The Coup That Laid the Fear of China, Gough Whitlam in Beijing, 1971* (Parramatta, NSW: Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney, 2012), p. 4.

25. Doran, “Introduction,” p. xxix.

issues; Canberra at least could argue that its position was more consistent than that of the U.S.

These events appear to have affected Australia's relations with the U.S., at least on an official level. They came in the wake of a major intellectual movement in the U.S., Australia, and other Western countries spawned largely by U.S. (and Australian) involvement in the Vietnam War. A letter survives in the archives, dated April 10, 1972, with a comment on the relationship written by Australia's then-Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs John Keith Waller to the former secretary and current Australian ambassador to the U.S., James Plimsoll. Although the letter was confidential at the time, I believe that the seniority of the writer and recipient, and the insightfulness of the comments, make it worth quoting at some length:

I am worried about our relations with the United States. The problem seems to me at two levels. First, I sense a growing anti-Americanism among the general public. This is an inchoate thing but it is a marked change from the atmosphere of the 1960s and in my judgement permeates all age groups. It is not by any means universal but the proposition that the United States is Australia's best friend does not any longer command general support. There is a general sense of bewilderment, stimulated by the United States news media, about where America is going. Are they really as bad as they sound? Is Nixon a wise man or an extremely unscrupulous one? Was the China visit a good thing or has he kow-towed to Chairman Mao? . . . Has the Government allowed itself to become too subservient to the Americans who are taking over the country commercially in any case?<sup>26</sup>

It is evident that Australia's bilateral relations with the U.S. and China were shifting on an unofficial level, even while the Australian government was trying to maintain the status quo.

#### WHITLAM AND THE ALP

In the event, Whitlam did win the 1972 election; among his first actions was recognizing the PRC, just as he had planned. Other than establishing diplomatic relations with China, Whitlam's earliest acts as prime minister included completing the withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam, releasing imprisoned

26. Doran and Lee, eds., *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy*, p. 730.

Australian conscientious objectors, and recognizing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The decisions Australia made on several major Asian issues in the early days of Whitlam's government were quite inimical to American interests. The most significant one concerned North Vietnam, not China, but relations with the latter were relevant in the sense that China was still supporting North Vietnam in its war against the U.S. The war was winding down, and the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973, the month after Whitlam became prime minister. Yet, at the last moment, the U.S. carried out a major bombing campaign against the northern cities of Hanoi and Hai-phong in order to force North Vietnam to come to an agreement. The new Whitlam ALP government reacted furiously. Three of his ministers "publicly rebuked the U.S. administration, an action without precedent in Australian-U.S. relations. Whitlam himself was more diplomatic; his protest was in official form to Washington. But the point was the same."<sup>27</sup> As one academic account of this action comments:

Criticism of the bombing amounted to a signal by Whitlam that his government would not necessarily share U.S. assumptions on how to achieve diplomatic and strategic ends. But if the United States recognised that Whitlam's intention was to maintain "continuity within change," this was not apparent in [its] strong reaction to the Australian criticism. Indeed, relations between the Australian and U.S. governments fell to a post-World War II low.<sup>28</sup>

These actions were symptomatic of Whitlam's wish to follow a policy that was much more independent of the U.S. and other great powers than previous governments had been. In a speech given at the Australian Institute of Political Science Summer School on January 27 in Canberra, Whitlam described regional cooperation as "one of the keystones of Australia's foreign policy for the 70s."<sup>29</sup> His government was also more nationalist in terms of Australian resources, as manifested in his Minister for Minerals and Energy Rex Connor, who was very keen to build an Australian-controlled mining

27. David Goldsworthy, David Dutton, Peter Gifford, and Roderick Pitty, "Reorientation," in *Facing North, A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia, Volume 1: 1901 to the 1970s*, ed. by David Goldsworthy (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2001), p. 316.

28. *Ibid.*

29. See *Australian Foreign Affairs Record* 44:1 (January 1973), p. 33.

and energy sector that would be independent of big international mining companies.

On China policy, Whitlam firmly opposed the “fear” syndrome of the 1950s and 1960s, although the fear of China was already dwindling before he became prime minister.<sup>30</sup> It was his government that made the real break, transforming fear into an enduring friendship.<sup>31</sup> Although a few tensions existed in Australia-China relations under Whitlam, mainly because of the extremist policies of the Cultural Revolution, he deserves credit for a radical change in China policy.

Meanwhile, Nixon made his triumphant visit to China in February 1972, like Whitlam, showing a radical break in China policy. Although the U.S. and China did not establish full diplomatic relations until nearly seven years later, this bilateral relationship was no longer one of enmity. The rhetoric of independence and regional cooperation that characterized Whitlam’s foreign policy in the early months of his government appeared to accord China a priority as high as the U.S., or even higher.

After his first year in office, Whitlam replaced the emphasis on independence with one on interdependence.<sup>32</sup> His majority was reduced at the 1974 elections, and popular confidence in his government declined. For reasons well beyond the scope of this paper, the Opposition under Malcolm Fraser was able to get the Senate to withhold supply from the government in 1975—in effect a vote of no confidence. On November 11, the governor-general, Sir John Kerr, dismissed Whitlam as prime minister, the only time in Australia’s history such an action has been taken.

Relations with China were not involved in this crisis. However, the American administration and embassy in Canberra, while denying that it had actually engineered Whitlam’s overthrow, made no secret of their distaste for him and his policies. The U.S. administration regarded Whitlam as “an unsound head of state,” so “the sooner he was removed from office the better.”<sup>33</sup>

30. For a full-scale attack on the “fear of China” syndrome, see Gregory Clark, *In Fear of China* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1967).

31. See especially, S. FitzGerald, *The Coup That Laid the Fear of China*.

32. See, for instance, Jim Hyde, *Australia, the Asia Connection* (Melbourne: Kibble Books, 1978), pp. 133–34.

33. Dennis Phillips, *Ambivalent Allies, Myth, and Reality in the Australia-American Relationship* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books Australia, 1988), p. 62. Partly based on documents released under U.S. Freedom of Information legislation, Phillips discusses the American role in and attitude toward Whitlam’s fall, pp. 62–64.

### THE FRASER, HAWKE, AND KEATING GOVERNMENTS

An election was held at the end of 1975 shortly after Whitlam's dismissal, which Liberal (and Coalition) leader Malcolm Fraser (1975–83) won with a large majority. As expected, Fraser quickly restored highly positive relations with the U.S., but, ironically, he maintained the friendship Whitlam had established with China. By this time, the U.S. was on reasonably good terms with China. At the end of 1978, Deng Xiaoping was able to assert his authority with the CCP and introduce reform policies that vastly reshaped China's economic structure, politics, culture, and lifestyle. There were implications for Australia. One scholar states, "The diplomatic convergence between the U.S. and China in the late 1970s created a new geopolitical situation for Australia. It reversed many presumptions of the early Cold War years, when Australia's regional relations with Asia were largely shaped by fear of China."<sup>34</sup>

Fraser's first major statement on foreign relations, which he delivered in Parliament on June 1, 1976, emphasized the theme of realism. This meant essentially that Australia wanted good relations with the U.S. and China and considered the Soviet Union the main threat to world peace. Fraser stated, for instance, that "Australia and China have a like interest in seeing that Soviet power in the Pacific and South East Asia is balanced by the power of other major states or by appropriate regional arrangements."<sup>35</sup> A range of crises emerged during his premiership. Among those involving China, the Soviet Union, and the U.S., probably the most important were over Indochina and Afghanistan, as detailed below. In both cases, Australia, the U.S., and China adopted a strongly anti-Soviet stand, even though they did not necessarily agree on all relevant matters. But it is striking that the three countries were to some extent behaving trilaterally.

In the U.S., Republican and conservative Ronald Reagan replaced the Democrat Jimmy Carter as president at the beginning of 1981, with Reagan's administration lasting until 1989. Another Republican, George H. W. Bush, succeeded him until 1993, followed by another Democratic administration under Bill Clinton. Meanwhile, in Australia, the Fraser government lost the March 1983 election to the ALP. The ALP remained in government until 1996,

34. Roderick Pitty, "Strategic Engagement," in *Facing North, A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia, Volume 2: 1970s to 2000*, ed. by Peter Edwards and David Goldsworthy (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2003), p. 49.

35. *Hansard*, House of Representatives, June 1, 1976, p. 2740.



with Bob Hawke as prime minister until the end of 1991, when he was ousted by Paul Keating (also ALP). These various changes in government made very little difference to Australia-U.S. relations, despite internal shifts in political direction in both countries.

At the end of 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, among other reasons to protect its own people there by getting rid of the highly brutal Khmer Rouge government then in power. China, Australia, and the U.S. all condemned the invasion. However, whereas China wanted the Khmer Rouge back in power, Australia and the U.S. were glad to see it go. China fought a border war with Vietnam early in 1979, largely over this issue. During the 1980s, Indochina caused some serious contention between Australia and China, in part because whereas the trade unions and the Hawke government were friendly to Vietnam, China was extremely hostile toward it. However, the Indochina question was never a major issue between Australia and the U.S.

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan at the end of 1979, establishing a pro-Soviet government there. Again, China, the U.S., and Australia condemned this action, which all three regarded as a clear case of aggression. During the 1980s, Islamic resistance forces launched a consistent and ultimately successful attempt to overturn the pro-Soviet government. China and the U.S. both supported these forces, and followed generally similar policies in Afghanistan, aimed mainly at countering Soviet influence. Australia had no interest in opposing either country on this issue. Afghanistan was one issue that could only improve the trilateral relationship.

There was one matter that saw Australia maintain a slightly different policy from the U.S. and act more positively toward China. This was the sale of arms to Taiwan, on which both the PRC and the U.S. held quite strong views. The communiqué China and the U.S. representatives signed at the end of 1978 to establish full diplomatic relations also derecognized the ROC and stated that the U.S. could maintain only unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan. However, in March 1979, the U.S. Congress enacted the Taiwan Relations Act, which in the words of one scholar “was an articulation of America’s continued commitment to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and a reminder of the centrality of U.S. involvement in the solution to the Taiwan question.”<sup>36</sup> In concrete terms, the Act assured Taiwan of enough defensive

36. Czeslaw Tubilewicz, “Cross-Strait Relations and China’s Reunification Prospects,” in *Critical Issues in Contemporary China*, ed. by Czeslaw Tubilewicz (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 234.

arms for it to maintain a self-defense capacity. For China, the supply of defensive arms crossed the boundary between unofficial and official ties, especially since the only major force against which Taiwan was likely to defend itself was the Chinese mainland.

The issue of American supply of arms to Taiwan was a thorn in the side of Sino-American relations throughout the 1980s. After the Taiwan Relations Act was passed, the Chinese quickly pressed for negotiations with the U.S. over the issue, leading to the signing of another joint communiqué on August 17, 1982. The result was that the U.S. promised it would not actually increase the level of sales, either in quality or quantity, and stated its intention “gradually to reduce its sale of arms to Taiwan, leading, over a period of time, to a final resolution.” This formulation explicitly stated that the sales would diminish, and implied, but did not confirm, that they would eventually cease altogether. However, no timetable was stated. On the other hand, there was no sunset clause in the communiqué, as a result of which both sides are apparently obligated indefinitely to abide by it. For the U.S., the communiqué points in a direction opposite to the Taiwan Relations Act. In a case of conflict between a Congress-passed law of the U.S. and a joint communiqué with a foreign power, the former will always prevail. The net effect has been that the U.S. put a fairly low priority on the 1982 communiqué during the 1980s and 1990s. The Chinese protested when it suited them, but mostly chose a low profile in doing so.

Australia opted all along to keep out of any disputes on the matter. It had no resolution equivalent to the Taiwan Relations Act and never sold arms to Taiwan. It did not condemn the U.S. for the sale, nor did it offer support. The overall result was that, although this matter affected U.S.-China ties, it had no impact on Australia’s relations either with China or the U.S.

Yet, it should be added that in the 1990s the Australian government responded positively to two initiatives that were displeasing to China, although more in line with U.S. policy. One allowed Taiwan to upgrade its representation in Australia. In 1988 Taiwan had established the “Far Eastern Trading Company,” but in March 1991 renamed it the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office. Australia still maintained its one-China policy, and the name of the body made clear that it was economic and cultural, not political. Still, the office performed consular functions and carried out other diplomatic activities. When Vice-Premier Zhu Rongji visited Australia to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of diplomatic relations in 1992, he expressed his displeasure about the existence of the office.

The other response concerned Tibet. Australia's policy was to recognize Tibet as part of China but to call on the Chinese leadership to negotiate with the Dalai Lama without preconditions. In April and May 1992, the Dalai Lama made a 16-day visit to Australia, calling on both Keating and Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. This visit resulted in the Australian government's allowing him to establish a Tibet Information Office. Ironically, China's reaction was low-key, with none of the strident critical public statements that came to be associated with the Dalai Lama's meetings with international political and state leaders in later years.

### HUMAN RIGHTS

Another matter strongly affecting the trilateral relationship was the overall issue of human rights. In this field, Australia and the U.S. followed similar policies, in particular toward China. However, the policies were never identical, indeed showing some interesting disparities, even tensions. At the same time, they were never a cause for major concern in the Australian-U.S. bilateral relationship.

Early in his presidency (1977–81), Jimmy Carter declared that human rights would be the “soul” of his foreign policy. Although some cynics denied that his performance matched his rhetoric, he appeared keen to reinstate a sense of moral purpose in American foreign relations.<sup>37</sup> Fraser was anxious to follow this lead, but his human rights policy gave higher priority to Indonesia, Cambodia, South Korea, and the Philippines than to China.<sup>38</sup>

The Bob Hawke ALP government (1983–91) promoted human rights in the Australian discourse. Hawke's minister for Foreign Affairs from 1983 until 1988 was William George Hayden, who took the main responsibility for the issue and may have cared about it even more than his prime minister. Hayden made quite a few speeches on the subject, one of his main ideas being that moralizing and posturing were usually counterproductive in the improvement of human rights in Asia.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, such words were directed, at least in part, against the U.S. Instead of “moralizing,” he advocated dialogue on an

37. Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 199.

38. David Dutton, “Human Rights Diplomacy,” in *Facing North*, vol. 2, ed. by Edwards and Goldsworthy, pp. 87–91.

39. For example, *ibid.*, p. 95.

equal basis and offers to assist in areas like legal training, summed up as “quiet diplomacy.”

Human rights came to the forefront of relations with China for both Australia and the U.S. with the suppression of independence demonstrations in Tibet in the autumn of 1987. The issue took on greater importance with the political crisis that erupted in spring 1989 in China, climaxing in the violent crackdown on the student movement. Both Australia and the U.S. issued strongly worded condemnations of China’s action brutally suppressing student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Both declared that their relations with China would be affected, and there was a big increase in the extent of condemnation of China’s human rights abuses. Prime Minister Hawke broke down in tears as he addressed Chinese students in Australia just after the incident. The great majority of these students supported the demonstrators; on June 20, Canberra granted them permission to stay for four years and in 1993 allowed them to remain permanently.

However, in the 1990s a divergence emerged between the U.S. and Australia over human rights. In 1991, the Chinese invited an Australian delegation to China to study the human rights situation, the first such visit from a Western country. The delegation visited Tibet, among other places, and focused on aspects of concern to China, such as legal reform. Its report raised many criticisms, for example, expressing misgivings that “the social and cultural rights of the Tibetan people are not being fully respected.”<sup>40</sup> However, the delegation articulated a need to establish “constructive and on-going dialogue” with China “on human rights issues of mutual concern.”<sup>41</sup> The implication appeared to be that Australia would give primacy to helping China improve rather than hectoring it. A second delegation went to China in November 1992, and although restricted from Tibet in retaliation against the Dalai Lama’s visit to Keating and Evans only a few months before, it did visit another sensitive ethnic area, namely Xinjiang. Australia’s policy contrasted with the hectoring tone adopted in the U.S., where there was a strong human rights lobby that wanted to link continuing most-favored-nation (MFN) treatment for China with an improvement in human rights.

40. Australia, Human Rights Delegation to China, *Report of the Australian Human Rights Delegation to China, 14–26 July 1991* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991), p. 37.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

In 1993, the U.S. House of Representatives urged the International Olympic Committee to award the 2000 Olympics to Sydney, rather than Beijing, on the grounds that China's human rights record made it an unsuitable host for the Games. This action proved decisive when, in September 1993, the Olympic Committee voted by a small margin in favor of Sydney; this was a severe humiliation for China, which had never hosted the Games. Although Australia was the beneficiary of the U.S. action against China, China put most of the blame on the U.S. and Britain, and its relations with Australia were not affected as greatly.

In 1993, the Keating government adopted the policy of compartmentalizing human rights issues and delinking them from trade. Keating took up the issue with U.S. President Bill Clinton personally, and also tried to persuade congressional leaders to his view. Early in 1994, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher visited Australia, in part to try and persuade Australia to support the idea of linking MFN to human rights. The then minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Gareth Evans, who held the office from 1988 to 1996, publicly disagreed with Christopher over the issue, causing some embarrassment to the Clinton administration. In April 1994, Evans went to China specifically to discuss human rights.

The next month Clinton reached a decision on MFN. Although the relevant statement was complex, the fundamental question of whether to link MFN with human rights was resolved in the negative. Of course, China welcomed the decision. It appears that pressure from Keating and his government was a factor influencing the Clinton administration in this respect.<sup>42</sup>

So there were tensions over human rights between the U.S. and Australia during Clinton's first term and Keating's prime ministership. However, they were never particularly serious.<sup>43</sup> In any case, they were swept away by the "new broom" of the Howard government and Clinton's official visit to Australia in November 1996 just after his second election victory. Australia-American relations returned to being as warm as ever.<sup>44</sup>

42. See also Henry S. Albinski, "Responding to Asia-Pacific Human Rights Issues: Implications for Australia-American Relations," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 50:1 (1996), pp. 43–58.

43. See the discussion in Derek McDougall, *Australian Foreign Relations, Contemporary Perspectives* (South Melbourne: Longman, 1998), p. 69.

44. See the discussion in Joseph M. Siracusa and David G. Coleman, *Australia Looks to America, Australia-American Relations since Pearl Harbor* (Claremont, Calif.: Regina Books, 2006), pp. 114–26.

On the other hand, China clearly regarded Keating and his government favorably, especially on the human rights issue. When in January 2002 Chinese Ambassador to Australia Shi Chunlai commented on human rights and “quiet diplomacy,” especially following Australia’s second human rights delegation in 1992, he had the following to say about the Hawke and Keating governments:

Their attitude towards China-U.S. relations was comparatively balanced. On their visits to Washington they passed the information they were informed about China to the White House, telling them that China was not like what the United States imagined. Both Hawke and Keating expressed the wish for China and the U.S. to maintain good relations. In this regard China should be grateful to Australia.<sup>45</sup>

#### A BRIEF UPDATE TO 2013

China has continued to play a role in Australia-U.S. relations since 1996 under all three Australian governments: the Liberal Coalition led by John Howard (1996–2007) and the ALP-led governments of Kevin Rudd (2007–10) and Julia Gillard (2010–13). All three administrations, especially the first, have been very pro-American in their policies, and all have been enthusiastic to maintain the ANZUS Treaty. Kevin Rudd distinguished himself by being the only Australian prime minister able to speak Chinese, and for his specialist knowledge on modern and contemporary China. Apart from the late months of her prime ministership, Gillard gave foreign policy a fairly low profile against pressing domestic issues.

Ironically, the period of greatest tension between Australia and the U.S. over China was in August 2004. Howard’s foreign minister, Alexander Downer, expressed the opinion that the ANZUS Treaty would not necessitate Australia’s supporting the U.S. in the event of a Sino-American war over Taiwan. His view was that the Treaty only mentions defending one of the three participating countries if attacked, and Taiwan is regarded as part of China. American Ambassador to Canberra Thomas Shieffer immediately criticized Downer, saying that he believed the Treaty included attacks on the interests of any of the countries in the Pacific. However, some media

45. Quoted in Hou, *The Impact of China’s Modernisation on Relations with Australia*, pp. 182–83.

comment suggested that the impact of the exchange was “to send a message to China that the balance is shifting in its favour.”<sup>46</sup>

Relations with China under Rudd’s government were actually not quite as good as expected. One significant problem involving the trilateral relationship was the May 2009 *Defence White Paper*, which had a slightly destabilizing effect. It proposed a strategic plan to 2030, by which time the strategic balance of power between the U.S. and China was presumed to have moved in China’s favor, and advocated a massive Australian defense build-up, especially of the navy. The *White Paper* included a section on China’s rise that was ambivalent in thrust and implied a Chinese threat to Australia. China’s reaction was low in profile, but evidently quite unhappy.

As for Gillard, her strong support for President Barack Obama’s pivot to Asia at the end of 2011, coupled with her enthusiastic support for slightly increased American troop numbers to be stationed in Darwin, Australia, seems to have irritated the Chinese government. However, her April 2013 visit to China improved relations markedly. Even more important was the May 2013 Australian *Defence White Paper*, which contrasted with its 2009 predecessor in its glowing enthusiasm for China’s rise. This was not only because of the benefits to the Chinese people, “but also in recognition of the benefits that it has delivered to states around the globe” (para. 2.27).<sup>47</sup> There was no hint of potential threat to Australia. Moreover, there was no suggestion that China’s status as Australia’s top trading partner necessitated any adjustment to the traditional ANZUS commitments. Paragraph 2.28 reads: “The Government does not believe that Australia must choose between its longstanding Alliance with the United States and its expanding relationship with China; nor do the United States and China believe that we must make such a choice.”<sup>48</sup> The Chinese response to the 2013 *Defence White Paper* was warm, and seemed to indicate a preference for the foreign policy neophyte Gillard over the Sinologist Rudd.

46. Catherine Armitage, “Message in a Muddle,” *Weekend Australian*, August 21–22, 2004, p. 31.

47. Australian government, Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2013), p. 11, at <[http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper2013/docs/WP\\_2013\\_web.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf)>.

48. *Ibid.*

## CONCLUSION

Three main points follow from the above material, especially up to 1996, which is the focus of this article. First, among the three countries, bilateral relations shifted radically over 1949–96. At the beginning, the U.S. and Australia were aligned with each other on one side in a collaborative bilateralism, to use He Baogang's term, with China on the other.<sup>49</sup> But a big break occurred in the 1970s that allowed the three to act in concert, sometimes even aligning themselves as a unit against the Soviet Union: a collaborative trilateralism. Although Australia and the U.S. tended to act together over human rights, it was a rather loose coalition and, in the case of Australia, not always directed mainly against China. It can definitely be argued that the three countries shifted in the 1970s from bilateralism to trilateralism. Both the bilateralism and the trilateralism demonstrated examples of conflict and collaboration. In the terms He Baogang uses in the introduction to this special issue, they are conflictual in some ways and collaborative in others.

The second major point is that Australia for much of this period was not nearly as subordinate to the U.S. as has sometimes been suggested.<sup>50</sup> Until 1955, Australian policy toward China was a little more flexible than American. Even after that, Australia traded with China, whereas the U.S. had a total embargo until 1969. In the early 1970s, Australia, on a government level, was considerably more inflexible than the U.S. However, despite Nixon's visit to China in February 1972, the U.S. did not establish full diplomatic relations with the PRC until January 1979, whereas Whitlam (like Japan's Tanaka Kakuei) took this step as soon as he became prime minister of Australia in December 1972. The trilateralism of the 1980s was partly undermined by the June 4 Incident in 1989, but the Keating government of 1991–96 was not as obsessively against China on the human rights issue as the U.S. In 1994, the Keating administration even persuaded the U.S. Clinton administration to its point of view, rather than the other way around, the more usual pattern.

Finally, the historical record from 1949 to 1996 shows that Australia-U.S. relations with respect to China were not quite as fixed and stable as they

49. He Baogang, "Collaborative and Conflictive Trilateralism: Australian, Chinese, and American Perceptions," this issue, 54:2 (April 2014), pp. 247–72.

50. Referring to the period from 1948 to the mid-1960s, Albinski describes ALP leader Arthur Calwell's charge that the Menzies government was completely dependent on the U.S., especially in China policy, as overdrawn but essentially correct. Albinski, *Australian Policies and Attitudes toward China*, p. 434.



appeared. Though ANZUS may not be in question, there could be room to maneuver concerning Australia's policy either on the U.S. or China. The historical background suggests that there was a definite power shift in the trilateral relationship during the period from 1949 to 1996, at least in the sense that the China-U.S. balance of power shifted in China's favor during that time. So the background has light to cast on Hugh White's "power shift" argument, as well as on other major themes that He Baogang's introduction highlights.