

Events pushing the things over the edge: A critical study of Sino-Australian Rivalry

By Saif Ali

Abstract

Australia and China are the two important countries of Asia Pacific. Sino-Australia relations remained uncertain throughout the past history. The state policies towards economic as well as regional policies contributed to underscore the stability or instability of the bilateral relations. But throughout the recent decades, stability in relations seemed tough for both the states. China's hostile actions towards the Australian citizens and journalists residing inside China, imposition of extra duties on Australian products, and diplomatic row over a controversial tweet of the China's spokesperson of ministry of foreign affairs are recent events to create a perception of deteriorating relations. The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze these major events, which are pushing both states to an extreme edge. The analyses of secondary data show that the process of interdependence won over the bilateral conflicts rose time-over-time. Many other extra-regional factors effected the bilateral relations but the economic, cultural, and human rights diplomacy were the major ones.

Early History of engagement

Many historians are of the view that Chinese explorers sailed to Australia before its discovery to European sailors. Manning Clark writes that certain explorers reached the coast of North Australia in search of a specific flower that was valued highly in China in the 15th Century¹. Until the 19th Century, Chinese remained limited to their own shores, receiving the foreign visitors and traders without developing their naval activities. On the other hand, Great Britain



and other Western states explored various areas and formulated strategies to gain maximum profit with newly discovered lands. They found Australia, a feasible place to act as an agent place for the trading between Great Britain and India, China, and the

¹ M. Clark, *Historia Australii*, Warszawa-Gdańsk 2004, p. 8.

whole Pacific². Gradually, Australia got law and order to maintain the state writ. The 20th Cultural Revolution in China and its intention of exporting the communist ideology sowed the seeds of “Sinophobe” in the minds of Australians.

Pace of modernization catalyzed bilateral relations

Diplomatic relations between the two states started in 1972, when China approached the United States as it came out of its isolationist policy. The China-Australia Council was subsequently established in 1978 to reinforce economic, cultural and educational relations. Trade volume increased in the consequence to these proceedings. The educational institutes in Australia increased the student intake from China as well as facilitated with residential projects. The consequence from these rapprochement phenomena came was degrading relations with Taiwan.

Uncertain events in late 2th Century

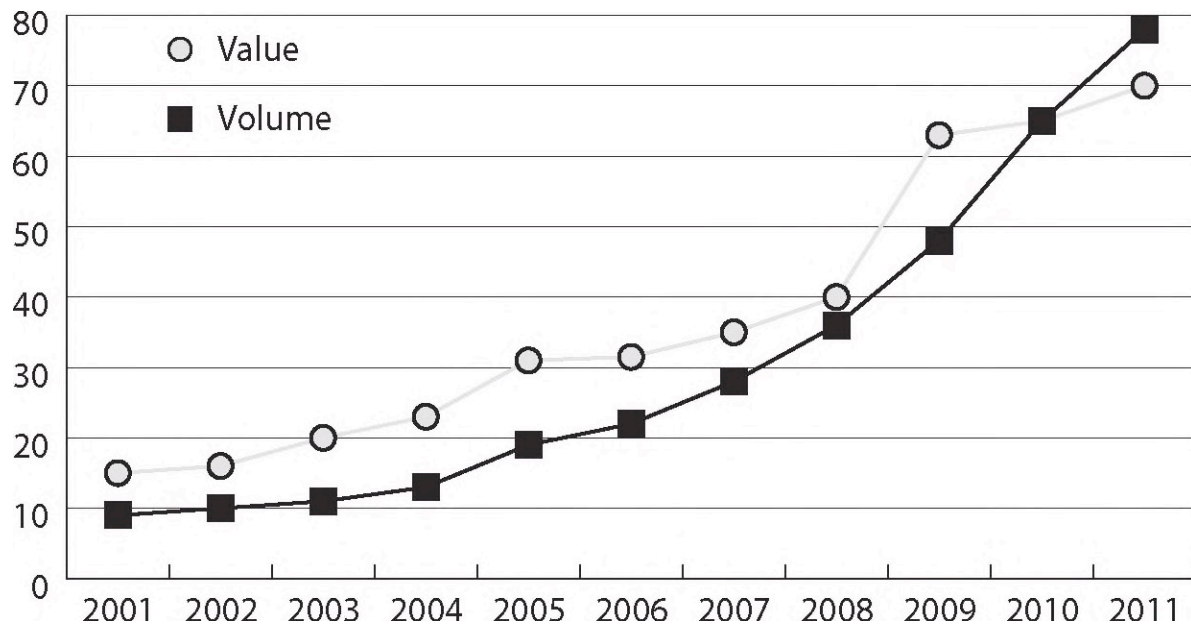
Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke condemned Beijing’s assault on student protestors at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Australia then granted asylum to thousands of students to enter. After these events, Australian policymakers pondered upon the options to choose either China or United states for economic as well as strategic objectives. Both the options were vital for Australia in terms of economy and security.

The late twentieth century remained tense, politically. Australian reaction to the China’s adventure in Taiwan Strait Crises in 1996, and support to United States’ aid to Taiwan raised another diplomatic row between China and Australia. Many negotiations and official visits were halted. This condition was mitigated by formation of Australia-China Human Rights Dialogue which organized many rounds of talks and published articles in languages of both states. Therefore, one can observe and conclude that throughout the 20th Century, China and Australia experienced uncertain history of bilateral relations.

In the 21st century, international politics and domestic issues made the situation uncertain again. An increase in trade volume was witnessed due to China’s dependency on raw materials after it instituted reforms that brought the necessity of coal, petroleum, steel etc for the newly industrializing economy.

²F. Welsh, *Australia. A New History of The Great Southern Land*, Woodstock & New York 2006, p. 2.

Chart 1. Australia's exports to China (in AUD billion)



Data source: *Australia's export to China 2011-2011*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, p.i, <<http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/stats-pubs/australias-exports-to-china-2001-2011.pdf>>, [20.10.2012].

Entering 20th Century; Opportunities and Challenges

Fu Ying served as the Ambassador of China to Australia from 2003 to 2007. Prior to this official designation, she visited Australia with propositions for China and Australia to improve bilateral relations in 21st Century. Specifically, she pointed to energy, agriculture, science, technology, environmental management, and education sectors where Australian experts could assist China. By being an ally of China, it was thought this would benefit Australia's regional position by enhancing diplomatic and political influence. Economically, by 2009, Australia enjoyed a huge trade surplus with China and was a major market. Australian authorities wished China to invest in telecommunication, media, finance, agriculture, and mining sectors as well but Chinese authorities limited their interest to only the construction and energy sectors.

This pleasant atmosphere was shaken by the Australian Defense White Paper that stated that Chinese growing power would be a future regional problem³ and suggested that Australia strengthen its air and naval forces. While there were no reported reactions from Chinese authorities, secret documents revealed that [China did inform Australia about the serious implications](#) if the concerned points remained unchanged in the.

³ Smith, M. L. R., & Khoo, N. (2011). *What the WikiLeaks Documents Tell us about Asian Security*. *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 6(2), 133-136.

A cultural event which created another rift in their relations was the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2009. A film about the head of World Uighur Council “Rabiye Kadeer” were selected to be premiered there. China pressured Australia to exclude the film from the nominated list but it did not happened⁴. This again instigated a diplomatic rift between the countries.

Role of Australia in Asia Pacific- Under Quad

The Quad or Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue was created by Japan’s Prime Minister Shizo Abe in 2007 as an informal forum of four countries: Australia, India, Japan, and United States. After the first meeting, an objective was to continue cooperation among the countries in the form of joint military exercises, information exchange, and semi-regular summits. The neutral narrative about this forum was viewed as ‘an alliance to deter China in the Asia Pacific Region’. This initiative was also tagged as “Democratic Peace”, as it is assumed that the forum was going to make an arc of democracies in the region -around China. The role of Australia in this strategic alliance has been summarized as follow;

- The future of the Quad looked uncertain when Australia left the forum in 2008. But the new regime kept enhancing its military co-operations with United States. Quad conducted Malabar joint naval exercises till 2019. Later in 2020, Australia rejoined Quad when India invited to participate in Malabar naval exercise.
- The isolated continent of Australia relatively enjoyed strategic advantages from external threats. As a whole Australia cooperated with United States and acted as an external balancer in the region.
- The recent rise of China in the region has disturbed the equilibrium of the region. Now, As a result, Australia is now conscious about the possible outcomes in case of rise of China as hegemonic power of the region.
- Rise of China will not only affect the US security umbrella but also it will undermine the free trade and foreign policy of the country- as apprehended by Foreign Policy white paper 2017.
- Australia is the first country to stop Huawei from operating 5G due to security risks.
- Australia accepted and stressed China to act upon the ICJ arbitrations regarding South China Sea.
- Australia faced backlash and immense pressure from every Australian gesture confronting the China’s measures-either in the aforementioned affairs or the Hong Kong protests, when Australia condemned tagging protestors as “terrorists”.
- The China’s acts of increasing influence in South Pacific is somehow worrisome for Australia as it is playing leading role among these states. The China’s military bases and

⁴ B. Child, *Rebiya Kadeer row engulfs Melbourne film festival*, The Guardian, <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jul/15/rebiya-kadeer-melbourne-film-festival>>, [10.10.2012].

ports in this region have made it clear that the China is using its hard and soft power to influence the region soon. Moreover, debt-trap policy towards the states of South Pacific has been indicated by Australia as a policy to bring these states under influence.

- Australia is also networked with China in the nexus of trade and human resources interdependence. So, Australia will be immediately effected as well s the frontline state in case of any agitation.

The Australia's commitment in the Quad proved to be the primary element of Sino-Australian confrontation. The US led joint strategic alliance made China skeptical about Australia's role in the Asia Pacific region. The Quadrilateral dialogue base alliance was created with an aim to open the Indo-Pacific, which evolved into a China-centric strategic counter-weight. One cannot ignore the United States' wish to leverage the alliance in order to deter a rising China. The U.S. succeeded in convincing the quad states about a dreadful future imaginary regional order ruled by China. Australia jumped into the great power politics ignoring the possible consequences to the Sino-Australian relations. The cultural ties and economic interdependence between the two countries remained central to maintaining cordial relations. But, the regional politics turned the states against each other.

Most recent events leading circumstances to conflict

Chinese Interfere in Australian Politics: Australia raised apprehensions about the possibility of China's interference in Australia's politics. Australian intelligence agency probed a case in which a luxury car dealer was allegedly funded by China to run for parliamentary seat. Australia blamed China trying to "take over" the Australian political system⁵. Australia brought constitutional changes and made laws against the "foreign political interventions." The authorities indicated political maneuvers in the form of political pressure, promises and foreign findings⁶.

COVID19 Politics: When COVID 19 broke out in China, and it readily took over the whole world under its effect, Australian authorities criticized China for mismanagement of the pandemic. The Australian PM Scott Morrison defended the call for investigating its origin and mishandling of the pandemic, which reportedly originated from the Wuhan in China. The Australian call for action paralleled US President Donald J. Trump's remarks towards China.

⁵ Hamilton, Clive. "Australia's fight against Chinese Political Interference." Foreign Affairs, July 26, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/australia/2018-07-26/australias-fight-against-chinese-political-interference>

⁶Cave, "Australian Politician's Home Raided in Chinese Influence Inquiry." The New York Times, June 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/world/australia/politician-home-raid-china-influence.html>

China responded with the tactic of “economic coercion”, increasing duties on Australian products. Australian wine witnessed the highest percentage of the increased duty. As China is the market for about 26 % of the Australian trade and the core place for Australian coal, wine and other major exports, both states will be hurt due to implications of tensed relations.

Twitter Diplomacy over manipulated image: A diplomatic rift occurred when the spokesman to Foreign Affairs of China posted a doctored image of Australian soldiers killing unarmed children in Afghanistan. Australia demanded an apology for the propaganda. China responded that even if the picture was manipulated, there were brutal actions being committed by allied forces in Afghanistan.

Conclusion:

The history of the Sino-Australian relationship has experienced many ups and downs but centripetal forces remained dominant as both states depended upon each other. There were some events that caused tension but the cultural and economical ties made their effects dormant. The Twentieth Century brought many challenges in the form of regional and extra regional politics as well as the bilateral issues of conflict. The increasing strength of China’s defense and economy not only drew the attention of neighboring states but also the United States. The U.S. influence in Asia Pacific saw a blurred image of a possible future world dominated by China. Very recent events increased trade barriers and harsh statements are pushing the bilateral ties to an irreparable situation. Therefore, both countries should understand the consequences of any further misadventure. The variation in the nature of relations is natural but the extent should be reparable for the future pleasant environment.

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