

Carr's chance to rally China interest

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From Beijing's viewpoint, the appointment of Foreign Minister Bob Carr signifies the possibility of a fresh start for the present Labor government to strengthen relations. Now would be an ideal opportunity for Canberra to convince Beijing of the need to establish a strategic dialogue, including broadening existing co-operation between the two militaries.

The resignation of Kevin Rudd as foreign minister was a welcome development for Beijing. One clear impression based on a week of meetings in Beijing with Chinese officials and researchers as well as Australian China-based diplomats is that the "Rudd factor" has been an underlying tension in China-Australia ties for four years.

With Rudd no longer in government, Chinese interlocutors were willing to elaborate on their dislike for the first Chinese-speaking Western leader. Interestingly, it was not the 2009 Defence white paper nor the (in)famous Beijing University speech by Rudd in 2008 that appears to have caused the greatest irritation among Chinese foreign policy specialists. Rather, it was Rudd's uncomplimentary remark about Chinese ("rats") at the Copenhagen Climate Summit in addition to his comments to Hillary Clinton about being prepared to use force against China, disclosed by WikiLeaks.

The second impression is that, despite media reports to the contrary, Canberra's decision to rotate 2500 US marines through Darwin has not caused new tensions in Australia's relations. Four Australian ministers have made official visits to China since Barack Obama's Canberra visit in November. The Darwin decision has not once been brought up by Chinese hosts in official talks with these government members. If Beijing was upset, the issue would certainly have been raised, regardless of the portfolio of the minister.

This does not mean the Chinese government was pleased with the way the Australian government handled the Darwin announcement or the Obama visit. Time and again in meetings in Beijing, including with two vice-ministers, I was told that Canberra could have been more deft in taking into account the views of China in responding to Obama's speech in the Australian parliament. I agree. I also heard Australia should beware lest it be perceived as a lackey of Washington.

But the expansion of military ties between Australia and the US did not figure in Chinese observations of China-Australia ties. A recurring comment was that China acknowledges the long alliance between Australia and the US. A final impression from this, my fourth visit to Beijing since moving away from China in April last year, was that for the first time there was beginning to be some interest among Chinese foreign policy officials and researchers to even discuss Australia. On previous visits in 2011, the usual response to a question about the state of China-Australia relations was a shrug, a quizzical look, and an apologetic response about not really having much to say on the issue.

This time I was confronted with a string of questions. Does the Darwin decision signal an intention by the US to contain China? What do Australians think about the Darwin decision? Is Australia prepared to play a role in persuading the US to seek more constructive ties with China?

So the Darwin decision has put Australia on the radar screen of China's foreign policy establishment. Some might ask for better or for worse, but in the words of one Australian official it is better to be noticed for the wrong reasons than to be "just a hole in the ground". Australia struggles to get the attention of a rising power, which in its foreign policy thinking is absorbed by its relations with its neighbours and other major powers, especially the US.

Herein lies a real and substantive opportunity for Foreign Minister Carr, an unknown entity to Beijing. Carr should seek a meeting with his Chinese counterpart as soon as possible. Australia needs more meaningful strategic engagement with China. Raising the level of scheduled, recurring meetings to deputy prime minister or foreign minister level would establish a high-level mechanism not susceptible to the inevitable ups and downs in relationships.

It would also offer the possibility to deepen discussions between Canberra and Beijing from merely bilateral issues to broadly regional issues. It is in Australia's interests to be perceived by China not only as a trading partner, but also as an important and useful regional player, with which regional problems can be jointly addressed.

The strategic dimension of Canberra's relationship with Beijing has fallen way behind the trade dimension. There is much scope to broaden engagement between the two militaries beyond the live-fire joint exercises off the coast of Qingdao in 2010 and disaster relief exercises near Chengdu in 2011. Australia could also target subsequent generations of China's top political leaders with an intensive leadership training initiative for senior officials at the provincial level.

In 2022 and 2027, men (and possibly women) who are now provincial vice-governors and deputy party secretaries will lead China. Australia would not run the risk of being "just a hole in the ground" if one (or more) of the most senior leaders in China could authoritatively say they know Australia.

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