

9 Unpacking Australia's “China Threat” Discourse

A Constructivist Approach

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Introduction

“I don’t think anybody’s in any fantasy land about where it started. It started in China” was Australian PM Scott Morrison’s verdict on the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020 (McGuirk, 2020). Australia called for an international inquiry into the pandemic’s origins and demanded full transparency from the Chinese government. This episode, the first of many as bilateral relations soured, led to Chinese trade restrictions on a number of Australian products (Laurenceson et al., 2020; Goodman, 2022). This was not an isolated incident: in recent years, China has utilised its economic leverage to pressure Japan (Bradsher, 2010; Evenett & Fritz, 2023), the Philippines (Higgins, 2012), and South Korea (Diaz & Zhang, 2017; Zelleke & Tilley, 2019) among others. These punitive measures come at a time when China has emerged as a global economic and military power. It is the second largest economy in the world and is also the second-largest military spender globally, allocating USD \$296 billion in its 2023 budget for the military—marking a 6% increase from last year and the 29th consecutive rise in military expenditure (SIPRI, 2024).

Had China’s economic resurgence, its use of coercive economic statecraft, and its concomitant military capability enhancements (or material variables, as Realists posit) been the primary factors engendering threat, then almost all Indo-Pacific nations would strive to diversify relations, limit their economic dependence on China, and enhance defence ties with regional and extra-regional partners. While these factors have generated some apprehension, they have not triggered large-scale balancing behaviour as Realists would predict. Most Southeast Asian nations, for example—some of them immediate neighbours of China—have hedged but not resorted to hard balancing (De Silva, 2020; Lobell, 2018). In fact, despite points of friction, China remains the top trading partner for many Asian nations. Even in the case of Australia, China is still the largest trading partner, accounting for 27% of two-way trade, despite the economic measures it imposed earlier on Canberra (Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 2023; Edmonstone, 2024). Clearly, threat perceptions result from a myriad of factors—not