

## **A new China narrative for Australia**

### **Submission by Mark Binskin**

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How do you develop a strategy and narrative to effectively engage with China? An engagement that is constructive – not subservient.

I think Australia's New China Narrative is a great start – and my congratulations to Linda and Stephen.

A couple of points of emphasis from me though.

First, when interacting with China, never let anything, no matter how subtle it is, 'go through to the wicket keeper'. If there is an issue raised that is incorrect or you disagree with, it should be politely and firmly challenged there and then. If not, your silence will be treated as acquiescence to the PRC position. In this sense, any Australian Government narrative will be scrutinised for what it doesn't say, as much for what it does say.

Second, China prefers to always work bilaterally – often citing 'traditional relationships' being the best way to resolve issues. While bilateral engagement is important, using multilateral forums is a much more transparent way to raise and resolve complex issues that affect the many nations in our region and should always be the norm. This must continually be emphasised as our position.

Third, and not just for engaging China, we – Australia – need to develop our own coherent whole of nation strategy.

A strategy that builds on our own culture and values. One that is based on us fully understanding and pursuing our global position. One that has all of Australia working together to maximise and exploit our key advantages – of which there are many; and a strategy that equally understands and mitigates our vulnerabilities to ensure our long-term national resilience and economic prosperity – especially when we are challenged and put under pressure. Because we will be.

And, importantly, a national strategy that is not undermined by Australian states, cities or corporate entities for their own shorter-term gain.

Finally, when engaging China, we must have a well-developed cohesive, consistent and firm approach – and not step back from this position.

So, does Australia's China Narrative hit the mark?

In most ways yes – and well. Noting my previous points, the narrative takes a very rational and balanced approach, but I think misses in a couple of areas.

First, the statement “we want a mutually agreed upon set of rules about how nations interact in the Indo-Pacific region and the world” could be read to imply there are none now! This is incorrect – is it really our position?

The second and always the hardest – How do you hold a nation to account – in a meaningful way - when they are heavy handed, or renege on an agreement, treaty or mutually accepted rules?

And third, it needs to note that if there is a change of Australian Government at the next election, they will be tested very early in their term to determine the coherency of their policy on China, their engagement strategy and their resolve as a Government.

This is critical – because at the end of the day, while having a narrative is great – having the will and determination to enact it is even greater.

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