

Australia won't pick sides in Pacific

Editor's Note:

The recent months have witnessed ups and downs in China-Australia relations. Since Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott took office in September, 2013, Canberra has taken tough stances that have antagonized China in some sensitive issues. How should we view recent tensions in ties between China and Australia? Where could this bilateral relationship be headed? Global Times (GT) reporter Liu Zhun talked to former Australian ambassador to China Geoffrey Raby (Raby), who now runs consulting firm Geoff Raby & Associates in Beijing, about these questions.

GT: What has made Australia change its policies toward challenging China politically and diplomatically?

Raby: I think the Australian government has difficulty getting the balance right amid matters including the rise of China, and alliances with the US and Japan. There are a lot of challenges going on in the world at present, and the new Australian government is trying to position itself and find a safe zone when dealing with China.

I think Abbott had a good visit to Beijing this April, and when Chinese President Xi Jinping comes to Australia to attend the G20 Summit this November, this will serve as a significant opportunity for both sides to recalibrate their relationship.

It is a complex challenge for the Australian government to manage its relationship with China well.

So far Australian people are holding more favorable views on China, which is very positive and welcoming. I think we just need to give both governments a bit more time.

GT: During Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's recent visit to Australia, he said that China may not be Australia's closest friend at the moment. What do you think both sides should do to deal with the current predicament?

Raby: We have seen ups and downs in



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the relationship before, and we have continued to seek common ground instead of focusing our attention on differences. These differences between Australia and China do not mean both sides cannot be cooperative in pursuing each other's interests.

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In 2009 when then vice premier Li Keqiang went to Australia and signed a joint statement with former prime minister Kevin Rudd, we were having a very

difficult year in the bilateral relationship, much more difficult and challenging than we have right now.

Li took a big step by going to Australia and talking about the problems. His efforts produced a joint understanding of the management of the relationship, which I think is a significant success that still influences things today. This could serve as an important experience for both sides in managing the relationship through bad times and good times.

But if you look at the 42 years of bilateral relations, for most of the time the two countries have had very good ties. I believe this trajectory will remain positive in the future because of the expanding mutual interests upon which Australia and China can base their relationship.

GT: Due to the changing landscape of the Asia-Pacific region, do you think Australia has taken sides between China and the US? What do you think of the much discussed paradox that many countries in this region are becoming economically reliant on China, but leaning toward the US in terms of politics and security?

Raby: Australia has been in a military alliance with the US for the sake of national security for about 60 years and this won't change. This fact is known to everyone including the Chinese government. We don't have similar alliances with other nations such as Japan and China, which makes Australia's relationship with the US quite special.

I don't think there is a situation where Australia means to take sides between China and the US. That sounds like an issue for us.

There is a rebalancing of power in the region, and it does mean that we all have to accommodate that. It is a very challenging question for the Australian government.

So far the most powerful force to change the regional balance of power is

the rise of China. Australia welcomes China's rise as well as its further integration into the international system. We mustn't get into a mindset that it is either this or that. It can be a win-win, and this is the great strength of the opening-up of East Asia.

I think even China welcomes a strategic presence of the US in this region to guarantee regional stability.

GT: What do you think are the prospects for a free trade agreement between China and Australia? Do you think the current political and diplomatic tensions will hold up progress?

Raby: I don't think the temporary displeasures in the relationship will jeopardize the progress of a free trade agreement negotiation. On the contrary, it is a good example of how strongly common interests prevail over short-term issues. It will go ahead because there is a commercial base for it.

As far as I know, the agreement is very close to being achieved. I hope it can be achieved because it was originally my idea back

in 2003. I put that proposal forward, and I have a personal interest in seeing it completed.

It will be very good in resetting and reinvigorating the relationship. The agreement will be very positive and both sides will be able to look at each other more closely. I think it is very important to mention the value of this trade agreement to China, which is often not properly understood.

This agreement is a government-to-government treaty-level agreement. It means the Australian government would not be able to support any sort of trade action against China. The agreement will also give China a greater degree of security over future supplies and resources in terms of energy, minerals and food. So the agreement will surely be a valuable government-to-government legally binding framework to wrap around the relationship.

TOP TALK

巅峰对话

Don't falsely equate people's living choices with their political stances

By Han Zhu

Nowadays a climate of fact-based and rational discussions about social issues is being formed in China. But some people remain used to taking an individual's identity as a factor when deciding to go for or against the person's views.

For instance, some in China are often questioned, if they praise the advantages of the US, why they don't emigrate to the US since it has so much to commend it.

Similarly, when those Chinese who live or study in Western countries speak highly of the progress China has made, they are also confronted by others as to why they don't stay in China.

Such a mindset that binds the discussion of social issues with the choices of personal life defies the right of free choice in personal life and social tolerance in modern society.

Modern society is marked by high diversity and mobility. Since the end of the Cold War, population mobility has increased dramatically. Nearly 3 million Chinese have studied abroad since reform and opening-up began and more than half of them have chosen to work or reside where they study. The number of Chinese emigrants overseas has also been rising rapidly. It's natural that different political views exist in such a big group.

A large number of overseas Chinese are sentimentally at-

tached to the societies they live in and meanwhile love their home countries. Such entwined feelings can generally be found in this group of Chinese people and also almost all the other emigrants. The ethnic groups living in the US always celebrate the major festivals of their mother countries, but this doesn't lessen their love for the US.

Another feature of modern society is the separation of one's life choice and political views.

Nowadays a person's life is decided by so many factors. While political views indeed have impact on such a choice, they are not the most important or decisive factor.

Even in the past, a person's

political views couldn't be simply equated with his or her dwelling place and it's not unusual that one has love for both the living place and the motherland. For instance, overseas Chinese have been a major force behind China's development from the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45) to the reform and opening-up period.

For the same reason, it's not appropriate to simply conclude that those who criticize China's political defects have no affection for the country.

Diversified social structures lead to different opinions on the same phenomenon and these views deserve to be treated without bias.

Equating political views with

personal life is an extreme approach, as is equating criticism of China's shortcomings with indifference to the country.

Politicizing everything makes it hard for people to calmly discuss social issues. I think it's key to be fact-based, rational and tolerant during discussion of social issues and this is the only way to keep society harmonious as well as undivided.

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