

How to Withstand China's Economic Coercion: The Case of China's Economic Pressure Campaign Against Australia, 2020–2024

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Abstract

From 2020 to 2022, China imposed restrictions on Australian imports after Canberra's inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 and a ban on Huawei's 5G network. Canberra was able to resist the pressure campaign by rerouting exports to new markets. However, as a compromise, Australia suspended its barley and wine cases against China in the WTO. Using publicly available sources, this case study examines trade restrictions China imposed on Australia in 2020–2022 as well as their gradual easing in 2023–2024, analyzes Beijing's motivations and objectives, and explains lessons learned for other smaller economies with high trade dependence on China.

Keywords: Economic coercion, trade restrictions, market diversification, economic statecraft, geoeconomics, China, Australia

JEL Classification: F13, F14, F51, F52

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1. Context and Actors

Shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's then-Prime Minister, Scott Morrison (2018–2022), called for reforms to the governance of the World Health Organization (WHO), including sending a team of investigators to countries to determine the origins of major outbreaks (Farr 2020). This angered China, which was actively seeking to deflect the blame and scrutiny for spreading COVID-19 (Westcott 2020). Just a few days later, on April 26, China's ambassador to Australia Chen Jingye told the Australian Financial Review that Morrison's government's accusations could spark a Chinese consumer boycott against Australian agricultural products such as wine and beef (Hitch and Hayne 2020; Tillett 2020). The following month, China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) imposed a combined 80.5% tariff on Australian barley while China's General Administration of Customs (GACC) suspended beef imports from four Australian establishments. This set in motion China's trade war with Australia, which would take four years to end.

Although Canberra's inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered the escalation of the trade war in 2020, tensions between Canberra and Beijing had been simmering for several years. In 2017, just three years after signing a free trade agreement with China, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (2015–2018) proposed laws that would target foreign interference in Australian political processes (BBC 2017; DFAT 2023). While he did not explicitly refer to China, it was widely understood that concerns about China's growing influence on Australia's political processes were among the primary reasons (BBC 2016; Remeikis 2017). In 2019, the Morrison government implemented a law that banned foreign donors from funding political campaigns in Australia (Special Minister of State 2019).

Simultaneously, the Australian government grew suspicious of Chinese telecom giant Huawei and became the first country to ban Huawei from participating in the 5G infrastructure rollout in 2018 (Slezak and Bogle 2018). The official press release by Mitch Fifield, then Australian Minister of Communications, stated that Australian carriers may not be able to adequately protect the 5G network from cyber intrusions if they are involved with “vendors who are likely to be subject to extrajudicial directions from a foreign government that conflict with Australian law” (Senator Mitch Fifield 2018). This was perceived as an escalation by the Chinese government, whose foreign ministry spokesperson stated that the Australian government should “provide a fair competitive environment for Chinese companies' operations in Australia” (Slezak and Bogle 2018).

Despite escalating political tensions, China remained Australia's top two-way trading partner throughout 2017–2020 (DFAT 2019; DFAT 2020). Iron ore has been the main driver of this trade, representing 56% of all Australian goods exports to China in 2019–2020, along with coal (ABS 2020). Crucially for Australia, China

TABLE 1. Key Actors

Actor Name	Actor Type	Role	Position/Action Taken
Australia's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF)	State Agency	Maintains and creates export opportunities for Australia's agricultural products (DAFF 2024).	Provided guidance to Australian agricultural exporters on finding alternative markets. Worked on resolving the dispute in close coordination with DFAT (DAFF 2021; Senator Penny Wong 2023).
Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)	State Agency	Leads Australia's whole-of-government approach in trade disputes, negotiates free trade agreements, and engages with the business sector (Parliament of Australia 2024)	Played a key role in thawing trade tensions with China and navigating the WTO cases against China.
Australian Forest Products Association (AFPA)	A peak industry body and a lobbying group (AFPA 2025)	Advocates for the interests of all industries in the forest products value chain.	Worked closely with the Australian federal government to ensure the interests of timber exporters were represented and the trade dispute with China was resolved (AFPA 2023).
Australia's National Farmers' Federation (NFF)	A peak industry body and a lobbying group (NFF 2024)	Advocates for the interests of Australian farmers with the Australian government.	Supported the federal government's barley case against China in the WTO (Sullivan et al. 2020). Welcomed the thawing of the trade conflict with China (NFF 2023)
China's General Administration of Customs (GACC)	State Agency	Manages import permits, collection of duties, and customs regulations (The US-China Business Council 2021).	Suspended processing import permits for Australian beef, wheat, and timber. Ordered increased inspection of Australian wheat.
China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM)	State Agency	Conducts anti-dumping investigations and imposes tariffs on imports if evidence collected from relevant stakeholders indicates that foreign imports have been dumped (MOFCOM n.d.).	Imposed tariffs on Australian wine and barley as an anti-dumping measure and later lifted them.

TABLE 1. Continued

Actor Name	Actor Type	Role	Position/Action Taken
China’s Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM)	State Agency	Conducts anti-dumping investigations and imposes tariffs on imports if evidence collected from relevant stakeholders indicates that foreign imports have been dumped (MOFCOM n.d.).	Imposed tariffs on Australian wine and barley as an anti-dumping measure and later lifted them.
China’s National Development Reform Commission (NDRC)	State Agency	Coordinates the implementation of macroeconomic policies and maintains macro-control of important commodities (NDRC n.d.).	Discouraged Chinese mills from buying Australian cotton. Directed MOFCOM and GACC to notify Chinese end users to stop importing Australian coal. Later permitted Chinese companies to continue buying Australian coal.
World Trade Organization (WTO)	International Organization	Plays a key role in resolving trade disputes between its member states (WTO n.d.).	Australia used the WTO to dispute the wine and barley cases against China. However, since Australia suspended both cases, the WTO’s role in resolving this trade conflict was limited.

Note: Actor categories are simplified for analytical purposes. The table identifies principal actors relevant to the China–Australia trade dispute and summarizes their roles and actions as they relate to the case; it is not intended as an exhaustive institutional mapping.

Source: Author’s compilation based on the sources cited in the article.

also highly dependent on Australian iron ore imports, accounting for 80% of China’s iron ore imports along with Brazil (Nyabiage 2024). It was against the backdrop of escalating political tensions, coupled with two-way interdependence in iron ore trade, is that MOFCOM and GACC, at the direction of China’s National Development Reform Commission (NDRC), imposed a range of restrictions, including tariffs, partial and full import bans on Australian wine, beef, lobsters, wheat, wood, cotton, coal, and barley.

2. Timeline of Events and the Instruments and Mechanisms Used

China imposed a series of import restrictions on Australian products in 2020 and kept them in place until their gradual lifting in 2023–2024. Reasons cited by the Chinese authorities for imposing these restrictions were technical in nature, including the need for inspections and preventing the dumping of Australian products in the Chinese market. However, the sudden escalation of restrictive measures against several Australian products in one year suggests that the Chinese authorities' motivations had underlying political objectives. This behaviour aligns with the widely acknowledged pattern in China's economic coercion, according to which Chinese authorities tend to impose coercive measures when they perceive threats to China's national and economic security, territorial sovereignty, or domestic political legitimacy but maintain ambiguity about their motivations and objectives (Xiong 2024).

In line with this pattern of economic coercion, China never clarified what type of behavioural change it expected from Australia in exchange for lifting restrictions, making it more challenging for the Australian government to navigate the trade conflict. In contrast, when the United States imposes financial sanctions against entities/individuals, the Department of the Treasury issues a press release explaining the reasons for imposing sanctions and specifies that reversal of their behaviour can lead to lifting of sanctions (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024).

The Australian government's change in 2022 was a turning point in this trade war. Prime Minister Morrison, who had made controversial statements about China's role in COVID-19 origins, was replaced by Anthony Albanese, whose government emphasized a "calm and consistent" approach to China (Senator Penny Wong 2024). Resumption of normal trade relations with China was in the interest of the targeted industries, whose lobbying groups worked closely with the federal government to ensure Australian exporters' interests were taken into consideration.

Despite Beijing's lack of clarity on its motivations, Albanese's government quickly figured out that a bilateral diplomatic engagement with Beijing would be more effective than disputing China within international organizations. Shortly after the election, Albanese's government changed the tone towards Beijing and made consistent efforts to increase diplomatic engagement. Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong held two meetings with her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, thawing diplomatic relations that had been frozen for three years by that point. In her first major policy speech in November 2022, Minister Wong blamed Australia's previous government for fueling tensions with Beijing and stated that Albanese's government sought to re-establish cooperation while protecting Australia's national interests (SBS 2022).

Around the same time, Prime Minister Albanese met with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, laying the groundwork for his upcoming meeting with Xi Jinping. A few days later, he met with Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Indonesia, which was the first

one-on-one meeting between the two heads of state since 2016. While the meeting itself did not result in the immediate lifting of restrictions, Albanese raised the issue of the AUD 20 billion losses due to trade restrictions, and both sides affirmed their commitment to normalizing relations (Doran 2022). Following this meeting, Albanese's government continued to publicly press China to lift trade restrictions (Dziedzic 2022). A few weeks later, on January 1, 2023, Beijing permitted Chinese companies to import Australian coal, followed by the gradual easing of restrictions on all Australian products throughout 2023 and 2024. On its part, Australia suspended the barley and wine cases against China in the WTO shortly after Beijing lifted tariffs on both products in August 2023 and March 2024, respectively.

Albanese's government continued diplomatic engagement with Beijing throughout 2023 and 2024. In November 2023, Albanese visited Xi Jinping on Chinese soil with the goal of taking China-Australia relations "forward" and navigating differences "wisely and with great respect" (Murphy 2023). By this point, Beijing had already removed restrictions on coal, barley, and other products. During the visit, Albanese advocated for the lifting of remaining restrictions (Prime Minister of Australia 2023). The China-Australia trade relations were normalized by the end of 2024.

Apart from Australia's diplomatic efforts, Beijing's strategic calculus may have also been influenced by a combination of domestic and international factors, such as a slowing domestic economy and the threat of Australia's growing military partnership with the United States (Maude 2023). Additionally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine put a strain on China's food security, making tariffs and restrictions on Australian food products a self-defeating strategy against the backdrop of soaring global food prices (Donnellon-May and Hongzhou 2023).

3. Impact and Outcomes

There is an agreement that the overall cost of coercion for the Australian economy was marginal, although specific industries were significantly impacted (Smith 2022). The Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023) assessed that Australian exports proved resilient, largely due to their ability to find alternative markets. For example, Australian barley exporters replaced China with Saudi Arabia in 2021 (World Bank Group 2020, 2021). Meanwhile, coal exporters redirected exports to India (World Bank Group 2021). Exports of wine increased to Hong Kong, South Korea, the EU, the UK, and Indonesia in the first quarter of 2021, although these increases did not fully recover the lost Chinese market value (Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2021).

In the case of rock lobsters, Australian fishermen were reported to be selling their product through unofficial "grey channels"—exporting lobsters to Hong Kong, from where they were likely re-exported to mainland China (Mercer 2021). Meanwhile, since Chinese restrictions on beef were partial, beef exports did not experience

TABLE 2. Timeline of Key Events

Date	Actor	Action/Response	Source
<i>Escalation phase: Chinese trade restrictions, 2020–2021</i>			
May 2020	MOFCOM	MOFCOM imposed a combined 80.5% tariff on Australian barley (73.6% anti-dumping duty and a 6.9% countervailing duty).	DAFF (2021)
May 2020	GACC	GACC suspended processing of import declarations for four Australian beef establishments.	Meat & Livestock Australia (2020)
September 2020	GACC	GACC stated that all Australian wheat shipments would be reviewed for contaminants upon arrival.	Holmes (2020)
October 2020	NDRC	NDRC discouraged Chinese mills from buying Australian cotton.	Hurst (2020) Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
October 2020	NDRC, GACC, MOFCOM	Under the direction of NDRC, GACC and MOFCOM gave verbal notice to Chinese end-users to stop importing Australian coal.	Ma and Li (2020) Li et al. (2020)
November 2020	MOFCOM	MOFCOM announced 107-212% tariffs on Australian wine as an anti-dumping measure.	BBC (2020) Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
November 2020	GACC	GACC increased inspection measures for Australian lobsters.	Reuters (2020) Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
November 2020	GACC	China suspended timber imports from some regions of Australia.	Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2020) Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
December 2020	DFAT	DFAT lodged a complaint at the WTO against China's anti-dumping and countervailing duties on Australian barley.	DFAT (2024)

TABLE 2. Continued

Date	Actor	Action/Response	Source
June 2021	DFAT	DFAT lodged a second complaint at the WTO against China’s anti-dumping and countervailing duties on Australian wine.	DFAT (2024)
<i>De-escalation phase: gradual lifting of restrictions, 2023–2024</i>			
January 2023	NDRC	NDRC permitted Chinese companies to resume imports of Australian coal.	Economist Intelligence Unit (2023) Raj (2023)
May 2023	GACC	GACC notified the Australian Minister of Agriculture that China will resume Australian timber imports.	Dziedzic et al. (2023) Regional Development Australia (2023)
August 2023	MOFCOM	MOFCOM announced that the 80.5% tariffs on Australian barley would be officially lifted.	Tan (2023) Senator Don Farrell (2023)
August 2023	DFAT, WTO	DFAT suspended its barley case against China in the WTO, notifying the panel that the two parties had found a mutually agreed solution.	DFAT (2024)
December 2023	GACC	GACC announced that suspensions would be lifted on three of Australia’s largest meat export establishments.	Senator Don Farrell (2023)
March 2024	MOFCOM	China lifted tariffs on Australian wine.	Export Finance Australia (2024)
April 2024	DFAT, WTO	DFAT suspended its wine case against China in the WTO.	DFAT (2024)
December 2024	GACC	China lifted suspensions on all Australian meat processing establishments.	Senator Penny Wong (2024)
December 2024	GACC	GACC notified DAFF that China would resume Australian live rock lobster imports.	DAFF (2024)

Note: The phase labels provide a temporal framework for analysing the dispute. They broadly correspond to the Morrison and Albanese governments, respectively, but do not imply responsibility for each listed measure. Responsibility is identified in the Actor column.

Source: Author’s compilation based on the sources cited in the article.

a significant fall. China remained the fourth largest market for Australian meat in 2019 as well as 2021 (World Bank Group 2019, 2021). Notably, Australia's wheat exports to China increased significantly in 2020 despite inspections by the Chinese customs. It happened because China's other supplier of wheat, Russia, imposed an export tax on the product that year to give an advantage to domestic customers and ease food inflation. The higher price of Russian wheat led Chinese importers to increase demand for the alternative Australian product (Tan 2021).

Overall, Australia's exports of goods to the world decreased by 7% from 2019 to 2020, but increased by 37% the following year, demonstrating resilience in the face of economic coercion (O'Neil 2025). The success in mitigating the immediate impact of China's trade restrictions can be attributed to the Morrison government's strategy of proactively identifying new markets for Australian exporters and signing multiple free trade agreements (DFAT 2021).

Australia has historically had several FTAs in place, including with the United States, Thailand, Chile, Malaysia, South Korea, and China, among others. However, Australia's pursuit of FTAs became especially strong after the onset of China's trade restrictions in May 2020. DFAT signed FTAs with Indonesia (July 2020), Pacific nations (December 2020), and ten countries as part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (January 2022). Anthony Albanese continued this strategy and signed an FTA with India (December 2022) and the UK (May 2023). Albanese's government is still negotiating an FTA with the EU and considering an FTA with the Gulf Cooperation Council (DFAT 2024).

Australia's effective responses to China's trade restrictions offer valuable lessons about withstanding China's economic coercion:

1. Maintaining economic relationships with allies is key to minimizing the impact of Chinese economic coercion. Australia's economic relationships allowed it to redirect coal exports to India and barley exports to Saudi Arabia.
2. Close collaboration between the government and impacted industries helps minimize the damage. The Australian government closely worked with agricultural exporters in finding alternative markets.
3. Trade interdependence weakens China's ability to wage trade wars. China's dependence on Australian iron ore was critical in curbing Beijing's ability to target Australia's most valuable export commodity.

Notably, an important factor contributing to Australia's success was China's lack of control of any critical chokepoints against Canberra in this case (Atlantic Council 2025). For example, the United States controls dollar-denominated financial transactions in international trade—a critical chokepoint of the global economy. Whenever the United States imposes secondary sanctions on adversarial regimes such as Iran, it deters third countries from trading with the sanctioned economies (Donovan 2025). Third

countries prefer to comply with US sanctions and avoid trading with heavily sanctioned regimes rather than risk being sanctioned themselves (Donovan et al. 2023). In China’s case, while it controlled Australia’s access to the Chinese market, it did not have control over Australia’s ability to trade with alternative partners.

TABLE 3. Changes in Targeted Australian Exports to China Following Chinese Restrictive Measures

Indicator	Observed Impact	Source
Australia’s annual exports of wine to China	–97.26% in 2021, compared with 2019	UN Comtrade Database Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
Australia’s annual exports of beef to China	–31.84% in 2021, compared with 2019	UN Comtrade Database Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
Australia’s annual exports of lobsters to China	–99.07% in 2021, compared with 2019	UN Comtrade Database Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
Australia’s annual exports of wheat to China	+1135.55% in 2021, compared with 2019	UN Comtrade Database Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
Australia’s annual exports of wood to China	–99.50% in 2021, compared with 2019	UN Comtrade Database Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
Australia’s annual exports of cotton to China	–90.09% in 2021, compared with 2019	UN Comtrade Database Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
Australia’s annual exports of coal to China	–99.80% in 2021, compared with 2019	UN Comtrade Database Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)
Australia’s annual exports of barley to China	–15.81% in 2020, compared with 2019	UN Comtrade Database Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023)

Note: Percentage changes compare Australia’s annual export values to China for the product categories and years shown in the table. Product categories follow the HS-code groupings reported in the appendix. Positive values indicate increases; negative values indicate decreases.

Source: Author’s calculations based on UN Comtrade Database export data; sectoral restriction context from Australian Government Productivity Commission (2023).

However, despite Australia's success in navigating the trade war, China's restrictions still created domestic pressure on the Australian government to normalize relations with its largest trading partner. Canberra still had to make political concessions, such as suspending the WTO case against China's anti-dumping duties on barley and wine. More importantly, the change in the Australian government and its tone towards China was critical in restoring normal trading relations between the two countries, signalling that Australia must strike a delicate balancing act with China to maintain access to the Chinese market.

4. Appendix

TABLE A1. Australia's annual exports of targeted products to China before and during trade restrictions (UN Comtrade Database)

Product Description	HS Code	2019	2021	% Change
Wine; sparkling	220401	\$2,729,767	1,295,161	
Wine; still, less than 2 liters	220421	\$729,604,995	\$13,938,165	
Wine; still in containers holding more than 10 liters	220429	\$52,535,517	\$6,252,685	
Total Wine		\$784,870,279	\$21,486,011	-97.26%
Beef; meat of bovine animals; fresh or chilled	0201	\$254,519,193	\$275,934,919	
Beef; meat of bovine animals; frozen	0202	\$1,603,408,035	\$990,500,856	
Total Beef		\$1,857,927,228	\$1,266,435,775	-31.84%
Crustaceans; live, fresh or chilled rock lobsters and other sea crawfish, in shell or not	030631	\$494,546,743	\$1,358,425	
Crustaceans; frozen, rock lobsters and other sea crawfish, in shell or not, smoked, cooked or not before or during smoking; in shell, cooked by steaming or by boiling in water	030611	\$1,787,654	\$3,240,659	
Total Lobsters		\$496,334,397	\$4,599,084	-99.07%

TABLE A1. Continued

Product Description	HS Code	2019	2021	% Change
Wheat and meslin	1001	\$71,277,503	\$880,666,977	
Total Wheat		\$71,277,503	\$880,666,977	1135.55%
Wood in the rough, whether or not stripped of bark or sapwood, or roughly squared	4403	\$419,293,418	\$2,082,517	
Total Wood		\$419,293,418	\$2,082,517	-99.50%
Cotton	52	\$775,325,664	\$76,861,018	
Total Cotton		\$775,325,664	\$76,861,018	-90.09%
Coal; briquettes, ovoids and similar solid fuels manufactured from coal	2701	\$9,533,227,787	\$18,615,456	
Total Coal		\$9,533,227,787	\$18,615,456	-99.80%
Product Description	HS Code	2019	2020	% Change
Barley	1003	\$410,668,229	\$345,736,912	
Total Barley		\$410,668,229	\$345,736,912	-15.81%

Note: Values report Australia’s annual exports to China for the listed HS product categories in US Dollars. Percentage changes are calculated from the reported totals. Positive values indicate increases; negative values indicate decreases.

Source: Author calculations based on UN Comtrade Database export data.

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