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Daniel Wild:

Hello, and welcome to Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. I'm Daniel Wild from the Institute of Public Affairs. Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott is your voice. Each week, Tony and I discuss mainstream Australian values, the future of the Australian way of life, family, community, and Australian culture. More importantly, we want to hear from you. That is why we have the talk to Tony Abbott segment at the end of each show where you can ask Tony your questions on whatever topic you want. Phone in to the Australian Heartland hotline on 03 9946 4307 to leave your question. You can also go to the website, [australia.ipa.org.au](http://australia.ipa.org.au), where you can join the Australian Heartland community and sign up to receive this podcast sent to you each week along with special analysis from the Institute of Public Affairs. Thank you for supporting the Australian way of life. And now, to this week's episode. Hello Tony and good day to all of our listeners.

Daniel Wild:

It's wonderful to be with you for another episode of Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. As a reminder as always to our listeners, hit subscribe or like wherever you're listening to this podcast so that you don't miss an episode. Tony there's a lot to discuss as always and you've made two very significant recent contributions to public debate. The first regarding China, the second regarding COVID and you've generated no shortage of headlines in relation to both. I'd like to start with your analysis of the situation with China. You gave a speech last week in Taiwan at a forum called the Yushan Forum. Before we get into the content of that, Tony, can you tell us a bit about the Yushan Forum and what it is that you were doing there? Look,

Tony Abbott:

Look, the Yushan forum has been going for, I think, five years now. It's this essentially the Taiwanese government's opportunity to showcase Taiwan to the wider world because of the isolation that the communist government in Beijing tries to impose on Taiwan. They don't get quite the same roll up of luminaries as the Chinese government's Belt Forum does or something like the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi might or the Shangri-La conference in Singapore. But nevertheless, it is quite a significant opportunity for people in the Indo-Pacific region who take economic and strategic and political development seriously to get together and try to work out how things can improve in the future and how we can avoid potential problems. And obviously the biggest problem at the moment particularly for Taiwan, is the increasing belligerence of the communist party of China and the Beijing Government.

Daniel Wild:

Indeed, it is. I want to quote a part of one of the speeches you delivered, Tony, in relation to democracy and freedom in Taiwan. And you say, "Taiwan will be the test. For the democratic world, that means the readiness to support this fellow democracy." Tony, to me, I think in Australia we've quite often taken democracy and freedom for granted whereas when you're facing an existential threat like Taiwan does, sometimes that heightens your awareness of what's at stake. I wonder whether the challenges Taiwan face will perhaps rejuvenate and rekindle Australia's fondness for democracy and freedom in this difficult time in Australia. What do you make of that?

Tony Abbott:

Look, it's a fair question, Daniel. I think the issue for us is not so much our own commitment to democracy, but our commitment to defending the democracy of others, because let's be under no illusions here. Taiwan is under existential threat in a way that very few other places are. The Ukraine is under existential threat from Russian irredentism. Israel is never not under existential threat from Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East but Taiwan certainly is under existential threat. Basically the government in Beijing has wanted Taiwan back ever since 1949. And the level of bellicosity across the Taiwan Strait has ratcheted up very [inaudible 00:05:02] in the last year or so.

Tony Abbott:

And just in the four days before I arrived, something like 150 Chinese war planes had entered into Taiwan's air defense identification zone in what is plainly an active intimidation. And these are likely to ratchet up. And the worry is that at some point in time, what looks like it's just another exercise might develop into a real attack and plainly there is a David and Goliath quality to any contest between China and Taiwan. Then the issue becomes will the United States intervene on Taiwan's side, given that it does have commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act to try to ensure that Taiwan is not subject to external coercion. So, this is the big question.

Tony Abbott:

Will China attack? When will China attack? And if and when China does attack, will America respond? And of course, if America does respond, it's pretty hard to see how Australia couldn't also respond because of our ANZUS Alliance with the United States. Let's not forget Daniel, that the ANZUS Alliance says that in the event of an attack on either country or its forces, we will, "act to meet the common danger." So, like all of these alliances, there's a bit of regal room in them, but nevertheless, you'd think acting to meet the common danger in the event of an attack on either country's forces would suggest that it would be pretty hard for Australia to stay aloof if we want the ANZUS relationship to survive.

Daniel Wild:

I just want to take a little bit of a step back when it comes to military conflict. And you've got a lot of experience in the area of foreign affairs and defense related matters. And you made this very astute observation, and I'm going to quote to you what you said. You say, "I am no military planner, but with Zanzu, I imagine that Beijing would prefer to win without a fight." Is it the case that military conflict is likely or will China continue to, I guess, undertake war by other means such as information and economic warfare rather than kinetic warfare, how do you see that playing out?

Tony Abbott:

Obviously there's all sorts of challenges that Taiwan is facing right now. There's the intrusions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone. There's the exercising of elements of the Chinese Navy in international waters, close by Taiwan. I think there's quite a lot of misinformation and bot warfare, if you like, going on where Chinese cyber operations, social media operations if you like, try to discombobulate and dismay. This kind of thing I gather is happen all the time in Taiwan. And the fear is that these exercises will further develop and intensify. They'll come closer to Taiwan, that an incident could be provoked that the Chinese could say justified an attack.

Tony Abbott:

If the Taiwanese are able to avoid anything like that, the fear is that at some point in time, the Chinese will declare a blockade. And then the question is, who is prepared to run the blockade and what is China prepared to do to stop people running the blockade? So, what I think we are likely to see is a continuing escalation of efforts on China's part to put pressure on Taiwan. Now, is Taiwan likely to be intimidated by any of this? I certainly think that the Taiwanese will find it pretty daunting, but whether they're daunted to the point of capitulation, I think is highly unlikely. Why would people who are both prosperous and free ever want to surrender their freedom for the dubious benefits of rule by Beijing and let's face it, the Taiwanese have watched very closely what's happened to Hong Kong over the last couple of years. Hong Kong was promised in a solemn international treaty between China and Britain, one country two systems for 50 years but in the last couple of years, the free systems of Hong Kong have been pretty substantially suffocated and strangled by the Beijing communists.

Daniel Wild:

I want to get your assessment Tony of the rise of China and why is it that it's become more belligerent over time. I ask this in the context of the narrative over the past couple of decades was really that economic liberalization, global integration, bringing China into the rules based international order would make it more of a custodian of the kind of values that we have and that would facilitate a peaceful rise of China. Instead, it appears that that has not come to fruition. And that over the last few years there's been a bit of a recalculation about the extent to which that strategy might be successful and in my view, it really hasn't been successful. It's made China prosperous, but not free. Would you share those views? And if so, can you us understand why those attempts to integrate China may not have been as successful as we hoped?

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, like just about everyone, I was hopeful that as China got richer, it would also become freer. I thought that the degree of economic liberalization that happened in the post Deng Xiaoping era would inevitably over time lead to a degree of political liberalization. But it seems that the commissars in Beijing were prepared to allow limited economic freedom in order to strengthen their position. But that was never because they believed in freedom. They just believed in strength. And as soon as they had sufficient strength to roll back those freedoms, that's exactly what they did. So, what we've now got is a China which is less economically free than it has been for a long time. And it's less politically free than it has been for a long time under Xi Jinping. Not just have we seen the rolling back of the economic freedoms of Deng Xiaoping, but we've seen a rolling back even of the limited political liberalization that seemed to be taking place for a while there.

Tony Abbott:

And whether how sincere any of those changes, even the Deng Xiaoping changes were, it has open to great doubt. It was Deng Xiaoping himself who talked about hide and bide. Hiding your strength and biding your time. Now, obviously, they now think that they are strong enough to drop the smiling face, if you like, and to snuff at the world through the sort of Wolf warrior diplomacy and the bullying on their borders and the belligerence towards all who call them into question that we've seen on full display over the last couple of years, including the weaponization of trade against Australia.

Daniel Wild:

Well Just one last question on China and it's in relation to that last comment you made about trade. When you were prime minister your government successfully negotiated a free trade agreement with

China, and that generated a significant opportunity for the Australian economy through investments and exports of our goods and services to China and that's created many benefits to Australia. I know that in recent times you've reflected on that free trade agreement and with the benefit of hindsight, you've perhaps reached some different views on the efficacy of it. Can you help us understand a bit of the dynamics of the free trade agreement with China and perhaps how your assessment of that may have changed over time?

Tony Abbott:

Sure. Well, back in 2013 and 2014, we still had generally a much more benign and optimistic view of China than we came to in subsequent years. So that's the first point to make. Second point to make is that the Australia-China Free Trade Deal, notwithstanding the recent problems, I think has been quite beneficial to Australia in that our exports to China increased at about double the rate post the free trade deal than their imports to us increased. So I think we've benefited from it relatively more than they have. Next point to make is that free trade does boost overall wealth. Absolutely no doubt about that.

Tony Abbott:

Free trade sometimes boosts wealth more in one country than in the other country. So there are unequal benefits from free trade. Although generally speaking, everyone in the long run is better off under freer trade. The difficulty with China though is that, for China it's always been more a question of taking advantage of free trade rather than giving advantage through free trade. In fact for China, it's often been predatory trade as opposed to free and fair trade. For instance, it looks pretty clear that China has engaged in wholesale theft of intellectual property and technology. It's engaged in secret subsidies of businesses in an attempt to dominate critical markets and so on. So, while I am a huge supporter of freer trade, and while I think that there is an argument for free trade across the board, certainly free trade is much more successful and much more fair when you're having it with a country which respects the rule of law, which respects the global rules based order and which doesn't, if you like, nationalize all trade and see trade as strategy by other means, as geopolitics by other means.

Daniel Wild:

Well, I think that's certainly the case, Tony, and thank you for that assessment of China. I now like to move to the second major contribution to public debate that you've made over the past week. Still on the issue of freedom and democracy, but more at home, in relation to COVID and government's response to COVID here in Australia. Now your contribution by way of a fantastic essay is a part of a landmark new publication of the Institute of Public Affairs called *Essays for Australia*, a twice yearly publication, including essays about Australian culture, society, and national identity. I'm very excited about this publication and the first edition will be out later this month, and I'll have much more to say about that including, how you can get your hands on a copy. Now, your essay was printed as an extract in *The Australian* over the weekend.

Daniel Wild:

It's got something like a thousand comments on the website, which shows the interest and thirst for this issue in Australia. Tony, I want to begin with one of the quotes from your piece that stood out to me most. You say this, "COVID-Zero has meant stopping people from living in order to prevent them from dying." And you speculate that this may have something to do with the decline of religion in our society and our related inability, perhaps to have perspective on matters of life and death. Can you please elaborate on those remarks?

Tony Abbott:

There's absolutely no doubt that governments should do what they recently can to protect people. But we've also got to keep a sense of perspective and all these things. And it was pretty obvious probably by about the end of April last year, that while COVID was serious, it was mostly a serious illness for people who were already very old and very sick. Now, the very old and the very sick deserve our help. There's absolutely no doubt about that, but I suspect that we could have more effectively done that without necessarily locking up the relatively young and the relatively healthy and that's been the problem.

Tony Abbott:

Life itself has been almost priceless, but living has been almost worthless. We've massively stressed safety, but in the process we have all my most entirely minimized freedom. I think that's finally changing, particularly in New South Wales. I think we should have stopped lockdowns once we had vulnerable people in nursing homes fully vaccinated, but certainly now, thank God, the New South Wales government in the lead, we are moving to a situation where New South Wales in particular, but it seems even Victoria eventually are going to to open up because they've decided that we just have to live with this thing. Difficult though it might be, increases in hospitalizations that we might have, the occasional deaths that we might indeed get, we just have to live with it now. Thank God we've finally come to this position. I think we should have come to this position many months ago, but nevertheless we are here.

Daniel Wild:

We are. And you mentioned New South Wales and Victoria. I'd be interested to get your assessment also of Queensland and WA. They appear to be fairly intransigent in not wanting to go along with the national cabinet agreement of reopening in Western Australia. Appears borders will be closed there, or at least heavily policed for many months to come. What do you think is going to happen with Queensland and Western Australia? How do you see this playing out in those two states?

Tony Abbott:

Well, for a long time in every state, with the partial exception of New South Wales, the test of good government was having no COVID cases. Now, under the assault of the Delta variant in New South Wales first and then Victoria, we worked out that you actually can't eliminate the Delta variant of COVID. You do have to live with it. And that's the situation that is now developing in those two states. But in the other states, particularly in Queensland and Western Australia, I think they are still committed to COVID-Zero. They are still mentally committed to locking down their cities and their states if there are any outbreaks. Now, as soon as you open the borders with New South Wales and with Victoria, you are inevitably going to start to have outbreaks in Brisbane and in Perth, which is why I think the temptation in both those states will be to keep the state borders closed for a very long time indeed. Now, I just don't think that state borders closed more or less indefinitely is compatible with the kind of federation that we thought we were living in.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, I just want to put to you one more quote in relation to your assessment of COVID, and then we'll move on. This is your quote in your article in The Australian, "Perhaps we really have become a more timid and fearful people, or perhaps it is more that an anxious and adrift society can't readily distinguish between big crises and little crises." And I just want to set up the context. You're talking here about the apparent popularity of many of the measures implemented by governments that are draconian

restrictions that have had widespread public support for much of the last 18 months. Can you elaborate on and give us your assessment of what you mean in relation to the Australian psychology or the Australian character?

Tony Abbott:

Well Daniel, I can fully understand why people want to be safe and I can fully understand the old dictum safety first, but it's almost like we've succumbed to safety only at this time. And it's almost like the only disease we're interested in is COVID. The only disease that no one is allowed to die from is COVID. The only hospitalizations that concern us are COVID. Well, the truth is that as they say, no one gets out of life alive, sooner or later, all of us will die of something. The important thing is to live life to the full, every day we've got. And in the attempt to ensure that absolutely no one anywhere got COVID less, they die, by G we've stopped a lot of living life to the full haven't we? And I think it's time that we pretty drastically rework the dial on this.

Daniel Wild:

No, I completely agree, Tony. And I just want to thank you again for your ongoing analysis and contribution to public debate. It's needed now more than ever. And I thought we could conclude just on, you've been in Taiwan, now you are over in the United States. Are you able to let our listeners know what you're up to in the US at the moment?

Tony Abbott:

Look, I've got a few speeches and workshops to give. I don't think that they'll be particularly newsworthy because they're mostly Chatham House discussions of, I guess, general economic, cultural and security issues. But look, this is what prime ministers do. Once they've left office, Daniel-

Daniel Wild:

Some of them.

Tony Abbott:

...we do our best to make ourselves useful by giving others the benefit of our experience. And if our experience has generated any wisdom along the way, well, we try to make that available to people.

Daniel Wild:

No, we appreciate it. Our listeners appreciate it. And certainly Australia appreciates your ongoing engagement and contribution to public debate. And I really appreciate you taking the time to continue with these important discussions as you've been in Taiwan and now in the US. So, thank you very much Tony. And with that, we'll let you get on with it.

Tony Abbott:

And I look forward to talking to you next week, Daniel.

Daniel Wild:

Lovely. Thank you, Tony.

Tony Abbott:

All right, mate. Good stuff.

Daniel Wild:

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