

Opinion

Beijing cannot dictate Australia's policy on Taiwan

Contrary to the assumption made by Chinese ambassador Xiao Qian, Australia has never endorsed Beijing's view that Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic.



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States telling self-serving falsehoods is a story as old as international relations itself.

The morally bankrupt mendacity of Russia's justifications for its war in Ukraine is just the latest outrageous instance.



A People's Liberation Army member looks through binoculars towards Taiwan's frigate Lan Yang during military exercises on August 5. **Xinhua/AP**

But the near universality of countries sacrificing truth for the sake of national prerogatives shouldn't desensitise us to the corrosive effect of such falsehoods.

For Australians, the case for calling out state disinformation is especially urgent in the wake of the Chinese ambassador's recent comment in this newspaper.

Ambassador Xiao Qian [wrote in these pages](#) on August 25: "Australia's commitment to [the] one-China principle is clear-cut in both concept and content ... The government of Australia is obliged to stick to its commitment to the one-China principle, both in words and in deeds, in name and in essence, with sincerity, without discount."

Despite their apparent earnestness, these claims are simply false.

Australia does not subscribe, and has never subscribed, to the one-China principle that Taiwan is and ought to be part of the People's Republic of China.

Instead, Australia has consistently maintained a one-China policy that "acknowledges" Beijing's view, without endorsing it, that "Taiwan is a province" of the People's Republic.

Language can have colossal consequences

The linguistic nuance of only acknowledging Beijing's position means that although Canberra "recognises the Government of the PRC as the sole legal Government of China", the Australian government need not accept, much less actively support, the Chinese government's view that Taiwan is in principle, and ought to be in practice, a province of China.

This might sound like a minor matter of word choice.

But when it comes to the fate of some 23 million Taiwanese and the future of their liberal democracy, language can have colossal consequences.

The Chinese Communist Party has been [building its People's Liberation Army into a massive fighting force](#) to rival any military on earth. Among China's many hard power objectives, Taiwan looms large as a motivating factor behind the breakneck modernisation of its defence capabilities.

But China would much prefer to annex Taiwan without the stratospheric military, diplomatic and economic risks of launching a [full-scale amphibious invasion](#) across the Taiwan Strait.



China's ambassador to Australia, Xiao Qian, stated China's position on Taiwan during his address to the National Press Club of Australia in Canberra on August 10. **Alex Ellinghausen**

To win without fighting a hot war, Beijing is seeking to further isolate and intimidate Taipei by, among other tactics, propagating the narrative that Taiwan already is in principle, and ought to be in practice, part of China, and that this is a settled international consensus.

By repeating this one-China principle, Beijing hopes to persuade people and their governments that Taiwan should rightfully be controlled by China, regardless of what the Taiwanese people want.

If successful, this Chinese government public opinion campaign will incrementally create conditions more conducive to China's eventual annexation of Taiwan.

It is in the context of this struggle to lay the global public opinion groundwork for seizing Taiwan that Australians should understand the ambassador's op-ed.

Far from a simple misrepresentation of the minutiae of Australian government policy, it is part of the Chinese government's long-term and determined campaign to isolate, intimidate, and eventually take control of Taiwan.

Policy flexibility

Beyond this existential danger for Taiwan, unchecked Chinese state disinformation is also a risk to Australia's sovereign decision-making.

Thanks to the inherent flexibility of this one-China policy, Australia has been able to take principled and forward-leaning positions on a range of Taiwan-related issues. These include Canberra's recent strong advocacy for the preservation of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and its support for Taiwan's membership of and contribution to international organisations where statehood isn't a prerequisite.

The Chinese government's efforts to shape public perceptions of Australia's one-China policy might not immediately constrict Canberra's policy options.

But there is the serious long-term risk they could undermine popular acceptance of Australia's engagement with and support for Taiwan by convincing the Australian community that their government is bound by the strictures of Beijing's one-China principle.

The Australian government has an obligation to ensure that the public understands both this country's one-China policy and the space this provides Canberra to choose its own path on cross-strait issues.

So, the next time the Chinese government repeats misleading claims about Australia's one-China policy, Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong and her colleagues should calmly set record straight.

Australia does not now and never has endorsed Beijing's view that Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic of China. Australia remains committed to recognising the government of the PRC as the sole legal government of China while also deepening its rich and mutually beneficial unofficial ties with the people of Taiwan.

In public debate, falsehoods should not go unchallenged.

Least of all when they are propagated by an authoritarian state seeking to crush a liberal democracy.

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