

Introduction

With the electoral defeat of the Howard Government, it is timely to assess the Howard Government's strategic depiction of China. The question of how to strategically depict China and its threat potential without arousing Chinese hostility or suspicion has been a taxing issue for successive Australian governments, including the Howard Government. During the past 30 years, as China's place in the Australian economy has steadily grown, the issue of how to depict China has increased in importance and complexity. Today, China's new status as Australia's largest trade partner secures its importance in Australian strategic policy alongside the United States, Japan and Indonesia.¹ But, at the same time, growing tension in Australia's foreign policy between economic interest (China) and security interest (the United States) is observable. Australia is facing the prospect of its largest trading partner (China) becoming a strategic adversary of Australia's major ally (the United States).² How Australia balances its economic and security interests is a demanding foreign policy conundrum. During a time of watchful strategic competition in US-China relations, Australia's strategic depiction of China remains a key indicator of Australia's response to the rise of China and the shifting distribution of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, as the Rudd Government begins to construct its own strategic depictions of China, it is important to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the Howard Government's approach towards China and to identify what aspects require retention, adjustment or rejection.

Ever since its early days in office, the Howard Government's strategic depiction of China was a source of debate and intrigue. In March 1996, the then Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared unequivocal support for two US carrier groups deployed to the Taiwan Strait.³ Over the course of time, other captivating statements were made. In May 2000 Prime Minister John Howard singled out high-technology Australian Defence Force assets for a Taiwan contingency.⁴ The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper of 2003, *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, described Australia's relationship with China as a 'strategic economic partnership', and in August 2004 Downer declared the existence of a 'strategic relationship' between Australia and China.⁵ Obviously the Howard Government's strategic depiction of China evolved remarkably over this timeframe. Understanding what these depictions, and others, meant in the context of Australia-China relations, Australia-US relations, Australia-US-China relations, and Australia's broader strategic orientation in the Asia-Pacific are a salient foreign policy issue for Australia. Because of China's growing potential to compete strategically with the United States, the possibility of US-China conflict over Taiwan, and the centrality of China to Australia's economic interests, it is key

for Australia to do whatever it can to reduce the probability of conflict. Although the degree of influence Australia possesses in this regard is contestable, the considerable diplomatic effort by China to promote its 'peaceful development' suggests that how the Asia-Pacific region responds is important to Beijing, and Washington.⁶ How Australia depicts China can certainly influence the latter's strategic perceptions and its corresponding strategic behaviour, and US attitudes towards China's rise.⁷ Examining Australia's strategic depiction of China between 1996 and 2006 therefore provides key insights into the possible future trajectory of Australia's foreign policy and a vital case study into the broader regional issue of how countries in the Asia-Pacific are responding to the rise of China.

This investigation complements and builds upon research conducted by Lachlan Strahan, Mohan Malik, Zhang Jian, Michael Wesley and Paul Kelly. Strahan has provided a comprehensive investigation of Australia's view of China from the 1930s to the 1990s and, with the passage of time, his analysis can now be updated.⁸ Malik and Zhang have produced chronological surveys of Australia-China relations in the period 1996–2005.⁹ Malik recognises two phases in the 1996–2000 period: an initial phase of acrimony and hostility during 1996, followed by a period of reconciliation from 1997 to 2000. Malik notes that, while the relationship is observing commercial convergence, broader regional developments indicate strategic divergence is occurring between the two countries. He believes that if China assumes a more aggressive regional posture, especially towards Taiwan, the ANZUS alliance will quickly assume a containment posture. Zhang regards the warmth of relations between Australia and China during the period 2001–2005 as a by-product of healthy US-China relations. He believes the 'war on terror' has provided a strategic distraction to the rise of China, and that Australia-China relations will deteriorate once the United States resets its vision towards China. Malik's and Zhang's valuable contributions have mapped the general events occurring within the relationship, and provide a firm foundation from which to conduct in-depth analysis upon the strategic dimension of the relationship.

Adopting slightly different research focuses, Wesley has produced a broader thematic analysis of Howard Government diplomacy in Asia, and Kelly a character analysis of former Prime Minister John Howard. Wesley's investigation concludes that although the Howard Government successfully conducted a period of deepened engagement with China, its 'hope based formula' presuming continuing stability in US-China relations was an inadequate policy to guide one of Australia's most demanding foreign policy challenges.¹⁰ Wesley's investigation reveals that deeper consideration is required concerning the nature of the Howard Government's engagement policy with China, which at face value appeared simplistic. Kelly's analysis of the effect of the executive branch on Australian foreign policy is a compelling read. One of Kelly's key portrayals of Howard is

as a ‘response agent’, a person who reacted to, rather than engineered, his political surrounds. Like Wesley’s ‘hope based formula’, Kelly’s observation of Howard (and subsequently the Howard Government) as a ‘response agent’ provides a provocative theory of the Howard Government as an opportunistic and even naïve political actor. This demands deeper analysis.

By examining the Howard Government’s strategic depiction of China during the decade in question, this investigation seeks to answer a series of pivotal questions left unanswered by the research of Strahan, Malik, Zhang, Wesley and Kelly. These questions include whether a coherent policy vision was implemented or whether an ad hoc process of policy evolution was instead at work. (Indeed, a synthesis of the two may be possible: a coherent, yet evolutionary policy formulating process may have been in operation). The answers to these questions will clarify the nature of Australia’s relationship with China, and assist in answering larger questions regarding the emergence, evolution and exact nature of Australia’s strategic interaction with China. Specifically, the answers will reveal whether Kelly’s description of Howard as a ‘response agent’ is accurate and applicable to the Howard Government, and whether Wesley’s ‘hope based formula’ accurately describes Howard Government policy towards China. In turn, answering these larger questions will provide valuable insight into the future trajectory of the relationship, and the role of depictions in international relations.

In his seminal work *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, Robert Jervis describes his investigation of strategic depictions as providing ‘the foundation for a theory of deception in international relations’.¹¹ According to Jervis, strategic depictions are ‘the way states can affect the images others have of them and thereby exercise influence without paying the high cost of altering their own major policies’.¹² Depictions often provide essential images of how a government *wants to be viewed*, rather than an accurate portrayal of what a government’s perceptions actually are. Jervis divided strategic depictions into two main categories: signals and indices. Signals are ‘a state’s direct statements of intention’, whether they are private (diplomacy) or public (policy) statements.¹³ They consist of varied and diverse methods of communication, such as policy statements, diplomatic notes, military manoeuvres, and extending or breaking diplomatic relations. In contrast, indices have a more subjective value, imparted by the strategic analyst. In essence, indices are actions and statements that are judged by the strategic analyst to be ‘too important to be used for deception’ because the state is either unaware its behaviour is being observed, or the state is unable to control its behaviour in a deceptive manner, usually because of the high profile status of the data.¹⁴

Evidently, strategic depictions are complex phenomena. They are the substance of strategic communication, granting insight into a state’s strategic

perspective, and how a state desires its strategic outlook to be perceived by other states. They provide windows into the strategic interests of a government and its polity. The Howard Government's strategic depiction of China was a message to China, the United States and the entire Asia-Pacific region, conveying how Australia strategically viewed China from 1996 until 2006, and how it desired its strategic outlook to be perceived by other states.¹⁵ It is a complex dialogue, to more than one audience, and it is an evolving rather than a static dialogue. Strategic depictions are the 'language' of strategy, imparting knowledge of broader strategic trends.¹⁶ Depictions can also reveal the influence of contextual circumstances, as a barometer of how relations between two states are faring. Furthermore, strategic depictions are not mere commentaries on strategic phenomena; they possess considerable strategic weight in the considerations of grand strategy. Consequently, in the field of Australian strategic studies the former Howard Government's strategic depiction of China is a seminal topic. How it viewed China had a genuine impact on Australia's strategic environs today. Thus Australia's depictions of China are important not only for providing clear transparent communication of Australia's perspective on the rise of China, but also for trying to influence the strategic behaviour of China and other regional actors, particularly the United States, Japan and country members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

This investigation draws upon a number of primary sources of strategic depictions, including policy statements, as well as government speeches and media releases. It is divided into three chapters. Research results indicate three discernible changes in the mood and rhetoric of Howard Government depictions of China and Australia-China relations between 1996 and 2006. These are Period One (March 1996 to December 1996), Period Two (January 1997 to December 2002) and Period Three (January 2003 to December 2006). Period One was characterised by frequent diplomatic disputes between Australia and China, and may be regarded as a period of relationship deterioration. While Howard Government *policy* depictions of China remained very positive, the mood of the relationship was extremely poor. January 1997 to December 2002 is distinguishable from the other periods as a time of relatively stable relations between the two countries, bolstered by a booming trade relationship. Although diplomatic disputes did arise frequently, these were successfully navigated around as economic interests took firm precedence. It can be characterised as a period of relationship restoration and intensification. The third period, January 2003 to December 2006, can be characterised as a period of relationship ambiguity, or 'friendly unease'. The key phrase in the 2003 White Paper, 'strategic economic relationship', opened new possibilities for interpreting the relationship in contrast to the distinctly economic driven vision of the previous six years.¹⁷ While the economic relationship remained vibrant and central to

the relationship, new strategic dimensions were becoming apparent in Howard Government rhetoric.

Having examined these three periods this investigation will submit concluding remarks. In brief, an overarching theme of this investigation is the tension between economic opportunity and strategic anxiety caused by China's rise. The investigation observes that, although the Howard Government's dominant *depiction* of China was positive, a persistent but subtle theme of strategic unease was discernible. This indicates that a resilient and persistent strategic *perception* of doubt and unease was evident within the Howard Government in relation to China's rise. Consequently, across the Howard years a coherent, deliberate policy of positive depictions was implemented. It can be argued that a steady and coherent evolution occurred in the government's depiction of the Australia-China relationship, from an economic relationship (1996), to an economic relationship with strategic significance (1997), to a strategic economic relationship (2003) and, finally, to an explicit strategic relationship (2004). This evolution, of predominantly positive depictions and occasionally cautious depictions, arguably served a Howard Government hedging strategy in the region. This hedging strategy was aimed in particular at the dual goals of a strong ANZUS alliance and US presence in the region, and the peaceful development and accommodation of China into the Asia-Pacific security architecture. The Howard Government's hedging behaviour reflected the actions of the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region, who lead the region in their hedging activities. According to Evan S. Medeiros,

the United States and China are pursuing policies that, on one hand, stress engagement and integration mechanisms and, on the other, emphasize realist style balancing in the form of external security cooperation with Asian states and national military modernization programs.¹⁸

In Australia's case, hedging involved building a strong ANZUS alliance and US-led regional security structure, while engaging and accommodating China at the same time. Recent events, such as the discussion of a trilateral missile defence system between the United States, Australia and Japan, provide strong supporting evidence for the case that Australia was hedging, rather than being drawn into a Chinese sphere of influence.¹⁹ By hedging, Australia was able to conduct a low-risk engagement program with China while bolstering its regional security partnerships. This policy served as an insurance guarantee: regardless of the future security environment—whether it be the ideal peaceful development and integration of China into the Asia-Pacific security architecture, or a less favourable, adversarial US-China balance of power system—Australian security would be ensured. Finally, this investigation briefly examines the utility of the

Howard Government's hedging strategy, and whether other viable policy alternatives were available to it.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Trade in the financial year to March 2007 with China grossed A\$52.7 billion, surpassing Australia's trade with Japan of A\$50.6 billion. See David Uren, 'China emerges as our biggest trade partner', *Australian*, 5 May 2007, available at <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/printpage/0,5942,21674786,00.html>>, accessed 8 May 2007.
- ² Hugh White, 'The limits to optimism: Australia and the rise of China', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 4, December 2005, p. 478.
- ³ Don Greenlees and Richard McGregor, 'Downer warns China over war games', *Australian*, 13 March 1996, p. 8.
- ⁴ Prime Minister John Howard, 'Interview with Steve Liebmann', 5 May 2000, available at <<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/interview/2000/today0505.cfm>>, accessed 1 April 2007.
- ⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2003, p. xv; and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, 'Media Conference', Beijing, 17 August 2004, available at <http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2004/040817_ds_beijing.html>, accessed 2 April 2007.
- ⁶ 'Peaceful development' has become the preferred phrase within Chinese foreign policy to describe China's rise, rather than the more disputable 'peaceful rise' term. See *People's Daily Online* at <http://english.people.com.cn/zhuanti/Zhuanti_458.html>, accessed 28 November 2008.
- ⁷ 'China's Military Modernization and Cross-Strait Balance', hearing before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, One Hundred Ninth Congress, First Session, 15 September 2005, p. 232.
- ⁸ Lachlan Strahan, *Australia's China: Changing perceptions from the 1930s to the 1990s*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 289.
- ⁹ Mohan Malik, 'Australia and China: Divergence and Convergence of Interests', in James Cotton and John Ravenhill (eds), *Australia in World Affairs 1996-2000*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 109-129; and Zhang Jian, 'Australia and China: Towards a Strategic partnership?', in James Cotton and John Ravenhill (eds), *Australia in World Affairs 2001-2005*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 89-111.
- ¹⁰ Michael Wesley, *The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia 1996-2006*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2007, p. 218.
- ¹¹ Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1970, p. 10.
- ¹² Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, p. 3.
- ¹³ Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, p. 20.
- ¹⁴ Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, p. 28.
- ¹⁵ As one commentator has noted, policy has four different audiences—the individual policy department that produced the statement, the government in general, the domestic audience, and the international audience. Often these audiences are ranked accordingly. Interview with former Howard Government employee.
- ¹⁶ Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, p. 21.
- ¹⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Advancing the National Interest*, p. 79.
- ¹⁸ Evan S. Medeiros, 'Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Winter 2005-06), pp. 145-67 at p. 145.
- ¹⁹ Alexander Downer, 'Joint press conference with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice', Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California, 24 May 2007, available at <http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2007/070524_jpc_rice.html>, accessed 25 May 2007.