

## 'Developing' rift points to growing divisions between Coalition and Labor on China

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

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At last, a healthy divergence of views between the Coalition and Labor about how Australia might manage its relations with its cornerstone trading partner and rising power in its own region.

It is a debate that is long overdue.

We now have [contrasting narratives](#) between the Coalition government and the Labor opposition.

That contrast was given sharp expression at the weekend by deputy Labor leader Richard Marles in an [interview on the ABC's Insiders program](#) .

Marles accused the government of mismanaging a “complex” relationship. After visiting Beijing last week for conversations with a range of Chinese opinion-leaders, he described relations as “terrible”.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, he said, had engaged in megaphone diplomacy on his visit to the United States, [insisting China be regarded](#) as a “developed” country for trade and other purposes. This includes its climate change obligations.

What we saw was the prime minister in the United States in the context of there being trade tensions between the US and China, and from there, taking pot shots against largest trading partner. The context in which he has engaged in this megaphone diplomacy is absolutely the issue, and it's not the way in which this issue should be dealt with in a respectful way.

These observations might be taken with a pinch of salt from an opposition spokesman. But it is true that relations are now at a low ebb for a variety of reasons, some of the government's making, some not.

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Australia did not initiate a trade war, but fractious relations with China are collateral damage.

Significantly, what is emerging in Australian domestic politics is an erosion of what has been a bipartisan consensus on how to relate to China in what are very challenging circumstances.

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**Read more:** [\*Morrison needs to take control of China policy - but leave room for dissent\*](#)

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This is, potentially, a watershed moment in the evolution of the Australian policy towards China. This policy has, more or less, been settled business since Gough Whitlam normalised relations in 1972 as one of his first acts as prime minister.

Morrison's embrace of American calls for China to be declared a developed country under World Trade Organisation rules means there is now a sharp point of difference between the government and opposition.

This is the nub of what the prime minister had to say on the issue to [The Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#)

China's economic growth is welcomed by Australia and we recognise the economic maturity that it has now realised as a newly developed economy... The world's global institutions must adjust their settings for China in recognition of this new status. That means more will be expected, of course, as has always been the case for nations like the United States who've always had this standing.

Labor does not regard China as a "developed" country under World Trade Organisation auspices, nor, for that matter, does most of the rest of the world. This is an American

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preoccupation, now signed onto by Canberra.

Why it should have been necessary for Morrison to take sides in this debate is not clear. On the face of it, his interventions have been unwise.

What should be understood about emerging differences over China's "developed" country status, is that it represents, in an Australian context, a wider divergence of views between the government and opposition on how to manage China's rise.

The government believes China should be pulled into line. Labor is more circumspect while acknowledging that Beijing's behaviour is exerting considerable – and unwelcome – stress on an international rules-based order.

Whether he pretends otherwise or not, Morrison has aligned Australia with the Donald Trump White House view of China as a mercantilist power seeking ruthlessly to extend its power and influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

In its mirroring of the US position, the government is indicating it believes China needs to have its wings clipped.

Morrison's visit to the United States may come to be regarded, therefore, as a watershed moment in Australian foreign policy in which a choice was made.

Whether the government pretends otherwise or not, Morrison's interventions on his US visit have been [interpreted in Beijing as hostile](#) .

Enter the Labor Party into this debate in a way that represents its boldest intervention in a foreign policy question since then Labor leader Simon Crean detached his party in 2003 from supporting the ill-fated rush to war in Iraq.

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The difference between then and now is that getting policy settings right in the great US versus China debate is far more important to Australia's well-being than an ill-conceived decision two decades ago that turned the Middle East upside down and empowered Iran.

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The view promulgated by former Prime Minister John Howard that Australia did not need to choose between its historical alignment with America and its geographical proximity to China is no longer sustainable.

The question now is how Australia positions itself between the elephants in the jungle to avoid getting crushed. Conspicuously siding with one of the elephants, unless necessary, would not seem to be the wisest course.

In all of this, one might spare a thought for Trade Minister Simon Birmingham, whose role has been to try to ensure Australia's trade in [merchandise](#) and services is not harmed by a trade war between China and the United States.

Birmingham has been doing his best. He has not been helped by his leader's injudicious remarks to The Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

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

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