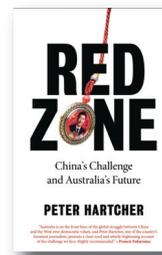


BOOK REVIEW:

Red zone: China's challenge and Australia's future

by Peter Hartcher

Black Inc.: Carlton, Victoria; 2021; 360 pp.; ISBN 9781760642167 (paperback); RRP: \$32.99
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Red Zone focuses on Australia's relations with China as we enter the 21st century's third decade. It examines China's rise to superpower status and the concomitant relative decline in United States influence and power. It seeks to answer the question "What does China want from Australia?"; and to assess how Australia should respond to these developments. It is a revised version of Hartcher's Quarterly Essay 76 *Red flag: waking up to China's challenge* (Black Inc.: Carlton, Vic., 2019).

Peter Hartcher is the political and international editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. He has won several awards for his journalism. He delivered the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales' annual Sir Hermann Black Lecture in 2014, 2015 and 2017; and is a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute.

Red Zone seeks to place Australia's current tense relationship with China in the context of the 19th century 'fall' of China and its subsequent 'rise' under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), especially since China opened up to global trade in the 1980s. China's border disputes with neighbouring states and territorial claims based on 'history' are examined, many being shown to be fallacious.

The primary focus, though, is China under Xi Jinping who has been its leader since 2012. Today, China is the most successful authoritarian regime in modern history, but achieving this status has been an ongoing struggle. Internally, ruthless 'anti-corruption' purges of other powerful forces (e.g. other CCP factions and oligarchs) and suppression of ethnic minorities have been necessary and continue. A paranoid Xi desires security first for his extended family, then for his own CCP faction, then for the CCP and only then for China.

Xi also wishes to gain hegemony over his neighbourhood and the wider Indo-Pacific region. Australia, including its natural resources, is a key part of Xi's equation. Decades of economic dependence on China have left Australia open to Xi's strategic ambitions. In return for a favourable trading relationship, Xi expects that Australia will meekly support and not question the CCP's policies – in effect, that Australia will cede its sovereignty to the CCP.

To this end, China is pursuing a covert and overt campaign for influence in Australia – over trade, defence, academia, politics, infrastructure, and the media – and is employing a range of 'grey zone' tactics and tools short of traditional warfighting. These include: cyber espionage and warfare; trade restrictions amounting to bullying; theft of scientific, military and commercial secrets; influence buying; infiltration of academia and political parties;

purchase of key infrastructure (including the Port of Darwin) and agricultural lands; and the like.

Australia has now woken up to China's challenge. Australia has established a foreign interference transparency scheme and associated controls, banned Huawei and ZTE from its 5G network, boosted its cyber security, and begun diversifying its trading partners where practicable, among other initiatives.

Since the Trump presidency, Australia also has become less naïve about its relationship with the United States, the 'guarantees' provided by the ANZUS Treaty and extended nuclear deterrence. The United States for now remains the world's most powerful nation and, under the Biden presidency, has returned to emphasising the importance to it of alliances. The relationship, however, while remaining of vital importance to our security, can no longer be relied upon in the way previous Australian governments had assumed. Instead, Hartcher says, Australia must provide for its own defence and security – it can no longer expect the United States or other allies to protect it.

Hartcher presents Xi's China as a country with great imperial ambitions, intolerant of dissent, determined to make Australia and the world toe the CCP line and ignore its human rights abuses. In response, so that it can engage confidently with China and the world, Australia must protect itself against the CCP's ambitions, set the terms of its engagement, exercise its sovereignty, and strengthen itself against foreign subversion and domination. Australia can no longer count on anyone else to protect it.

Expert analysts may endorse much of the broad picture painted by Hartcher, but are likely to differ with him on matters of detail especially as he has not cited his sources, except by way of references in the text to politicians and strategic analysts interviewed – no credible literature has been cited and there are no endnotes or a bibliography. That may be acceptable in a newspaper opinion piece, but not in a work of this type and it detracts from the work's value for scholars. The book also lacks an overarching narrative and the chapter titles give little indication of the contents making it hard for the reader to follow the argument as it develops.

Nonetheless, I recommend *Red Zone* to both specialists in international relations and to the wider community. It brings an urgent, fresh and realistic perspective to how Australia now needs to manage its relations with both China and the United States.

David Leece