

Australian Foreign Policy Needs More Silence

John McCarthy

Simon and Garfunkel sang of the dangers of the sound of silence. But in Australian Foreign Policy, we need more of it.

This reflection came to mind on Friday with the news of an alleged snub of Australia by India when the latter declined to accept Australia in the Malabar naval exercise involving India, Japan and the United States—our partners in the proposed Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Reportedly India took this position to avoid irritating China on the eve of this weekend's summit between Indian PM Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Actually it was not much of a snub. Malabar has been going for years and we have never been in it. But our omission raises questions about the viability of the Quad as a strategic tool.

There have always been different views in New Delhi about the merits of the Quad because India too seeks balance in its dealings with China and because some in India see the Quad as inconsistent with India's doctrine of Strategic Autonomy.

A further concern in Japan and India in the past about the Quad was also whether Australia would have the stamina for it given our earlier vacillation on it and given our economic dependence on China. India's concern may now be as much about excessive Australian zeal.

But the issue also raises wider questions about our Asia Pacific policies.

In discussing our regional security, our Foreign Policy White Paper advocated three central objectives: broadening and deepening our alliance cooperation with the United States; strong and constructive ties with China; and in terms of achieving a balance in the region favourable to our interests, working with the major democracies notably Japan, India, Indonesia and South Korea.

We are doubtless deepening our alliance cooperation with the United States, albeit that America's policies towards the region are jagged and some American actions, particularly on trade, are not in our interest.

Our relationship with China has deteriorated. While for this China must share much – maybe most – of the blame, we need to do something about it.

In working with the major regional democracies, we have done reasonably well. But we should think more closely about how the conduct of our relationships with the United States and China dovetails with our dealings with the rest of the region.

Our relationship with the United States is a factor in facilitating United States strategic engagement in the Asia Pacific. Most countries, China excepted, favour this. So while our

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anxiety to please Washington tends to portray us as an American proxy, ANZUS itself is a net plus for our regional dealings.

However regional countries are also seeking to construct relationships with China which are multifaceted, nuanced and flexible. Most are profoundly impacted by China and have an existential interest in getting their relationships with it right. China's economic clout is self-evident. India and Japan have irredentist issues with China. For most ASEAN nations China is crucially important because of its size, propinquity and the existence of influential Chinese diasporas.

So while regional countries may welcome Australia as a friend, they may not welcome too close a visible association with us on China policy while our relationship with China is so obviously in the doldrums.

If that judgement is valid now, it will be the more so if the major players in the region and China increasingly seek a measure of mutual accommodation.

There are signs of this happening in India's case as evidenced by Modi's reportedly positive meeting with Xi this past weekend.

China and Japan are also exploring the possibilities of a more constructive relationship. Both countries are under the pump from the Americans on trade and Japan has felt out of the loop on North Korea. Japanese Foreign Minister Kono has spent a lot of time with his Chinese counterpart Wang Li. The latter recently made the first official bilateral foreign ministerial visit to Japan in eight years. There is talk of an Abe/Xi summit.

Moreover, in the longer term, a post Abe dispensation in Japan may want to take a significantly more accommodating approach towards China. Abe is after all at the nationalist end of the Japanese political spectrum and such shifts in Japanese China policy have happened before.

What then should we do?

There are no sensible arguments for Australia declining to be clear with China about where our national interest lies and where China traduces those interests. So we may have to just put up with some difficult times. But there are arguments for a less noisy approach if we are not left like a shag on a rock on China policy-both in terms of our dealings with China per se and in terms of our wider dealings in the Asia Pacific.

In the South China Sea, Australia should go where it is entitled to go according to its national requirements and consistent with international law. But there is little merit in grandiloquent Freedom of Navigation exercises with the Americans designed to show the Chinese who's boss. Fortunately we seem to be avoiding such gestures.

If the Chinese offend by interfering in our political processes or engage in cyber warfare, we should oppose this in calibrated ways, considering what is best said privately and what requires public remonstrance. We should not unnecessarily give the Chinese ammunition to accuse us as they have of "systemic, irresponsible and negative" remarks EG: frequent adverse comments on China at prime ministerial level; statements by ministers critical of Chinese aid to the South Pacific; or attributable briefing to media by ministers' offices about the benefits of Britain and France countering Chinese influence in the region.

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In our diplomacy generally, we would do well to follow Teddy Roosevelt's advice about speaking softly, all the more so because unlike the United States, we do not carry a big stick—and everyone knows it. If we follow such advice, we may be listened to more, including by China.



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