

Explaining the Troubled Australia-China Relationship: A Perspective from Australia

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Abstract

Across a range of indicators, relations between Australia and the People's Republic of China have sunk to their lowest level since they established diplomatic relations in 1972. What explains this dramatic shift in Australia-China ties and what are the prospects for the relationship going forward? Applying a basic neoclassical realist framework, the article argues that Australia's more cautious, distrustful, and defensive policies toward China arise from changes in the international power structure—especially the PRC's emergence as a stronger and more influential actor—and how in turn those changes are interpreted through Australian domestic norms, worldviews, processes, and incentives. The article explores and explains these developments through a discussion of the overarching geostrategic and normative precepts which have consistently shaped Australia's past, present and future approach to the world, including its approach to relations with China; the application of a neoclassical realist framework for understanding the changes in Australian policies toward China; an in-depth look at three key intervening domestic variables which shape Australia's increasingly tough approach to China; and an overview of the key Australian policy outcomes vis-à-vis China. Based on this analysis, the article finds that Australia-China relations will likely face a prolonged period of tension and distrust.

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