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The Interference Narrative in Australia — China Relations: Towards Confrontational Securitization

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Abstract. Theoretical research indicates that foreign interference, and even allegations thereof, cause long-term negative effects: they erode trust, damaging the bilateral relationship, and lead to a greater polarization of the political system and society due to the securitization of the relationship with the presumed interferer. The article examines the case of how the Australian government and society have reacted to the perceived attempts of interference by the People's Republic of China (PRC). It tests theoretical hypotheses by answering the question of what are the implications of the above-mentioned issue for Australia — China relations and Australia's politics. The study has identified that the rhetoric about foreign interference by the PRC into Australia's internal affairs has been publicly attributed to a complex of attempts at unwanted influence not only in politics but also in other domains such as society, economics, education and mass media. This issue served as a critical juncture in initiating a downward trend in bilateral relations by significantly eroding Australia's trust in China and public opinion about it as well as by prompting the Australian government to reassess its policy vis-à-vis the PRC against the background of challenging geopolitical landscape of the Asia-Pacific. The securitization of cross-border links with China has become a notable phenomenon. As a result of these events as well as other foreign policy factors, Australia — China relations deteriorated significantly. The Australian government promptly took a hard stance against the perceived foreign interference, becoming the first to adopt a special legislation to combat it. This issue was instrumentalized in political competition, especially by the Liberal Party of Australia. However, there has been no polarization of the Australian political system and society. The result has been a broad public and bipartisan consensus on the need for a greater transparency and public scrutiny over the links with China, as well as the establishment of an effective system to counter foreign interference. The Australian case demonstrates that the instrumentalization of the interference issue may lead not to a polarization but, on the contrary, to a domestic consensus over standing up to a perceived threat.

Key words: elections, Asia-Pacific, People's Republic of China, PRC, Chinese-Australian relations, the United States, USA

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Австралийско-китайские отношения в свете нарратива вмешательства: конфронтационная секьюритизация

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Аннотация. Согласно теоретическим исследованиям, вмешательство во внутренние дела и даже подозрения в такого рода действиях приводят к негативным последствиям как для межгосударственных отношений, так и для внутренней политики стран, усиливая поляризацию политической системы и общества ввиду секьюритизации трансграничных связей с предполагаемым инициатором вмешательства. Исследование проверяет эти положения на примере реакции правительства и общества Австралии на совокупность явлений, которые в 2017 г. стали позиционироваться Канберрой как попытка воздействия Китайской Народной Республики (КНР) на внутреннюю политику страны. Автор ставит целью ответить на вопрос, какие последствия имели обвинения в иностранном вмешательстве КНР во внутренние дела Австралии для двусторонних отношений и австралийской политики. Установлено, что риторика о китайском вмешательстве во внутренние дела Австралии возникла в публичном дискурсе как комплексная проблема, включающая нежелательное влияние не только на политику, но и на общество, экономику и информационную сферу. Именно это стало поворотным внутривнутриполитическим событием, которое привело к существенной эрозии доверия, значительному усилению негативного отношения в австралийском обществе к Китаю и запустило процесс ужесточения австралийской политики в отношении КНР на фоне роста геополитической напряженности в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе (АТР). Произошла секьюритизация трансграничных связей с КНР, которые стали рассматриваться Австралией как потенциальные каналы влияния Пекина на политические, общественные и экономические процессы в стране. В результате этих событий и иных внешнеполитических факторов произошло серьезное ухудшение австралийско-китайских отношений. Правительство Австралии приняло ряд оперативных и жестких мер, в том числе первым приняло обширное специализированное законодательство по противодействию иностранному вмешательству. Произошла инструментализация проблемы вмешательства, использовавшейся в политической борьбе, преимущественно со стороны Либеральной партии. В то же время существенной поляризации политической системы и электората не произошло. Итогом стал широкий общественный и межпартийный консенсус по поводу необходимости повышения надзора за связями с Китаем и создания эффективной системы противодействия иностранному вмешательству. Австралийский пример демонстрирует, что инструментализация обвинений во вмешательстве в странах с либерально-демократическим режимом необязательно приводит к поляризации, а, наоборот, может способствовать формированию внутривнутриполитического консенсуса на почве борьбы с внешним врагом.

Ключевые слова: выборы, Азиатско-Тихоокеанский регион, Китайская Народная Республика, КНР, китайско-австралийские отношения, США

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Introduction

The phenomenon of foreign interference into domestic affairs has become an increasingly relevant research topic in the 2010–2020s. There has been a consensus that digital technologies have led to new forms and methods

of foreign interference, contributing to the expansion of its spread and scale, with liberal democracies being especially vulnerable (Dowling, 2021).

Existing research demonstrates that foreign interference into domestic affairs and, even

suspicious thereof, leads to negative consequences for both bilateral relationships, eroding trust and damaging the opinion of the society about the alleged interferer, and domestic politics. They tend to cause the polarization of the political system and society of the target state, while the cross-border links with the supposed interferer become securitized (Tomz & Weeks, 2020; Istomin, 2022). Interference attempts or corresponding allegations are frequently instrumentalized by the politicians in their attempts to retain power, especially if the interference is perceived to be aimed at bringing their competitors to power. As a result, the governments tend to adopt especially tough measures (Wohlforth, 2020; Istomin, 2023b). In addition, the rhetoric of interference is regularly used to discredit political opponents.

This article tests the statements about the destabilizing effects of the securitization of interference attempts or allegations thereof by looking at the case of Australia, more specifically, into the discourse on the interference into domestic affairs by the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the second half of the 2010s. The paper investigates the effects of these accusations on Australia's domestic politics and its relationship with China. The existing information in the public domain seems to be insufficient to assess Australia's accusations. As a result, this paper does not address the issue of whether or not the PRC interfered into Australian politics. The article focuses on the securitization of cross-border ties, including at the societal level, and its influence on Australia — China relationship and Australian domestic politics.

The Australian case is notable for two reasons: firstly, the scale and impact of the rhetoric on perceived foreign interference; and secondly, the swiftness of the governmental response. Australia was the first state to adopt a complex, specialized legislation to counter foreign interference (Medcalf, 2019; Köllner, 2021).

The case of Australia is also noteworthy because of the nature of its political regime and its relations with China. As a liberal democracy, Australia enjoys a highly competitive party politics, centered on the competition between the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal-National Coalition — that of the Liberal Party of Australia and the National Party of Australia. The competition between two major political forces and regular government changes brings about the trend towards political polarization, as opposed to the systems with multiple smaller parties or a dominant party. Additionally, a developed federalism in Australia means that the states and territories enjoy a fairly high degree of autonomy within their allocated competences. As the experts noted, the openness of the system enabled greater opportunities for the interference into domestic affairs and for exercising foreign influence, with even greater vulnerability to election interference, because Australia used to lack the ban on party donations by foreigners.¹

Regardless of which administration was in power, up to mid-2010-s Canberra pursued a policy of developing cooperative relations with the PRC in a pragmatic way. Australia — China relations saw a particularly fruitful period of collaboration under the Labor Party in 2007–2013. In 2014, under the Coalition government, the two countries proclaimed the “comprehensive strategic partnership.” All these developments took place despite Australia being a staunch US ally.² Australia has a formidable Chinese diaspora, with about 5.5% of the total population claiming Chinese ancestry. Australia

¹ Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 32. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

² Cook M. Australia's Second China Challenge // ISEAS Perspective. 2018 (April 10). No. 20. P. 3. URL: https://www.academia.edu/36373219/Australias_Second_China_Challenge (accessed: 06.11.2023). See also: (Graham, 2023, pp. 16–18).

has greatly benefited economically from economic, people-to-people and educational contacts with China, all of which have become an important source of national income. This in turn has led to a high level of economic dependence in terms of trade in goods and services (Garin, 2021, pp. 209–210; Köllner, 2021, p. 408; Graham, 2023, p. 16).

This article is structured as follows. The first provides a concise overview of the findings of theoretical research examining the implications of foreign interference into domestic affairs for the bilateral relationship with the alleged interferer and for domestic politics. The second part examines the Australian narrative of China's interference. The third section analyzes two sets of consequences: for Australian domestic politics, including government responses to counter foreign interference; and for the bilateral relationship with China.

Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Foreign Interference into Domestic Affairs and Its Consequences

Theoretical research demonstrates that foreign interference is a vaguely defined and sometimes contested concept that can encompass an array of different phenomena, which makes it “unclear, blurred and changeable” (Istomin, 2023a, p. 122). As I.A. Istomin maintains, foreign interference is understood as an act of foreign policy which is coercive in nature (Istomin, 2023a, p. 130). In a narrow sense, foreign interference entails actions targeted against the policymakers who are in power (Istomin, 2023a, p. 133). Foreign interference can also be regarded as a part of inter-state struggle which possesses its own “escalation ladder” (Suchkov, 2024).

States tend to react strongly to the suspicion that other states are interfering in their internal affairs because, unlike other means of external pressure (political declarations, sanctions, military demonstrations), such actions directly affect the interests of political

elites, and the corresponding risks cannot be redistributed to other groups in society. Political elites are particularly sensitive to the threats to their own political survival, that's why their counter-reaction is often very much pronounced (Istomin, 2023b, pp. 111–113), which is especially the case when the interference has a goal to support their political opponents. Since elections interference in most cases has a real effect on their results (according to Dov Levin's research, an average increase in votes of about 3% (Levin, 2020)), it often emerges as a political issue and can be instrumentalized to secure electoral benefits. Accusations of interference can also be employed to discredit political competitors as the ones acting on behalf of foreign principals rather than national interests. This statement can be illustrated by the accusations by the U.S. Democratic Party about Donald Trump's collusion with Russia in 2016.

A destabilizing effect of the foreign interference accusations is reflected in the securitization phenomenon formulated by the representatives of the Copenhagen school which implies that an issue becomes perceived as a security threat (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). The securitization of cross-border links with the supposed interferer provokes taking extraordinary and tougher measures which would not be possible in an ordinary policy setting. It erodes trust and bilateral cooperation (Wohlforth, 2020, p. 469; Istomin, 2022, pp. 1678, 1693–1694).

In mature democratic systems, the population negatively reacts to the electoral interference which is supposed to have a real influence on the results of voting. The level of public disapproval varies depending on the level of supposed interference: a relatively mild in the case of a foreign state expressing its preferences in favour of one of the political parties, a considerable one in the event of verbal threats, and a really high one when a state takes specific policy actions such as financing electoral campaigns, dissemination of information or hacking elections. Foreign

interference is described as contributing to the polarization of the electorate in case of already existing differences (Tomz & Weeks, 2020, pp. 7–9, 15–16).

A major theoretical contribution relevant to this study is the conclusion that the accusations of foreign interference cause not only a deep mistrust and the deterioration of the relationship with a perceived interferer, but also to domestic polarization in the state that brings these accusations forward.

The Narrative of Chinese Interference into Australian Domestic Affairs

Rhetoric about Beijing's attempts to interfere into Australian internal affairs began to circulate in June 2017, when the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) aired a series of "Four Corners" investigative journalism TV-programmes, presenting the results of the investigation it had conducted together with Fairfax Media.³ The programmes claimed that China and, more particularly, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was seeking to influence Australian politicians, political parties and Chinese students in order for them to support China's policy. These programmes received tremendous public and political attention, having brought to light long-held suspicions and highlighting a picture of a large-scale systemic foreign interference campaign aimed at influencing Australian politics.⁴ The Australian intelligence community used to have mounting concerns even before that, whereas in 2016 the Australian government ordered intelligence services to prepare a closed report on foreign interference (Medcalf, 2019, p. 119). The

journalistic investigations were followed by an array of media revelations and publications by think-tanks and academia.⁵

The key mechanism for the Chinese influence was attributed to the United Front, which encompasses the CCP, other formally existing in China political parties and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce. It is coordinated by the United Front Work Department, which is part of the CCP Central Committee.⁶ The United Front activities were positioned in the "Four Corners" and the policy brief by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)⁷ as being carried out through a system of agencies which target groups and specific individuals, such as Chinese community groups and their leaders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), various associations, think-tanks, media associations and journalists, overseas students, scientists and intellectuals, universities and academia, political and business leaders, etc. Ethnic Chinese communities are described to serve as the main focus of the United Front work, with a goal of co-opting ethnic diasporas ("sons and daughters

³ Schulz T. Power and Influence — Four Corners // Vimeo. June 5, 2017. URL: <https://vimeo.com/279445142> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁴ Cook M. Australia's Second China Challenge // ISEAS Perspective. 2018 (April 10). No. 20. P. 4. URL: https://www.academia.edu/36373219/Australias_Second_China_Challenge (accessed: 06.11.2023). See also: (Graham, 2023, p. 22).

⁵ See: Cook M. Australia's Second China Challenge // ISEAS Perspective. 2018 (April 10). No. 20. URL: https://www.academia.edu/36373219/Australias_Second_China_Challenge (accessed: 06.11.2023); Joske A. Picking Flowers, Making Honey. The Chinese Military's Collaboration with Foreign Universities // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2018. No. 10/2018. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/picking-flowers-making-honey> (accessed: 06.04.2024); Joske A. The Party Speaks for You. Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2020. No. 32/2020. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you> (accessed: 06.04.2024); Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024). See also: (Hamilton, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2022).

⁶ Joske A. The Party Speaks for You. Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2020. No. 32/2020. P. 3–9. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁷ Ibid.

of China”) in order to promote the Chinese objectives. The ASPI policy brief highlights the fact that the Australian politicians who are ethnic Chinese, have to visit the events hosted by the United Front-associated agencies or groups and have to deal with them in order to win the votes of the Chinese community.⁸

Australian media, analytical publications and political debates presented the narrative on China’s interference into Australia’s domestic affairs in the following five areas.

Firstly, the most striking allegations concerned *Beijing’s interference into Australian elections and the promotion of Chinese interests through Australian politicians*. This was substantiated by information on donations to major political parties and the funding of election campaigns by China-friendly politicians or those willing to lobby for its interests. Additionally, the examples of information campaigns against China-unfriendly politicians from the Liberal Party on the states’ and territories’ level were brought up.⁹

The “Four Corners” programmes featured allegations that in 2015 Chinese billionaire property developers Huang Xiangmo and Chau Chak Wing and their associates were reported to have spent over 6.7 million USD on donations to major political parties.¹⁰ Chau Chak Wing, an Australian citizen, donated money to both the Liberal and the Labor Parties (2.9 million AUD and 1.7 million AUD respectively)

⁸ Joske A. The Party Speaks for You. Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front System // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2020. No. 32/2020. P. 13–20. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁹ Cook M. Australia’s Second China Challenge // ISEAS Perspective. 2018 (April 10). No. 20. P. 6. URL: https://www.academia.edu/36373219/Australias_Second_China_Challenge (accessed: 06.11.2023).

¹⁰ ASIO Warns Political Parties Over Foreign Donations // ABC. June 6, 2017. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170606002821/http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-05/asio-warns-political-parties-over-foreign-donations/8590162> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

(Hamilton, 2018, p. 74). He was a member of a provincial-level People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and thus directly connected to the United Front activities.¹¹ A Chinese businessman, Huang Xiangmo, who was granted a permanent residency in Australia, was reported to make donations estimated at more than 1 million AUD to both the Liberal and Labor Parties separately between 2012 and 2015. A total estimated figure of the funds donated by Huang Xiangmo and his associates to the major political parties was about 3 million AUD. In February 2012, he became an honorary president of the Australian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China (ACPPRC), which is closely linked to one of the structures of the United Front — the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification. The two businessmen were reported to have vigorously cultivated a network of Australian politicians from all major parties.¹²

A scandal erupted over the ties between Huang Xiangmo and Senator Sam Dastyari of the Australian Labor Party. On June 17, 2016, the senator convened a press conference for Chinese-language media, during which he asserted that Australia should avoid interfering into the South China Sea (SCS) conflict, respect China’s position and maintain neutrality.¹³

¹¹ Searight A. Countering China’s Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 6. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

¹² See: Joske A. The Party Speaks for You. Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front System // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2020. No. 32/2020. P. 20–23. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you> (accessed: 06.04.2024); Searight A. Countering China’s Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 6–7. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

¹³ See: Tillett A. Chinese Political Influence Sparks Espionage, Foreign Interference Law Changes // The Australian Financial Review. June 6, 2017. URL: <https://www.afr.com/politics/chinese-political-influence->

This position ran counter to that of the Labor Party.¹⁴ It was later revealed that Huang Xiangmo had assisted S. Dastyari in covering legal expenses worth 5,000 AUD, while another Chinese businessman, also a member of the United Front, helped to pay the senator's business trips when he exceeded his parliamentary travel budget.¹⁵ The media reported that in 2016 Huang Xiangmo tried to use his pledge to donate 400,000 AUD to the electoral campaign of the Labor Party in order to influence its stance on the South China Sea (SCS) conflict, threatening to withdraw the funding.¹⁶

Furthermore, there have been a number of information and political campaigns targeting specific politicians. To illustrate, an anonymous

sparks-espionage-foreign-interference-law-changes-20170606-gwl5ue (accessed: 06.04.2024); Joske A. The Party Speaks for You. Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2020. No. 32/2020. P. 20–24. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you> (accessed: 06.04.2024); Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 7–8. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

¹⁴ See: Chan G. Sam Dastyari Contradicted South China Sea Policy a Day After Chinese Donor's Alleged Threat // The Guardian. June 5, 2017. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jun/05/sam-dastyari-contradicted-south-china-sea-policy-a-day-after-chinese-donors-alleged-threat> (accessed: 10.07.2024); Yaxley L. Election 2016: Federal Labor Would Green-Light South China Sea Military Exercise: Conroy // ABC. June 16, 2016. URL: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-16/labor-would-approve-south-china-sea-military-exercise/7518330> (accessed: 06.11.2023).

¹⁵ Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 8–9. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

¹⁶ McKenzie N., Uhlmann C. ASIO Warned Politicians About Taking Cash from Huang Xiangmo, Chau Chak Wing // The Australian Financial Review. June 5, 2017. URL: <https://www.afr.com/politics/asio-warned-politicians-about-taking-cash-from-huang-xiangmo-chau-chak-wing-20170605-gwktc9> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

letter was widely circulated during the course of an electoral campaign for a federal by-election in the electoral division of Bennelong in New South Wales in 2017. The letter, addressed to “Chinese Australians,” urged them not to vote for the Liberal Party candidate, John Alexander. The same information campaign was visible in Chinese-language local media outlets.¹⁷ Another example is a vehement criticism targeting Liberal MP Gladys Liu, who was elected in 2019 in the Victorian seat because of her omission to publicly announce declare her membership in organizations linked to the CCP and the United Front.¹⁸

Secondly, the allegations included *information campaigns aimed at presenting a pro-Chinese narrative in Australian media outlets and Chinese-language social media*. Journalists and experts described the Chinese policy as aimed at promoting the CCP-approved narrative without any criticism of the PRC. The specific measures to influence the editorial policy included acquisitions and commercial pressure through advertising among others.¹⁹

Thirdly, the narrative of Chinese interference included *Beijing's influence on the educational policy and academic research in Australian universities* through the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, which is part of the United Front system, and through financial instruments.²⁰ For example, a rally at

¹⁷ Cook M. Australia's Second China Challenge // ISEAS Perspective. 2018 (April 10). No. 20. P. 6. URL: https://www.academia.edu/36373219/Australias_Second_China_Challenge (accessed: 06.11.2023).

¹⁸ Gladys Liu: The Row Over a Trailblazing Chinese-Australian MP // BBC. September 16, 2019. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-49712187> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

¹⁹ Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 16–17. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024). See also: (Hamilton, 2018).

²⁰ Schulz T. Power and Influence — Four Corners // Vimeo. June 5, 2017. URL: <https://vimeo.com/279445142> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

the University of Queensland in support of the Hong Kong democracy protests in 2019 turned violent, when mainland Chinese students appeared and started a scuffle. Xu Jie, the Chinese Consul-General in Brisbane, highly evaluated this behaviour as a patriotic one in confronting “anti-China separatism.” Law enforcement officials noted that these actions, as well as those on other campuses, might have been coordinated by the Chinese consulate.²¹

Chinese students have become important to Australia’s major universities: they account for between 13 and 19% of total enrollments of Australia’s eight leading universities (excluding the University of Western Australia) and of the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Given the importance of Chinese students and the existence of mobilization instruments of these students by the PRC, as a number of researchers note, many Australian universities are afraid of criticizing China. The above-mentioned Huang Xiangmo and Chau Chak Wing made lavish donations to Australian universities including the Western Sydney University, the University of Sydney and the UTS, where a new research center, the Australia — China Relations Institute (ACRI), with pro-China views was founded.²² Chinese student dissatisfaction with

the teaching of materials critical of the PRC was reported to have resulted at times in social media campaigns or administrative pressure on university lecturers following protests by consulate officials. This in turn led to self-censorship and restrictions on academic freedom.²³

Fourthly, China was accused of *conducting joint research together with Australian scholars to realize China’s own goals*, exemplified by promoting the PRC’s official views, knowledge, and technology transfers to China as well as industrial espionage. The major instrument highlighted in expert publications on this topic was the provision of grants to universities and think tanks, while the results of the joint research were subsequently transferred to the representatives of the PRC such as grant-awarding agencies or partner organizations.²⁴

Fifthly, the narrative of China’s interference into Australian domestic affairs included the accusations of *unwanted influence on the politics of Australian states, territories, and municipalities*, in particular with the goal of striking the business-deals profitable for Chinese companies and promoting the above-mentioned goals at the local level. Major concerns were about the fact that the decisions on investment deals with China at the local level could lead to an increase in the economic influence of the PRC and also to China gaining access to critical physical and telecommunication infrastructure because

²¹ Searight A. *Countering China’s Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia* // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 21. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

²² See: Babones S. *The China Student Boom and the Risks It Poses to Australian Universities* // CIS Analysis Paper. 2019 (August). No. 5. URL: <https://www.cis.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ap5.pdf> (accessed: 06.11.2023); Cook M. *Australia’s Second China Challenge* // ISEAS Perspective. 2018 (April 10). No. 20. P. 5. URL: https://www.academia.edu/36373219/Australias_Second_China_Challenge (accessed: 06.11.2023); Joske A. *The Party Speaks for You. Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front System* // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2020. No. 32/2020. P. 23. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you> (accessed: 06.04.2024); Searight A. *Countering China’s Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia* // Center for Strategic and International Studies.

July 31, 2020. P. 6–7, 11–12. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024). See also: (Hamilton, 2018, p. 94).

²³ Searight A. *Countering China’s Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia* // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 20–22. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

²⁴ Joske A. *Picking Flowers, Making Honey. The Chinese Military’s Collaboration with Foreign Universities* // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2018. No. 10/2018. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/picking-flowers-making-honey> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

of the differences in the federal and local agendas, which is considered to possess national security risks (Fitzgerald, 2022, pp. 5–6, 187). The examples provided include: the 2015 agreement on a 99-year lease of the Darwin port provided by the Northern Territory Government to a Chinese Landbridge Group company, believed to be connected with the People's Liberation Army;²⁵ agreements signed by the Victorian Government and the PRC, under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), that were not the subject of prior consultation with the federal government (Fitzgerald, 2022, pp. 142–146, 202–203).

To sum up, by the end of the 2010s, there had been a complex securitization of cross-border ties with China, which was accused of trying to exert unwanted influence not only on Australian politics but also on its society, economy and information sphere.

The Interference Narrative: Implications for the Australian Policy and Its Relationship with China

At first the repercussions for domestic politics will be analyzed. After the revelations of the “Four Corners” programmes the Australian Labor Party stated that it would no longer accept the electoral donations from Huang Xiangmo and Chau Chak Wing.²⁶ In December 2017, the leader of the Liberal Party and the Coalition government, Malcolm Turnbull, made a statement that the Labor senator S. Dastyari “sold Australia out” and was a vivid illustration of taking the money linked to the Chinese government and in return “delivered essentially Chinese policy

²⁵ Wade G. Landbridge, Darwin and the PRC // Australian Strategic Policy Institute. November 9, 2015. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/landbridge-darwin-and-the-prc/> (accessed 10.07.2024).

²⁶ Tillett A. Chinese Political Influence Sparks Espionage, Foreign Interference Law Changes // The Australian Financial Review. June 6, 2017. URL: <https://www.afr.com/politics/chinese-political-influence-sparks-espionage-foreign-interference-law-changes-2017-0606-gw15ue> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

statements.”²⁷ A few days later, S. Dastyari resigned, while in December 2018, the Australian government declined Huang Xiangmo's citizenship application and revoked his permanent residency.²⁸ According to the Australian intelligence, he was involved in the acts of interference into Australia's internal affairs.²⁹ In 2018, the head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) Duncan Lewis called the level of foreign interference and espionage “unprecedented” and in 2019 characterized it as an “existential threat.”³⁰

During a broad political and public discussion different views were voiced on the issue of alleged China's interference into Australian domestic affairs. As a result, a public political response took shape supported by the society and major political parties in the form of a request for a greater transparency of interaction with the PRC, whereas the sitting Coalition government announced the legislation aimed at combat foreign interference,³¹ becoming a pioneer in this area (Medcalf, 2019, p. 109).

In December 2017 M. Turnbull introduced the legislation aimed at countering foreign interference. The 2018 Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) Act was passed

²⁷ Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 9. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Joske A. The Party Speaks for You. Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System // Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief. 2020. No. 32/2020. P. 24. URL: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

³⁰ Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 34. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

³¹ Cook M. Australia's Second China Challenge // ISEAS Perspective. 2018 (April 10). No. 20. P. 4. URL: https://www.academia.edu/36373219/Australias_Second_China_Challenge (accessed: 06.11.2023).

by the Australian parliament among other laws with a strong bipartisan support in 2018. The legislation contains a ban on donations to political parties from foreign citizens, an obligation for individuals or entities to register certain activities if they are taken on behalf of a foreign principal in order to influence politics among other goals, an establishment of criminal offences for failing to comply with the obligations and register and a definition of what constitutes “foreign interference.”³² Counter Foreign Interference Coordination Centre (CFICC) was established at the Department of Home Affairs and a National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator (NCFIC) appointed to work across government and non-government sectors.³³

In March 2018 the Australian parliament passed Security of Critical Infrastructure Act which entails creating the Register of Critical Infrastructure Assets in eleven sectors such as energy, water and sewerage, transport (for example, port infrastructure), communications, etc., as well as oversight of control over it. In case of a national security threat a revision of agreements was made possible.³⁴ In August 2018 the Australian government de-facto banned the participation of *Huawei* and *ZTE* in constructing 5G networks, becoming the first state to introduce such a ban (Köllner, 2021, p. 415).

Scott Morrison Coalition cabinet which succeeded Turnbull government in August of 2018 undertook additional measures, as the existing ones were deemed insufficient. In

December of 2019 a Counter Foreign Interference (CFI) Taskforce was established, headed by the representative of the ASIO and uniting the resources of this agency, Australian Federal Police and other security services in order to investigate and disrupt foreign interference activities. In August 2019 a University Foreign Interference Taskforce was formed to protect higher education from foreign interference threats, while the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce was established in June 2020.³⁵

Another consequence for domestic politics was the instrumentalization of the foreign interference issue in order to gain electoral benefits, first and foremost by the Liberal Party. It used the Dastyari affair in the political competition, intentionally drawing attention to this case by making the senator the scapegoat and calling him names such as “Sichuan Sam” or “Shanghai Sam.” Many in the Australian Labor Party, especially of its New South Wales branch, saw such actions as an opportunistic and unprincipled campaign by the Turnbull-led Coalition government for partisan reasons in order to gain electoral benefits. Another example was the above-mentioned electoral campaign in the Division of Bennelong, where the Labor candidate Kristina Keneally accused the Liberal Prime Minister M. Turnbull of being China-phobic and promised to “stand up for the Chinese community in Bennelong.” Following the information campaign against the Liberal candidate J. Alexander, he was able to retain his seat, but his support suffered a 4.8% swing compared to the 2013 and 2016 elections.³⁶

³² Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme // Australian Government. Attorney-General’s Department. URL: <https://www.ag.gov.au/integrity/foreign-influence-transparency-scheme> (accessed: 17.06.2024).

³³ Countering Foreign Interference // Australian Government. Department of Home Affairs. URL: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-foreign-interference> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

³⁴ Security of Critical Infrastructure Act 2018 // Australian Government. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220505075210/https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2022C00160> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

³⁵ See: Countering Foreign Interference // Australian Government. Department of Home Affairs. URL: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-foreign-interference> (accessed: 06.04.2024); Searight A. Countering China’s Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 36–37. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

³⁶ Cook M. Australia’s Second China Challenge // ISEAS Perspective. 2018 (April 10). No. 20. P. 6–7. URL:

A diametrically opposed example was the Labour Party's public criticism of ethnic Chinese Liberal Party MP Gladys Liu in 2019. The members of the latter were reported to call her a "traitor" because of her membership in the institutions connected with the CCP and the United Front. Prime Minister S. Morrison called it a "smear" campaign and an "insult to every single Chinese-Australian in this country," while ex-Minister for Defence Christopher Pyne named it a "xenophobic paranoia."³⁷

At the same time, despite a harder rhetoric in specific electoral campaigns and political competition, no serious polarization of the political system and society has ever taken place. Such instances were characteristic of campaigns involving the candidates with clear-cut anti-Chinese or pro-Chinese positions or Chinese Australian politicians, but were not the feature of the party positions, even given the fact that the Australian Labor Party is considered more friendly towards China, while the Liberal Party of Australia is more critical of the PRC. It can presumably be explained by the fact that the donations from the Chinese property developers were made in favor of all three major parties rather than just one. On the other hand, the donation to the Liberal-National Coalition was reported to be even larger than that to the Labor Party.³⁸ Additionally, a decision to lease the port of Darwin was taken by the local branch of the Liberal Party³⁹ while the Labor Party opposed it.

https://www.academia.edu/36373219/Australias_Second_China_Challenge (accessed: 06.11.2023).

³⁷ Gladys Liu: The Row Over a Trailblazing Chinese-Australian MP // BBC. September 16, 2019. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-49712187> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

³⁸ McKenzie N., Uhlmann C. ASIO Warned Politicians About Taking Cash from Huang Xiangmo, Chau Chak Wing // The Australian Financial Review. June 5, 2017. URL: <https://www.afr.com/politics/asio-warned-politicians-about-taking-cash-from-huang-xiangmo-chau-chak-wing-20170605-gwktc9> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

³⁹ Gibson J. Labor Accuses Scott Morrison of 'Encouraging' Darwin Port Lease with Nearly \$20 Million Incentive Payment // ABC News. May 12, 2022. URL:

More than that, both the Liberal and the Labor Party criticized each other's representatives for the supposed influence by the PRC and called for a greater transparency of links with China. Shortly after the release of the "Four Corners" programmes the head of the opposition party Bill Shorten was the first to announce his refusal to interact with the Chinese billionaires featuring in the journalist investigation. He urged the Parliament's joint intelligence committee to investigate the extent of direct and indirect external influence on elections and asked Turnbull-led Coalition government to adopt legislation that would prohibit external interference in the future.⁴⁰ When it became known that senator S. Dastyari had voiced a position on the South China Sea completely at odds with that of the Labor Party at a press-conference, B. Shorten removed him from senator committees, saying that he had lost faith in the senator as his judgement had been erroneous.⁴¹ The Australian Labor Party's position was thus quite tough and aimed at countering perceived foreign interference.

Following the federal elections of 2022 in Australia, the Liberal-National Coalition lost its majority whereas the Labor Party won. Throughout the electoral campaign, S. Morrison and other Liberal Party members criticized the Labor Party for being soft on China and even on taking its side. However, in fact the positions of the two parties on the PRC demonstrate more similarities than differences.⁴² In the electoral

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-12/scott-morrison-nt-government-darwin-port-labor-documents/101060900> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁴⁰ Tillett A. Chinese Political Influence Sparks Espionage, Foreign Interference Law Changes // The Australian Financial Review. June 6, 2017. URL: <https://www.afr.com/politics/chinese-political-influence-sparks-espionage-foreign-interference-law-changes-2017-0606-gwl5ue> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁴¹ Sam Dastyari Resignation: How We Got Here // ABC News. December 12, 2017. URL: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-12/sam-dastyari-resignation-how-did-we-get-here/9249380> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

⁴² Hurst D. Factcheck: The Coalition Says Labor Always 'Takes China's Side', But Are the Parties'

districts with a larger-than-national-average share of ethnic Chinese the defeat of the Coalition was more pronounced. This was attributed to the anti-Chinese rhetoric and dividing lines initiated by Prime Minister S. Morrison and Minister for Defence Peter Dutton, which essentially meant: are you on Australia's side or on China's side? Clearly, many Chinese Australians did not appreciate this logic.⁴³

The sharp *deterioration of Australia — China relations* became the major consequence for the bilateral relationship. Chinese officials characterized the accusations in the journalists' investigations as absurd and completely fabricated. As a counterstrategy, they started to accuse the Australian government and its society of racial prejudice and Sinophobia as the key reasons for the whole campaign on countering foreign interference. The PRC embassy in Australia stated that it was "typical anti-Chinese hysteria."⁴⁴ China put high-level meetings on hold and the previously planned visit by the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs took place only in late 2018 (Köllner, 2021, p. 415). In May 2018, the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* characterized China's relations with Australia as the worst of all Western states.⁴⁵ Chinese officials started signaling that such anti-China policy measures could be followed by a boycott of Australian

goods, education in Australian universities and tourist visits.⁴⁶ Several months later, China began applying harder customs rules regarding Australian wine and iron ore.⁴⁷

The reaction of the Chinese government was regarded by Canberra as unconstructive and focused on inflating the racial question with ethnic Chinese within Australia,⁴⁸ while the economic pressure only exacerbated negative perceptions. The issue of foreign interference became the key political factor that caused the deterioration of the views on China in the Australian society, eroded trust and led to a tougher Australia's policy vis-à-vis China (Köllner, 2021, pp. 413–315; Graham, 2023, p. 22).

According to the Pew Research Center's annual opinion polls, in the spring of 2017 only 64% of Australians expressed a positive attitude towards China, while 32% of respondents — a negative one. Since 2018, there has been a clear worsening trend: 47% of respondents with a negative view in 2018, 56% in 2019 and 81% in 2020,⁴⁹ with the latter being linked to the unofficial "trade war."

Similar results, albeit with less dramatic shifts, are found in the Lowy Institute opinion

Positions So Different? // *The Guardian*. April 21, 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/22/factcheck-the-coalition-says-labor-always-takes-chinas-side-but-are-the-parties-positions-so-different> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

⁴³ Read M. Chinese-Australians Abandon Liberals Over Anti-China Rhetoric // *The Australian Financial Review*. May 25, 2022. URL: <https://www.afr.com/politics/chinese-australians-abandon-liberals-over-anti-china-rhetoric-2022-0524-p5ao46> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

⁴⁴ Cave D. China Scolds Australia Over Its Fears of Foreign Influence // *The New York Times*. December 6, 2017. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/australia/china-foreign-influence.html> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁴⁵ Canberra's China Policy Justly Under Fire // *Global Times*. May 15, 2018. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180515180602/http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1102433.shtml> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁴⁶ Chambers G. Chinese Warnings of Consumer-Led Boycott Over Worsening Relations // *The Australian*. December 22, 2017. URL: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/foreign-affairs/chinese-warnings-of-consumer-led-boycott-over-worsening-relations/news-story/00558abc6d9011bc8f4ef7e2ed63d70f> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁴⁷ Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. July 31, 2020. P. 27–28. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁴⁸ Cave D. China Scolds Australia Over Its Fears of Foreign Influence // *The New York Times*. December 6, 2017. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/australia/china-foreign-influence.html> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁴⁹ Silver L., Devlin K., Huang Ch. Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries // *Pew Research Center*. October 6, 2020. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

poll. According to the poll, in 2017 and 2018 most Australian respondents viewed China as an economic partner (79 and 82% respectively) rather than a security threat (13 and 12%). In 2020, the results were as follows: 55% — economic partner, 41% — security threat, whereas since 2021 China has predominantly been viewed as a security threat (63%) but not an economic partner (34%). The changes of the year of 2021 are attributed to tense political relations and an unprecedented economic pressure by the PRC.⁵⁰

No less important in the deterioration of Australia — China relations are foreign policy factors. Australia's increasingly negative perception of China has taken shape against the background of security tensions in the Indo-Pacific in general and the South China Sea in particular. The Australian leadership has linked these trends with China's behavior such as land reclamation and military infrastructure build-up in the South China Sea, and its refusal to accept the SCS Tribunal ruling in 2016, which is clearly demonstrated in Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper of 2017,⁵¹ as well as in the speeches of the Australian governmental officials. Another reason for the heightened threat perception regarding China has been an increase of its presence, economic and potentially political and military influence in the South Pacific, which has traditionally been seen by Australia as its sphere of influence (Aleshin, 2020, pp. 70–72; Köllner, 2021, pp. 412–413).

Undoubtedly, the shift in the US strategy towards a strategic competition with China could not but have influenced on the deterioration of Australia — China relations. It should be seen in the context of Australia's foreign policy priorities, which largely coincide

with those of the United States. Moreover, the Australia — U.S. security alliance is deemed quintessential for the Australian security by the Australian policymakers. The Australian elite is also interested in maintaining the U.S.-led international order (Aleshin, 2020, p. 67). However, it should be noted that a downward trend in Australia — China relations, which started in the summer of 2017 following the perceived interference by the PRC into Australia's domestic affairs, was not initiated by the American administration. Firstly, the D. Trump's administration designated China as a strategic competitor in late 2017 and launched the following strategy further on in 2018, while the interference narrative preceded these events. Secondly, the Australian elite and society viewed President Trump in a predominantly negative light,⁵² with the information on the pressure by Trump's administration absent from the public discourse, although it did not shy away from publicly pressuring allies on other issues.

A further deterioration in Australia — China relations was caused by an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 at the World Health Organization, initiated by S. Morrison-led government in 2020, and the investigation of the Australian Anti-Dumping Commission regarding a number of Chinese goods (Garin, 2021, p. 211). The PRC responded with a large-scale unofficial economic sanctions campaign (Kashin, Piatachkova & Krashennikova, 2020) and launched a “trade war” against Australian goods, which led to a serious degradation in

⁵⁰ China: Economic Partner or Security Threat // Lowy Institute Poll. 2024. URL: <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/charts/china-economic-partner-or-security-threat/> (accessed: 10.06.2024).

⁵¹ 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper // Australian Government. 2017. URL: <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/foreign-policy-white-paper> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁵² According to the opinion poll by the Lowy Institute conducted in May 2017, 60% of Australian respondents expressed a negative opinion towards US President Donald Trump. See: 2017 Lowy Institute Poll // Lowy Institute. URL: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2017-lowy-institute-poll#heading-4148> (accessed: 22.06.2024); Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 31, 2020. P. 38. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

bilateral relations and a prevailing negative attitude among the Australians towards China. Chinese economic and political pressure resulted in a strong public and bipartisan support for the government's tougher stance on countering Chinese interference and pressure.⁵³ In 2021 Australia together with the U.S. and Great Britain initiated the establishment of the Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) defence partnership, which complicated the relationship with China even further.

In December 2020, the Foreign Arrangements Scheme Act was adopted, which entails notifying or seeking approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on arrangements between state and territory governments, their entities, local governments and public universities in terms of their consistency with Australia's foreign policy. It covers new agreements and already existing ones.⁵⁴ Since its introduction, hundreds of agreements have been reviewed. For example, the agreements between the state of Victoria and the PRC were cancelled in April 2021.⁵⁵

Against the background of a strained relationship with China, there has been a certain "overheat" of the interference issue, while the influence of the Chinese interference discourse on domestic affairs has become an object of criticism by some politicians and public figures. One such criticism came from Kevin Rudd of the Labor Party, who held the positions of

Australia's Prime Minister in 2007–2010 and in 2013, and who made great efforts to expand cooperation with China. In August 2019, he accused the Liberal Party, in particular former Prime Minister M. Turnbull and the chair of parliament's Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, Andrew Hastie, of fomenting national hysteria and "going all hairy-chested" about China.⁵⁶ In July of 2021, shortly after leaving the post of ASIO Director-General, D. Lewis warned of "over-egging" of the threat of foreign interference and overheated rhetoric. According to him, assertions started to be made of "spies under every bed, and that is not the case."⁵⁷

According to a critical assessment provided by the Director of Australia — China Relations Institute of the UTS, James Laurenceson, the cases of transfer of sensitive technologies to China as a result of joint collaborations have been greatly exaggerated, whereas the current political environment leads to any academic cooperation with the PRC being viewed as toxic, damaging Australia's national interests and academic potential. The discourse on China's interference brings about an increased threat perception, when the limitation of links with the PRC becomes a goal in itself rather than a means of a goal to protect domestic politics from foreign interference.⁵⁸

⁵³ Searight A. Countering China's Influence Activities: Lessons from Australia // *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. July 31, 2020. P. 27–29, 38. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-chinas-influence-activities-lessons-australia> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁵⁴ Foreign Arrangements Scheme // *Australian Government. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*. 2020. URL: <https://www.foreignarrangements.gov.au/> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁵⁵ Callanan T. What Is China's Belt and Road Initiative and What Were the Four Deals the Federal Government Tore Up? // *ABC News*. April 22, 2021. URL: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-22/what-was-in-victoria-belt-and-road-deal-with-china/100086224> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

⁵⁶ Doherty B. Kevin Rudd Accuses Liberals of Stirring Up Hysteria About China // *The Guardian*. August 23, 2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/aug/23/kevin-rudd-accuses-liberals-of-stirring-up-hysteria-about-china> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

⁵⁷ Dziejic S. Former ASIO Chief Duncan Lewis Warns Australia Not to 'Inflate' Foreign Interference Threats // *ABC News*. July 7, 2021. URL: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-07/duncan-lewis-asio-downplays-foreign-interference/100275304> (accessed: 06.11.2023).

⁵⁸ Laurenceson J. Lessons from Chinese Government Interference in Australia // *Australia — China Relations Institute*. February 14, 2022. P. 1–3. URL: https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/20220214_ACRI%20Opinion_Lessons%20from%20Chinese%20government%20interference%20in%20Australia_James%20Laurenceson_9DashLine.pdf (accessed: 06.11.2023).

When the Labor government of Anthony Albanese came to power in Australia in May of 2022, it took steps to normalize the relationship with China. Prime Minister Albanese's visit to the PRC in November of 2023 was instrumental in this regard. At the same time, the stabilization of Australia — China relations has not been followed by the cancellation of the measures on countering foreign interference.⁵⁹ Discussions are currently underway on how to reform the system of countering foreign interference, first and foremost the Chinese one, in order to make it more efficient. In March of 2024, Australian Parliament's Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security issued a review in which it strongly criticized the FITS Act aimed at countering foreign interference because of the insufficient level of measures and the problems with their implementation, and urged to overhaul it.⁶⁰ In June 2024, the Australian government responded to the review by endorsing it in full and committing to significant reform of the FITS Act.⁶¹

Conclusion

The article has demonstrated that the events perceived by Australia as foreign interference into its domestic affairs by the PRC and the corresponding accusations became a critical juncture in terms of Australian politics, significantly eroding trust, increasing negative perceptions of China in Australian society, and

prompting a tougher Australian policy towards the PRC. Against the background of security tensions in the Asia-Pacific, Australia — China security relations deteriorated, with China's behavior increasingly seen as a security threat.

Since 2017, the attention of the Australian society and political parties has to a very large extent been focused on the issue of foreign interference by the China Communist Party through the United Front system, while cross-border links with China have increasingly been viewed as potential channels for its influence on Australia's politics, society and economy. Australia has been a pioneer among the Western countries to introduce a specialized legislation and create taskforces to counter foreign interference, with other states such as the U.S. and Canada thereafter learning from the Australian experience. The agreements with the participation of Chinese capital in the spheres of infrastructure, scientific and academic projects with China's participation have de-facto started to be considered unwanted or at minimum demanding risk reevaluation. The intensity of educational and academic cooperation has decreased. Therefore, the securitization of cross-border ties has led to a rapid deterioration in relations between Canberra and Beijing.

At the same time, the hypothesis about the influence on the Australian political system and domestic politics has proven to be only partially correct. On the one hand, the Australian government promptly took a number of measures and created an institutionalized system to counter foreign interference. More than that, the interference issue was instrumentalized in order to gain electorate benefits, mostly but not exclusively by the Liberal Party which was in power at the time.

On the other hand, while the issue of foreign interference has been used in political competition, it has not been a defining factor in most election campaigns. Moreover, unlike in other countries, such as the U.S., there has never been a polarization of the Australian political system and society. The reason for this

⁵⁹ Crowe D., Bagshaw E. Xi Says China and Australia Have 'Worked Out Some Problems' — But Trust Issues Remain // The Sydney Morning Herald. November 6, 2023. URL: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-hails-new-starting-point-with-australia-as-albanese-meets-xi-20231106-p5ei1i.html> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

⁶⁰ Knott M. 'The Scheme Has Failed': Landmark Foreign Interference Laws Set for Overhaul // The Sydney Morning Herald. March 27, 2024. URL: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/the-scheme-has-failed-landmark-foreign-interference-laws-set-for-overhaul-20240327-p5ffom.html> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

⁶¹ Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme // Australian Government. Attorney-General's Department. URL: <https://www.ag.gov.au/integrity/foreign-influence-transparency-scheme> (accessed: 17.06.2024).

phenomenon is that, contrary to theoretical assumptions about the support of a given political force by a foreign entity, in the Australian case the representatives of all major political powers have been suspected of having ties to a foreign benefactor. The position of the Australian Labor Party also played a role in this outcome, as it responded strongly to the issue of interference and, on the contrary, criticized the Coalition government for its indecisiveness. Presumably the party leadership decided that being soft on the issue could have a negative impact on voter preferences.

The major result has been a broad public and bipartisan consensus on the need for a greater transparency and public scrutiny over the links with China. It should be highlighted that not only the Liberal-National Coalition, but also the opposing in 2017 Labor Party urged to

adopt a legislation to counter foreign interference.

What is interesting about the Australian case is that a liberal democratic system, which is seen as most vulnerable to foreign interference, has, on the contrary, consolidated itself on the grounds of countering China and demonstrated a harsh response to perceived foreign interference. Consequently, the Australian case supports the theoretical theses that the perceptions of foreign interference and accusations thereof have a destabilizing effect on the bilateral relationship, and that it tends to become a political issue and is frequently instrumentalized. At the same time, it refutes the assumption that the issue has a polarizing influence on domestic politics and demonstrates that, on the contrary, it can lead to a domestic consensus on confronting a perceived threat.

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