

Australia and China push the 'reset' button on an important relationship

Written by Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

Australia can thank an erratic Donald Trump for the opportunity to “reset” its relationship with China after a [chill engendered](#) by what was interpreted as criticism from the then prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, and foreign minister, Julie Bishop.

Turnbull had caused offence with his [criticism of Chinese interference](#) in Australian politics via Beijing’s front organisations. And in March 2017, Bishop had questioned China’s political model in a [speech in Singapore](#).

A reset was already in the works before Turnbull was felled in August in a palace coup. The two countries had been reassessing shared interests in light of the wrecking ball US President Trump has taken to an international rules-based system.

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Former treasurer and new Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s elevation of Marise Payne to replace Bishop provided a pretext for an important diplomatic engagement in Beijing in the lead-up to what is being called the “summit season”.

This interaction may well have happened anyway, but a changing of the guard in Canberra helped get over any “face issues” that might have lingered after fairly trenchant criticism of Australia in Chinese official mouthpiece publications.

Payne’s arrival in the Chinese capital ahead of an East Asia Summit in Singapore, an Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Port Moresby, and a G20 summit in Buenos Aires this month is not a coincidence.

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Her presence in Beijing for the fifth [Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue](#) is the first visit by an Australian foreign minister in nearly three years.

After putting Australia in the freezer, Beijing has enabled a thaw ahead of these important events at which America's behaviour will be under scrutiny, if not censure.

Beijing's [emollient words](#) at a meeting between Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Payne could have hardly contrasted more sharply with criticism expressed over the past several years as debate about foreign interference disrupted the relationship.

This is what Wang had to say about a reset:

We are ready to step up our strategic dialogue and deepen strategic cooperation ... in particular, rebuild and cement our political mutual trust.

These are Chinese diplomatic buzzwords, with an emphasis on "mutual trust".

Payne described her two hours of talks – which ran overtime – as a "full and candid discussion". Australia and China had agreed on a "respectful relationship".

Pointedly, Wang had referred to a "new government" in Canberra, as if to say that a change of management had enabled a thaw.

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China's conduct of its foreign policy, in which it alternately rewards and penalises those who fall out of favour, in some ways resembles a Beijing opera.

Melodrama is intrinsic to this Chinese art form.

China's invitation to Payne for a long-delayed strategic dialogue is a calculated diplomatic move. It's one that also suits Australia, anxious to get its diplomatic relationship with China back on track.

It is in neither country's interests – certainly not Australia's – for an estrangement to persist at a time when uncertainty prevails due to an unpredictable American presidency.

Concerns in Beijing and Canberra about preserving open markets when American protectionism is threatening a liberalising trading environment [have prompted this reset](#) and determined its timing.

Beyond that, Canberra appears to have resolved that Australia's interests are not well served by allowing an Australian security establishment possessed of a certain anti-China mindset to tilt policy in directions that do not serve the national interest.

It is one thing to exhibit scepticism about China's behaviour and motivations. It is quite another to allow a "reds under the bed" mentality to drive policy.

No-one with more than passing knowledge believes China is a benign power. But nor is it the enemy. Its rise is a fact of life, whether Australian policymakers in thrall to a security establishment like it or not.

Interestingly, China sought to allay [Australia's concerns about](#) its push into the southwest Pacific by offering "trilateral cooperation" in assisting Pacific island states build their infrastructure.

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How this would work practically is not clear. But Wang appeared to be suggesting that Australia's [newly announced infrastructure fund](#) for the Pacific could participate in joint projects with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Australia and China are not competitors, not rivals but cooperation partners, and we have agreed to combine and capitalise on our respective strengths to carry out trilateral cooperation involving Pacific Island states.

Significantly, [Australia's announcement](#) on the eve of the Wang-Payne meeting that Canberra was blocking the takeover of the APA Group by Hong Kong's CK Group on competition grounds was not an impediment to improving ties.

Pragmatism prevailed. "We hope a single case won't affect Australia's attitude to investment," Wang said.

Payne's visit took place against the background of overtures to China begun by Turnbull and Bishop in their efforts to restore certainty to the relationship.

[A speech by Morrison](#) to the Asia Society last week, in which he spoke of the importance of the Australia-China relationship, provided further impetus for a reset, propelled to a certain extent by Washington.

Tony Walker does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University

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