

# Australia needs to focus more on China in a Donald Trump world

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by **Linda Jakobson**

Every morning we seem to awake to news about a new executive order from President Donald Trump and the ensuing confusion. Many in Canberra view this as the moment for the Australian government to more resolutely than ever try to exert its influence in Washington. Australia and the United States are such long-standing and close allies, the reasoning goes, that the Trump administration will surely take into consideration what is – and what is not – in Australia's interests.

Since Trump's election and even more so since his inauguration, public statements by Australian ministers, opposition leaders and public servants overwhelmingly follow two lines of thought. There have been those that are entrenched in the status quo, impressing upon the US that its leadership is very much desired and needed. Or, language has been based on a new paradigm, stressing the need for Australia to have a more independent foreign policy and strengthen regional cooperation with Japan, India and Southeast Asian nations. But both of these approaches are missing a crucial element.

Let's refocus our eyes – on China. There has never been a moment when Australian public servants and government ministers all the way to the prime minister are better positioned to reach out to their Chinese counterparts.

## Dealing with uncertainty

If the unpredictability of Donald Trump causes anxiety in Canberra, one can surely presume that there is outright angst in Beijing. What will Trump do next? How will we respond? How will the region's other nations respond? The same questions that perplex policymakers across the region confront Chinese officials. Australian officials from all sectors should grasp this opportunity to engage with Chinese counterparts to discuss these uncertainties. Having a better understanding of Chinese thinking will be of great value to Canberra as the government formulates its own policies in the era of Trump.

No doubt China is also feeling quite lonely. All eyes are on Washington, not only in Canberra but across the Asia-Pacific. While no government in the region wishes to have to choose between the US and China, no one wants to see the US neglect the region, leaving China to accelerate its pace of domination without the counter-balancing force of US power. So, in a similar vein as Canberra, other governments are also doing their best to convey their concerns to their American counterparts. They are also contemplating new ways to cooperate with each other.

Whether or not Washington is listening is questionable. Most senior posts in the State Department are currently vacant – due in part to resignations in protest of the Trump team. In any event – with or without expertise in the State Department – Trump appears to be a hands-on operator who only consults his closest advisors.

## **An existential worry**

But Beijing is listening. Regional efforts, which exclude China, only exacerbate the "existential anxiety" that China's senior leaders live with. They are not at all as self-confident as they wish to appear. They are fearful that domestic problems, coupled with the challenge of a potentially hostile neighbourhood, will result in the Communist Party losing its grip on power. From Beijing's viewpoint, any suggestion to formally institute mechanisms to strengthen regional collaboration without including them is the same as targeting China, or worse yet, building a coalition to try and contain China. It is naive to think that calls to "enhance regional cooperation" without China's involvement are interpreted by Beijing in any other manner.

In addition to exchanging views on what to do in the event that Trump carries out his China-related threats, discussions between Australian and Chinese officials could flesh out how to more rapidly develop the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement proposed between the 10 ASEAN governments and their six partners: Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. They could also discuss how to involve Australia more deeply in One Belt One Road projects; strengthen Australia's role in Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank; and work together more effectively on humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations.

Australia has nothing to lose by doubling down on its relationship with Beijing. It has a lot to gain. Ministers, public servants, ADF officers and independent observers should be dispatched or encouraged to go to China as never before. Australia would not have to compromise any interests or give in on any values by engaging with Chinese officials much more energetically than hitherto. They would simply transmit a similar message: Australia wants to take its ties with China to a new level in this era of volatility.

*Linda Jakobson is chief executive of China Matters, an Australian public policy initiative. Her forthcoming book, with Dr Bates Gill, is China Matters – Getting It Right For Australia.*