

‘The Great Debate on China’—Babones vs himself

On 11 August Martin North’s independent YouTube Channel, Digital Finance Analytics, hosted “[The Great Debate On China](#)”. Citizens Party Research Director Robert Barwick, and University of Sydney sociologist, Associate Professor Salvatore Babones, debated issues around the Australia/China relationship, including foreign policy and investment, mainstream media coverage, and geopolitical tensions. In truth, Babones could have been debating his own more balanced positions expressed very recently, which he has abandoned in favour of an extreme hostility to China. The question is why?

Babones’ arguments echoed the talking points of anti-China activists like *Silent Invasion* author Clive Hamilton: “Australia, more than any other western country, has been deeply infiltrated by China”, he alleged. Furthermore, many Australians have “bought into the Chinese collaboration” and “Chinese point of view”, which he claimed influences mining magnates, politicians and universities—all familiar mainstream media tropes. Curiously, Babones’ arguments starkly contradicted his own views only a few years prior.



Salvatore Babones

In the debate, following a disclaimer, “there are always accusations of racism that just get thrown at this topic”, Babones proceeded to single out the unique threat Chinese people pose to Australia. When Australia accepts “so many new citizens” from China, he claimed, these Chinese-Australians will “share the Chinese government’s point of view”. These new immigrants “may be party members themselves”, and once they become citizens, “the infection is in the house, there’s not much you can do about it”.

Australia, he expanded, “has an internal constituency from China which is different from the mere foreign influence.... [I]f you speak for a foreign country in Australia you have to register as an agent of foreign influence, but if you just happen to share the points of view that the Chinese government ... well that’s perfectly legitimate in a democracy, and I think that becomes dangerous for a country like Australia”. Putting aside that Babones is himself a foreigner—an American—in Australia, who says he “broadly [shares] an American world view” and has no plans to become an Australian citizen, it is curious that Babones espoused a different view as recently as 2018 [when he actually defended Confucius Institutes in Australian universities](#). Even though the Chinese teachers may have “internalised a government-approved world view”, 2018 Babones said, “[in] pluralistic Western societies, there should be room for such world views, even though today’s China—which lacks Western pluralistic values—does not always reciprocate. ... Values rub off, and the best way to learn democracy may be to live it.” What changed?

What evidence?

Reminiscent of international China hawks, Babones referred to China’s “militarisation of the South China Sea”. Barwick countered, contrasting Chinese sandbar installations with the firepower of US aircraft carrier groups that sail through the region. Barwick noted Chinese “militarisation” only began after 2012, when US President Barack Obama declared the “pivot to Asia”, deploying 60 per cent of the US military to the region, following a decade of US/Anglo regime-change wars and repeated violations of international law.

Babones’ response was a clear deflection: “As I understand it this is the great China debate, not the great America debate”. Reducing the issue to ideology, he asked: “My question is, and the China debate question is, is this the regime that Australia wants to do business with?”

Babones’ current views contradict [his statements in 2015](#), when he acknowledged pragmatically that although the Chinese military could shut down sea lanes, this would negatively impact trade, therefore “[I]t’s hard to imagine any circumstance under which the Chinese government would want to shut it down. ... If China’s military budget is growing, it is likely because China is growing, not because China has any specific invasion plans. There are as yet no signs that China’s military expansion threatens the United States. Quite the contrary: It might support greater Chinese involvement in international peace-keeping.... Peaceful coexistence is a much cheaper and much less provocative strategy.”

When Barwick confronted Babones with official figures of foreign investment in Australia, overwhelmingly dominated by the USA (not China), Babones ignored the data, again reducing the argument to ideology: “I don’t think it’s a matter of how much, I think it’s a matter of what character”, he said. “[I]n the back of your mind that’s always the question:

are they truly there for commercial reasons, or are they there acting on behalf of a foreign government? That's not a question you have with British or American or other investors, who for the most part are just there to make a buck." Barwick countered: "You have no evidence for anything you just said, it's a feeling you have because of a perspective you have on China." Without debate, Babones conceded: "Yes, absolutely! Guilty as charged." (This author has observed that such "feelpinions-as-evidence" is rampant among the anti-China crowd nowadays.)



Robbie Barwick and Martin North.

Which is the real China?

Whereas 2020 Babones debated, "There's no such thing as true private industry in China now, perhaps there was in the early 2000s, but since the Xi Jinping era began there hasn't been", in [2017 Babones had said](#): "Xi is a pragmatist who will stay on the capitalist road so long as it leads to much greater wealth than any other."

In [2015 Babones demonstrated a nuanced understanding of China's economy](#): "American ideas don't always work for Chinese realities." After the 2008 GFC collapsed Chinese exports, the Chinese government embarked on massive public spending on infrastructure, "rightly threw theory out the window and did what common sense dictated had to be done. ... Now that the immediate crisis has passed, American economics is back in vogue in Beijing. ... In a poor country with inadequate human and physical infrastructure the conventional American view that public investment should be left to the private sector is just plain wrong. ... The private sector will open fast food outlets in China but it won't build urban mass transit systems, rural high schools, or nationwide food safety agencies. ... China has the opportunity to teach the world instead how development is actually done."

In the debate, 2020 Babones asserted: "China is a party state run by a profoundly illiberal regime" and "self-correction does not happen in today's China", inferring China does not learn from past mistakes, unlike the USA which Babones claimed "self-corrected" after the Guantanamo Bay scandal. (Although, as Barwick pointed out, Guantanamo is still open.)

[Yet in 2016 Babones had a more balanced view](#) of China's government and acknowledged its capacity for selfcorrection: "To realise how momentous this transition is, think back 40 years to 1970s China. ... All of those forms of party-state social control are now gone for good. The Communist Party of China may still pull all the levers of economic and political power, but in the social sphere most Chinese people are freer now than their ancestors had ever been. ... The freedom of personal choice in these kinds of everyday activities may not equate to gold standard freedoms like the freedom to advocate the overthrow of the government, but they are probably felt and appreciated by vastly larger numbers of people." Although "one should not sugar-coat the Chinese regime", he'd said, "one should applaud the fact that everyday freedoms are increasing every day in China".

The question remains: What initiated Babones' transition from 2017 pragmatist ("[China needs peace as much as the rest of us, and probably more](#)") to 2020 hawk ("[China has become a threat to world peace](#)")?

Who is demanding Australia choose 'sides'?

In the debate, Babones supported a decidedly interventionist US foreign policy, which he calls "adventurous" and "moral": "I think a lot of Americans sincerely want to see a moral foreign policy in the United States that is very active out in the world and supports people out in the world.... Americans are very proud of their involvement in World Wars One and Two and very proud of their involvement in the Cold War with the Soviet Union". Many Americans "are very proud for what the country is doing with regard to China today". Barwick was taken aback, noting Babones "glossed over" the "unmitigated disasters" of Libya and Iraq. This wasn't out of ignorance—[several years prior Babones had acknowledged](#): "In countries like Iraq, Libya, and Syria where the United States has used overt military force to attempt to install pro-American regimes, it has failed."

Babones told Barwick that Australia must take sides. "There are only two countries in the world with which Australia really has to make decisions about taking sides, and that's with the United States and China ... two countries with which Australia really doesn't have the resources to run an independent foreign policy, and [note: back to feelpinions] ultimately I think Australians have to decide which country they're more comfortable with."

In 2020 Babones said the "Chinese regime" is "quite evil". Australia exporting raw materials to China for its "increasing militarisation of the world", is comparable to "when Sweden supplied the German war machine with iron ore, and Sweden became complicit in the crimes of the Nazi regime." Barwick retorted, visibly angry: "They're not building a war machine, they built 35,000 kilometres of high-speed rail in 10 years using our iron ore, so [that] 1.4 billion people can travel around in [it], at a

higher living standard. That is not a war machine, that is a positive thing.”

As it happens, [in 2016 Babones agreed with Barwick](#): “Over the past 10 years China has built about 20,000 km of high-speed rail connections, 20 urban public transport systems, countless roads and highways, and dozens of new airports. At a glance this looks like a massive infrastructure boom—and it is. But at a second glance it represents an unprecedented expansion in human freedom.”

The day before the debate, Babones wrote a comparison of China and Nazi Germany: “The parallels between 1930s Germany and 2010s China are profound. The free world’s failure to contain the Nazi evil in Germany led directly to World War II and the Holocaust. China may not be plotting a third world war, but the need to contain its evil is no less profound.” This article was commissioned by Harry Kazianis, Senior Director of Washington-based think tank, the Centre for the National Interest. Kazianis is a frequent contributor to pro-war propaganda tool Fox News, [declaring China is a “rogue state”](#), and Beijing is “a dangerous 21st-century evil empire whose communist government should have fallen into the ash heap of history along with the Soviet Union.” Kazianis and Babones were founding members of a new think tank, 19fortyfive, created by “national security experts who are tired of the same old publications publishing the same tired ideas”, where Babones has published articles like “Can China Escape 1930s-Style Totalitarianism?”

In addition to his position at the University of Sydney, Babones is an Adjunct Scholar at the neoliberal Centre for Independent Studies, ideological battering ram for the City of London and Wall Street financial interests, which refuses to disclose most of its financial backers.

[Independent Australia reported](#) Babones’ “core academic expertise is in methodology for quantitative sociological research, though he has moved on from this field into global economics (self-advertising as ‘Australia’s globalisation expert’) and, by further extension, sinology—the battle of China. ... He does not come up under ‘China’ among the sinologists on the University of Sydney ‘Find An Expert’ service used by journalists.”

Does Babones believe his own spin? The 2020 “China = Nazi” Babones is profoundly different to the more thoughtful academic of prior years, who demonstrated a nuanced and tolerant understanding of the differences in Chinese society and its government’s [“accountability without democracy”](#)—his words. His change parallels a similar drastic change in attitude towards China by his own US government, which change has been driven not by President Trump, but by bellicose Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ([Babones enthused in a 25 July 2020 article](#) on the 19fortyfive website that “presidential” Pompeo is positioning himself for a run for the White House).

Today, like all China hawks, Babones reduces the issue to an ideological one, a binary choice—Australia must choose between the USA and China. An independent Australian foreign policy, which best serves Australians, is off the table. China-hawkish, Babones dismissed the possibility of harmony with China, to which Barwick countered: “I think to put air quotes around the idea of harmonious win-win solutions and a harmonious future is unnecessarily cynical. I think the whole world would work better if we tried to look for that kind of grounds for cooperation.”

By Melissa Harrison, Australian Alert Service, 19 August 2020