



China Matters' Inaugural Young Professionals Debate Summary

22 February 2017, held at Westpac Place, 275 Kent St Sydney

Conducted under Chatham House rules

"Should Australia welcome China's pursuit of a new regional order?"

China Matters' first Young Professionals Debate posed the question, "Should Australia welcome China's pursuit of a new regional order?" The two teams, each comprised of one young professional and one special guest, put forward arguments from the perspective of business and government. On the affirmative team was China Matters' Young Professional Cameron Bruce joined by special guest Peter Hartcher. On the negative team was China Matters' Young Professional Brenden Chen joined by special guest Zoe McKenzie.

The affirmative side began their case with the premise that China is not seeking a wholesale reconfiguration of the regional order. The team argued that China is simply seeking to adjust the existing regional order to better suit its own national interests, as any rising power would. The affirmative stated that the deepening Australia-China relationship has been highly beneficial for Australia, citing the rapid increase of Australian exports to China and the success of an ambitious free trade agreement.

The negative side responded by first observing that the US-led status quo has greatly benefited Australia, and questioned why Australia would want to change something that is not broken, especially given that China's ambitions are so opaque. The team further argued that Australia's economy is too dependent on China, and greater Chinese influence in the region would only make Australia more vulnerable to Chinese demands and coercion.

The affirmative side rebutted by arguing that the existing world order is in disarray and no longer beneficial for Australia. According to the affirmative team, the choice that Australia faces is between a China-influenced regional order and a chaotic regional order. The team emphasised the potential benefits of China's vision for the Asia-Pacific, citing China's One Belt One Road initiative as highly advantageous for Australia.

The negative side expressed reservations about whether China would be able to achieve the same depth of regional trade agreements that the United States has

championed, pointing out that China did not grasp the chance to lead the Trans-Pacific Partnership when the US reneged, and stating that the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is an inferior agreement. The team raised concerns about the likelihood of China strengthening ties with North Korea rather than South Korea and Pakistan rather than India. The team questioned whether China would prove to be a trustworthy friend for Australia.

During the moderated discussion, the negative side voiced concern that China does not intend to abide by the 'rules-based order'. The affirmative retorted that China's behaviour is kept in check by the strength of the regional norms and institutions it is bound by. The team added that the US has always been selective about honouring the same 'rules-based order' that it aims to promote, citing the 2003 invasion of Iraq as an example.

Responding to an audience question about whether Australia would be selling out on its morals if it welcomed more influence in the region from China, the affirmative side challenged the assumption that China acts immorally. The affirmative tendered that China is building military capabilities in the South China Sea only for defensive means and not for offensive purposes.

An audience member raised concerns about Chinese investment in Australian infrastructure. The affirmative side responded by observing that when Australia blocked a Chinese investor from purchasing a stake in Ausgrid, China graciously accepted the decision and did not retaliate. The negative side retorted that China likely retaliated by lodging complaints with the Australian government behind closed doors and not necessarily in the public eye.

After hearing two very convincing cases the audience took to a vote. With only a very small margin the negative team won the debate. Well done to Brenden Chen and Zoe McKenzie for arguing so persuasively.

Please note the views expressed by each team were put forward for the purposes of the debate only and do not represent personal or professional opinions.



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