

Anti-China hawks in a flap over Victoria's Belt and Road agreement

By Richard Bardon

13 Nov.—The Victorian state government's Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signed by Premier Daniel Andrews on 8 October and announced a fortnight later, predictably set off yet another blizzard of anti-China scaremongering. Even after the MoU's public release on 11 November proved it entirely innocuous, the Canberra security establishment and its media stenographers continue to decry the agreement as evidence that the Chinese Communist Party is taking over the country, while academics on both sides of the debate on Australia-China relations have used it as an occasion to sling mud at one another even as most of them remain blind to the fundamental issue at hand. Far too often, the question of whether China's return as a so-called Great Power threatens Australia's national sovereignty is framed around the preservation of the status quo, ignoring that Australia has no real sovereignty to be threatened. The real issue with Victoria's Belt and Road MoU is not whether it undermines Canberra's foreign policy objectives, but that it illustrates once again Canberra's prostitution of the national interest to that of an Anglo-American empire which demands China be confronted and suppressed, at any cost.

As the *Australian Alert Service* reported last week,¹ news of the MoU sent commentators scrambling to their keyboards to denounce Andrews for opening Australia's gates to a Chinese "Trojan horse", while Sky News spent many hours of airtime demanding the then-confidential text be published. Prime Minister Scott Morrison lied at a 6 November press event on Queensland's Sunshine Coast that "the Victorian government went into that arrangement without any discussions with the commonwealth government at all or taking ... any advice ... on what is a matter of international relations", when in fact the federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) had been consulted during the MoU drafting process and had had a copy since June. And contrary to the ravings of neoconservative warmonger Peter Jennings, director of Defence Department- and arms manufacturer-funded think tank the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), there is no legal, let alone "Constitutional" impediment to the agreement—not least because the MoU itself states that it is not legally binding on either party. Moreover, as Foreign Minister Marise Payne told ABC Radio's AM program on 6 November, "the states and territories ... make arrangements of this nature, at this level, regularly, with other countries in this region and more broadly".

Do as I do, not as I say

The Victoria-China MoU, which is [available to the public](#) on the Department of Premier and Cabinet website, states that the parties will work together "with the aim of promoting connectivity of policy, infrastructure, trade, finance and people ... to achieve common development, strive to develop an open global economy, jointly combat global challenges and promote the building of a common future." To this end, they will "encourage businesses and organisations ... to play facilitating roles and foster long-term, sustainable partnerships", so as to "Create an enabling, growth-friendly policy environment between the businesses on both sides." The MoU states

several times that this co-operation shall be built around existing mechanisms, and does not commit either party to any new initiative or specific project.

This reflects the outlook PM Morrison expressed, albeit in less friendly terms, in a 12 November interview with the *Australian Financial Review*. "The more stable the region is, the more prosperous the region is", he told *AFR*, and suggested Australia and China could co-finance BRI projects (though he refused to refer to them by that name) in third countries. "However others may describe them in any number of terms, we just look at an individual project and we consider that on its own merits", he said. Meanwhile the federal government is celebrating the presence of 150 Australian companies, led by Trade Minister Simon Birmingham, at last week's inaugural China International Import Expo in Shanghai (p. 8). According to the 5 November *Australian*, Birmingham even praised the Victorian government's decision to join the BRI. "We welcome the fact that Victoria has shown their enthusiasm and initiative", he said. "The Australian government welcomes the fact that, through (the BRI), China is investing more across our regions." Canberra's actions, however, speak louder than its words. Even as Morrison and his ministers talk up the benefits of economic engagement with China, his government remains committed to the US-led drive to push China out of the Pacific by armed force, and stymie its economic growth—upon which our own economy is dependent.²

A similar cognitive dissonance colours the academic discussion. As Asia historian Dr David Brophy (himself no fan of the Chinese government) commented 12 November on Twitter, regarding a recent paper by Prof. James Laurenceson of the Australia China Relations Institute (ACRI)³ which showed most China scare-stories to be unfounded: "so much of this debate is a proxy for the deeper issue. ... [A] lot of the Chinese influence stuff is about ensuring Australia stays in lock-step with the US—clearly that is what drives people like ASPI. ... The ACRI approach on the other hand is to debunk the sensationalism and argue for 'pragmatic' pursuit of economic interests, while still supporting the US alliance. Not sure if that's tenable though. What would be the pragmatic option in a crisis that forces us to choose between the two?"

Meanwhile the most important question is left unasked, even by those with "an unabashedly positive and optimistic view of the Australia-China relationship", as ACRI director and former foreign minister Bob Carr once described himself: If China is not a threat, or is made so only by the US alliance, then why do we need the US alliance in the first place?



Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews with Chinese Ambassador Cheng Jingye after signing the BRI MoU. Photo: Screenshot

1. "Victoria defies intelligence establishment by joining BRI", *AAS* 7 Nov. 2018

2. "Morrison re-commits Australia to US military hegemony, confrontation with China", *AAS* 7 Nov. 2018

3. "Sydney academic shreds anti-China scaremongering", *AAS* 7 Nov. 2018