Diplomacy  Beijing deserves scrutiny for little transparency amid the pandemic, but Australia’s proposal for an inquiry is badly timed, argues James Curran.

Canberra’s wolverines threaten our connection

Only the muddle-headed would demur from the need, once the coronavirus crisis has passed, for a rigorous investigation of its origins, the initial reaction to its outbreak and lessons to be drawn from this global catastrophe.

In dealing with the diplomatic fallout from the Coalition government’s proposal for an independent inquiry into COVID-19’s origins, the question has never been about the justifiable desire to derive greater knowledge about the pandemic with a view to being better prepared for future contingencies of this kind. Rather the question has been about its timing, as well as the febrile domestic context into which it was pitched.

Warnings from the Chinese ambassador about potential boycotts of Australian products, front-loaded with intimidation and laced with mockery, have only served to push the government and the opposition towards solidarity on the issue. So a relationship already ailing at the most senior levels is plunged into another round of spiteful recrimination.

It is difficult to know where all this ends: whether Beijing will act on the threats of boycott or, more likely, whether this simply sees Australia-China relations settle into a longer term pattern where their management – not repair – becomes the norm.

Australia is not the only country feeling China’s wrath. Chinese ambassadors around the world are using the occasion to showcase party loyalty and assertively respond to criticisms of China’s initial handling of the crisis, or to suggestions that Beijing is curating a global disinformation campaign about its source.

All this hardly bodes well for EU-China policy, where foreign investment laws and 5G communications security are up for discussion later this year. The European debate over how to manage China had been in its formative stages prior to the virus outbreak, but China’s diplomatic heavy-handedness will undoubtedly harden attitudes.

A central question in Australia is why the Morrison government felt the need to launch this initiative now. And why it was done with precious little guile, with so much noise yet so little substance.

Foreign Minister Marise Payne resembles something of a rogue archer, firing a diplomatic arrow into the ether but with little forethought about either its trajectory or landing point. Its target, though, was clear enough.

Nevertheless, without consulting regional partners, and with no evidence of serious reflection about the context in which this proposal was floated, this arrow has already suffered a rather deflating drop.

It may be nothing more than a touch of Australian hubris at work here, but no amount of stirring appeals to “Team Australia”, however critical they have been in Australian hubris at work here, but no amount of stirring appeals to “Team Australia”, however critical they have been in successfully marshalling the country behind its flattening of the curve, should prevent scrutiny of the government’s diplomatic modus operandi.

Canberra’s laudable efficiency in tackling the crisis might have brought on the feeling once more that Australia could “punch above its weight” by leading from the front.

While the President of the European Commission has supported similar calls from European politicians for an investigation, Britain, France and Germany gave the Australian proposal short shrift. Japan has remained publicly silent. Even the US has been unsure, as Colum Lynch argued in Foreign Policy, since it “could potentially expose Washington to an embarrassing assessment of its own response to the pandemic”.

The optics of pushing the proposal in a conversation with Trump will not help the Australian image in regional eyes. But the government is unlikely to mirror Trump’s desire to litigate Beijing for its handling of the pandemic, and the prime minister doesn’t share Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s conviction the virus was deliberately started in a Wuhan laboratory. Nevertheless the US will further push Australia, along with other allies and partners, to support its move to restore Taiwan’s status as an observer at the WHO. That too, though a worthy move, would unquestionably stoke again China’s ire.

The atmosphere here, as elsewhere around the world, is tense. Feelings are raw: people have lost loved ones, others have had their lives turned upside down. The search for a scapegoat and the appetite for finger pointing becomes instinctive as these emotions are unleashed.

The government’s proposal seemed oblivious to the risk it poses for community cohesion. Some Chinese Australians have already been the subject of racist insults and attacks. The prime minister was quick to condemn such acts, but he surely must have recognised the underlying hint of retribution some discerned in this proposal would work in the opposite direction of his call for calm.

It is a sad but accurate truth that crises like this habitually bring to the surface cranks and crackpots. And it has been no different in Australia, particularly from the frenetic thumbs of the tweeterati. But others should know better.

ASPI head Peter Jennings dismissed the idea that China deliberately spread the virus, but in the next breath warned about Beijing’s biological weapons program that would be “working on far more lethal agents than COVID-19”.

Some journalists are also reviving a view that is having a creeping stranglehold on the China-Australia debate. Chris Uhlmann said Australian business leaders and university vice-chancellors “can’t handle the truth” about China, while Sydney Morning Herald columnist Peter Hartcher said the Chinese ambassador’s threats amounted to “gangsterism” and that China “seeks dominance through any means possible”.

It is one thing to be rightfully wary of the brand of Chinese exceptionalism espoused by Xi Jinping, quite another to thrash about in mouth-foaming fulmination.

Andrew Hastie, chair of the parliament-ary joint intelligence committee, has resorted to the cheapest of nationalist stunts, raising signatures for a petition to “push back” against China.
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Even before the coronavirus pandemic hit, Hastie, backbench MPs Tim Wilson and Phillip Thompson, along with Senators James Paterson and Labor’s Kimberley Kitching, had taken to calling themselves the “wolverines”, boasting of their preparedness to “speak out against China’s expanding power”.

Their group’s name is a nod to the 1984 Hollywood film *Red Dawn*, about a team of high school football jocks thwarting a Soviet invasion of the United States. Membership of its Australian branch is signified by the appearance of stickers featuring wolf claw marks on the entrances of their parliamentary suites. It is difficult to know whether to laugh or cry at this kind of juvenilia from some of the nation’s elected representatives. But we are where we are.

Where does this avalanche of anger and indignation ultimately fall? Sure, China deserves serious and sustained scrutiny for its missteps and lack of transparency amid the pandemic. But is the latest pile on here productive?

One need only remember the constant drip of inflammatory remarks concerning Japan from prominent Australian policymakers and politicians in the 1930s, statements that hardly helped matters in what was already a flint-dry geopolitical landscape.

Do these wolverines wish a full blooded cold war, where trade and investment with China is strictly limited? Do they want to be the ceremonial attendants as Washington brings down an iron curtain on Beijing? What’s at stake here too is nearly a half century of bipartisan commitment to finding new ways for Australia to connect and belong to the region.

Morrison began his prime ministership looking to continue the Turnbull reset on China, dampening down some of those on his backbench clearly spoiling for a more aggressive stance towards Beijing. He archived the old cold war glossaries of containment.

But he has shown on occasion other tendencies which have more than a whiff of the populist – first, his rock-throwing speech at ‘negative globalism’; now this poorly conceived initiative. The prime minister will need to resist any temptation to go hunting with the ‘wolverines’ that circle both behind and in front of him in the parliament. Best he shepherds these cubs back into the cave from whence they ventured out.

On that score, the prime minister was the recipient of some timely advice from a party elder. While John Howard quietly endorsed Morrison’s move for an inquiry, his warning was unmissable. A ‘pragmatic approach’ to China was still needed. This is not a time,

Howard added, to ‘suddenly turn the relationship on its head’.

More worrying is that this combination of Australian fears of China is now toxic on three levels.

There is the economic fear of an over-dependent Australian economy, the military fear of Xi’s strategic muscle flexing in the South China Sea and elsewhere, and now the anger over the outbreak of a lethal virus in China that has spread worldwide, diminishing Australian prosperity and threatening livelihoods in its wake.

All of these anxieties in one way or another touch deeper chords in the Australian strategic and cultural imagination that date from the late 19th century. But they now fold in one another, collapsing into a dangerous intensity that will make the management of this relationship even more prickly and unpredictable in the years ahead.

James Curran is Professor of Modern History and senior fellow at Sydney University’s US Studies Centre. He is writing a book on Australia’s China debate for NewSouth Press.

Best of friends?

Above: PM Scott Morrison and Chinese President Xi Jinping are friendly in front of the camera; Right: Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Liberal MP Andrew Hastie. Photos: Alex Ellinghausen, AAP
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