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The people's Republic of China and Australia: an end to years of tension?

Abstract

Australia is a country which faces a complex situation from the point of view of world geopolitics, as it maintains an economic and trade dependence on China while is also aligned with the United States on security issues. For this reason, Canberra's strategy has been based on trying to balance its trade relationship with Beijing with the strengthening of its defence alliance with Washington.

Despite this, Sino-Australian relations have deteriorated dramatically with accusations and doubts raised about government policies on both sides in recent years. This resulted in China's imposition of trade restrictions on Australian key exports and in a diplomatic freeze between both countries that has now ended after several years.

However, a wide variety of factors have contributed to the stabilisation of the situation between the actors involved, as demonstrated by the meeting between Anthony Albanese and Xi Jinping on November 6, 2023.

Keywords

Australia, China, Asia Pacific region, International relations.

Cite this article:

Román González, M. (2024). The People's Republic of China and Australia: an end to years of tensions? *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*. N.º 23, pp. 257-279.

I. Introduction

Despite being a country traditionally perceived as Western because of its historical and cultural ties with both the United Kingdom and the United States, Australia decided at the beginning of the 21st century to reach out to new countries in its Asian neighbourhood, such as China. Indeed, during the first years of this century, the Oceanic country decided to extend its political-diplomatic contacts with the Asian giant to make the most of the potential of the economic relations between the two sides.

Thus, in recent decades, relations between the two countries have been mainly linked to the economic sphere to the detriment of the political one. The latter would be more neglected as evidenced by the few high-level meetings of its political leaders at the bilateral level, beyond the existing interactions at the multilateral level in bodies such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the East Asia Summit or the G20.

For China, however, what makes Australia a key target is its strategic value. By increasing its influence over what is one of the United States' main allies in the Asia-Pacific region, Beijing seeks to condition Canberra's efforts to limit its ambitions. In doing so, the Chinese authorities aim to strengthen their role and undermine US leadership in an increasingly contested region.

Australia, thus, finds itself in a highly complex situation in geopolitical terms as it is situated between two rival powers. While the country is economically and commercially dependent on Beijing, this one is aligned with Washington on security issues. Despite this, there have been numerous occasions on which Australian political figures have defended Australia's ability to make its own decisions as a sovereign state without having to choose between two nations rather than on the basis of self-interest. This explains Canberra's strategy so far of balancing its relations with both powers. In this regard, it is important to note that beyond the already noted importance of the economic and trade factor, there are several interests at stake for Australia in its relations with China. This includes the community ties generated by the Chinese diaspora in Australia, the wide diversity of views within the population on Sino-Australian relations, among others.

In recent years, relations between the two countries have been at their worst for many reasons. On the Australian side, there have been several accusations against China in relation to its possible interference in national affairs, the effects of its influence on Australian universities, arbitrary detentions of Australian citizens on Chinese territory, or even threats to Australia's own security. China has repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction with such accusations. In addition to allegations of racism towards Chinese citizens on Australian soil, the Asian giant has expressed its strong opposition to Canberra's regional policies.

Arguably the height of this period of tensions came in 2020 with Australia's decision to launch an investigation into the origins of COVID-19. This act was seen by China

as an unjustifiable attack, which led to China's decision to take a series of measures that affected Canberra mainly in the economic sphere and eventually resulted in a freeze in relations between the two countries.

However, tensions began to ease recently following the victory of the Labour Party in Australia and the subsequent formation of a new government led by Anthony Albanese from May 23, 2022. An example of this is the new prime minister's trip to Beijing in November last year, the first visit by an Australian leader to the Asian country since 2016. Since then, both countries appear to have returned to a path of stability, as evidenced by the progressive withdrawal of China's economic restrictive measures and the softening of Australia's rhetoric.

Despite the relevance of the issue, the existing bibliography on the subject in Spain is quite scarce, with publications such as, for example, that of Alejandro Mackinlay (2022). Beyond the news related to Sino-Australian tensions that have been published in Spain, in the Spanish literature the issue is generally framed as part of the analysis of the dispute for global power between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region, as can be seen in works such as those by Laura Paíno Peña (2018) and Magi Castelltort Claramunt (2023), among others. Thus, the existing literature is primarily Australian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese. Within what is the most abundant bibliography, relatively current articles published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) stand out, such as those by Bates Gill (2023) and Graeme Dobell (2024). These are of great relevance for an introduction to the topic in question by providing a record of the evolution of the events under study.

The aim of this article is to analyse the main causes and effects of the period of political tensions between Australia and China between 2017 and 2023. Considering that the phenomenon to be analysed requires the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches, the methodological framework used for this study is the mixed method, characterised by combining both methods (Bryman, 2008: 603). On the one hand, quantitative data collection has been carried out through large official databases accessible on the Internet. Qualitative data collection was based on a literature and documentary review. Among the documents used, a distinction can be made between primary sources, if they are original documents, or secondary sources, if they analyse or refer to primary documents (Lamont, 2021: 97). In the case of the former, a review of official documents such as legislation or political declarations, among others, has been essential. As for the secondary ones, we can highlight the reading of monographs, press or articles in academic and scientific journals.

The article is therefore structured in three sections, which will be accompanied by the respective conclusion of the research. First, by way of introduction, the document has a first section in which the most important episodes of tension that have taken place between the two countries from 2017 to the present day are presented chronologically. Then, taking into account the importance of the economic and security factor in Sino-Australian relations, China's role in these areas is analysed in order to explain as fully as possible the effects that these tensions have had on Australia. Finally, the

conclusions section presents the main results of the research in order to be able to conceive possible future scenarios with respect to the issue analysed.

2. Sino-Australian tensions since 2017

The main erosion of Sino-Australian relations since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1972 occurred in 2017. From the second decade of this century onwards, Australia began to adopt defensive policies towards China, coinciding with the rise of the latter as a power and the consequent changes in the international power structure. China's actions stemming from its growing influence as a major player changed Australia's perception of the regional security environment and its concerns about interference in internal affairs (Gill, 2023: 250-263). In this regard, there have been several reasons for such a deterioration in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

On the one hand, Canberra has denounced Chinese meddling in Australian affairs and in various sectors of Australian society, including government and institutions, going so far as to accuse China of espionage almost directly. In 2017, Australia's then prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, publicly denounced the danger posed to the country by foreign meddling in national affairs, putting democracy and the values that characterise the Australian state at risk:

“We should not be naïve about this; foreign powers are making unprecedented and increasingly sophisticated attempts to influence the political process both here and abroad [...] Recently we have seen disturbing reports of Chinese influence. I take these reports very seriously, as do my colleagues. But these reforms are not just about one country. Foreign interference is a global problem” (Turnbull, 2017).

Consequently, a year later the Australian Parliament pushed through legislation against foreign interference with the aim of ensuring national security by strengthening the country's capabilities against acts intended to interfere in Australia's affairs and/or support the intelligence activities of a foreign government (Australian Government, 2018). Although Canberra initially sought to generalise on this issue without explicitly naming China in these laws, their mere passage further inflamed tensions with the Asian giant.

In the same year, Australian authorities banned Chinese technology companies Huawei and ZTE from carrying out projects in Australia aimed at providing 5G technology to the country's wireless networks, citing national security concerns: “The Government considers that the involvement of vendors who are likely to be subject to extrajudicial instructions from a foreign government that conflict with Australian law, may run the risk of inadequacy on the part of the operator to adequately protect a 5G network from unauthorised access or interference” (Parliament of Australia, 2018).

Although not explicitly referred to, this decision by the Australian executive came almost immediately after the adoption of the National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic of China, Article 7 of which states that: "Pursuant to the law, any organisation and citizen shall support, assist and cooperate in national intelligence work and protect the secrecy of national intelligence work of which they are aware" (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2017; China Law Translate, 2017). In response, as tensions between the two countries escalated, arrests of Australian citizens on Chinese soil became a constant occurrence, to the point where the Australian government issued official warnings to its people about travelling to the Asian giant. These, which are still in force today, explicitly state that: "Australians may be at risk of arbitrary detention or strict enforcement of local laws, including the broadly defined National Security Acts" (Government of Australia, 2024).

Another measure taken by Beijing was to send Chinese academics to Australia with the aim of criticising the drift of Australia's policies and to generate a feeling of rejection of the future of Sino-Australian relations among the population, also generating sympathy towards China to the detriment of the United States (Hayes and Ping, 2023). In this regard, another Australian concern about its Asian neighbour is its growing influence on its universities and its dangerous effects on academic freedom (Babones, 2019). This Chinese influence is growing due to the increasing dependence of Australian higher education on investment and the influx of international students, most of whom come from China (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024).

Given the drift in Sino-Australian relations against such a backdrop, the Fifth China-Australia Diplomatic and Strategic Dialogue between the then foreign ministers of the two countries, Wang Yi and Marise Payne, was held in Beijing at the end of 2018. In order to promote stability in the Asia-Pacific region, the aim is to rebalance bilateral relations between two key regional players by rebuilding mutual political trust between them (Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia, 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). But far from easing, the situation escalated further in 2020, when the then Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, addressed the United Nations Assembly and made a clear case for an enquiry into the origins of COVID-19 (UN Audiovisual Library, 2020). In this way, Australia led global calls for impartial international research, consolidating an initiative that would be endorsed by several countries at the World Health Assembly (World Health Organization, 2020).

China's response to the Australian initiative was swift. The Beijing authorities decided to impose high tariffs and trade investigations on major Australian exports in an attempt to get Australia to reverse its actions. The main products affected were barley, beef and wine, while restrictions were imposed on a range of other products including coal. These have been among Canberra's top twenty-five exports since before 2020, with China also being its largest market (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023). For this reason, Australia requested consultations under the World Trade Organisation's dispute settlement mechanism regarding the Beijing government's measures on its products (World Trade Organisation, 2020).

The same year also saw further episodes of tension. On the one hand, Australia suffered a large-scale cyberattack, adding to a long series of attacks spread over several years. In this case, while the Australian authorities avoided blaming any actor, the then Australian Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Scott Morrison and Linda Reynolds, noted that the scale of such an attack pointed to it being carried out with the backing of a state (Australian Government Defence, 2020a). As reported by the Chinese government's official news agency, the *Xinhua News Agency* (2020), China responded to the possible accusations by accusing the Australian Strategic Policy Institute of conducting a smear campaign against Beijing in order to please Washington. In turn and following the example of countries such as the UK and Canada, Australia took the decision to unilaterally suspend its extradition and mutual legal assistance treaties with Hong Kong as a rejection of China's controversial implementation of the National Security Law (Parliament of Australia, 2020).

Therefore, in late 2020, in a clear attempt to put pressure on the Scott Morrison government, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canberra provided local Australian media with a document listing a total of fourteen complaints from the Asian country regarding the future of Sino-Australian relations and the policies adopted by the then prime minister. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, one of the Australian news media to receive this document, reported that the complaints were as follows:

- The rejection of Chinese investment projects.
- The decision to exclude Huawei and ZTE from the country's 5G network.
- Legislation against foreign interference.
- Politicisation and obstruction of cooperation between countries.
- The enquiry into the origins of COVID-19.
- Australia's position on Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan.
- Australia's statement to the United Nations on the South China Sea.
- Alignment with the United States and its campaign against China.
- Attempts to torpedo the Belt and Road Initiative.
- Funding "anti-China" think tanks.
- Random actions and seizures against Chinese journalists.
- Accusations against Beijing regarding cyber-attacks.
- Criticism of the Chinese government and alleged racism towards Chinese citizens.
- Negative coverage of China by the Australian media (Kearsley, Bagshaw and Galloway, 2020).

On a related note, the same newspaper published an ultimatum issued by a Chinese official stating: “China is angry. If you make China the enemy, China will be the enemy” such that only if Australia gave in to these demands, could the relations between the parties be stabilised once again (Kearsley, Bagshaw and Galloway, 2020). Far from giving in, the Australian authorities stated on numerous occasions that they would not compromise Australia’s national security and sovereignty to suit the interests of any state. Moreover, their stance on Chinese provocations has since then become much firmer, as proved by the government’s response to a social media post by the spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian. It featured a fake photograph of an Australian soldier holding a bloody knife to a child’s throat in Afghanistan. This aroused Canberra’s ire to such an extent that the then Prime Minister demanded an apology from the Asian giant, which the latter refused to make (Bagshaw, 2020).

The situation would once again become complicated in September 2021 with the signing of the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. This initiative would seek to deepen cooperation between the three countries in the area of security and defence, a key issue for the country within a context where security challenges in the region have only increased significantly. Specifically, the agreement would focus on strengthening cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and submarine capabilities by delivering nuclear propulsion technology to the country so it could equip nuclear attack submarines (Australian Government Defence, 2021).

This all changed with the election of a new government in Australia in 2022, when the Labour Party won and Anthony Albanese became the current Prime Minister. Since coming to power, it is clear that the new leader has opted to pursue a policy focused on normalising relations with the Asian giant in order to ease Sino-Australian tensions in both economic and security terms. Even though its mandate began with a new incident with the Asian giant, the controversial interception of an Australian plane by a Chinese aircraft in the South China Sea region (Australian Government Defence, 2022a), the new government has taken several steps towards diplomatic stability.

Firstly, there was the meeting between the defence ministers of the two countries. In June 2022, during the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Richard Marles and Wei Fenghe held talks that were defined by both countries as a key step towards stabilising their complex relations. After stressing Australia’s intention to not forego its own interests and values, Marles raised Australia’s concerns with his Chinese counterpart in what was the first ministerial meeting between the parties in almost three years (Australian Government Defence, 2022b).

In November 2022, Anthony Albanese and Xi Jinping met on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali in what was an initial rapprochement (Prime Minister of Australia, 2022). One month later, it was announced that Australia’s Foreign Minister Penny Wong would visit China for the 6th Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue, becoming the first Australian Foreign Minister to visit China in almost five years. This visit, which took place on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic

relations between the two countries, sought to formally stabilise relations between the nations (Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Meanwhile, Albanese visited China in November 2023 in what was the first visit by an Australian Prime Minister since Turnbull in 2016. During this visit, Xi Jinping acknowledged that with Albanese's appointment "the China-Australia relationship has embarked on the right path of improvement and development" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). Albanese declared that "we can [...] take up the opportunity to explore how we can have further cooperation between our two countries" (Prime Minister of Australia, 2023).

Other notable diplomatic achievements include the release of the Australian journalist Cheng Lei, who was arrested in China in 2020, as well as Albanese's announcement not to cancel the Chinese company Landbridge Group's lease of the port of Darwin (Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2023), a key city in the US strategy to contain China within the Pacific. Moreover, his election seems to have marked a step not only towards diplomatic stability with Beijing, but also economic stability. The softening of Australian rhetoric has been followed by China's gradual withdrawal of restrictive trade measures adopted at the height of the tensions, while Australia has withdrawn its complaints to the World Trade Organisation, suspending the dispute (Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2023).

However, several hurdles will have to be overcome in order to maintain this stability. One example is the recent conviction of the Australian writer Yang Hengjun, who was detained in China in 2019 as one of the aforesaid successive arbitrary detentions. In this regard, while Australia's Foreign Minister declared her government's disagreement with the ruling, she also rejected measures such as the expulsion of the Chinese ambassador from the country, insisting on Canberra's willingness to continue to work with Beijing (Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2024).

3. Australia-China relations in economic terms

As with several other states within the international system, ever since China emerged as a key player within it, Australia's economy is highly dependent on the Asian giant, it being crucial for the nation's own development. As mentioned, Beijing's trade dynamics in the new century encouraged Canberra to deepen its economic ties thereafter. Under the government of John Howard, a staunch advocate of centring Sino-Australian relations in terms of economic interaction as the real converging interests of both sides, the concept of a strategic economic partnership with China had been introduced in the country's main strategic documents (Uren and Sharpe, 2012: 114-16).

In 2015, the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement came into force. It improved trade, financial and socio-economic relations between the parties by guaranteeing zero tariff measures on almost all Australian products until 2029. This agreement has

generated benefits for Canberra by improving its competitive position in the Chinese market and boosting its own economic growth (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015).

Looking at the most current data for the year 2022, China is both the main destination for Australian exports (accounting for 27.6 % of the annual total) and the main source of Canberra's imports (accounting for 21.5 % of the total). Far behind are Japan as the second largest export destination and the United States as the second largest source of the country's imports, with 17.9 % and 10.7 % respectively (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022). In the same year, 2.2 % of Chinese exports were destined for Australia, which is the thirteenth main destination for the Asian giant's total exports. At the same time, 5.2 % of Beijing's imports came from Canberra, making it the fifth largest source of its imports (Australian Government, 2022a).

This makes China Australia's largest two-way trading partner, accounting for almost a third of Australia's trade. For this reason, the country explored various tactics intended to mitigate the impact of Chinese restrictions introduced in 2020 at the height of tensions. These include diverting products through grey routes to enter the Asian continent or increasing exports of certain products to other markets such as barley to Saudi Arabia, copper to Japan and Europe, or cotton to Bangladesh and Vietnam. However, the search for alternative destinations for other affected products such as wine or timber was not as effective because they were specifically produced for the Chinese market (Wilson, 2021).

Sino-Australian tensions made market diversification a matter of urgency for Australia, which is once again being driven by the concerning international economic situation. Therefore, several agreements have been put in place since then to foster new trade relations. At the regional level, these include the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA), the Australia-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (AI-CECA) or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). At the global level, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Australia-UK Free Trade Agreement (A-UK FTA) or the Australia-EU Free Trade Agreement (A-EUFTA) are noteworthy agreements (Monzalsha *et al.*, 2023: 162-163). Except for A-EUFTA, most of them have already been signed.

Another of Australia's options to diversify its economy is to focus on strengthening its role in rare earth supply chains. As well as being key to the energy transition, these are required to produce essential components for a wide range of products, from major electronic devices to defence technology. Given its importance, the fact that China is the world's largest rare earth producer and dominates this supply chain has prompted numerous initiatives by different stakeholders to internationalise it. However, while China leads by a large margin in this area, there are countries such as Australia with significant rare earth reserves but little domestic production (Chipman Koty, 2022).

As diversifying this supply chain has become a priority for important players in the international system, Canberra is gradually investing in rare earth production, having identified it as a strategic industry. For example, during the Scott Morrison government, the then Minister for Industry, Energy and Emissions Reduction, Angus Taylor, announced major investments to exploit Australian reserves with the explicit aim of countering China's dominance (Minister for Industry, Energy and Emissions Reduction, 2022). At the same time, the general interest in reducing reliance on Chinese supply chains has encouraged several countries to establish partnerships with Australia in this area. In this regard, apart from ongoing cooperation under the Quad (Curtis, 2023), the formalisation of the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) between Australia, India and Japan is noteworthy (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022). However, given the complexity of the field in question, it must be understood that the success of these projects will only be possible in the long term.

All the above highlights Beijing's economic importance for Canberra. On one hand, although there are other stakeholders such as the United States who are also important in terms of trade and especially investment, it is clear that trade figures between China and Australia are far removed from what other markets can offer the latter. In relation to this, it is also worth noting that between 2017 and 2022, corresponding to the period of increased tensions, Australia's exports of goods and services to China grew by 9.8 %. Australian imports of goods and services from China also grew by 9.6 % within the same period (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022).

Thus, despite the predictable negative effects of Chinese restrictions on Australia, Canberra's economy proved resilience. As noted in the report published last year by the Australian Government's Productivity Commission, while the measures imposed by Beijing led to a decline in the export of products such as lobsters and wine, thereby affecting Australian exporters, exports of other products subject to the restrictions were generally resilient (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023: 38).

While the aforesaid diversification strategies have had an effect, another factor behind this situation is the very real importance of the Australian economy for China. For example, China's need to import certain materials from Australia explains the increase in Canberra's total exports to Beijing even after the measures were implemented in 2020. Given the Chinese economy's dependence on construction and manufacturing exports, materials such as iron ore and Australian thermal coal are virtually irreplaceable for the Asian giant (Coyne *et al.*, 2021: 15). This explains China's interest in stabilising relations with Australia by taking advantage of the change of government in the latter.

Regardless of the possible success of this new Sino-Australian reset, it is clear that the market diversification promoted by Australia, especially since 2020, must remain a foreign policy target for the country. Given the international economic situation today and China's unreliability as a partner for Canberra, the lifting of trade restrictions should not deter Canberra from continuing to search for new markets in order to ensure its economic resilience.

4. China as a challenge to Australia's security

Another of Australia's major concerns *vis-à-vis* China is in the area of security and defence. While Beijing continuously asserts its stance in favour of regional cooperation and integration policies as the main instrument to achieve greater regional security (The State Council of The People's Republic of China, 2017), both its moves and its clear intentions to dominate the Indo-Pacific and counter US influence in the region indicate the opposite. While the Asian giant mainly makes use of soft-power, vigorous efforts to build up its military might indicate that the country is preparing to use hard-power if necessary (Peña, 2018: 711-712).

Despite still being one of the largest importers of arms globally in recent years according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024), China's arms industry responds to the demands of its armed forces thanks to, among other things, the military-civil fusion and self-sufficiency policies implemented by the country given its rapid economic growth. The progress of the Asian giant's domestic arms production means that it is beginning to replace imports by covering, not only major weapon types, but also advanced technology, as demonstrated by the fact that China is a pioneer in the production of armed unmanned aerial vehicles (Béraud-Sudreau, 2022: 12). This military build-up has gone hand in hand with the widespread narrative within Australia's mainstream political circles identifying Beijing as a revisionist power that seeks to undermine the structures of the existing order for its own benefit. These concerns regarding the Asian giant and its growing presence in the Pacific have led Australia to perceive China as a threat (Varrall, 2021: 107-109).

Australia's growing unease about the Asian power is reflected in its key defence regulatory documents. The 2009 Defence White Paper already discussed the strategic implications of China's rise, especially at the regional level, (Australian Government, 2009: 34). Although China was not explicitly named in the security documents approved in 2013, they mention the risk posed by states with hostile intentions and the capacity to exert influence over Canberra through economic, political or military pressure (Australian Government, 2013a: 25, 2013b: 11). Years later, the 2016 Defence White Paper acknowledged Australia's rapidly changing security environment due to regional uncertainty and tension stemming mainly from territorial disputes in the East and South China seas, as well as the evolving relationship between Beijing and Washington (Australian Government, 2016: 30). A year later, the 2017 Defence White Paper re-emphasised the importance of Sino-US relations for the stability of an increasingly confrontational region. In this regard, Australia made explicit its support for the United States and its commitment to regional affairs, at the same time encouraging China to exercise its power peacefully in the region and to respect the interests of all other actors involved (Australian Government, 2017: 38-39).

In the year 2020, when Sino-Australian relations were strained, Canberra decided to update its defence strategy by boosting its military budget, among other steps. In order to respond to the rapidly changing strategic environment, Australia published both the 2020 Strategic Update (Australian Government Defence, 2020b) and the

2020 Force Structure Plan (Australian Government Defence, 2020c). An analysis of the documents reveals that their main goals were to shape Australia's strategic environment, deter actions against Australian interests, and provide the country with the ability to respond with credible military force, if necessary. To achieve these goals, the country pushed for the development of a robust defence strategy along with increased defence spending in order to have the real capacity for its implementation.

It is also noteworthy that, when contextualising the situation faced by Australia, the 2020 Strategic Update (Australian Government Defence, 2020b) explicitly mentions the US-China confrontation as a driver of Asia-Pacific dynamics. In addition to the specific case of Beijing's active attempts to exert greater influence in the region, it is also worth noting its recognition of the coercive behaviour of certain countries as a threat, in what appears to be a compilation of episodes of tension with the Asian giant:

“Some countries will continue to pursue their strategic interests through a combination of coercive activities, including espionage, interference and economic levers. Tensions over territorial claims and the establishment of new military facilities are rising and are involving the use of military or paramilitary forces more frequently than in the past, including coercive paramilitary activities in the South China Sea” (Australian Government Defence, 2020b: 12).

At the same time, Canberra reiterated that it would continue its alliance with the US, despite seeking greater self-sufficiency in military terms (Australian Government Defence, 2020b: 4). Thus, the 2020 Strategic Update and the 2020 Force Structure Plan not only outline the country's main measures to strengthen its military capabilities, but also state the importance of boosting its security ties with neighbours such as Japan, India and Indonesia in order to preserve stability within its geographical environment. As a result, several months later, Australia and Japan announced breakthrough negotiations on the Australia-Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement, which was finally signed in early 2022 (Australian Government, 2022b).

Likewise, the gradual expansion of Chinese interests in the region and its increasing military capabilities have aroused Australian fears of a new String of Pearls, that is, the Chinese installation of port infrastructures around Australian territory that could be used to carry out operations against the latter. This explains Australia's interest in signing the AUKUS treaty by which Canberra would not only strengthen its alliance with the world's leading maritime power, the United States, but also exponentially expand its naval capabilities (Mackinlay, 2022: 15-16).

Canberra is also concerned about the Asian giant's activities in the Pacific Islands region. Firstly, it is possible that China's increasing influence over these islands will mean that the future behaviour and positions of their governments will be conditioned by Beijing's directives as compensation for the loans granted to them (Varrall, 2021: 119-139). However, it is important to note that China's debt trap diplomacy is a controversial and little-proven assertion that has been refuted by certain studies, such as that of researchers Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri (2020). On the other hand, while

historically it has been Australia's objective to maintain security and stability in what is one of its closest areas (Hegarty, 2015: 8), one of the country's main apprehensions today involves China's ambition to establish military bases in the region as part of a power projection strategy (Varrall, 2021: 117).

This may be seen in the first official document on security published by Canberra after the recent stabilisation of Sino-Australian relations began: the Defence Strategic Review 2023. This type of document has only been published three times in the country's history, its predecessors being the 1986 *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* and the 2012 *Defence Force Posture Review*. Indeed, according to the report, its publication responds to the country's need to adapt to a new strategic reality marked by the destabilisation of regional security, especially as a result of China's assertiveness:

“Regional countries continue to modernise their military forces. China's military build-up is now the largest and most ambitious of any country since the end of the Second World War. This has occurred alongside significant economic development, benefiting many countries in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia. This build-up is occurring without transparency or reassurance to the Indo-Pacific region of China's strategic intent. China's assertion of sovereignty over the South China Sea threatens the global rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific in a way that adversely impacts Australia's national interests. China is also engaged in strategic competition in Australia's near neighbourhood” (Australian Government Defence, 2023: 23-24).

Thus, according to the document, immediate actions to be taken by the country range from developing the capabilities of the Australian Armed Forces to deepening the country's ties with key partners in the Indo-Pacific, either in diplomatic terms or in defence terms, especially through the AUKUS format (Australian Government Defence, 2023: 7).

In this regard, it is worth noting that two elements are constantly repeated in all referenced documents. Firstly, the US is recognised as Australia's main security ally, and secondly, Australia's firm stance in favour of maintaining global and regional security in the hands of Washington and not any emerging power such as China itself, is repeatedly underscored. This is due to the fact that Canberra has regarded the US as an indispensable and priority partner since 1952, when the ANZUS Treaty was signed between Australia, New Zealand and the United States in order to promote defence cooperation between the signatories.

In this regard, despite being a diplomatic initiative, Australia's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is also noteworthy. Factors such as China's assertiveness under Xi Jinping's leadership, the implications of the Belt and Road Initiative, and tensions in the East and South China seas would lead to the reactivation of this initiative, which was initially proposed in 2007 (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024). Ten years later, Australia, India, Japan and the United States took up the plan based on a common interest in countering

Chinese action in the region to provide the latter with a stable balance of power (Lee, 2020: 2-4).

5. Conclusions

Although there has been little media coverage, the ongoing tensions between Australia and China in recent years are a good example of the power struggle that exists in the Asia-Pacific, a region where the centre of global power is increasingly shifting. Beyond highlighting China's well-known claims to strategic enclaves in the region, the tense episodes in Sino-Australian relations in recent years have demonstrated the tools and capabilities at Beijing's disposal to exert influence over any actor involved in the region.

So far, Australia has faced the challenge of balancing its economic dependence on China with its own values and interests in the face of growing authoritarianism in the Asian giant and its continuing regional ambitions. However, it should not be forgotten that there are differences of opinion within Australia itself on the direction to be taken by the nation in its relations with China, as Beijing's economic importance means that many view cooperation with the Asian giant as a necessity.

Australia has found it increasingly difficult to maintain its traditional duality between economic interests represented by China, and strategic interests represented, in this case, by the United States. This explains Beijing's economic coercion regarding Canberra as the latter's actions were increasingly not to its liking. Thus, scholars such as Clive Hamilton (2018) consider that, rather than a trade war *per se*, this case may be defined as a psychological war waged by China on Australia.

While Chinese trade restrictions fell far short of the impact sought by Chinese authorities on the Australian economy, the constant episodes of tensions in recent years have pushed Canberra to strive to diversify of its economy. In general terms, however, it is very difficult for this country in Oceania to find a suitable alternative to offset its trade figures with China, despite available options such as strengthening regional ties with countries such as India or with other global actors such as the European Union. In this sense, the fact that both sides sought to stabilise bilateral relations and the consequent withdrawal of restrictive economic measures from 2022 onwards, coinciding with the discouraging international situation, especially in economic terms, is somewhat revealing.

In terms of security, the growing hostilities between the two nations increased Australia's sense of vulnerability. Even though the country's main security documents approved over the last century increasingly identify the Asian giant as a threat, this period of tensions has definitely forced Canberra to intensify the strengthening of its ties with regional allies and increase national defence spending. This accounts for Australia's attempts to reinforce its official security and defence instruments, as well as the signing of the AUKUS agreement.

Therefore, while the new Australian government appears to have taken the decision to implement policies of rapprochement with China, leaving aside past tensions, it is clear that Australia must still keep in mind the importance of reducing its economic dependence on the Asian giant, even if this is an extremely complex measure, given the Chinese market's significance for its national economy. Given that China can use economic coercion to target the most vulnerable sectors of Australia's economy as a punitive measure if it does not act in the former's interests, Australia must realise that to maintain its sovereignty and independence, it must diversify its economy, even if Beijing remains an essential trading partner today.

In security terms, Australia is obliged to continue to expand its partnerships and further strengthen its own defence capabilities. Beijing's increasingly active claims to leadership in the region and the very history of tensions between the two countries, not only make China an unreliable partner, but also a permanent threat to Australian security. Regardless of whether these improved relations between the two countries will continue in the medium and long term or not, it is clear that the main basis for this period of stability will be economic, given the complementarity between the two sides. In the area of security, there will still be new concerns.

Despite the considerable differences between the parties involved, all these factors make it clear that both countries now seem to be opting for a new direction in their relations, towards a common goal of prosperity. However, it should be understood that this stabilisation is in the interest of both sides so as to maintain their converging interests rather than to foster real two-way trust. This Sino-Australian reconciliation must therefore still be treated with caution. It remains to be seen whether this trend will continue over time, given the situation of both countries in a region whose geostrategic value has made it a key matter in the fight for global dominance.

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Article received: February 18, 2024.

Accepted article: May 23, 2024.
