

## **Marise Payne's China trip good news, for now**

Greg Sheridan, Foreign Editor, 12:00AM November 6, 2018

Marise Payne's visit to China this week — the first by an Australian foreign minister in almost three years — is a sign Beijing wants a thaw in the official relationship.

It is, paradoxically, also a sign of how well the Morrison, Turnbull and Abbott governments have managed the extremely challenging relationship with Beijing.

Julie Bishop can feel aggrieved. The Chinese, especially Foreign Minister Wang Yi, have been much nicer to new girl Marise Payne than they were to Bishop in recent encounters.

This may reflect the almost automatic way that Beijing always tries out a new prime minister and a new foreign minister. It likely also reflects that Beijing has so much trouble at the moment coping with the challenge from the Trump - administration on trade and other issues that it does not want too many battles on too many fronts.

Like most of Donald Trump's targets and critics, it has to try to paint a picture that he is an aberration, a lone figure on the world stage. If it is having disputes which involve similar issues to those it is in dispute with Trump about, that narrative is even harder to sustain.

Most of all, this thaw, which may be momentary or may be medium-term, is fairly typical in the bully/stroke/bully pattern of Beijing's external relations.

Beijing in the past few years has been very unhappy with Canberra over a raft of critical issues — Australia's steadfast opposition to Beijing's aggressive territorial acquisitions in the South China Sea; Canberra's foreign interference laws; the tightening protection of Australian critical infrastructure from Chinese government investment and takeover; the rejection of an extradition treaty; and the banning of Chinese involvement via Huawei and a couple of other Chinese companies in the building of a new 5G network in Australia.

At the same time, the Australian government has been as close to the Trump administration on broad security issues, especially Indo-Pacific security issues, as any nation in the world.

This led over the past couple of years to frequent denunciations of Australian policy from Chinese media and occasionally Chinese government and bureaucratic figures, to a partial freeze on high-level visits and to some bureaucratic difficulties with some narrow classes of exports to China.

There has also been some fall in overall Chinese investment.

However, the overall trade, tourism and student numbers have continued to be very good, so it is difficult to say the relationship suffered harm. Where all three Coalition governments, along with Bishop and the various defence ministers, including Payne herself, deserve great credit is that they have been pretty steadfast in protecting these key Australian national interests against Beijing's objections but have remained as positive and low key about China as possible.

The pattern from Beijing is that it turns on a dispute for as long as it wants to punish an interlocutor, then it turns the dispute off.

So for the moment Beijing has turned our dispute off. That's good news, as far as it goes. But of course it guarantees absolutely nothing for the future.