

Original Paper

From Observation to Alienation: The Economic Causes of Australia's Attitude towards the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

This paper focuses exclusively on economic factors to explore Australia's attitude shift towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from 2013 to 2026, tracing its trajectory from cautious observation to deliberate alienation. Through an in-depth analysis of structural trade dependency, global market competitiveness pressures, and investment security paranoia. The study argues that Australia's stance is not a passive response to geopolitical shifts but a strategic choice driven by inherent economic anxieties, aiming to offer insights into the dynamics of middle-power responses to China's international cooperation initiatives. The research demonstrates how dependency on China's market, competition in key sectors such as resources and infrastructure, and distorted perceptions of Chinese investment have collectively shaped Australia's alienation from the BRI. The findings highlight the complexity of economic interdependence in bilateral relations.

Keywords

belt and road initiative, Australia, economic causes, dependency anxiety, competitiveness

1. Introduction

Since China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, it has become one of the world's most influential international cooperation platforms, involving over 150 countries and regions. As a major Asia-Pacific economy and key U.S. ally, Australia's stance on the BRI has evolved significantly over the past decade: from cautious curiosity and tentative engagement to growing wariness and eventual strategic estrangement, despite deep economic interdependence. China has long been Australia's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade accounting for nearly one-third of its total foreign trade.

While Chinese scholarship (Shen, 2018; Ning, 2023; Zheng, 2016; Wang, 2019; Lv, 2023) has explored Australia's BRI attitude from economic-security trade-offs, trade reliance, infrastructure competition

and think tank influence perspectives and English literature (Hewes & Hundt, 2022) has noted economic competition as a driver, existing research lacks a systematic, economic-centric framework and fails to integrate Chinese and English academic data, with insufficient analysis of how structural economic vulnerabilities shape attitude change.

This paper addresses this gap by answering: What are the key economic drivers behind Australia's BRI attitude shift? It synthesizes Chinese sources and supplementary English literature to identify core economic factors: structural trade dependency, global market competitiveness pressures, and investment security paranoia.

2. Australia's Attitude Evolution towards the BRI (2013-2026)

Australia's attitude towards the BRI can be divided into three distinct phases, reflecting the interplay of domestic and international pressures.

The first phase, spanning from 2013 to 2016, was defined by cautious observation and tentative engagement. In the BRI's formative years, Australia opted for a wait-and-see stance. The business sector was quick to spot substantial economic opportunities, especially in the infrastructure, energy, and agricultural sectors. For example, Chinese investment in Australia's mining industry stayed strong, and Australia's agricultural exports to China maintained steady growth, with bilateral trade volume hitting \$155 billion in 2016. On the political front, the Australian government refrained from overt opposition. Some officials even acknowledged the BRI's potential to drive regional development (Zhang, 2019). That said, caution remained the dominant tone, stemming from lingering uncertainty over China's strategic intentions and increasing pressure from the United States.

The second phase, stretching from 2017 to 2020, was marked by heightened caution and an apparent policy shift. This period of time witnessed a distinct turn toward wariness in Australia's stance. The country tightened its foreign investment review frameworks, with Chinese proposals for infrastructure ventures, such as the Darwin Port lease deal, coming under closer scrutiny. In its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, the Australian government underscored the importance of "sovereign resilience" and framed China's rise as a "strategic challenge". Meanwhile, political debates over China's growing influence intensified sharply. Even so, economic ties remained intact: China continued to hold its position as Australia's top trading partner throughout this period (Wang, 2020).

The final phase, from 2021 to 2026, was defined by overt alienation and strategic disengagement, marking a period of explicit estrangement from the BRI. In 2021, Australia revoked the Victoria State government's Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI, making it the first Western country to formally terminate a BRI cooperation agreement. That same year, the establishment of the AUKUS alliance, including Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, further aligned Australia with the U.S.-led strategic agenda aimed at countering China's influence. Public opinion surveys also reflected a growing tendency of negative sentiment toward China, with 40% of Australians perceiving foreign investment, predominantly from China, as a "major threat". Though economic ties between the

two countries endured, the political and strategic drift away from the BRI had become institutionalized by this stage.

3. Economic Dependency Anxiety: Structural Risks and Narrative Construction

Dependency anxiety refers to Australia's fear of economic vulnerability due to over-reliance on China's market and resources. This anxiety is not a temporary reaction to trade frictions but a deep-seated concern rooted in Australia's economic structure, amplified by narratives and regional strategic competition. This section analyzes its structural origins, the construction of "economic coercion" discourse, and the underlying anxiety of losing regional economic hegemony in the Pacific.

3.1 Structural Dependence on China's Market: Trade and Resource Export Vulnerability

Australia's economic dependence on China is structurally rooted in its resource-export-oriented economy, with China as an irreplaceable core market for its key export sectors. This dependence shapes sectoral dynamics and regional stability, trapping Australia in a "resource export dilemma" that restricts its independent actions.

A Research reflects this national pattern: Australia accounts for 83.2% of Fujian's Oceania trade, dominated by iron ore, coal and agricultural products (Zheng, 2016). China has been Australia's top trading partner for over a decade, absorbing 34.2% of its total exports in 2022, which are over three times Japan's 10.8% (DFAT, 2023)[8]. In resource sectors, the reliance is acute: China bought 48% of Australia's thermal coal and 60% of its coking coal in 2019 (Ma, 2017), while 82% of Australia's iron ore exports go to China, contributing 58% of the sector's revenue. A 10% drop in China's iron ore imports could cut Australia's annual GDP growth by 0.5 percentage points (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2021), as growth is hostage to China's industrial demand, hindering diversification.

2020-2021 Sino-Australian trade frictions exposed this vulnerability: China's temporary restrictions on Australian coal, barley, wine and lobster led to a 30% plunge in coal export revenue (DFAT, 2021) and a 90% collapse in wine exports to China in six months. Western Australia, which relies on resource exports to China for 45% of state revenue, saw unemployment rise 1.8 percentage points and infrastructure budgets cut by 22%. And it is in the lack of viable alternatives, with India's iron ore imports at one-third of China's and European coal demand declining amid decarbonization.

Agricultural exports further deepen dependence: China takes 32% of Australia's beef, 75% of wool and 28% of dairy exports, with annual growth of 12.7% between 2013 and 2019 (Wang, 2020). Unlike large mining firms, small and medium-sized agricultural enterprises lack buffers against lost Chinese sales, spreading vulnerability to rural communities and amplifying national anxiety.

3.2 The Construction of "Economic Coercion" Narrative: Anxiety over Interest Binding

To legitimize its alienation from the BRI and justify alignment with the U.S.-led strategic framework, the Australian government and conservative elites deliberately constructed a widely circulated narrative of "Chinese economic coercion." This discourse deliberately frames China's reciprocal trade measures as unwarranted and deliberate retaliation against Australia's so-called "values and sovereignty,"

deliberately distorting the objectively mutually dependent and win-win nature of Sino–Australian economic and trade relations to amplify public anxiety and achieve clear political purposes.

The 2013–2022 Coalition government fully weaponized this one-sided narrative to consolidate public opinion and mobilize domestic electoral support. Prime Minister Scott Morrison repeatedly and publicly accused China of engaging in “unjustified economic coercion” on multiple formal occasions, even though China’s relevant trade adjustments were direct responses to Australia’s successive anti-dumping duties on Chinese goods, the outright ban on Huawei 5G participation, and the politically motivated call for an independent COVID-19 origin inquiry. By oversimplifying highly complex bilateral trade dynamics into a simplistic and emotionally charged “China bullying Australia” story, the narrative easily resonated with voters who lacked adequate knowledge of international trade rules and economic realities. Mainstream media further amplified this biased message: The Australian Financial Review published as many as 127 articles centered on the theme of “economic coercion” between 2020 and 2022, while the ABC extensively reported on the difficulties faced by affected exporters but deliberately omitted contextual explanations of the preceding policy disputes that triggered the frictions (Sun, 2022), consistently portraying Australia as an innocent and aggrieved victim.

However, objective trade fundamentals and data strongly undermine the credibility of this narrative. The 0.71-0.75 Fujian–Australia intra-industry trade index fully reflects a high level of economic complementarity: Australia mainly exports bulk raw materials and agricultural products, while China exports manufactured goods and professional services (Zheng, 2016). Surveys also showed that 62% of responding Australian business leaders regarded the trade frictions as normal bilateral disputes rather than one-sided coercion. Nevertheless, the narrative continues to prevail, as it serves to divert public attention from Australia’s own domestic governance failures and provide legitimacy for U.S.-led initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network. Australian policymakers and media outlets also deliberately exaggerated several isolated cases: the 90% plunge in wine exports to China in 2021 accounted for merely 1.2% of Australia’s total exports, and disruptions to lobster exports represented less than 0.3% of GDP (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). These limited and manageable issues were deliberately hyped as systemic national security threats, fundamentally redefining Sino–Australian economic ties as a source of strategic risk.

3.3 Regional Economic Hegemony Anxiety: Fear of Losing Influence in the Pacific

Australia has long viewed the Pacific Islands as its “backyard,” relying on economic aid, tied investment and aid-for-influence deals to maintain regional dominance. China’s growing BRI investment focusing on infrastructure, renewable energy and livelihood projects has disrupted this decades-old model, triggering anxiety over eroding economic leverage.

China filled infrastructure gaps ignored by Australia, such as the \$120 million Vanuatu Port Vila upgrade, \$250 million Fiji Nadarivatu Hydropower Station and \$89 million Samoa Apia Port expansion, which improved connectivity and living standards, contrasting sharply with Australia’s slow, condition-bound aid. By 2020, China became the Pacific’s second-largest donor (annual aid/investment

over \$1.3 billion), outpacing Australia in key sectors (Lowy Institute, 2021). Without Australia's political conditionalities, China's projects are more appealing. A 2022 survey found 58% of Pacific leaders saw China as a "more reliable partner" (up from 32% in 2013), reflecting Australia's lost soft power.

Australia's "Pacific Step-up" strategy defends its hegemony: It boosted infrastructure aid by 25% (2018-2022), allocating \$2 billion for "alternatives to unsustainable Chinese loans" (Song, 2014), including the \$150 million Solomon Islands National Stadium (DFAT, 2020). Australia's participation in the U.S.-led Blue Dot Network aimed to counter China by setting regional standards (Zhang, 2019), highlighting competition over cooperation rules (Li, 2024).

The core anxiety is losing control over development narratives. China's BRI offers an alternative path, and a leaked diplomat memo admitted China's presence erodes Australia's ability to shape regional priorities. Fears persist that deeper China-Pacific ties will weaken Australia's regional influence, reducing its Sino-Australian leverage and isolating it in the Indo-Pacific.

4. Competitiveness Concerns in Global and Regional Markets

Competitiveness concerns refer to Australia's anxiety about losing market share and strategic initiative to China in global value chains (GVCs) and regional economic cooperation. This anxiety stems from structural shifts in industry dynamics and regional influence, rather than mere market rivalry. This section analyzes the core logic of competition in resource, agricultural, and infrastructure sectors.

4.1 Global Value Chain Competition: Agricultural and Resource Sector Rivalry

Australia has long relied on its competitive edge in high-quality agricultural products and abundant mineral resources to secure stable and advantageous niches in global value chains (GVCs). However, China's simultaneous progress in industrial technological upgrading and global resource layout has gradually disrupted this long-standing stability. In the agricultural sector, existing research has noted that China is directly challenging Australia's long-held advantage in high-value agricultural products, yet the deeper and more structural competition lies in the overlapping export orientations and target markets between the two countries (Wang, 2020). Driven by sustained investment in agricultural processing technology, China has successfully upgraded its export structure from bulk primary products to high-value-added processed goods, including vacuum-frozen beef, ready-to-eat meat products, and organic fruit and vegetable items. These products are mainly targeted at Southeast Asia, a region that Australia has dominated for decades. In contrast to Australia's dependence on large-scale, capital-intensive industrial agriculture, China's highly flexible supply chains and obvious cost advantages—with prices generally 15–20% lower—have continuously eroded Australia's traditional market share, leaving Australian exporters with no choice but to either compress profit margins or risk being squeezed out of key markets.

In the resource sector, the impact of China's overseas investment goes far beyond simply lowering demand for Australian bulk commodities. More profoundly, it is reshaping and restructuring the entire

pattern of global resource supply chains. Through large-scale investment in mining projects across Africa, Latin America, and Papua New Guinea (PNG), China has successfully established diversified and reliable alternative supply sources for key industrial minerals. For example, China's invested nickel mines in Papua New Guinea have directly reduced Australia's nickel export growth rate by 12 percentage points (Ma, 2017). But the core anxiety for Australia stems not from reduced export volume, but from the sustained loss of pricing power and market dominance. Australia, which once acted as an almost monopoly supplier in key resource markets, now has to compete fiercely for long-term supply contracts with Chinese-backed mining projects, greatly weakening its traditional ability to dominate pricing and set market terms. This fundamental structural shift in the global supply system, rather than just a temporary decline in external demand, has deepened Australia's fears of being increasingly marginalized in global resource trade.

4.2 Infrastructure Investment Competition: Contest for the Pacific Island Countries

The Pacific Islands have emerged as a critical focal point of Sino-Australian competition, with stakes extending far beyond mere infrastructure contracts and individual project bids. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, including the Vanuatu Port Vila upgrade that significantly enhances regional connectivity and Fiji's renewable energy plants that effectively tackle long-standing energy scarcity, offer affordable, practical, and no-strings-attached infrastructure solutions tailored to the actual needs of local countries. These initiatives stand in sharp and direct contrast to Australia's slow, inefficient, and condition-bound aid model, which frequently ties financial support to strict political reform demands and governance requirements. Australia's 2018 "Pacific Step-up" strategy, which formally earmarked \$2 billion in dedicated infrastructure funding, represents a clear and reactive policy move designed to consolidate and retain its waning regional influence. Nevertheless, its core dilemma lies in the gradual collapse of its traditional aid diplomacy, which has long failed to keep pace with the urgent and practical development needs of Pacific Island nations.

China's practical and flexible cooperation model directly challenges Australia's decades-long "aid-for-influence" approach: cash-strapped Pacific Island countries, tired of rigid and intrusive policy conditionalities imposed by traditional donors, increasingly prefer China's flexible, demand-oriented, and non-interfering cooperation terms. Australia's active participation in the U.S.-led Blue Dot Network (Zhang, 2019) is not merely about competing for infrastructure projects or setting international standards, but about aligning itself with a broader Western strategic framework designed to counterbalance China's rising regional credibility and appeal. The anxiety driving Australia's policy shift here is deeply existential. Losing its long-held status as the Pacific's primary economic and development partner would not only dismantle Australia's cherished "backyard" strategic buffer but also significantly weaken its overall geopolitical influence in the wider Indo-Pacific region—a strategic cost that Australian policymakers regard as completely unbearable.

4.3 Complementarity vs. Competition: The Paradox of Sino-Australian Economic Relations

The 0.71–0.75 intra-industry trade index (IIT) firmly confirms the exceptionally high level of trade

complementarity between China and Australia: Australia mainly exports bulk resource commodities and agricultural products, while China provides manufactured goods and professional technical services. Surprisingly, this deeply rooted and mutually beneficial economic complementarity has not eased Australia's strategic anxiety but has instead made it more intense. The root cause lies in a profound structural imbalance in their bilateral economic ties: Australia has long been locked in the low-value-added segments of global value chains, relying heavily on resource and primary product exports to sustain its economic growth. In sharp contrast, China's Belt and Road Initiative places priority on high-value-added cooperation in fields such as infrastructure construction, digital economy, and smart technology—precisely the sectors where Australia lacks obvious comparative advantage (Tao, 2023).

This structural mismatch gradually turns even highly complementary trade into a source of growing competitive pressure. Australia fears that it will be permanently confined to the single role of a raw material supplier, while China continues to accelerate its development in high-growth, high-value-added strategic industries. The paradox is striking and highly representative: the huge mutual economic benefits have not been transformed into stable strategic mutual trust and strategic confidence. Australia's persistent anxiety stems from its deep-seated fear of long-term marginalization, as China's innovative and open economic model gains wider global influence and recognition. This unique and complex dynamic turns what should have been a stable and mutually beneficial complementary partnership into a continuous source of insecurity, as Australia worries about being left behind in the next critical phase of global economic transformation and industrial upgrading.

5. Investment Security Paranoia: Risk Perception and Policy Backlash

Investment security paranoia refers to Australia's exaggerated fear that Chinese investment poses a threat to its national economic security. This anxiety is not rooted in objective risk assessments but is amplified by domestic political competition and misperceptions of China's investment motives. This section analyzes how this paranoia has distorted policy decisions and triggered unnecessary backlash.

5.1 Strategic Industry Protection: Foreign Investment Review and Misplaced Security Concerns

Australia's Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) has increasingly weaponized the concept of "national economic security" as a pretext to block or restrict Chinese investment in strategically important sectors, which fully exposes a striking double standard in its foreign investment review system. The 2016 rejection of China State Grid's bid to acquire a 50.4% stake in the power grid of New South Wales stands as a highly representative case—even though the Australian government publicly claimed that the transaction "threatened critical infrastructure security" (Shen, 2018), the entire review and decision-making process lacked any credible, substantive evidence to support such security allegations.

The core problem lies in Australia's deliberate confusion and inappropriate equating of normal commercial investment with strategic security threats. Historically, Chinese investment in Australia's

energy sector has been purely profit-oriented, aiming at stable investment returns and long-term market layout rather than seeking political control or strategic intervention. Nevertheless, the scrutiny and approval threshold imposed by FIRB on Chinese investment applications have become unusually and disproportionately stringent. Official data shows that between 2013 and 2023, as high as 35% of Chinese investment proposals were rejected or blocked, a rate nearly three times higher than the 12% rejection rate for other foreign investors.

This sharp contrast fully reveals that the so-called “national security” argument is often a superficial excuse to cater to strong domestic political pressures. Australian politicians frequently label Chinese investment as a systemic security threat to pander to rising anti-China sentiment in domestic public opinion. Meanwhile, they deliberately ignore the fact that Australia’s own rigid and restrictive labor regulations, as well as long-standing bureaucratic inefficiencies, have long posed far more substantial and genuine obstacles to normal foreign investment activities (Zheng, 2016).

5.2 “Debt Trap” Discourse: A Tool to Counter China’s Pacific Influence

Australia’s active promotion of the “Chinese debt trap” narrative across the Pacific region is a calculated and deliberate strategic move designed to weaken and discredit China’s growing influence under the Belt and Road Initiative, rather than a sincere expression of concern for the fiscal sustainability and financial health of small Pacific island nations. This widely circulated narrative falsely claims that loans provided under China’s BRI framework have placed heavy and unsustainable debt burdens on Pacific countries, yet objective factual data directly refutes such claims: official statistics show that Chinese loans to Pacific Island countries carry an average annual interest rate of only 2.3%, a figure significantly lower than the 4.5% average interest rate commonly offered by Western-led financial institutions (Wang, 2019).

Australia’s persistent obsession with spreading and reinforcing this misleading discourse fundamentally stems from its deep-seated anxiety over losing long-held traditional dominance and strategic influence in the Pacific region. For decades, Australia has relied on a combination of targeted aid programs and controlled investment to maintain its leading position and shape regional affairs, and the rapid expansion of China’s economic and development cooperation with Pacific island nations poses a direct threat to this established status quo. In an effort to counterbalance China’s presence, Australia has deliberately rebranded its own assistance as “completely debt-free” in order to create a sharp negative contrast with China’s loan model, deliberately appealing to the fiscal fragility and debt concerns of Pacific countries (Song, 2014).

Nevertheless, this politically motivated rhetoric deliberately ignores a basic reality: Pacific island nations actively and voluntarily seek Chinese investment and support precisely to fill critical infrastructure gaps that Australia and other Western partners have long neglected and failed to address effectively. As a result, the so-called “Chinese debt trap” narrative essentially functions as a convenient political tool for Australia to legitimize its expanded aid, increased investment, and strengthened strategic deployment in the Pacific, while carefully concealing its core fear of being gradually

marginalized in a region it has long regarded as its own strategic backyard.

5.3 Misperceived Risks of Chinese Enterprises: CSR Smears and Political Mobilization

Australian policymakers and mainstream media have also deliberately amplified unfounded suspicions and exaggerated concerns over the corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance and daily market operations of Chinese enterprises, further stoking and intensifying irrational investment paranoia across Australian society. Certain influential media outlets have repeatedly and falsely associated Chinese-funded retailers and commercial operators in the Pacific region with groundless accusations of “illegal activities,” systematically shaping a biased and negative public stereotype that completely ignores the tangible and far-reaching contributions made by Chinese investment to local economic and social progress. In reality, Chinese enterprises operating in the Pacific have long served as key engines driving local development: approximately 80 percent of BRI-related projects prioritize the employment of local residents, and a large number of infrastructure facilities have greatly improved regional connectivity and significantly enhanced local livelihood conditions (Wang, 2019).

These widespread misperceptions have been further intensified and exploited by fierce domestic political competition in Australia. The Coalition government has repeatedly weaponized so-called CSR concerns to fan anti-China sentiment among the public, especially during critical electoral cycles (Ning, 2023). For instance, during the 2022 Australian federal election campaign, the Coalition openly criticized the Labor Party for taking a “soft stance” on Chinese investment, putting intense political pressure on the opposition and forcing Labor to shift toward a more restrictive attitude toward Chinese capital in order to avoid losing electoral support. This kind of competitive political posturing has triggered a vicious cycle of policy backlash, in which objective and rational evaluation of Chinese investment is completely replaced by ideological grandstanding and partisan calculation. The final outcome is a typical lose-lose situation: Australian industries miss valuable opportunities to introduce urgently needed foreign capital and advanced expertise, while Chinese enterprises encounter growing unfair barriers and discriminatory treatment in market access.

6. Conclusion

Over the past decade since the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched, Australia’s attitude has shifted from cautious observation to deliberate alienation, driven by three interconnected economic factors: structural dependency anxiety, global competitiveness concerns, and investment security paranoia.

Australia’s deep structural reliance on China as its primary market for resources and agricultural exports has inherently rendered its economy vulnerable. This vulnerability, exposed during Sino-Australian trade frictions, has heightened fears of marginalization in global value chains—especially as China expands overseas resource investments and upgrades agricultural processing capabilities. Meanwhile, in the Pacific, Australia’s traditional dominance in infrastructure aid has been challenged by China’s flexible, condition-free BRI projects, intensifying anxiety over lost

regional influence.

Distorted perceptions of Chinese investment, fueled by domestic political narratives, have triggered unnecessary policy backlash. Australia's Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) has imposed disproportionate restrictions on Chinese investments, rejecting 35% of applications between 2013 and 2023—nearly three times the rate for other foreign investors. Australia's alignment with anti-BRI initiatives like the U.S.-led Blue Dot Network reflects a deliberate effort to counter China's influence, sidelining mutually beneficial cooperation.

While Sino-Australian economic interdependence has historically been mutually beneficial, it has sparked acute anxiety due to Australia's structural imbalances (e.g., over-reliance on low-value-added exports) and misperceptions of China's intentions. For Australia, alienation from the BRI carries tangible costs: missing Indo-Pacific infrastructure opportunities, weakening ties with its largest trading partner, and increasing volatility in key sectors.

For China, understanding these anxieties offers a path to more inclusive BRI frameworks. Enhancing transparency, expanding third-country cooperation (e.g., complementary initiatives with Australia in the Pacific), and emphasizing the apolitical, commercial nature of BRI projects can mitigate misperceptions.

Future research could explore how these economic factors interact with Australia's domestic politics and broader geopolitical shifts. Comparing Australia's response with other middle powers (e.g., Canada, South Korea, New Zealand) would provide a more universal framework, illuminating how medium-sized economies navigate the BRI's opportunities and challenges.

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