This week the Australian government took its expected step and cancelled the Belt and Road Initiative agreement that the Australian State of Victoria had signed with the Chinese. The move was not unexpected and had been signalled by the government some time ago. The ostensible reason for the cancellation was that it was contrary to the security interests of Australia. In which way it threatened Australia’s security was not made clear and it is difficult to ascertain security threats in an agreement that seeks to promote trade between two entities, in this case China and Victoria.

Australia thus became the first state to formally withdraw from participation in the BRI. That grouping now consists of more than 140 countries in all regions of the world, including 12 nations in Australia’s region of the world, such as Fiji, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea just to name the bigger ones.

The officially quoted reason of “national security” is of course simply invented to justify what is a political decision. Australia is for all effective purposes, simply another State of the United States in its foreign policy. That has been evident ever since the Japanese entered the Second World War and Australia opened its borders to the location of United States servicemen. They have been here ever since, and now occupy an estimated eight military bases, including the important electronic spying base of Pine Gap in the Northern Territory.
There was a brief flurry of independence during the three years of the Whitlam government from 1972 to 1975, during which time Australian troops were withdrawn from their involvement in the Vietnam war. The overthrow of that government was engineered by long time United States intelligence asset John Kerr who held the post of governor general, which he used to dismiss the Whitlam government.

Since then, no Australian government has seriously diverted from the United States foreign policy position, reflected in part in the involvement of Australian troops in the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. The bipartisan approach of the two major Australian political parties can be seen in the unqualified support the Labor party’s foreign affairs spokesperson Penny Wong (ironically of Malay – Chinese extraction) gave to the government’s decision.

The move was not unexpected. Relations between China and Australia have been on a poor footing, at least since the Australian prime minister Scott Morrison in 2020 openly asked for an inquiry into the “Chinese origins” of the coronavirus pandemic then starting to rage the world.

It is frankly difficult to understand why Australia should go out of its way to annoy the Chinese government. China is Australia’s largest trading partner by a considerable margin, being twice the size of the next largest, Japan, and accounting for more than 40% of Australia’s total export earnings. As a response to the government ill-advised comments and other frankly punitive measures that were introduced, the Chinese government suspended a range of imports from Australia and imposed punitive sanctions on others such as wine.

It is not just in exports that China is a critically important trading partner. In 2019 (before the pandemic) China was the largest source of foreign tourists to Australia, the largest source of foreign students (worth more than $10 billion per annum) and the third largest source of foreign investment. Those figures have all plummeted and are unlikely to recover in the foreseeable future.

The latest move by the Australian government was therefore not a total surprise. It led to a sharply worded response by the Chinese government. The Chinese foreign ministry urged the government to immediately reverse what it called its “wrong decision” and to stop “irresponsible words and deeds.” If it did not do so, China would respond “firmly and forcefully.”

The official Chinese outlet, the Global Times, in an editorial on 22 April, pointed out that the Chinese government had long urged the Australian government to take urgent steps to avoid taking further action’s that poisoned bilateral relations. They accused the Australian government of complaining about Chinese actions with respect to four imported goods while ignoring the fact that they had launched more than 100 anti-dumping and anti-subsidy investigations about Chinese products.

The trading actions follow a lengthy history of hostile Australian actions against China. It became the first country in the world to ban the 5G equipment of the Chinese company Huawei from being used in Australia. It has also been an active participant in the propaganda war being waged by the United States and some other western countries over issues relating to Hong Kong and the Xinjiang region of China. In the latter case Australia has joined in the allegations of “genocide” against the Uighur people of Xinjiang despite clear evidence that the allegations are politically motivated and lack credence.

The Russian writer Lyuba Lulko writing in Pravda on 22 April 2021 stated that Australia was “sacrificed” to the United States crusade against China’s growing economic global power. Lulko points out that the trade war with China has thus far cost Australia $20 billion (and that does not include the effects of the loss of tourists and students).

The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin is quoted as urging Australia to “immediately correct its mistake, immediately reverse the wrong corresponding decisions and not to rub salt in the wound of the already complicated Sino-Australian relationship.”

The close links between the United States and Australian actions were also noted by China’s deputy ambassador to Australia, Wang Xining, who was quoted as saying that

"China is not a cow. I don’t think it would occur to anyone to milk China in its prime while plotting to kill it in the end."

It is difficult to perceive the rationale behind the Australian actions which clearly will have a devastating economic
impact. Lulko concludes her article by suggesting that the Australian elite “should keep their heads on their shoulders and think twice before they send a kangaroo to slay a Chinese dragon.”

This is good advice. Sadly, it is unlikely to be heeded and the Australian people will be sacrificed in the interest of the Australian government’s wrong-headed blind allegiance to the United States.

James O’Neill, an Australian-based former Barrister at Law, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.