



## **Should values be central to Australia's China policy?**

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The Australian Government appears to be making an important shift on the role of values in its China policy by halting the ratification of an extradition treaty and urging the country to adopt democratic institutions.

Australia's debate over whether to emphasise values or interests in foreign policy really began in the 1970s when it was shifting its focus to Asia just as the question of rights and values gained new prominence in world politics. Australia faced a conundrum: should it lecture Asian countries which were either communist, authoritarian or one-party states at the same time as it was trying to find a new way to connect to the region?

Governments have long been aware of the criticism that many individual rights are so-called "Western" cultural values. But they have faced public pressure to defend these rights on the world stage because they are variously seen as Australian values. Politicians have asserted the intrinsic morality of these rights, for example by arguing that no country has officially rejected the UN Universal Declaration of Rights. But governments have also realised that this approach is unpalatable to non-Western neighbours such as China which has juxtaposed what it calls "Asian values" against "Western values". China has consistently argued that its culture, in contrast to the West, values the community over the individual, authority over autonomy and belief above tolerance.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972, governments have managed this dilemma by pursuing China policies which were variants of Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser's 1976 view that national interest, not ideology, should be the primary driver of how Australia conducted its foreign relationships. Underlying this interests-based approach, Australia, had hoped China's economic liberalisation would lead to liberal politics. These hopes suffered a setback with the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. But even then, while the Hawke Government suspended aid for a year, trade and investment continued in the hope that the next generation of Communist leaders would be more tolerant. The overriding view was that Australia should have a long-term cooperative relationship with China because it was undesirable that it China should become isolated.

Over that time Australia's economic dependence on China has grown to the point where it takes 32 percent of Australia's goods exports – the greatest exposure to a single country since the UK in 1952-53. Australia is also second only to the US as a recipient of Chinese overseas direct investment.

However China has not moved towards political liberalisation. Under Xi Jinping social restrictions have tightened with crackdowns on large-scale public protests, the targeting and incarceration of human

rights lawyers, activists and journalists and the draconian treatment of dissidents such as Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo.

The Xi regime has overseen increased mass surveillance and monitoring through data providers such as Tencent. Surveillance may be further extended through the proposed introduction of a social credit scoring plan. Censorship of the news media, social media and other public communication continues to intensify, with a crackdown on virtual private networks. China is the world's leading user of the death penalty, declines to rule out use of torture by its security agencies, has an opaque legal system, implements harsh laws in its response to Uighur separatism, and represses Falun Gong practitioners.

Australian governments have mostly refrained from public criticism of China's human rights record and use an annual dialogue as the primary platform to voice concerns. However several developments have contributed to a new debate about values and interests: increasing economic dependence on China coupled with increasing social repression there; shifting great power dynamics; and a changing geostrategic climate.

Now the Turnbull Government seems to be addressing or at least publicly acknowledging these issues. The ratification of an extradition treaty was pulled abruptly in March due to concerns about its human rights safeguards and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop sent a blunt message to China on the importance of adopting democratic institutions in a speech in Singapore. These are stronger positions than from other post-1972 governments.

Irrespective of what precipitated this tilt on China the Australian Government should encourage the notion that the national interest involves the upholding of values. But this should be built into foreign policymaking across the board rather than be prone to ad hocery. The right approach is crucial: publicly raising the treatment of political dissidents might be productive, but a lecture on democracy is likely not.

## Questions

- Should the Australian government make public statements that criticize China's human rights record and political system?
- Does Australia risk repercussions by taking a tougher stance on human rights in China? What retaliatory measures can China be expected to take?
- Over what kind of an issue should Australia uphold its values despite the possibility of angering China?
- Should Australia ratify the Extradition Treaty with China?



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