

# Pandemic Diplomacy: “The Gum on China’s Shoe”

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Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

*“Australia is always there, making trouble. It is a bit like chewing gum stuck on the sole of China’s shoes. Sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off.” – Hu Xijin, Global Times editor, April 27, 2020.*

Disasters always invite blame – divine, natural, human – and the current calls of blame being directed with vengeful spleen have one target. The People’s Republic of China is being accused for everything from having shoddy and irreverent diplomats to having dubious and duplicitous scientists wickedly unleashing viruses. Australia, in China’s heavy debt for keeping its fossil fuel industry boosted and primed, is happy to be the stalking horse of powers keen to find the culpable and the guilty for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main thrust of the recent “target China” approach is the use of that mechanism any sovereign state will be suspicious over: an independent inquiry into the origins and ultimate transmission of COVID-19. Such an inquiry serves two purposes: to identify the cause of the coronavirus and vest the relevant investigative body with powers akin to those of a weapons inspector. Two parties end up being tarred in this: the World Health Organization, considered unreformable, and the PRC, considered recalcitrant.

This seems to be an Australian brainchild as much as anything else, a provincial and parochial effort to shore up support and garner prominence on the international stage. Australian politicians have seen such suggestions as benign and benevolent. As **Foreign Minister Senator Marise Payne** [described it](#), “Australia has made a principled call for an independent review of the COVID-19 outbreak, an unprecedented global crisis with severe health, economic and social impacts.”

Labor’s foreign affairs spokeswoman Senator Penny Wong sees things similarly. “We have to press for what is right,” [she claims](#) somewhat bombastically, “what we believe is right, for us and for the international community, and making sure that humanity understands how this virus started is the right thing to do.” Canberra has ceased talking to China, and any sense of conviviality has dried up. Support, instead, is [being sought](#) in France, Germany and the United States.

French **President Emmanuel Macron** has [responded with diplomatic caution](#). In the words of an Élysée official, he agreed that “there have been some issues at the start, but that the urgency is for cohesion, and that it is no time to talk about this, while reaffirming the need for transparency for all players, not only the WHO.”

This is the language Beijing has hoovered up, with its envoy in Australia, **Cheng Jingye**, [remarking](#) that, “Resorting to suspicion, recrimination or division at such a critical time could only undermine global efforts to fight against this pandemic.” China’s ministry of foreign affairs spokesman Geng Shuang [put the point](#) less severely. “The urgent task for all

countries is focusing on international cooperation rather than pointing fingers, demanding accountability and other non-constructive approaches.”

This is not a view taken in Australia. Comments by Australia’s **Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton** this month suggest that unison and cohesion are not exactly on the briefing notes of ministers. As [he claimed](#) in an interview, it was “incumbent upon China to answer those questions [on COVID-19] and provide information, so that people can have clarity about exactly what happened because we don’t want it repeated.” For good measure, he added that “we know that this is not the first instance of a virus being spread from the wildlife wet markets and we need to be honest about that.” These remarks were made after an oblique reference to US State Department “documentation” supposedly detailing the spread of the coronavirus, something which Dutton personally had not read.

The Chinese embassy, ruffled, [responded accordingly](#), using the *Global Times* as their platform. In the view of a spokesperson, Dutton would surely have consulted the US documents before enthusiastically launching into an attack on China. “Obviously he must have also received some instructions from Washington requiring him to cooperate with the US in its propaganda war against China.” Cheng has not shied away from threats, [suggesting that a boycott of Australian goods](#) would be an appropriate response to any Australian-led inquiry. “Maybe the ordinary people will say, ‘Why should he drink Australian wine? Eat Australian beef?’”

As with much in such spluttering accusation, kernels of truth are discernible in the foam. Australia remains the unquestioned sentinel of US designs in the Asia-Pacific, and should never be confused with being with the angels of impartiality. Any sense of that was killed off in the brief and dying days of the Whitlam government. Washington sees Canberra as a natural front for Chinese containment, though such an effort requires gentle padding and coating to lend a certain plausible effect. This involves, for instance, the avoidance of terms such as the “militarisation” of Northern Australia, or US “garrisons” operating on home soil. Terms such as “rotation” and “friendship” are preferred.

Sentiment in Australia against Beijing is now almost militant, watered by claims of domestic interference from the PRC, cyberwarfare, and disputes in the South China Sea. It is to be found in the usual pea-shot pugilists at Sky News to the otherwise more cautious assessments in Fairfax and *The Guardian Australia*. “At the moment,” [suggests](#) Richard McGregor, “Beijing is like someone who lends you a book and urges you to skip the horrifying opening chapters and flip straight to the end, where the hero – in this case, the party-state – prevails, shining a path for the rest of the world to follow.”

An international investigation along the lines being proposed by Australia would also involve its own bit of chapter skipping, with China being found to be the villain at the yawn-inducing conclusion. Such bodies of inquiry tend to suffer from an oxymoronic emphasis, since the investigators run the risk of already having their conclusions ahead of time. In all of this, someone has to pay. Partiality is lost in the zeal of getting a conviction, or finding a cause.

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