

Australia's Relationship with China: Political Artefact Analysis and Reflection

Australia's relationship with China is incredibly important. China is our largest trading partner, accounting for up to 48% of exports during 2020. However, China and Australia have very different political doctrines and our relationship has deteriorated in recent years. In my political artefact, I acted as the foreign affairs spokesperson for the Australian Labor Party in order to criticise the Morrison Government's foreign policy. As a member of the opposition, I gave myself the platform to talk politically and be a vehicle for reform and change. I asserted my position that the Government needs to develop a long-term strategy for dealing with China, rather than making decisions based on short-term domestic politics. My aim was to create a public of voters who believe the ALP will steer Australia towards a better future.

Talking politically is important in democratic societies, as leaders require public support in order to gain a level of power. In order to get this support, they must mobilise a group towards some ends. In studying political talk, Latour (2003, p.146) says "we need to abandon the idea of the guaranteed existence of groups." This is how we can understand that talking politically is what forms groups and social relations. Political talk is also referred to as "drawing the political circle" and "mobilising talk". In my artefact, I talked politically by using well researched information that was persuasive and targeted towards my audience. The artefact is not defined as talking politically simply because I was talking about a political issue. I also attempted the "enunciation regime" of political talk but tried to avoid the "truisms, cliches, handshakes, half-truths, half-lies, windy words..." (Latour 2003, p.144) that give political talk a bad reputation in the media. In the conclusion of my press release, I used a quote from Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt, a successful American statesman, is juxtaposed to Morrison in order to highlight Morrison's inability as a leader. Criticising the opposition is a common technique used by politicians in talking politically. In March this year, opposition leader, Anthony Albanese, accused the prime minister of having "not so much a tin ear as a wall of concrete". The comment came after Scott Morrison declared it a "triumph of justice" that the women's rights protest march could occur in Canberra without being "met with bullets".

Gay Hawkins said, “Publics aren’t there waiting to be communicated with they are engaged or called into being” (2013, p.85). In order for my artefact to be well received, it needed to be more than put into an Australian Labor Party press release format in the hope that Labor voters would read it and agree. I needed to ensure that I had captured the audience’s attention, in order to create the desired effect. According to Hawkins, “Publics emerge in and through the relations in which they are engaged” (2013, p.85). In my artefact, these relations were published in an Australian Labor Party press release, which is not a mode of address designed for mass attention. Different sites of publicity involve distinct conventions and techniques (Hawkins 2012, p.539). If I had wanted to attract mass attention, I would have designed a poster or social media post with more imagery and simplified information. There were limitations to the press release that stopped a mass public from forming. People who are not politically engaged but feel as though the Australian Chinese population is being isolated by the Morrison Government’s hyperbolic claims about China would also be inclined to agree with my position. However, it is unlikely that they would see or hear about the press release. The mode of address I chose allowed me to use specific language targeted towards those who are politically engaged. For example, I discussed foreign funding and political donations, and Eric Abetz’s comment in a senate hearing last year. These discussions would not have engaged the Australian population as a whole, as not all Australians would know about political donations and Eric Abetz.

In order to affectively draw a political circle and form a public, I made assumptions about the target audience of the press release. People who read ALP press releases are often politically engaged, and have an interest in the issue being discussed. The target audience of this piece was people who already vote for the Labor Party, or people who are concerned about Australia’s relationship with China. Press releases generally occur after a certain event or occasion, and my press release would have been published after Australia signed the nuclear submarine deal. My position in the press release was that “eight nuclear submarines will not defend us from China’s military”, which highlights the Morrison Governments focus on short term solutions, rather than a long-term strategy. I use the phrase “playing politics”, which is a common party phrase that would be familiar to the politically engaged public I was addressing.

A key component of my artefact was the emerging idea that Beijing poses a threat to Australia's democracy and national sovereignty. The Chinese Communist Party holds starkly different political doctrines to Australia's ALP and Liberal Party. China's political system is authoritarian, where leaders are not freely elected, political opposition is oppressed and there have been a number of reports of human rights abuse. Recently, there was an Australian think tank report from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute that detailed the "architecture of repression" towards the Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang province. Australia is a representative democracy where leaders are elected by the Australian population. Our doctrines provide a framework for how we assess and interpret situations. While not all Australians share the same political doctrines, most Australians see our democratic system as a part of our country's identity. In my artefact, I mentioned the fourteen grievances China detailed towards Australia in 2020. These grievances can be interpreted as a threat to Australian sovereignty and way of life. I encouraged readers to see the way in which we respond to China's grievances as in "our hands". This comment was designed to empower a public who see our relationship with China as something over which we have some control, and not just an imminent threat. Voting for the ALP is the desired effect of a public making this realisation.

A basic principle in Australia's representative democracy is that people can vote based on how they feel about those elected to make decisions on their behalf. This idea is referred to as popular sovereignty, which is a political doctrine that the government is created by and subject to the people. What counted at election time is "how people felt about the politicians who were taking decisions on their behalf, big and small" (2018, p. 107), according to David Runciman. My political artefact relies on the argument that the Australian Labor Party will make better decisions about Australia's relationship with China than the coalition. However, regardless of the proposition, politicians are competing to prove their worthiness as decision makers in Australia. The meaning of democracy has historically broadened and changed. For example, more groups have been included in decision making. In 1902, Australian women were granted the right to vote and in 1962, Indigenous Australians were also given suffrage (National Museum of Australia 2021). In comparison, China is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party and there is no genuine democratic activity in China and little respect for individual human rights. As I mentioned in my artefact, Australia was one of 39 countries to publicly issue "grave concerns" about China's abuse of human rights according to a statement released in the UN's Third Committee General Debate.

The Government must be careful not to alienate the Chinese-Australian population when condemning China's actions. Heightened rhetoric has the ability to breed Xenophobia, as well as spark unprecedented responses from China. The example of the Eric Abetz comment that I used in my artefact is what we cannot allow to happen. There needs to be a clear distinction between criticism of the Chinese Communist Party, and criticism of Chinese people. Senator Abetz was unable to make this distinction when he questioned the allegiance of three Chinese Australians in a senate hearing last year. Abetz's questioning had the potential to make the Chinese diaspora lose trust in the Australian Government, as well as Australian people question their trust in Chinese-Australians.

The Australian Government has increased our security reliance on the alliance with the United States. Arguably, the nuclear submarine deal is simply expanding the US Navy's Pacific fleet. The deal also compromised Australia's relationship with France, who described the Scott Morrison's actions as "un-Australian". In my artefact, I argue that Australia needs to develop a closer relationship with countries in the Indo-Pacific. While countries such as Vietnam and Malaysia have a different approach to their relationship with China, it does not mean that they do not share our concern about China's increasing influence in the region. Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamed, is a long-time critic of Australia's dealings with China. In an interview with The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age in September of this year, Mohamed described the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue as an "aggressive move" and said Australia must make the first move in settling ties with Beijing. The Quadrilateral Security dialogue is an alliance between Australia, United States, Japan and India recently strengthened in response to China's increasing influence in the region. Mohamed said Malaysia is unhappy about the treatment of the Uighurs but they "can't fight against China". Mohamed said they instead try to "work with them and influence them in a small way so that they will treat the Uighurs better".

Australia needs to recognise our diplomatic resources and work with international partners to strategically set an acceptable standard for ourselves and the rest of the world in the Indo-Pacific region.

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MEDIA RELEASE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHINA FURTHER DETERIORATES UNDER COALITION

SENATOR RACHEL JACKSON

FOREIGN AFFAIRS SPOKESPERSON

Coalition causes relationship with China to further deteriorate

The relationship between Australia and China has significantly deteriorated.

Last year, the Chinese Embassy published a list of fourteen grievances the Beijing Government has with Australia. These grievances include not allowing a Chinese government owned telecommunications company to build our 5G network, legislation banning foreign interference and criticisms of China by Members of Parliament.

As the Chinese economy grows, so does Beijing's desire for political influence. Accepting this influence would threaten Australia's way of life. We cannot change China's criticism of the Australian Government, but we can refuse to be influenced. China remains our largest trading partner, accounting for up to 48% of exports in 2020. Australia is a middle power with limited resources, assets and allies. Eight nuclear submarines will not defend us from China's military.

China's criticism of Australia does not threaten our sovereignty. The way in which we respond to China's grievances is in our hands. The Morrison Government has painted a picture of China threatening our security and freedom. Heightened rhetoric towards China increases scepticism and hostility on both sides, sparking nationalistic responses. Hyperbolic claims from the Morrison Government about the threat of China have dangerous consequences to our national unity. Liberal Party Senator, Eric Abetz, questioned the allegiance of three Chinese Australian members of the community in a senate hearing last year. This comment drew furious responses from Chinese- Australians, as the Senator was essentially asking them to prove themselves as "Australian." We must embrace our Chinese Australian population, not isolate them. We cannot repeat the blunder of the white Australian policy.

The United States is an important ally for Australia to maintain, however, we need to be careful in how we seek to strengthen this alliance. Is the new nuclear submarine deal simply an expansion of the current US fleet? Past Australian leaders have supported the United States by sending troops to the Vietnam and Iraq wars. Hundreds of Australians died in the Vietnam War, which was arguably not our war to fight. Based on history, the Morrison Government cannot blindly trust the United States.

Australia is one of 39 UN nations to publicly issue "grave concerns" about China's abuse of human rights. I believe it is important for the Australian Government to continue to raise the violation of human rights in China. However, great power rivalry is not going to be a vehicle for advancing human rights.

Foreign policy towards China is currently based on short term domestic politics. Prime Minister Scott Morrison is more interested in playing politics than he is in developing a long-term strategy. Australia needs to take responsibility for our own actions. Instead of further impacting our relationship with China with a series of short-term responses and reactions, we need to develop a coherent long-term strategy. The current policies the Liberal Party is pursuing are not in Australia's best interests.

Australia's alliances could be strengthened by developing better relationships with Southeast Asian countries, providing further protection from China. We also need to shore up our own democratic institutions to ensure we are not influenced by China. The Morrison Government must stop foreign funding and donations to political

parties. Despite what Scott Morrison leads us to believe, we are our own greatest threat to democracy.

As Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far."

It appears that Scott Morrison speaks loudly and carries a small stick. Let's not allow him to place Australians in greater danger from one of the most powerful countries in the Southern Hemisphere.



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Rachel Jackson is an Australian politician who has been a Senator for South Australia since 2021. She has served as Senate leader of the Australian Labor Party since 2021, and is currently Leader of the Opposition in the Senate. Rachel Jackson has a strong interest in international relations and condemns the Morrison Government's foreign policy.

