

## Australia-China spat is a warning

Written by Liberty Times Editorial  
Sunday, 13 December 2020 06:40

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The relations between Australia and China have undergone abrupt changes.

In the past six months, their economic ties have taken a sharp downward turn after 10 years of close exchanges.

As part of Beijing's "wolf warrior" diplomacy, a Chinese official last month posted a fake photograph on social media showing an Australian soldier killing an Afghan child.

Beijing is imposing anti-dumping tariffs of more than 200 percent on Australian wine.

China, which once claimed that it would "blind" the "Five Eyes," an intelligence-sharing partnership comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US, is now singling out Australia.

Beijing's biggest bargaining chip in its relations with Australia is the trade imbalance between the two countries. China is Australia's largest trading partner, accounting for one-third of Australia's total trade volume, while Australia accounts for less than 4 percent of China's foreign trade.

This imbalance makes China confident about launching a trade dispute and playing its old trick of using business to promote its political ambitions, a strategy that is all too familiar to Taiwan.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), signed by China, Australia and other countries last month, states that the member countries will mutually reduce tariffs, but China soon changed its mind. By imposing heavy tariffs on Australia, it tore its promise into pieces and instead opted for political blackmail.

Chinese officials in Australia listed 14 accusations against Canberra that they say "poisoned"

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the bilateral relations.

The accusations included sponsoring “anti-Chinese” research projects; investigating Chinese journalists and canceling the visas of Chinese academics; taking the lead in international forums to “attack” China’s dealings with Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang; calling on the international community to investigate the origin of COVID-19; excluding Huawei Technologies Co from Australia’s 5G networks; blocking 10 Chinese-funded local infrastructure and agricultural investment projects; accusing China of cyberattacks; repeating the US condemnation of China’s claims in disputed areas; and Canberra’s attempt to undermine the state of Victoria’s participation in China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

Most of these points are reminiscent of the same old tricks that Beijing has used to infiltrate the international community. Many democratic countries have been observing the situation, and have adjusted their policies and taken preventive measures.

In the face of the threats, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has emphasized that Australia would “never apologize” for being itself and would not be intimidated by China.

Having awoken from its “Chinese dream” induced by the close relationship with Beijing, Australia has passed legislation against China’s covert influence, for example its Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act in 2018.

On Thursday last week, the Australian parliament passed the Foreign Relations Bill, which gives Canberra the power to veto deals between local Australian governments and foreign governments, a law implicitly aimed at China.

Such legislation would also be worth considering in Taiwan.

In terms of Australia’s overall strategy in developing foreign relations, the establishment of the US-Australia Ministerial Consultations in July is the most important development.

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During the first meeting of the bilateral forum in Washington, the US secretaries of state and defense, and the Australian ministers of foreign affairs and defense discussed a wide range of issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic, security, regional organizations and defense cooperation.

The joint statement issued after the meeting not only criticized Beijing's destruction of regional peace, it also made a rare mention of Taiwan, emphasizing the importance of Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific region.

On the one hand, Australia is guarding against improper Chinese influence, while on the other, playing an active role in the region.

Last year, the Australian government disclosed the case of self-confessed former Chinese spy William Wang Liqiang (王立强), who confessed to having been recruited by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to spy on Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Canberra also accused China Innovation Investment Ltd executive director Xiang Xin (向鑫) and his wife, the company's acting director, Kung Ching (孔晶), who were in Taiwan at the time, of being Chinese intelligence officers.

Ahead of the presidential elections in January, the pan-blue camp tried to spin the Wang case in its favor, but its attempt could not gain traction before Australian media reports suggested that the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) had teamed up with the CCP to influence the vote.

The exchange of information between Taipei and Canberra also shows that for Taiwan, Australia is the second-most important member of the "Five Eyes," after the US.

Australia's dependence on trade with China is its Achilles' heel, and Beijing is making use of the situation to intimidate Canberra.

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It will likely take time for Australia to adjust its relationship with Beijing, and it might have to go through an uneasy period.

At present, China is continuing to increase trade sanctions, from imposing high tariffs on Australian barley and wine to restricting Australian beef and cotton imports, and restricting coal imports.

Absurdly, Chinese companies in the first half of this year stocked up on goods imported from Australia, suggesting that they had knowledge of Beijing's planned measures.

Sixty percent of the iron ore used by the Chinese industry is imported from Australia, and the industry has not at all been affected by the dispute between the nations. Despite all the tough talk and threats, China has not forgotten to save something for itself.

Beijing is punishing Australia to make clear to the international community what would happen to any state that dares demand investigations into the origin of COVID-19 or joins the anti-China side.

China has further escalated the pressure after last month's US presidential election, attempting to take advantage of the transition period between two US administrations, when Washington has less capacity for dealing with foreign affairs.

Beijing is trying to make the most of this period, deploying its carrot-and-stick strategies to warn democratic countries with close economic and trade relation with China, such as Canada, Japan and the EU countries, not to go against it.

Beijing is making the first move before the administration of US president-elect Joe Biden, who is expected to advocate multilateralism, takes over the helm in Washington, attempting to weaken the will of the international community to take collective action against China.

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At this critical moment, with China continuing its expansion and threats, the example of the Beijing-Canberra spat shows Taiwan and other democracies the importance of consolidating an alliance against China, preventing Beijing from sowing division that could weaken or defeat the alliance.

Translated by Lin Lee-kai

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2020/12/13](#)