

Summary of Third China Matters Young Professionals national meeting

23 March 2018, held in partnership with China Australia Millennial Project

The Third China Matters Young Professionals national meeting brought together 35 select individuals from business and the public service to discuss specific challenges facing Australia's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The two topic sessions attempted to formulate policy recommendations for the Australian government and/or business community.

Session I: How can Australia build a realistic and credible China narrative in our public debate?

Most participants agreed that Australia's China narrative is not as robust and varied as it could be. The degree to which this posed a problem to Australia's relationship with the PRC was under contention, as were the specific ways with which Australia could improve the current public conversation on the PRC.

Participants discussed different 'threads' of the China narrative. Geostrategic and security narratives on the PRC are often negative, whilst those focusing on economic aspects are generally more positive. Participants noticed that certain narratives exist within these larger topics, such as the 'foreign direct investment narrative', 'foreign (political) donations narrative', and the 'political system narrative', all of which serve to limit the type of discussions we have about China.

In general, participants agreed that the root cause of the problem is a lack of understanding in Australia of the PRC. A participant commented that this difficulty is compounded by the fact that the narratives within Australia differed greatly. For example, the general China narrative on the west coast of Australia focuses very much on prosperity as a result of the iron ore boom, whereas on the east coast the dialogue speaks much more to security threats and political challenges that Australia must navigate.

Participants noted the responsibility of Australian media to maintain journalistic integrity whilst reporting on the PRC. The incentives that journalists face to write sensationalist pieces must be tempered. This was confirmed by a panellist, who noted the existence of feedback loop between media and politicians.

The lack of historical elements in Australia's China narrative was one focus of the session discussion. Participants noted that points of commonality are often overshadowed by politics, and deserve to be highlighted. Other participants disagreed, citing intrinsic differences between Australia and the PRC (such as political freedoms) as major challenges that must be addressed first and foremost.

Policy Recommendations

1. The federal government should foster a deeper understanding of the PRC in Australia. This could start at the 'elite' level by sponsoring (or at the very least, facilitating) prominent policy-makers (such as politicians) to take study trips to the PRC in order to build a more realistic, first-hand understanding of the PRC.

2. State governments must take a key role in working to promote China literacy for future generations. Active measures such as early-age language and cultural literacy courses are vital, supplemented with long-term cross-cultural exchanges.

Session II: Are there risks for Australia in engaging with PRC tech and innovation?

Participants agreed that risks undoubtedly exist when Australia pursues tech and innovation collaboration with the PRC, but were divided over whether these risks are higher with the PRC in particular than with other countries.

All agreed that a balance needs to be struck between under-regulation and over-regulation of PRC tech and innovation collaboration. On the one hand, some warned that blanket statements describing a threat from the PRC could seriously harm Australia's international competitiveness in tech. One cited the necessity that Australia improve its skill in every industry for fear that we will be left behind – and that Australia could face losing the opportunity to collaborate at all in future.

On the other hand, others said that Australia should more stringently prioritise capability-building as a key criteria for collaboration, with the implication that without substantial and proven capability-add as a result of collaboration, such efforts should not be undertaken. However, participants on both sides agreed that it was important that regulatory measures be transparent in order to effectively influence the behaviour of relevant Australian stakeholders.

With respect to risk, a participant argued that civilian and military applications of technology are closely related and often interchangeable. However, another participant said that Australia already has strong ethical frameworks surrounding military applications of technology. Another added that the concept of threat should not be depicted so broadly: some risks only affect certain sectors of communities, certain sectors of business, certain individuals, or all Australians.

A consensus about the effectiveness of Australia's current risk-mitigation framework could not be reached. The majority of participants acknowledged that risk assessment will always need to be performed on a case-by-case basis, and therefore any policy developments will need to embody a flexible and individualised approach.

Policy Recommendation

1. In order to increase transparency, the federal government should create a foreign donation register of international tech and innovation collaboration to be better placed to mitigate and assess risk in this area.
2. The federal government, through a relevant body such as the Department of Home Affairs, must spearhead a concerted effort to educate stakeholders such as tertiary education institutes on the concept of 'national security'.

Summarised by Sophia Sun Zou, Project Coordinator, China Matters.