

How much does Australia matter in Asia, in the Pacific? What is its role in addressing pressing regional issues such as security and climate change? How is the new Albanese government positioning itself and what signals has it so far sent? Dr Stephen FitzGerald, author and first Australian ambassador to the People's Republic of China, shares insights gained through decades of diplomatic experience and advising corporations, governments and in regional forums. From his home in Sydney, he spoke to Frances Cowell by telephone on 15 August.



*Frances Cowell*      Do the actions of the new Australian government, lead by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, herald genuine re-engagement with the Asia-Pacific region, following a decade or so where Australia punched below its weight in its neighbourhood?

*Stephen FitzGerald*      Its early days of course, but I really think this is a turning point. Foreign Minister Penny Wong's visits in the region, going out of her way to be photographed with her brother in Kota Kinabalu, her old home town in Malaysian Borneo; and Prime Minister Albanese taking with him Ed Husic, Minister for Industry and Science, who is a Muslim, to Indonesia, all send very special messages to the region that contrast with the outgoing Liberal (conservative) governments, most recently lead by Scott Morrison, who cut foreign affairs budgets and gave priority to security and intelligence over diplomacy.

It also contrasts with the last two Labor governments, under Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, from 2007 to 2013, which paid less heed than they might have to respected former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, who urged them to restore the centrality of relations with Southeast Asia.

Penny Wong has signalled her seriousness by appointing, as head of the foreign affairs department, a senior diplomat and previous ambassador to Tokyo and Beijing, and by personally addressing the department's staff, underlining the importance she gives them over security and intelligence agencies. She has also been quite explicit about restoring ASEAN to centrality in our foreign policy, among other, less publicised, initiatives. This new posture is for real, it is really good news.

*Frances Cowell*      Minister Wong wasted no time getting herself to the Solomon Islands. This was welcome, but might it be perceived there as merely a reaction to China's security deal?

*Stephen FitzGerald* I have no doubt that many in the Solomons and elsewhere in the Pacific will see it that way. And, indeed, the, very late in the day, interest of the Morrison government was couched specifically in those terms. And some in the current government are framing it that way. But the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, and we need to work honestly and genuinely with them on their issues, rather than simply moving and blocking every action by China. Interestingly, China's Ambassador Xiao Qian, in his speech last week to the National Press Club in Canberra, suggested working together on climate issues in third countries. In fact, at the beginning of this century, I did interest the Chinese external aid agency, in working together on aid projects in developing countries, including in the Pacific, and they were quite keen. But our bureaucracy saw it as too complicated, too difficult. Now there is an opportunity to show that our door is open and that we really want cooperation, not just on climate, but also on other issues related to immigration and working visas, seasonal fruit pickers, and so on. If we're smart enough and courageous enough, we would do a lot to allay those negative perceptions.

*Frances Cowell* Australia's long relationship with Pacific Island states has been mostly paternalistic. Will it now go beyond just sending aid money to the region?

*Stephen FitzGerald* Yes, I think so. Penny Wong has said repeatedly that from now on Australia will be listening, rather than patronising these "poor little countries". This signals seriousness, particularly regarding climate change. But I wish she hadn't referred to Pacific countries as "family", which is to me, well, colonial. After all, these are independent countries, sovereign states that Australia must address as equals.

*Frances Cowell* Despite its wealth and resources, Australia has been, until now, call it a climate recalcitrant, whereas it should be a leader. To be serious, it needs to wind back its dependence on coal extraction and use, which will be painful both economically and politically. What else can Australia do to restore its climate credibility, both in the Pacific and globally?

*Stephen FitzGerald* I'm a bit wary of the word leadership, Australia should aim to be a good international citizen. Gareth Evans recently published a book titled Good International Citizenship, which means getting behind the countries that really want action on climate change, taking account of what they want to see happening, and working internationally to help bring it about. Ross Garnaut, development economist, erstwhile adviser to Prime Minister Bob Hawke and author of Australia and the East Asian Ascendancy, says we should be a clean energy superpower. For that, Australia needs to change to renewables and take a lead in international forums on climate, to take account of the voices of South Pacific countries, but also African and Latin American nations. It is worth mentioning that Garnaut helped in the collaborative writing of China's first ever white paper on climate at the beginning of this century. But we do need to set our own house in order, which entails a national debate and, as you say, it's not going to be easy.

*Frances Cowell* You did your doctoral thesis on China's relationship with Chinese abroad. Chinese people have long been drawn to Australia, for example by the gold rushes in the 1850s, and many of the Asian faces you see on Australian

streets have been in Australia for more generations than many of European descent. But there are also relatively recent arrivals. Ambassador Xiao Qian, in his address to the National Press Club, said clearly that China considers all to be Chinese. So, how do you see that relationship between China and Chinese Australians now?

*Stephen FitzGerald* In my current work as Chair of the Board of a new project to set up The Museum of Chinese in Australia, I've become very engaged - or re-engaged - with this subject. And I find absolutely delightful stories, like the very first recorded free settler of Chinese descent, in 1818, not all that long after the first recorded British free settlers. He was a furniture maker in Paramatta, and there has been a continuous line of Chinese-Australian furniture makers until today. As well as undertaker and coffin-maker, he opened a pub, about the most quintessentially Australian thing you could do. Importantly, early Chinese settlers got on very well with First Nations, Aboriginal people; there was, and still is a lot of inter-marriage. Alexis White, winner of the Miles Franklin award for her 2008 novel, *Carpentaria*, is of both Chinese and part Aboriginal ancestry. There are hundreds if not thousands of such examples. I sometimes refer to the Chinese as the first true multi-culturalists in Australia.

So, now we have about 1.2, nearly 1.3 million people of Chinese descent in Australia. About three or four years ago, Xi Jinping started suggesting that all Chinese living overseas should unite around, and be loyal to the motherland. In fact, that policy was inherited from the Kuomintang until Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, a really bright, strategic thinker, canned it in 1954, having come to understand that this was bad for China and the Chinese, particularly in Southeast Asia, where suspicions, fed by the United States, were harboured that those Chinese were a fifth column for Beijing. Zhou introduced a Nationality and Citizenship Act, directing Chinese people overseas to choose, with China's preference that they should choose, and be good citizens of the country in which they live. But now we see Xi Jinping appearing to suggest otherwise. At the time, the outgoing Morrison government rhetoric alleged that they, and virtually all people of Chinese ethnicity were stooges of the Chinese Communist Party. And certainly, there was a lot of activity by Chinese consular staff, particularly in universities.

*Frances Cowell* Are you talking about Confucius Institutes?

*Stephen FitzGerald* Yes, but also amongst the student population at large and their own student organisations. About two years ago, I started to raise this here in Australia. Referring to Zhou Enlai's policy, I said to the Consul General that, should he happen to be speaking to Xi Jinping, I would hope he could convey the message that those messages could be very damaging to Chinese in Australia. I really feel for those students, being squeezed on one side with demands for loyalty to China, and on the other by Australian authorities. Of course, the Consul General here would not be in a position to be talking to Xi Jinping, but almost certainly others would have said similar things and he would be obliged, as you know, to report back to the foreign ministry in Beijing. There now seems to be less of that messaging from Beijing.

Yet, there's a fine line, because these students are still citizens of China, and diplomats here have a responsibility to look after them, as we would have for our students in China.

*Frances Cowell* What is bound to worry a lot of people are reports that China sometimes exerts pressure on the families in China of Chinese abroad. Do you see evidence of that?

*Stephen FitzGerald* Yes, there are known, unproven cases. You can't always be sure whether it's come from the top, or whether it's zealous middle and lower-levels officials or a bit of both. And, although I haven't heard any new ones for the past few months, there certainly have been in the past. This is another fine line, because by its nature, the Chinese political system demands conformity and compliance.

*Frances Cowell* You have said that the only thing that would provoke a Chinese threat to Australian security would be an explicit Australian defence pact with, say, the United States. Is that not exactly what we're doing with AUKUS and ANZUS and the Quad and the Five Eyes?

*Stephen FitzGerald* That is what we're doing, and more than those big, symbolic things is how enmeshed with the Americans Australian defence forces are. For example, for some time now, the deputy commander of the US forces in the Pacific has been a uniformed Australian officer, with 45 Australian officers working in that command. We're also involved in their Navy, their Air Force and their ground forces, as well as Pine Gap, and other US installations in Australia operating spy satellites, missiles and so on. Worse, previous governments seemed to invite China to see Australia as hostile. So, if there's a war between the US and China, Australia will be in it. And some signs from the new Labor government have not helped, such as, at the time of the Pelosi visit to Taiwan and the PRC's subsequent military exercises, Penny Wong, who until then had just been calling for restraint, allowed herself to make a joint statement with the United States and Japan condemning China. That was unnecessary, I think.

*Frances Cowell* When Malcolm Fraser became Prime Minister in 1975-76, you wrote four despatches to his foreign minister, Andrew Peacock, saying that we need to get to know our neighbours so well that we understand when what they're doing could be against our interests, and when it's not likely to be. Clearly, we're a long way from that, and may have gone backwards in the last decades. That was evident when Ambassador Xiao Qian addressed the National Press Club, with the message that China recognised the need to reset its relationship with Australia, and suggested that we start by focusing on our common interests, what we could agree on, before addressing other subjects, and he admitted that there are differences. He also stated several times that, for China, all issues are on the table, except Taiwan. Yet as he was talking, the camera panned around to hostile expressions on the faces in his audience, who seemed not to care what he said. In their questions, the press zoomed in on the disagreements between China and Australia. You must have found that very frustrating. So, what must we now do, in your view?

*Stephen FitzGerald* I thought that his speech as such was very conciliatory and highly professional. But the media were simply going for “gotcha”.

*Frances Cowell* They were playing to the gallery, yet it does matter what ordinary Australians think. I think it's a Chinese expression: a fish rots from the head, which means that leaders can influence how Australians view China. Do you agree?

*Stephen FitzGerald* Absolutely. And over the period from Whitlam, through Fraser, Hawke and Keating, from 1972 to 1996, the messages coming from the leadership were all very positive. That started to change from 1996 under John Howard, who encouraged racism with stories about “boat people” immigrants throwing their children overboard.

For a time, from 2007 to 2023, the Rudd and Gillard governments seemed not to realise, or perhaps didn't want to know, how bad it was. But the message from leadership is important, not least because they feed material to their favourite people in the media, known in some quarters as “stenographers” or “access journalists” rather than investigative, as they simply write what has been given to them, have no understanding about China, Japan or Indonesia, for example; they don't speak the languages. So, what is reported is unidimensional. It's a serious problem that we have regressed to the time of the Vietnam War.

*Frances Cowell* Is this where education comes in? In the 1960s and 1970s, I studied Indonesian at school and ancient Indian history in university. That was very unusual at the time, but it was there, and I think its not there now.

*Stephen FitzGerald* Indeed, from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, our education emphasised Asian languages and study of Asian societies. Reversing the decline since then will be difficult, and will demand both strong messages from the top, and funding. The government also needs to educate itself: although a number of Labor ministers have been learning Asian languages, most of those now running the country don't know China, Indonesia, or Cambodia, for example. And whereas they have established high-level contacts with the United State and the UK, those connections are lacking for Asian and Pacific countries. That impedes their capacity to see issues from the other side, hence our understanding of our region and our ability to work more closely with it.

*Frances Cowell* Is it mostly about tertiary education? What about teaching Asian languages in primary school?

*Stephen FitzGerald* Oh, yes, absolutely, and I have direct experience of working with the Queensland Government, in the late 80s early 90s, teaching what was called LOTE: Language other than English. I was inspired by the enthusiasm of parents and teachers in tiny, remote, one-horse towns, where the sole teacher, trying to teach Chinese, was one lesson ahead of the kids, yet could still speak in sentences and write a few characters on the board. Unfortunately, that is largely gone.

*Frances Cowell* Both host and sending countries benefit enormously from foreign students, as we learned over the decades with the Colombo Plan. So, when that gets interrupted, as happened with the pandemic and its fall-out, both countries necessarily lose. Will Australia again start receiving Asian students and will Asian parents start sending them again?

*Stephen FitzGerald* For a while, when we were really in the deep freeze, Beijing was sending negative, if not instructions, then advice not to come to Australia to study. I haven't seen those messages in recent months, but many people may still be reluctant. I was a bit surprised that Ambassador Xiao Qian, in his speech last week, said there are 110,000 Chinese students in Australia, considerably more than I had understood there to be, suggesting there has been some return. Despite opportunities in the United States, Canada and the UK, Australia is still a desirable destination for students and their families. The education system is held in high regard, notwithstanding some falling off in quality. There is still enormous pent-up demand for students to study overseas. But it will be slow. The universities have got to get back on the front foot, to be present in China, as previously, when Vice Chancellors and other members of academic staff would go and present awards in special graduation ceremonies in Shanghai and other major Chinese cities. A bit corny, perhaps, but also clever. A lot of our universities have special relationships with universities in China, some even with sub-campuses there. Interestingly, over the weekend, there was a long article in one of the main newspapers here about the very significant increase in the number of young Indian people and students, who are about to overtake Britain as the number one source of immigrants in Australia. That is likely to continue.

Dr FitzGerald paints a picture of nearly three decades of misspent foreign relations, but what emerges from our conversation is an important opportunity, and a government signalling readiness to take it, to harness Australia's wealth and abundant resources, its respected education system and the diversity of Australians to lend weight to addressing the pressing issues of security and climate change faced by its neighbours. To grasp that opportunity, Australia needs to regain the trust and respect of other Asian and Pacific countries that it once had. This will demand hard work and thoughtfulness at all levels of government. Internationally it must protect its own geo-strategic interests and be a bit circumspect about engaging in conflicts that might be at odds with those interests, notably in its traditional security alliances. At home, it needs to harness its abundant sunshine, capacity for innovation and enterprise and wean itself off coal: putting its own house in order, as Dr FitzGerald puts it. It also needs, through education and communication at all levels, to encourage ordinary Australians, of whatever ancestry, to engage constructively with their fascinating neighbours. Meeting those challenges will be hard, but the rewards worthwhile. Failure to do so could be very costly for Australia and its neighbours.

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