



# China relations require a delicate balancing act

Our security lies with the US while China is our trading partner — and we need both

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ROSS Terrill, one of Australia's best known experts on China, who has been based at Harvard University in the US for most of the past 50 years, warns that for Canberra to align on security issues with Beijing "bristles with difficulties".

He does not believe Australia is faced with a frightening choice between our great ally and our main trading partner. While commending Hugh White for instigating a lively debate with his book *The China Choice*, he says this thesis "underestimates Australia's power to say yes or no in concrete diplomatic situations".

Terrill, a visiting senior fellow at the Australia Strategic Policy Institute, says: "We can be economically open to China and still speak up for Australian values. I know some people think there is a contradiction there, but I think we have to do both. We should welcome the trade and investment with China but should never give the impression we are packing our values away in a trunk — China wouldn't respect us for that."

He notes that John Howard has written in his autobiography

of how his message to his Chinese counterparts was that "we both have our values, but let's see if we can do business anyway" and this made sense to the Chinese, who "didn't necessarily want others to praise them or their culture, as in the old days they were expected to praise Mao".

In contrast, he says, Kevin Rudd was perceived as a friend by Beijing, and suffered from the response when he was perceived to have hurt his Chinese friends.

Terrill agrees with an article written by Bill Hayden, who said as long as China remained authoritarian, there would be limits to the level of intimacy the official relationship could reach.

He says the burgeoning relationship between Vietnam and the US, and the greater inclination of East Asian countries in general to counterbalance China's growing weight, cannot be negated just because they may not be willing to join a war against China. Their publicly expressed concerns, he says, are causing Beijing to pay attention — and thus do matter in the great strategic games being played out.

Back in the early 1970s, when US president Richard Nixon dramatically reached out to the People's Republic, "the Chinese and Americans never discussed explicitly the question of the US militarily assisting China in the case of its being attacked by the USSR — they had fought just two years before," he says. "But the Mao-Nixon handshake certainly produced an impact in Moscow."

Gough Whitlam, he says, was asked, as he recognised the People's Republic, to affirm that in the case of a more severe split between China and Soviet Union, he would support the former.

"He declined to do so and Australia was less influential then."

Before that, he says, US secretary of state from 1961 to 1969 Dean Rusk asked foreign affairs department head Keith Waller whether Australia had to sell wheat to China. But prime minister Robert Menzies did not halt the sales.

"Australia does have the capacity to say yes or no," says Terrill, who is writing a book on the his-



tory of the relationship between the US and China and remains an Australian citizen. "Our nightmare would be if the US withdrew and Japan and China got to blows, as has happened so many times in history. But other countries have prospered from the equilibrium," and also support the status quo, he adds. "China too has benefited."

Terrill is not convinced, either, that projections of straight-line trajectories for US decline and China's rise are likely to prove accurate. And he says the US has not always insisted on being the sole superpower. When Nixon returned from his visit to China, for instance, he listed five "stars for the future of the world": western Europe, the Soviet Union, Japan, China and the US.

"There's been an ebb and flow on this primacy business. And it wouldn't be easy for China to pre-empt Asia," Terrill says.

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CHINA EXPERT

He says the US "has been tolerated" in Asia because it is across the Pacific, and has had substantial resources through the years "but that's different from being cheek-by-jowl, as countries like Laos, Vietnam and South Korea are with China".

"People here in Australia who simply want us to transfer our loy-

alties from Washington to Beijing haven't said what this new relationship would be like. Would we be more independent than we are with our alliance with the US or less? And how would Indonesia view such an Australian alignment? It bristles with difficulties," Terrill says.

And if China began taking on a dominant role in the Asia-Pacific region, he says, "no US president would be allowed by the American people to accept it without an immense struggle".

Our attitude to China is different from the US's, he says. Although Canberra followed Washington in refusing to recognise the People's Republic, "it wasn't a crusade at all here. Australians seem to be natural realists."

Terrill, whose books on Mao Zedong and his wife Jiang Qing have sold hundreds of thousands of copies within China, criticised the notion, presented by authors such as Martin Jacques, that "China's past is the shape of the world's future". China's own young people are already distant from China's past.

"China has had a major rupture with its past. The Communist Party has reclaimed some of that tradition for political purposes, but the modernisation of Chinese society and the nature of its economy are both in a heavily cosmopolitan direction."

He does not think the party will collapse, or that the country is in a transition towards liberal democracy, as happened in eastern Europe after the Soviet Union fell.

"The Chinese are too proud to think they are following anyone else," Terrill says, adding that China's connections with the world, and the new global economic interdependence, form the

most important context for its success. China, he says, "gained the know-how and technology for its rise from outside. It is not a nationalist story."

It is a story he began following in 1964, when, "a stubborn idealist", after graduating from the University of Melbourne he persuaded the Chinese embassy in Poland, where he was hitchhiking, to give him a visa.

On his return he wrote a long account, and sent it to the newly launched newspaper *The Australian*, based in Canberra. It was published in six parts, under the title Report From Red China, and was sub-edited by the paper's founder and publisher, Rupert Murdoch, who signed Terrill's cheque, made out in guineas, in fountain pen.

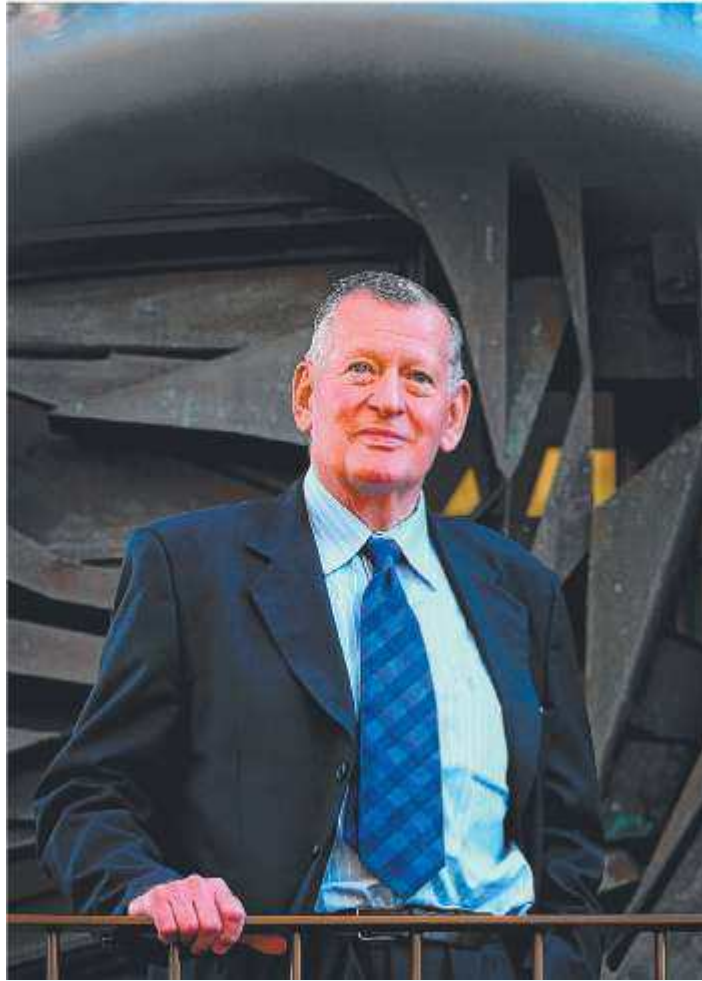
Terrill helped set up Whitlam's groundbreaking visit to China in 1971, through a contact with the French ambassador in Beijing. When the invitation from China came through, Whitlam cabled Terrill: "Eureka! We won!"

He dates the turning point in his thinking on China to 1976, when a Chinese diplomat criticised him for an article he had written on Deng Xiaoping, saying: "If you don't understand Deng is a counter-revolutionary, you don't understand anything about China."

Terrill says this triggered a suspicion of the official line, and in the 80s he began to develop Chinese friends who were frank in their criticisms of the party-state.

"Yes, I was wrong, and had to change, but then China changed" and more information became available, and "I sought the truth from facts, as the Chinese saying has it".





KYM SMITH

**China expert Ross Terrill says we don't have to make a choice**