

Australia's Fear of Invasion 1930 – 2020

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Well thank you Darren [Mitchell] for that very kind introduction; thank you to David [Ross] as well; thank you to the battle for Australia association for the invitation to address you today. I'd like to obviously say hello to distinguished guests including my mother Jeannie Addison. Of course both of us would be thinking today about Jeannie's father, my grandfather who served in world war II in the second AIF in both in the Middle East and New Guinea so we'll dedicate this address to him.

When I re-read the press statement that the Australian prime minister John Curtin released after Singapore fell on the 15 February 1942. I could not help but be struck by just how much it was framed in terms of an appeal to both empire and nation. This should hardly come as a surprise given that Curtin like other leaders of his generation saw no contradiction between his Australian nationalism and his British race patriotism; indeed, the two ideas were mutually reinforcing not inherently antagonistic. In his remarks at that anxious hour as the strategic nightmare that Australian politicians and policymakers had feared since the late 19th century unfolded before him namely, that Australia would be left defenceless with Britain engaged in a simultaneous war in Europe. Curtin appealed to the people of Australia by invoking a British example. Indeed, his call to arms was premised on both British and Australian terms. If he had looked to America in late December 1941, he wanted Australians now to look to Britain as they rallied themselves for the challenges and struggles ahead. The loss of Singapore that supposed last bastion between Australia and a raging Japanese imperial army was, he said Australia's Dunkirk and if Dunkirk he said it initiated the battle for Britain the fall of Singapore opened the battle for Australia.

What the battle for Britain demanded he went on so the battle for Australia requires the complete devotion shown by Britons would need to be matched by those of his own by that of his own people more particularly in setting out the stakes involved. Curtin said that on the outcome of this battle rested as he put it the fate of the British speaking world. Now I just want you to focus on that term for a second British speaking it does sound I think quite odd to the contemporary ear because there is no such thing as a British language yet Curtin and later Ben Chifley as well. both Labor men of Irish catholic descent use this term in their speeches at home and in Britain. Curtin in fact said that he wanted to preserve Australia as a bastion of the British speaking race. Now why is he using that term? I think it spoke to the particular way that these leaders believed Australia represented a purer better form of Britain than those who lived in Britain itself that is one which had melted the English, Irish, Scots and Welsh components into an indissoluble whole. I have enough problems as it is convincing my students about the power of this British race idea from the late 19th century down to the 1960s. When I make the case to them that some of these leaders actually believed Australia was a better form of Britain. Charles Bean said it many others said it. Across the political spectrum their eyes are even more sort of glaringly open, these leaders knew their people, the idea that Curtin's appeal to Britishness was a cunning ploy to carry favour with the electorate or that it was a mask consciously warned to hide the true nationalist beneath will not stand up to scrutiny. One of Australia's most distinguished historians tried to equate Curtin's rhetoric of empire with his repeated reminders to Labor MPs that they should wear shirts with starched collars to work. In other words the argument runs here Britishness was a garment consciously worn rather than something which spoke to Curtin's own understanding of Australia's identity and outlook. In that period it supposedly had nothing to do

with the deep-seated ideas that Australians had of themselves in that era as a British people ideas which came out most clearly at times of national crisis such as in nineteen fourteen and again of course in nineteen forty two.

Even after the war polls showed that a majority of Australians preferred their nationality to be classified as British rather than Australia. it would take until the 1960s for the political culture to start letting go of its British race patriot outlook on the world and that was really only after Britain had forced Australia's hand to do so by signalling its intention to join the European Common Market and by withdrawing its military from South East Asia. As Harold Holt said in 1966 Australia had been jolted by events to adulthood. The Curtin legend however seems really to allow for this kind of complexity there is indeed I think a tension in the way that Curtin is often portrayed. It vacillates between a picture of him as the resolute commander in chief on the one hand, and on the other the worried wavering leader, the reluctant warlord. It means that too often I think we receive a picture of the man as a sum of his tortured parts rather than as a singular political phenomenon. As the historian Marcus Cunliffe once observed of the first American president George Washington "the legend of the public figure he said has become like a can to which each passer-by adds a stone, pamphlet, speech, article and book; pebble, rubble, stone and boulder have piled up. So it has with Curtin. Although I should add that the two-volume biography by John Edwards I think is the most magisterial account of John Curtin that we have to date. It might also be remembered that when the threat of invasion passed Curtin spent the best part of 1943 and 1944 convincing his party and his people that Australia's future lay with the British Empire even that the concept of Empire defence which had been so glaringly shown up in Singapore.

It is why we have the commemoration that we are marking today even though concept could be reinvigorated to make it work better for Australian interests. At the December 1943 Labor conference Curtin brought his party with him on this idea of an Empire Council he wanted to establish. A kind of a Commonwealth Secretariat that would rove around the Empire. This would be the great symbol of organic equality not an Australia that was subservient to Britain or the mother country as they used to call it; but an Australia that was on equal terms with Britain and that would have an equal say in the making of policy along with the other dominions. This was what they meant by this organic concept of Empire I can't stress that enough. It wasn't about being a boot-licking obsequious toadying to London. It was about an empire made up of equals.

The essence of this was to make sure that a calamity such as the fall of Singapore could never happen again this was not some slavish devotion to London even if it did repeat similar attempts by so many of his predecessors and the New Zealanders to gain a seat for Australia at the top table of imperial policy making, rather this was about institutionalising what I call this organic concept of empire in which all were equal. It failed the proposal failed Churchill did not even turn up at the commonwealth prime minister's conference in 1944 where Curtin took this really quite thoroughly worked out idea for an empire council for the consideration of his prime ministerial colleagues across the empire. The Canadians had already poured cold water on it. The South Africans had as well, they wanted more autonomy within the empire not these older ideas of joint policymaking. Churchill didn't even bother to show up to the meeting where Curtin was advancing the proposal, he was getting briefed with the South African Prime Minister Jan Schmutz on the upcoming D-day landings. This was in early May of 1944. But just because it is a failed policy doesn't mean it's not a policy it was no less an example of a national leader pushing for Australia's distinctive interest in the Pacific to be not only heard but to be safeguarded.

This too was a remarkable achievement given where Curtin's party had been on foreign affairs in the interwar period when he took over as Labor leader in the mid-1930s. Labor counted among its ranks

liberal internationalists who supported the league of nations, international socialists who saw the Soviet Union as a model of world leadership Catholics who despised communism as the enemy of religion and isolationists who wanted to turn their backs on the world altogether. Political parties today think they have got factional problems.

In commemorating the battle of Australia too we might remember that one of the reasons why it had to be fought relates to the very poor state of preparedness that the country found itself in for total war as Curtin said in that statement "external forces and support might well be coming" he said and of course come they did in the form of one million American troops who passed through the country during the course of world war. He said the problem of their coming and its relation to the calendar of the enemy are factors which Australia should disregard in its composition of a nation completely at war for the purposes of its own defence.

In talking about the lack of preparedness I don't want to go down the traditional path that so many do go down and throw all the blame onto Robert Menzies in his first stint as prime minister from 1939 to 1941. We know that Paul Hasluck wrote to Menzies after the war and said you got a rough deal in the argument that you had left the country unprepared. It's worth bearing in mind that Menzies did hold off on sending the second AIF immediately to the middle east on the outbreak of war. He waited until he had received further assurances from London about Australia's defence in the Pacific. Yes we can ask why Australian leaders Menzies and others before him like Joe Lyons continued to place their faith in these British assurances. Remember too that it was Menzies who, fearful that Australia wasn't getting the right information from London about matters relating to the Pacific established the first Australian diplomatic posts in London, Washington and Chongqing in China. He said what Great Britain calls the far east is to us the near north.

What I'm getting at here is about the interwar period in Australia; the damage that had been done to the debate over defence and foreign policy. I'm talking about the deep-laid suspicions which arose out of the conscription crises of 1916 and 17 and how they fractured and corrupted the working of the political culture in this country. The long-term consequence for Australian domestic politics and foreign policy was that many important issues could no longer be dealt with outside this framework of antagonism and distrust. For example, before the first world war the Labor party had been willing to look at defence policy in terms of potential threats and to support a civilian style compulsory military training for the purpose. After the bitterness of the conscription campaign and the Labor party split. The new Labor party made opposition not only to conscription for overseas service but also opposition to conscription for the defence of Australia's own territory a necessary test of loyalty to the party. We know that Curtin again brought his party with him as he changed the party policy on that in the middle of World War II. But as a result of world war one the Labor party's defence platform consisted mainly of things that defines force should not do. Defence itself had come to be seen as an agent of their domestic political enemy. Likewise the conservatives who prior to the conscription crisis had been as willing as the labour leaders to criticize publicly the British government for failing to honour its commitment to Australian defence and they'd been willing to take independent action against British advice. Now after the conscription crisis where they had placed so much store on loyalty to Britain and the empire they could no longer stand up against Britain or criticise Britain for failing to keep its promises. They couldn't even suggest that Australia might have to act alone to protect itself. Any such admission would of course throw doubt on their idea of loyalty and play into the hands of their opponents the Labor party.

So as a result, one might venture to say that Australia went into World War II totally unprepared to deal with the new and greater crisis which threatened the survival of Australia and the British empire. The point is that the foreign and defence policy of the country could not be seen on its own terms

rather it became hostage to the domestic debate over loyalty. I hardly need to make the point foreign policy can never be separated from domestic politics and more often than not the latter trumps the former. But there are times when the balance between political point scoring and the making of a country's international policy so shifts in favour of short-term domestic political needs that the framing and the discussion of the country's foreign policy suffers as a result.

I mention this because in today's debate over how Australia should handle its relations with China. The discussion and the debate has been injected with a toxicity which in some ways mirrors that of the 1920s and 30s where domestic political dividends are being given a bigger weight than those of foreign policy and diplomacy. This is true of both Australia and China. Just as the government of Scott Morrison thinks that a tough line on China works well domestically and there's every indication in the polls that it does work well and indeed some in his inner circle have told journalists privately that they know that the playing of the so-called red card at the next election will be a plus for the government. Just as the Australian government can see this issue through a domestic prism so clearly Beijing and the Chinese president Xi Jinping feels the compulsion to be seen to be standing up against those it perceives as threatening its legitimacy for a regime that consistently speaks of the century of humiliation it suffered at the hands of the western powers. It is no surprise that China reacts so stridently and as we have seen so counterproductively to criticism as well as to decisions it sees as targeting directly its status and legitimacy as a great power whose time it says has finally come. As opinion polls show China's behaviour whether it be in terms of its militarising of the south China sea, its persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province, its sabre rattling over Hong Kong, its constant threats over Taiwan, is only souring public attitudes towards it both here in South East Asia, Asia, Europe and the United States; there are judgments being made now about China, its system of government leadership and international behaviour that are going to be immensely difficult to shift in future years.

It's difficult to know what the ultimate intention of Chinese leadership is in terms of its current targeting of Australian trade. Is it to make an example of Australia to show that this is what happens if you get too close to the Americans? That there are costs to be paid for displeasing China. What we can be clear on is that China has not previously targeted a country like this across so many export markets at precisely the same time. We can also be clear that it's playing very well for the Chinese communist party domestically. But too often the debate over how Australia should react to the assertion of Chinese power is couched as if the past is irrelevant. The expression that Australia's China policy changed in 2017 because China changed is only half right. Once more we're falling into the lazy trap of short-term thinking and chronic adhocism in policy. As the historian David Walker has argued and I quote "Australians have long known, suspected or feared that China would rise to world power status". So it's not a new problem for Australian diplomacy. But there are new dimensions to the problem.

A key contextual point I think is that this is a new assertiveness of an authoritarian China. We've been dealing with an authoritarian China since 1949, but this is a new assertiveness under Xi is unsettling and disturbing and it's come about at precisely the same time that doubts about American staying power in Asia have intensified. These two stiff and cool winds have been blowing onto Australia at the same time and the result as we've seen is a certain panic. On the one hand when we feel that Washington is not treating us in the way that we feel is our right by virtue of the close alliance. I mean the dummy spitting that occurred in the press. I'm talking about the dummy spinning that occurred when the telephone conversation took place between Malcolm Turnbull and Donald Trump and it got a bit rough over the refugee deal on Manus Island. The spits were something to behold in my view. If the alliance is so strong and so unbreakable as we are constantly told it is, it should be able to handle a disagreement such as that. It's nothing compared to the disagreements that took place between

Whitlam and Nixon for example in the 1970s, or between or between Kennedy and Menzies over West New Guinea. I can talk more about them in the questions, but it was small beer.

I understand that the domestic political considerations that made Mr Turnbull need to get his deal on the refugees that had been set up with Barack Obama honoured. But the panic, some of the most assertive alliance true believers at this time were saying my god Mr Trump might rip up the alliance. We need a plan B. How can the confidence be so high on the one hand and yet when there's a ripple of disagreement the whole thing is about to collapse? There is something not right there there's something deeper in the Australian psyche that an action like this speaks to in terms of uncertainty that maybe somehow at some point the Americans might not be there for us. At the same time as the two stiff winds there's this feverish speculation about a silent invasion by China. Anxiety too about our institutions collapsing meekly before the very onslaught of this new red peril.

The trump administration after some early internal debates ended up putting its China policy more decisively on the footing of what is now routinely referred to, even if in the view of respected scholars incorrectly, as the new cold war, or as some call it cold war 2.0. But even that hot talk could not assuage widespread doubts in the region about American staying power. There are still some frazzled nerves in Seoul and Tokyo after Trump's initial desire to make them pay more for the cost of housing and stationing US troops in those countries. There's still widespread disappointment across the region that Washington did not sign up to the trans-pacific partnership and looks very unlikely to under the new Biden administration. The Biden white house appears to be reading by and large from the same cold war missive as did the Trump one. This was always I think going to be likely in the US, the domestic debate over China whether it be about taking American jobs from its industrial heartland or the coming of COVID-19 was always going to make a kind of a China reset under a democrat administration under a new president all the more difficult. There might be areas of more cooperation, on climate change for example but remember that Biden spent much of his campaign proving his anti-China credentials. Witness the statement for example by the new national security adviser Jake Sullivan that America wants to create once more what Harry Truman's secretary of state Dean Acheson called "situations of strength to push back against the China" challenge Sullivan's what predecessor Robert O'Brien called the quadrilateral security dialogue or quad. Which as you know involves the United States, Japan, India and Australia as possibly the most important relationship America has established since NATO. And O'Brien left strewn on the white house lawn a declassified document in an attempt to show that behind all the Trumpian chaos and dysfunction there really were American officials looking to shore up its regional position; to tighten up their Asian moorings in the face of Chinese provocation and strategic muscle flexing. And Biden is now proposing that meetings of the quad once only attended by officials then foreign ministers be held at the leaders level because the US China relationship is problematic.

So then is Canberra's relationship with Beijing; and I think there have been some very important attempts by the Prime Minister and senior ministers to extract Australia from that kind of dynamic. It's a very difficult thing to do given the closeness of the alliance given the commonality of concern about Chinese behaviour. But the Australian efforts to extract themselves from this problem have been lost in some ways amidst the clamour and the din of a domestic debate that has fuelled this relentless China threat narrative. Now I am not sure we fully grasp how America understands the threat that China poses to its exceptionalism. It's one thing talking about the technological threat, the military threat, the economic threat of China just keeps growing. But the threat to American exceptionalism is particularly important to grasp. The point is that no national security adviser or United States secretary of state will in the foreseeable future present a President with a policy of accommodation with China. Their belief in manifest destiny in divine providence runs too deeply in

the American DNA. To deny it is to deny the very essence of what makes them American. Australia, I think has to do more to clarify its broader policy settings even as China makes it all but impossible to defrost the political relationship from its current state.

It is important I think to acknowledge that finding this new framework for Australia will take time. There is no short-term solution there's no there is no magic bullet. What is of concern is actually whether that process has yet begun in earnest? This means as former DFAT secretary and ONA head Peter Varghese has recently argued, the biggest risk he says is that we will over correct and move from engagement to containment wrapped in hard decoupling. So far the results are mixed, indeed it might be said that the government's China policy is somewhat confused, and the confusion stems from its decision to not think coherently about how the various strands of its policy fit together. The prime minister goes out of his way to eschew talk of a new cold war, or seeing US China competition in zero sum, excuse me binary terms. He talks of wanting an end state of happy coexistence with China, he holds back from describing it as a strategic competitor. The Prime Minister says openly that Australia has a different view of its economic partnership with China than does America. The problem is that one sometimes needs to conduct an archaeological excavation of his speeches to pull all this together. It remains something of a conundrum as to why neither the prime minister nor the foreign minister has not levelled with the Australian public about the nature of the China relationship. Its past and present, its highs and lows, opportunities and difficulties, benefits and risks. What principles it might lay down in terms of how to manage it in future, what costs it's prepared to pay if this economic coercion continues. Now I am not suggesting for a second that one speech is going to make a difference. It probably will not make a difference in Beijing. What I am talking about is the communication of policy to the electorate.

Now let me look at three central questions which I hope might help illuminate the past out of which the present has emerged. The first is why we've been so slow on our feet and what does this say about the last half century of engagement with Asia; the second is when did Australian leaders and officials start to talk about going to war with China; and the third which follows closely from the second relates to why Australia is now at the vanguard of China policy. A position for which it's one plaudit's from the Trump administration and from other US allies in the region. Even if circumstance more than calculation has put us there, there's an element in the Australian political psychology that appears to like being there, that is out the front.

Okay to take this first question now we have been here before in a sense. Australia cut itself off from China in the early 1950s because of the need it felt then to defer to American wishes. To slip into that mindset again I think would be problematic. So how can we not remember the history of this relationship before 2017? Is it all to be thrown out with the bathwater I'm not saying the answer is there, but it must surely help illuminate as I said the present problem, even if one accepts the coming of a relative US decline brings a whole new set of challenges for Australian policy makers? This has been an exceedingly difficult relationship from the beginning in the late 1940s. Australia was in Chiang Kai-shek's sights especially because of racial issues pertaining to the white Australia policy. Menzies when he came to power in 1949 did not care much for China. It had seemed likely that Australia would follow Britain in recognising the Chinese communist victory in China's civil war but out of deference to American sensitivities Menzies decided not to proceed with recognition. His second external affairs minister Richard Casey was smitten with Xiaowen Lai at a conference in Geneva in 1954. Casey had come to the view in the words of his biographer W J Hudson and I quote that "while China might not be nice, nationalist China was passe and an alien presence on what was then called Formosa and that therefore Beijing must be accommodated diplomatically". But Casey had no success in seeking change to Australia's policy of recognition. In mid-1955 for example; cabinet decided that "no steps shall be

taken in the direction of or leading towards recognition of communist China". Now Casey's push on this front was discrete. In public he red-baited with the best of them. "We feel the hot breath of communism on our necks" was one of his favourite phrases in the 1960s. With the impact and influence of the catholic anti-communist democratic labour party China became a necessary prop to ensuring that the United States remained focused on the mainland of Asia.

This at a time when strategists in Canberra as elsewhere were hearing the long melancholy rule of British military withdrawal from South East Asia. Prime Minister Billy McMahon was therefore lumbered with the policy of his predecessors and especially the commitment of so many conservative politicians to Taiwan. That meant that McMahon's sense of being badly stranded by the American change in China policy under Richard Nixon was all the more acute. Making fists in his pockets McMahon even publicly speculated that Nixon's visit to China in 1972 would cost him re-election later that year. He said that publicly, privately he was believed to be near psychotic at what he thought was this American betrayal. He dug his pen nib so deeply into the briefing paper when he was told about the American change that it created its own ravine of rage in the page. He wrote across it "but the Americans told the Pakistanis!". He complained to departmental officials and of course don't forget that during the 50s and 60s Australia is trading in non-strategic goods with China. There was very good wheat trade that cut off towards the end of the 60s. Then Whitlam goes to China to try and sort that out by making promises on recognising China should he win in 1972. The trade used to infuriate the Americans. How could these Australian allies who are with us all the way in Vietnam, how can they have been trading in non-strategic goods with China? It doesn't make sense they were furious about it.

Whitlam couched his opening of relations to China in the language of national discovery and his role was central to the story of the first five years of the resumed relationship. He also recognised that Australia could not afford to sow suspicion in Chinese minds about its motives for seeking a new relationship. Nor could it give China the impression that Canberra was "careless of our own interests" typically for Whitlam the task was couched in Homeric language. "The Chinese", he told his first ambassador Stephen Fitzgerald at the beginning of his posting 1973, "are hard-headed realists and it would be unnatural of them not to take advantage of us or hold us in contempt for apparent weakness". He said, "that you have to steer a course between the stiller of unnecessary suspicion on the one hand and the Caribbean's of apparent carelessness on the other". In some ways with differences, it's been across that tightrope that subsequent governments have been treading.

Malcolm Fraser and Deng Xiaoping provided the underpinning to further development of the relationship primarily because each distrusted the Soviet Union. This was an understood matter not something on which they engaged each other Fraser did not have a political mandate from his party to pursue his thought bubble of a formal anti-Soviet grouping he actually went to Beijing in 1976 before he went to London and Washington and proposed a quadrilateral security initiative involving the United States, China, Japan and Australia to take on the Soviet Union. A classic case of the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It went nowhere but it was again another example of a of an independent Australian policy proposal. Fraser was also vulnerable on Taiwan. In cabinet the relationship with China really took off when Hu Yao Bang visited Australia in the mid-1980s to conclude an agreement for its first overseas investment in the iron ore mine in Western Australia.

The interests of these Chinese leaders Hu Yao Bang and Zhao Ziyang in reform led to what some might call the great love fest with Bob Hawk where the Australian leader had lengthy late-night conversations with both about the coming political reforms in China. However, the fall of Hu Yao Bang which marked the conservative fight back within the Chinese communist party leading all the way to

the Tiananmen square massacre of June 1989 sent Hawk into a tailspin. Possibly because he feared his frank talks and correspondence about reform had played a part in it.

The second question is to ask when Australia started to talk about the possibility of going to war with China. Now it is I think well known the success that John Howard had in managing the China relationship. He visited China more times than any of his predecessors. The signature moment of the Howard doctrine in Australian foreign policy was surely the almost simultaneous visits to Canberra on subsequent days in October of two thousand three of US President George W Bush then the Chinese president Hu Jintao. They both addressed the Australian parliament on subsequent days in October of that year. As Howard wrote in his memoirs in one unmistakable gesture "Australia was telling the world it was possible to have close relations with both the United States and China". But these two parts of the Howard doctrine were not equal. The alliance with the United States appealed to history and shared cultural values. The relationship with China was a pragmatic conjunction of economic interests.

Then along comes Kevin despite his study of Chinese language and culture despite his experience as a diplomat in Beijing Rudd was determined to prove that as a Labor Prime Minister, he could be trusted on the US alliance. This of course was after the Mark Latham episode on bringing troops home from Iraq at the end of 2004. In private remarks to then US secretary of state Hillary Clinton in march 2009 Rudd put his cards on the table. He said I'm a brutal realist on China, countries need a plan B to prepare to deploy force if everything goes wrong. His defence white paper of 2009 contained what one minister who saw it described as a blood curdling section with "explicit discussion of the Chinese military threat including missile strikes port blockades and submarine warfare" By late in 2009 the Chinese recognised that the relationship was entering troubled waters, were suggesting themselves a visit to Australia to arrest this downward. It resulted in a statement which according to Jeff Raby quote codified the Howard approach to China. Stating in an agreed document that there were many points of difference but that we also had major interests to advance through close cooperation bilaterally and multilaterally. This must surely be one of the more ironic of conclusions to Australia-China relations. In the Rudd era the PM who had proclaimed himself as the coming man for the Asian century ended up having to accept principles for the relationship that his predecessor John Howard had put in place.

It should be no surprise that Rudd subsequently complained that Julia Gillard's white paper on defence had strategically gutted the rationale of his own effort. Instead of hard strategic logic Rudd said the Gillard white paper had chosen to play Pollyanna - don't worry be happy and everything will be all right in the morning. One lesson which needs more examination is surely I think that the hardliners in the bureaucracy were already beginning their ascendancy on this question. China was already being typecast as the enemy even if as the journalist and former financial review editor Max Such pointed out some time ago that the defence build-up with this in mind was "poorly managed even incoherent plagued by budget and technology problems and by what seems to be a broad incompetence". In choosing and introducing new weaponry the euphoria that came with Gillard's signing of a strategic partnership with China that Tony Abbott upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership was short-lived indeed. Despite its frequent invocation by prime minister Morrison. That very framework is little more now than a diplomatic gibbet swaying in the breeze.

My third question is to ask how in the period following Ji's coming to power in 2012 the Australian government came to be at the forefront of this China pushback. This is not an easy question to answer I don't think there's a cabinet submission or a memorandum probably not even a briefing to a minister or prime minister setting out that this was the stance that had to be taken. This I think is something that has evolved for example as early as 2013 Kim Beasley then Australia's ambassador in Washington

told the then foreign minister Bob Carr as he was coming into the job that Australia's commitment to host US marines in Darwin, its protest to China over Tibet and the exclusion of the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei from the national broadband network meant that whilst Canberra was not exactly alone in its actions Beasley said it was very prominent.

Around the same time pentagon strategist Edward Luttwak wrote a book on China's rise in which he asserted that Australia was the first country to clearly express resistance to China's rising power and to initiate the coalition building against it that is mandated by the logic of strategy. The evidence he used was Rudd's defence paper of 2009. He also said why should we be surprised that Australia is in that position given its expeditionary military tradition. Rudd at this time was apparently describing himself as the original cold warrior on China.

By 2017 senior Australian officials were already expecting that Australia like South Korea could expect Chinese economic coercion to come its way. At one end of the scale some officials spoke of the need to unleash political warfare on Beijing as a means of publicly calling out China's bad behaviour. The intention of this to send a message to Beijing that Canberra knew what it was up to and that Canberra was not about to cop what the Chinese regime was doing to its own people. In other words Canberra was not going to fall for being given economic goodies in exchange for political compliance. Others began to talk of a contest for ideas in Asia. I think this the emergence of a new cold war of Canberra having to strike a balance between its political independence and its future economic prosperity. Which at that stage and in many ways still is based on the Australia-China economic relationship. Another line being advanced at that time, less ideological yet no less forward leaning was that the government would have to find an equilibrium in its China policy through a mix of push and shove. And that meant laying down markers. I think that's probably the closest explanatory framework that we can get to for understanding China policy here over the last four years.

I think the evolution of this policy awaits sustained investigation. Understanding how it took root is surely one key to charting any kind of new path forward. But what shelf life this pioneering Australian China policy has remains to be seen. Based on its early actions the new Biden administration. Which has been inviting the most senior Taiwanese representative to the inauguration, continuing arms sales to Taiwan and delaying high-level talks with China until allies were consulted; President Biden hardly looks like he needs his hand to be held by Australia as a guide to US China policy. American analyst Walter Russell Mead has said that these early actions constitute the most aggressive concatenation of moves against the foreign power that any peacetime US administration has ever launched so early on. Now some of course will see this in Canberra as ongoing vindication for Australia's stance of being out the front. It does seem clear that momentum for coordination with others in pushing back against Beijing such as with Japan in the East China sea is only building. Jake Sullivan the new national security adviser has called for this chorus of voices. Increasingly it does look like it's there. One need only look at the recent statements by the incoming Japanese Ambassador about Australia being willing to come and assist in the East China sea. It is also not clear that should more serious costs eventuate from continued Chinese coercion that America can throw much Australia's way if it is still bunkered down in its dugout shouting that's not an argument for retreat it's not an argument for caving into Chinese pressure. This debate you constantly must put sandbags around. You to make sure you're not misinterpreted.

It is what I mean by the debate becoming toxic. What it is though is a call to make Australian diplomacy and statecraft less tethered to alliance management and for it to mobilise much more smartly to prosecute the nation's distinctive interests in this part of the world.

let me move now to my conclusion. As I said earlier, there is no magic bullet on the horizon to fix this relationship. At the political level it's not clear what the incentive is for Beijing to keep punishing Australia other than as I said earlier to treat Australia as some kind of tethered goat that can be fiscally whipped as an example to others. It's also not clear the Australian government has the room to manoeuvre because of this intense domestic debate, and because of the positions that have been so sharply staked out now whether it has the room to manoeuvre without giving the appearance of caving in. So the government's got to look into the whites of the eyes of China whilst not appearing to be prepared to kow-tow furiously. No government can do that. The government has already been very clear on that point. In other words, there's very little political space in either country to attempt any kind of genuine refreshment. The relationship I think will bump along the bottom for some time yet.

One of the most fundamental questions thrown up by Australia's China debate though is whether the country has the courage to see itself as it really is. Since the early 1970s Australia has been one of the most successful and harmonious multicultural communities in the world. Even if as in the early 1980s or during the Hanson debate of the late 1990s or at Cronulla beach in 2005 where on each of these occasions we have seen some of the smouldering resentments of the old Australia emerge. What the China debate shows is that it seemingly takes little to let loose a slew of old fears and prejudices. Prejudices that revive older anxieties and bring back the ugly face of racial prejudice. At times we are seeing a very ugly xenophobic cat being let out of the bag. Consider that the rampant China threat narrative has now put in its sights members of the Chinese - Australian community in the most harmful hurtful and destructive way. We now have figures like senator Eric Abetz engaging in the crudest kind of McCarthyism. We have junior members of parliament on both sides of politics putting wolf claw mark stickers on the doors of their offices to prove their toughness on China. Wolf claw mark stickers denote they are part of a group of parliamentarians on both sides of politics who have called themselves the wolverines to show that they're prepared to be tough back bench MPs. Creating lurid videos of the Chinese taking over the country. These similar kinds of ads were going around in the 1930s over Japan. Former heads of ASIO saying that we will one day wake up to find that decisions are being made in our parliament over which we have no control. Think tanks plastering covers of their reports with 1890s style bulletin magazine images of prowling dragons, the ABC regularly publishing maps of the Australian continent being smothered by an incoming red tide. Along with a coterie of journalists; self-appointed as watchmen on the walls of freedom; predicting that Australia might well give up its independence to a foreign fascist state.

It has been an unedifying sight bearing in mind as I said there are legitimate concerns about Chinese behaviour. One has to ask about the prudence and the wisdom of some of these reactions. The differences in values between what the Chinese communist party represents, what we cherish here and what all of those soldiers who fought throughout the second world, all of the women who served in that conflict and in all conflicts that Australia has been involved in. What we cherish here in terms of freedom diversity openness and tolerance are of course stark differences in values. The thought of a region dominated by an authoritarian great power such as China is not at all desirable for Australia. It focuses the mind.

Now we should not write off America's capacity to regenerate even at the even if at the moment it is institutionally wobbly, sick and struggling to come out from underneath the Trump covered rock. Like it or not we are going to have to somehow manage this relationship with China going forward. As former foreign minister Gareth Evans said in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 "despite our abhorrence Australia may have to deal with this new Chinese leadership for some time unlike Europe, Australia cannot walk away from China". Whether for good or ill China will remain one of

Australia's most important foreign policy and trade concerns. These realities need to be addressed regardless of who governs China.

The kind of toxicity that I'm talking about is not simply though the result of a commentariat that is excitable; it is also consistent with a long-standing deep-seated grievance at the perceived loss of a national essence. The very same kinds of laments that are driving BREXIT the coming of Trump and any number of populist nationalist posers in Europe, Latin America and elsewhere. In Australia it might even be argued that the China threat debate is driving a new insularity in the Australian outlook.

Now I think this is especially important to grasp as we approach the centenary of the second world war. In commemorations over the next sort of 18 to 19 years some of the ANZ-achary that pervaded the centenary of the great war I think would be best avoided. Such as the tendency towards package tour patriotism or to treating the pilgrimage to foreign fields as a backpacker's picnic. The war memorial in Canberra a place I have been visiting as a child and a place of quiet and humble solemnity should not be turned into a kind of digger theme park with live crosses to ADF training exercises which I understand is part of the plan for the 500 million that is being spent on the war memorial over the next decade. This at a time as other key national institutions are struggling financially. The National Library for example is closing down a huge part of its East Asian collection. The National Archives and the National Museum are not in the best fiscal shape. ANZAC and its commemoration cannot be allowed to become a cult of uncritical veneration one which loses a sense of the gravity of what occurred in battles at Kokoda and Milne Bay for example.

All from understanding the lead up to these wars in the 1930s the vociferous diplomacy that was engaged in which played its own part in the lead up to the second world war; it is only absolutely right and altogether proper that we mark the service of those like my grandfather who fought in the Pacific during the second world war. It's right too that we remember and pay deep and sincere and lasting respect to the ultimate sacrifice that was paid by so many; especially those in the POW camps on the Sandakan run death march and elsewhere. I do not think it should derogate from this occasion however to wonder aloud whether John Curtin would have approved of marking it. I'm not convinced he would have approved Curtin once said that he said war is hell. He knew that Australians had to fight for their liberties on foreign fields, but he was passionate too about fighting for those liberties at home. He said he did not wish to be "manacled to the blatant screamers of loyalty"; and he grew more and more frustrated throughout the nineteen thirties at the tendency of the debate over foreign defence policy being reduced to cat calls across the parliamentary chamber about who was the more loyal to Britain.

Earlier in his career when still a trade union leader and a journalist in Perth, Curtin had reflected on the effect of the first world war on Australian society and culture. He said he regretted the loss of national self-confidence that came out of that conflict. Of individualising ourselves as he put it in harmony with true ideas of progress of battling our own way onward. He said and discovering what destiny had in store for us he said, and I quote him again: "We were then before the war developing a patriotism of a natural and rational kind; we loved Australia for many reasons it was our homeland. To the true Australian there was ever and still is the glamour of mystery and attraction covering our great plains, our hills, and our gullies, clothed with noble eucalypts. Our wide stretched deserts of barren vegetation. but often rich in useful minerals and the long wash of the Australian seas. These all woke he said echoes of an affection which is the genesis of true patriotism. I think it's that depth of affection for the country and an enthusiasm for its well-being not the crudity of a narrow nationalism lamenting a lost past that might be born keenly in mind as Australia continues to grapple with a rapidly changing and challenging international environment.

Thank You

The Speaker

James B. Curran is Professor of Modern History in the University of Sydney where he specialises in the history of Australian and American foreign relations. In 2013, he held the Keith Cameron Chair at University College Dublin, and in 2010 was a Fulbright scholar at Georgetown University. Prior to joining academia, Curran worked in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Office of National Assessments. A past non-resident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, he is also a regular commentator on radio and television, and his opinion pieces on foreign affairs and political culture have appeared in major Australian newspapers as well as the Lowy Interpreter, China-US Focus, the East Asia Forum and the Council on Foreign Relations Asia Unbound series.

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