Abstract

Because Australia is facing the prospect of its largest trade partner (China) becoming a strategic adversary of Australia’s major ally (United States), how Australia depicts China’s rise has become a salient foreign policy issue. This investigation argues that the former Howard Government’s predominant depiction of China was positive, but that its predominant perception of China was one of mistrust and unease. According to this investigation, positive depictions of China are motivated by insecurity rather than genuine strategic reorientation towards China. Three distinct periods can be discerned in the mood of Australia-China relations, and corresponding depictions, between 1996 and 2006. Period One (1996) was characterised by positive policy depictions, and negative crisis depictions. Period Two (1997–2002) was characterised by predominantly positive depictions, with occasionally cautious depictions. Period Three (2003–2006) observed depictions of strategic alignment, with, yet again, several cautious depictions. This paper argues that the Howard Government positively depicted China as part of a regional hedging strategy. Positive depictions serve three objectives. First, they compel the United States to work harder at strengthening its security alliances in the region. Second, they allay Chinese fears of containment and convince China that its ‘peaceful development’ diplomacy is allowing it to successfully engage and integrate into the region. Third, in the case of the Howard Government, they shut down an avenue of domestic criticism towards its foreign policy. Hedging reveals that the Howard Government was a complex actor, in contrast to descriptions of it as a ‘response agent’ conducting a ‘hope based formula’ of engagement with China.