

Time to lower the temperature in the China debate

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Concerns that China is attempting to influence Australian politics have resurfaced spectacularly with the release of a recording of Sam Dastyari's ill-judged comments on the South China Sea and counter-espionage tactics out of a cheap spy thriller. It will crank up the sensationalism around the China-Australia debate and underlines the fact that all is not well in the Sino-Australian relationship. As the recently released foreign policy white paper makes clear, the mood in Canberra has soured and Australia is increasingly taking a more critical line toward the People's Republic of China.

Over the past year, the Australian government has expressed concern that China is not playing by the international rules, and is seeking to achieve its ambitions through coercion and meddling in the affairs of others. While many in the region have become uneasy about the scale of Chinese power and influence, and indeed unsettled by its often unilateral actions (such as its island building in the South China Sea), few have taken such a publicly strident position toward China as Australia has over the past year.

Australia is concerned by China's growing military capabilities and the ways in which these, when paired with the ambition and will of Xi Jinping, are changing the strategic balance of power in Asia. This shifting security setting disadvantages Australia and increases the country's sense of vulnerability. This has been accentuated by the election of the nationalistic Donald Trump and the attendant risks of US retrenchment from Asia.

This sense of insecurity has been heightened by representatives of the Party-state attempting to interfere in many aspects of Australian domestic politics and society more generally. The Dastyari affair is only the most high-profile example of this perceived meddling. And it is not just that China appears to be quite happy to breach the core norm of international politics, that states should not interfere in the affairs of other states, but that it is infringing on fundamental rights and freedoms of Australian citizens and institutions.

Spies and informants

While concerns about Chinese influence in Australia have been around for some time – in 2005 Chen Yonglin defected from the China's consulate in Sydney and claimed there were more than 1000 Chinese spies and informants in the country – it has become

acute over the past year. In fact, it has become a prominent part of public debate and is an important factor influencing Canberra's firm line on China.

Concerns have been raised about interference in the domestic political process, on university campuses, and within the Chinese-Australian community. The evidence supporting these claims varies from the utterly unarguable to the highly questionable, with implication and innuendo playing too great a role. At times one might think China is a mortal enemy such is the tenor of some reporting. And this often sensational and sinister tone is becoming a significant problem in itself.

Recently, La Trobe University and East China Normal University held their second annual Australia-China Forum in Shanghai and discussed these sensitive yet important issues. It became clear that there is a high level of concern in China about this debate, and the discussion – which was quite emotional and heated at times – has the potential to badly damage the people-to-people side of the relationship.

Debate in Australia about China is becoming increasingly polarised. At one end there are the China sceptics, those who are suspicious of China's intentions, either for geopolitical or political reasons, and tend to see the dark side of everything the PRC does or says. At the other end are the China enthusiasts, who look only to the positive and downplay or ignore the very real challenges that China's growing power and influence presents, and the genuinely awful way in which this authoritarian state behaves at times.

Discussion about Chinese influence in Australia has been caught up in this polarisation. It is increasingly difficult to find a nuanced middle ground to discuss the complexities of the relationship, both the challenges as well as the opportunities.

Common interests

There is an urgent need to lower the temperature in the discussion about China's influence in Australia. This polarisation of views feeds hysteria and sensationalism, creating an escalatory cycle in which each side's perceptions of the other are confirmed and hardened. We must step back and inject a sense of proportion into the discussion about a country and a people of considerable importance to Australia.

The two countries share a large number of common interests and there is a great deal to be positive about, such as deepening business links, innovative projects funded by the Australia China Council, and the growing numbers of Australian students spending time in China. These need to be the starting point of the conversation not an afterthought.

But we need to also recognise there are legitimate concerns that a liberal democratic country like Australia have about the actions and behaviour of an authoritarian, one-party state like China, one that does not share the same values as us. It is plainly unacceptable for representatives of China's government to infringe on the rights and freedoms of Australian citizens. Regardless of their heritage, they are Australians.

The challenge is to recognise these differences and work out mature and cool-headed ways of discussing them openly and respectfully. If we do not, then the corrosive effects of personal mistrust and miscommunication will move from a small academic seminar into inter-state relations and further drive a combative dimension to Australia-China relations.

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