

Australia's Threat Perception of China on China– Vanuatu Cooperation in 2018

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ABSTRACT

China's plan to construct a seaport in Vanuatu in April 2018 was seen by Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull as a threat. He stated that Australia would view this cooperation with great concern. As a middle power in the Pacific and a representative of Western power, Australia's reaction was exaggerated in some ways. This paper suggests that such a reaction reflects the emergence of threat perception on the part of Australia toward China. The paper mainly discusses the factors leading to threat perception based on Cohen's threat perception theory. Three variables are used to explain Australia's reaction/response according to Cohen's theory: (1) geography, (2) threatening signal and mistrust, (3) sense of vulnerability.

Keywords: *Australia, China, Vanuatu, Threat Perception.*

1. INTRODUCTION

China's activity in the South Pacific has generated various reactions in this past decade, from skepticism about its *debt trap* strategy to concern about the expanding influence of China in that region. Australia, as a middle power that has played a key role in ensuring the stability of security in the South Pacific during the last four decades, has also held changing views regarding China's actions.

China was Australia's biggest trade partner as of 2014 (Dittmer & He, 2014). The economic partnership between Australia and China has been a focus of the two countries since the *reform and opening up* by Deng Xiaoping. Until now, China's contribution to Australia's economy has been significant, with China importing at least one-third of Australia's wool production. Moreover, China has been one of the countries that send the largest number of foreign students to Australia, and therefore many Australian politicians believe that Australia needs to put more focus on China more than before (Fitzgerald, 1990).

A new phase began when the slogan "Rising China," which describes the significant development of China's economy, began to come more into the spotlight in international politics. Many countries' leaders have shown different reactions to this. China's economy, which surpassed the US economy in 2012, has put China

in a stronger position and has led other states to see that country as both a threat and a potential partner.

Regarding "Rising China," according to Australia's 2013 *White Paper of Defence*, the prime minister at that time, Jullia Gillard, stated that the phenomenon of a "Rising China" was taking place in a peaceful way, and that strategic rivalry in the region would not lead to conflict (Jain & McCarthy, 2016). But Australia's *White Paper of Defence* in 2016 stated that the country would strengthen its partnership with the United States and other partners such as Japan and India. This statement failed to satisfy China, and they saw their partnership with Australia as uncertain, as stated by China's spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry. Australia as a middle power faced something of a dilemma as to whether to choose China in terms of an economic partnership or the United States in terms of a security alliance. Australia's position in terms of a bilateral partnership with China has always been burdened by its relations with the United States, which means that Australia's relations have always tended to be trilateral more than bilateral.

The presumption regarding China as a threat arose after the drastic increase in China's economy in the early 1900s. It was believed that economic capacity could lead to greater power, based on records that show a big increase in China's military spending in 1995 (Roy, 1996). Some observers assessed China's aggressivity in

an optimistic way, assuming that if it were true that China's power was based on its economy, then it would not likely attack its partner states.

However, China's aggressive action in Southeast Asia has apparently motivated Australia to hedge its position that China will not use its power and wealth in a threatening way. Even though China's activity in the South China Sea has not had any direct impact on Australia, Australia's position as an ally of the United States and a partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries in maritime security (named MANIS, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Singapore) at the same time, has encouraged Australia to respond to China's activity in the South China Sea (Blaxland, 2017). In this case, Australia has employed an *engage but hedge* strategy because it still has an interest in an economic partnership with China (Bisley, 2018). But as China grows more powerful and highly regarded in international politics, Australia may have to make a decision regarding its relations with both China and the United States, even though in reality the security cooperation between Canberra and Washington has not directly affected the economic partnership between Canberra and Beijing. This was implied in Tony Abbott's (prime minister of Australia 2013–2015) statement that Australia's policies toward China are based on both insecurity and greed (Bisley, 2018).

A change in Australia's response again occurred; it was suggested in Australia's 2017 *White Paper of Defence*. Australia finally saw "Rising China" as a security threat and needed to strengthen its strategic cooperation comprehensively. In fact, Australia still consistently chose to hedge the influence of China, which, at that time, was a big competitor and rival to the United States in international politics and trade.

But the more logical reason for Australia's changing view toward China since 2017 has been less about China's aggressive activity in the South Pacific and bilateral relations, and more about the aggressivity of US policy toward China following Donald Trump's election as president. The proof is the strict policy on tariffs, which has resulted in a *trade war* between the two countries. On the other side, China has continuously reassured Australia that "Rising China" is a peaceful approach to both countries increasing their economic partnership (Liu & Hao, 2014).

The next response from Australia came in April 2018 when China communicated with Vanuatu about its plan to build a port in Espiritu Santo (an island in Vanuatu). Most Australian politicians saw this as a threat due to the port being allegedly for military use, even when both China and Vanuatu rejected this allegation and responded that the port is for cruise ships. After this news of the port spread, the prime minister of Australia at that time, Malcolm Turnbull, issued a statement, saying, "*We would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign*

military base in those Pacific islands and our neighbors." The responses from Australia to China's actions, which have differed from time to time, are uncommon, and therefore require further research into how Australia sees China as a threat in association to China's activity in the South Pacific, especially its relations with Vanuatu.

Previous academic studies about the changing views or perceptions on the part of Australia toward China focused only on the period between the colonization era and the modern era (early 1990s). As an ally to the United States and a member of the British Commonwealth, Australia's biggest threat was the communist ideology. Australia's geographical location in the south end between Asia and the Pacific also indicated that the surrounding countries can be seen as potential threats. But considering that the economic and military capacity of the Pacific countries was far behind Australia, Australia could enjoy a peaceful situation without viewing any surrounding countries as threats. The only possible threat to Australia from the Asian region was probably Indonesia, in terms of geographic factors. Furthermore, historical records showed that tensions existed between Australia and Northeast Asian countries such as Japan and China in the past. The success of Japan in the World War also raised concerns for Australia. And historically, China was also viewed as a threat to Australia in the late eighteenth century due to the racist notion of the Yellow Peril, and China was considered a threat to British leadership (Dupont, 1991). However, even though China was part of Australia's concerns in the past, China's activity in the Pacific has not been specifically studied within an academic framework. Therefore, I believe that the research question stated above will give a variation in addition to the treasury of research topics about Australia, China, and the Pacific countries.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

To answer the research question, I use a qualitative method with a historical descriptive approach, and for the data collection I use a literature review. The historical descriptive approach involves collecting and evaluating data in a systematic way in relation to events in the past to verify the truth about certain issues related to causalities, in order to explain current events or to predict future events. Through this approach, past events can be evaluated to contribute to the study of current society (Martono, 2015). This method was used due to the ease it provides in identifying any factors that may influence Australia's perceptions of China as a threat.

The data analysis technique in this paper is based on the Miles and Huberman model. In this model, there are three phases: *data reduction*, *data display*, and *conclusion drawing/verification*. The *data reduction* phase sorts out the important points in order to obtain a clearer image/explanation and to help the author in the

data collection. After reducing the data, the data serves in brief description. Tables, intercategory links, graphs, and so on. Last, I conclude by stating all the findings in order to show any novelties (Sugiyono, 2012).

3. THREAT PERCEPTION THEORY

I answer the research question by using threat perception theory as proposed by Raymond Cohen. The meaning of perception in Cohen's theory is based on the effort to identify the means of certain actor(s). *"Usually it is assumed that threat perception, like perception as such, refers to a more or less immediate act of recognition"* (Cohen, 1978, p. 95). There are three variables that form a perception of an actor toward others. Perception is often used to identify any potential threats rather than wait for an existing threat to transform into an actual threat. The three variables are (1) *geography*; (2) *threatening signal and mistrust*; and (3) *sense of vulnerability*. I then visualize the variables to make them easy for the readers to understand them.

The first variable, *geography*, explains that direct contact at a territorial boundary will result in threats. If any direct contact occurs, the possibility of tension and conflict will grow bigger, and this will form threat perceptions among the involved actors. Cohen stated that *"the attention of decision-makers was drawn to the events in question because they concerned or involved areas strategically or emotionally of high priority and pressing relevance"* (Cohen, 1978, p. 96). The decision-makers of a state will employ its strategic territorial position to construct both priorities and potential threats toward their country. In this case, the closer two countries are (in terms of geographical location); the greater the possibility that conflict will occur.

The second variable, *threatening signal and mistrust*, is described by Cohen as "a second factor making for sensitivity to threatening signals and extreme pessimism in their interpretation was an atmosphere of tension and mistrust relations between the act" (Cohen, 1978, pp. 96-96). The existing tension resulting from those signals will trigger threat perceptions that clarify the interpretation of an actor toward other(s).

Regarding the third variable, *sense of vulnerability*, according to Cohen, "There was one important exception to the pattern associating the perception of threat with a sense of vulnerability" (Cohen, 1978, p. 99). If one of the actors senses vulnerability, then the assumption of that will trigger the formation of perceptions for the actor who is in a vulnerable position.

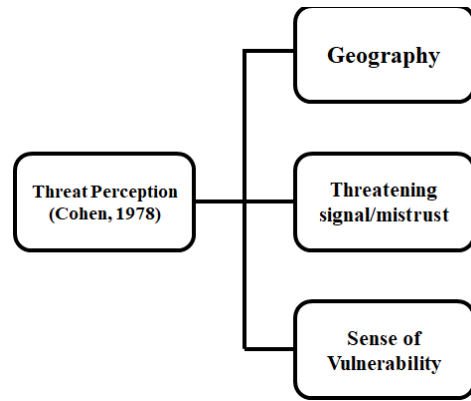


Figure 1 Visualization of Cohen's Threat Perception Theory, 1978 (Source: Arranged by author based on Cohen, 1978).

Threat perception theory has also been discussed by Robert Jervis, who sees threat perception as used by an actor to make a decision in relation to other actor(s): *"crucial decisions is impossible without considering the decision-makers' beliefs about the world and the images of others."* Even though perception is not the only factor that can be used to affect an actor's behavior, a perception that is understood by other actors will have a linear impact on how a policy is made. In addition to Jervis, Elena Andreeva, in her paper titled "The Impact of Threat Perception on National Role Conceptions: The Cases of Turkey and Russia," explained that the existence of threat perception is the main idea that is passed down from realism. Changes in the balance of power will result in insecurity according to the anarchic system of international system. Based on Cohen's theory, threat perceptions are measured by how an actor anticipates the actions of other actor(s). Behavior that is based on the relation between actors can also trigger the emergence of threat perception. Some important points that contribute to further understanding the formulation of threat perception are (1) the historical relations among involved actors; (2) the experiences among actors based on threats in the past; (3) the balance of capability, such as military, diplomatic, or economic; (4) the structural factors among actors; (5) historical records about the involvement of the actors in the same law of order; and (6) policy issues linked to interests among actors or the territory of actors (Andreeva, 2016). From the description above, we can clearly see that threat perceptions are caused by the relationship between many factors that affect the actors, both on the threatened and the threatening side. Furthermore, a threat is seen not from a static perspective but rather a fluctuating and dynamic relationship between actors.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Australia's Geographical Factors

China's overly active involvement in Vanuatu specifically, and the Pacific generally, shows that China's

room for mobility has slowly widened and is about to collide with Australia’s border. Despite Australia’s role as a middle power and as a representative of Western power in the Pacific region that accommodates the activity of the surrounding countries, in both security and economy, China’s expanding role is slowly shifting Australia’s position. The concern about a power shift in the Pacific is a burden to Australia in viewing China’s relations with the South Pacific countries.



Figure 2 Map of Australia and Vanuatu (Source: matamatapolitik.com)

Furthermore, there was a decline in the relations between Australia and Vanuatu due to Australia’s intervention in Vanuatu’s domestic politics (around 2010–2011, the time of the election of Vanuatu’s prime minister). This could be seen as an opportunity for China to spread and strengthen its influence. Moreover, this is apparent in China’s position as the biggest aid provider for Vanuatu, having surpassed Australia in the amount of funds provided. With the relation between China and Vanuatu growing closer, the possibility of China using Vanuatu to achieve its interests is also growing stronger and Australia can do nothing about it.

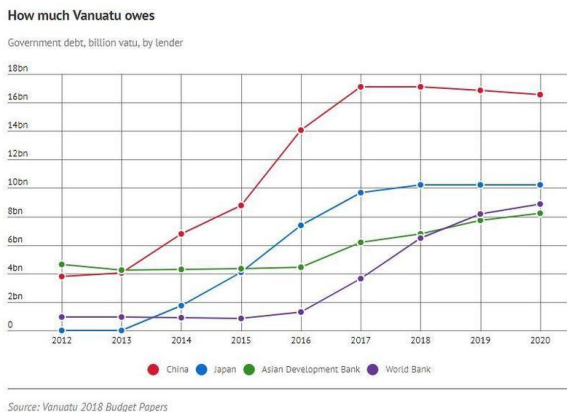


Figure 3 Amount of Foreign Debt of Vanuatu in 2012–2020 (Source: zero hedge.com)

4.2. Threatening Signal/Mistrust

Australia’s distrust of China reached its most intense point when China allegedly made a deal with Vanuatu to establish a port on Espiritu Santo Island, even though both countries (China and Vanuatu) have denied the

allegation that this port is for military uses. The location of the port construction is close to Vanuatu’s international airport, which was also built with aid from China. In the past, China’s aid to other countries (African countries and Pakistan) has shown the same pattern, and is famously known as a *debt trap* strategy, which is a situation in which China gives a large loan and aid in an amount that the recipient can hardly pay off, and the aid is used to build nonproductive sectors such as hospitals and government offices. A similar incident took place in Djibouti, and unfortunately the concerned strategy happened to play out. The airport that was constructed, was actually used for a military base, which contains a seaport and a hangar, and is able to place at least 10,000 armies. Dan terbukti pembangunan bandara di Djibouti benar-benar difungsikan menjadi pangkalan militer Cina yang dapat berisi pelabuhan, landasan helicopter, hangar, dan mampu menampung 10.000 military troops.

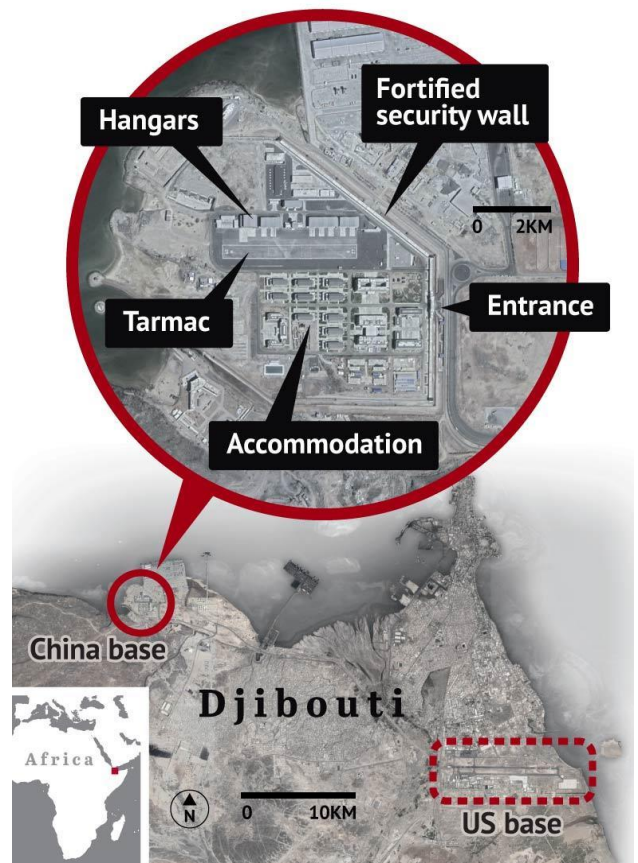


Fig.4. China’s Military Base in Djibouti

Figure 4 China’s Military Base in Djibouti (Source: smh.com.au).

With the construction of a seaport in Vanuatu, it is surely logical for Australia to be concerned about China as a threat. If the alleged port in Vanuatu is completed, then it will be China’s first-ever military base in the Pacific region.

4.3. Sense of Vulnerability

China is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, trade partners with Australia to date, but as I briefly stated in the preface, Australia has a somewhat complicated triangular relationship with China, having a US military alliance with the United States and an economic partnership with China. These are two different situations, but Australia has to carefully consider its relations with each country.

In midst of a trade war between the United States and China, Australia has decided to maintain its relations with the United States but at the same time is concerned about China's unpredictable activity in the South China Sea. China's effort to balance US influence can clearly be seen in its plans for construction of the military base. The military bases already constructed by China are geographically went against those of the United States.

With the heating up of United States–China relations, Australia's partnership with China may lead to high tension and more culturable to be affected by conflicts.

Bases and potential bases: China, US and India

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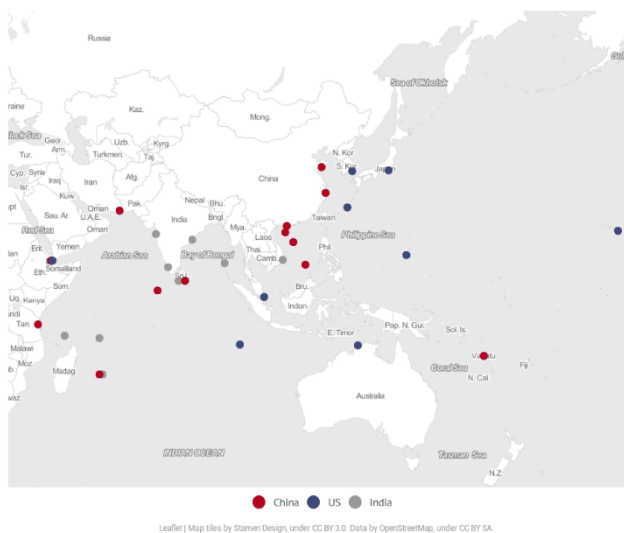


Figure 5 Bases and Potential Bases: China, US, and India (Source: smh.com.au).

5. CONCLUSION

Australia's threat perception of China is based on three factors. First, Vanuatu as China's partner in the construction of infrastructures that are allegedly being expanded to provide military assistance will be directly adjacent to Australia's territorial border. Furthermore, the declining relations between Australia and Vanuatu in the past few years have created an opportunity for China to move closer to Vanuatu in various areas. With the establishment of a potential military base, Australia finds itself in an uncertain situation where a sudden attack could occur at any time.

Second, Australia's prime minister has shown signs of distrust regarding the partnership and relations between China and Vanuatu. Such a response is based on the pattern of China's *debt trap* strategy, which has been used in previous partner countries, one of which is Djibouti that resulted in the construction of China's first military base in the region.

Third, there is currently a sense of vulnerability in Australia–China relations. Even though China is the biggest trade partner of Australia, in terms of security issues Australia tends to lean more toward the United States. US Meski Cina adalah mitra ekonomi terbesar Australia. With relations between China and the United States heating up due to the *trade war*, Australia's relationship with China can be described as "running on a thin thread." China's overly active involvement in constructing military bases appears to be a direct confrontation with the United States in terms of their placement geographically.

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