

## View from The Hill: It's not in the 'national interest' for the backbench to shut up about China

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Trade minister Simon Birmingham on Sunday weighed into the debate over [Andrew Hastie's warning about China rise](#)

. Birmingham said colleagues in future should ask themselves two questions before speaking out on “sensitive foreign policy matters”.

These were: “Is the making of those comments in a public way necessary? And is it helpful to Australia’s national interest?”

On a narrow view, the warning by Hastie - the chairman of the powerful parliamentary committee on intelligence and security - about Australia not being alive enough to the dangers of an ever more powerful China was not “necessary”; nor was it particularly helpful to a government trying to manage a relationship that gets more complicated all the time.

But the idea that backbenchers should not voice considered views on such a major long term issue for this country shows a certain contempt for parliamentary democracy.

Birmingham, speaking on the ABC, said: “There are a range of ways in which any of us can contribute and we can do that with direct discussion with ministers and with leadership in backbench committees and other ways”.

Decoded, the message to the backbench was: boys and girls, when in public just follow the talking points we give you.

Amid the noisy chatter and clatter of our current politics, serious foreign policy discussions among politicians are relatively rare. But the broad community debate grows ever stronger about China and its implications for Australia - including the now-great power’s trajectory, our dependence on it economically, its reach into this country (including through investment and our educational institutions), and how we juggle our respective relationships with it and the United States.

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New Liberal backbencher Dave Sharma entered the China debate at the weekend, with a robust thread of nearly a dozen tweets, in support of Hastie.

A former senior diplomat, Sharma is more steeped in foreign policy than most on the frontbench.

“Hastie is right to ring the bell on this issue, and to warn that our greatest vulnerability lies in our thinking, which is Panglossian at times,” he wrote.

Significantly, Sharma also supported Hastie’s comparison with France’s failure to comprehend properly the rise of Germany before World War 2.

“In WW2, we failed to realise early enough that German ambitions could not be accommodated. National Socialist Germany was not a status quo power, but we mistook it as such, or deceived ourselves that it was,” Sharma wrote.

Hastie’s reference to Germany had been sharply condemned on Friday by Senate leader Mathias Cormann, who said it was a “a clumsy and inappropriate analogy.”

But Hastie was verbedled over his invoking of Germany. He wasn’t saying the Chinese and Nazi regimes were the same – he was talking about the underestimation of the threats they posed to other countries.

Hastie could have drawn another parallel – with the failure of countries in the 1930s to fully appreciate the looming threat from Japan.

Sharma noted that rising powers inevitably cause convulsions - “the challenge is to accommodate a rising power IF it is sufficiently status quo in nature that it can be accommodated. This was the thesis with China for much of the early 2000s,” Sharma wrote.

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“But if the rising power is revisionist in nature, and cannot be accommodated within the existing order – because it fundamentally does not accept the legitimacy of that order – then the future becomes much tougher”.

Given it was clear China’s ideological direction and ambition had become “far more pronounced” under its current leadership, “our strategy and thinking needs to reflect this shift, which is basically Hastie’s point – that we need to remove the blinkers from our eyes, recognise reality for what it is, and act accordingly,” Sharma said.

“This does not mean we should not be pursuing a constructive and positive relationship with China – we should be. Nor does it compel us to make a ‘choice’. But we need to be honest with ourselves about the challenges of managing this relationship and what might lie ahead.”

Of course Australian government policy in the last few years has been reacting to what has been seen as a heightening Chinese threat - even while the government has often been unwilling to admit as much.

The Pacific “step up” is all about China. So was the legislation, enacted by the Turnbull government, against foreign interference. The exclusion of Huawei from the 5G network was an unequivocal message. Australia’s intensified efforts to counter the cyber security threat have China front of mind.

The Chinese predictably reacted with annoyance to Hastie’s comments. But they are much more attuned to the actions Australia has taken and continues to take – measures which have been and are in the national interest. That’s the basic reason why Australia-China relations are strained.

The government’s trying to shut down backbench contributions to this debate is less a matter of the “national interest” than an exercise of attempted control of its MPs in its own interest. In fact it might be counter-productive for the national interest, which may require the Australian public to acquire a much better understanding than they have now of what could be increasingly difficult times and decisions in the years to come.

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*Michelle Grattan 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: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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