



Session I Discussion Paper

How should Australia respond to growing nationalism in the PRC?

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Chinese nationalism has emerged as one of the most influential intellectual currents of the twenty-first century. Whether seen through the prism of popular belief, or as a source of influence and rationale for policy decisions, state-sanctioned nationalism has already affected Australia.

By Chinese nationalism this paper refers exclusively to the concept as it is advanced and propagated by the Communist Party of China (CPC). Many citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC) feel a sense of patriotism. Many believe in a sense of nationalism, based on racial, cultural or political grounds. In this there is a diversity of views and beliefs. Chinese nationalism, as sanctioned and propagated by the CPC, is grounded in a sense of national cohesion, the inalienable territorial integrity of the state, and the overcoming of longstanding historical grievances. It is predicated on the notion that the Chinese nation is reemerging as a great power after a prolonged period of weakness, and that the process to resume its rightful place as a powerful global state requires the support and participation of all Chinese.

Nationalism is a powerful tool the PRC uses to extend its influence abroad, and Australia is not immune. Chinese nationalism affects Australia in three specific areas: the influence of nationalism on the formation and implementation of the PRC's foreign policy; the influence of nationalism on PRC students studying at Australian universities; the use of nationalism as a rationale for intervention in the Chinese diaspora community. These three areas span both Australia's foreign and domestic policies, and collectively present a further difficulty for an already complex relationship with the PRC. It is also important to separate the issues arising from Chinese nationalism from other challenges facing Australia from the PRC, such as influence operations or espionage. The impact of Chinese nationalism on Australia carries none of the immediate dangers of espionage or influence peddling. It is, rather, a slow burning matter that will be of growing importance to future decision making.

None of the three specific areas in which Chinese nationalism influences Australia carries an easy solution:

The PRC's territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, as well as the ongoing claim over Taiwan, are couched in nationalistic terms. The argument centres on the notion that regaining lost territories is essential for the process of restoring the PRC to its place of global prominence. Such claims to territory are framed as 'core national interests' and allow little room for compromise and negotiation. This places Australia in an unenviable position in these disputes, caught between tremendous pressure from the PRC government (and sections of the Chinese community in Australia), and other considerations such as maintaining alliances and relationships with other states. State sponsored Chinese nationalism therefore exacerbates the already difficult geopolitical challenges confronting Australia.

There have been reports (mostly anecdotal) of PRC students at Australian universities attempting to influence discussions of the PRC, with a view to spreading a perspective which aligns with the nationalist narrative. These actions are reported to be disruptive and sometimes involve intimidation of other students. These attitudes and behaviours are inimical to the culture of free and open inquiry upon which universities are supposed to operate. Australian universities are heavily dependent on PRC students for income, and such conflicts create a dilemma for Australian universities

The Communist Party of China attempts to exercise influence over the Chinese-Australian communities. The rationale for this interference is grounded in the nationalist narrative; namely, that each ethnically Chinese person around the world retains an unbreakable bond to the PRC. Through this bond, these communities have an important role to play in the rejuvenation of the PRC, whether they like it or not. This influence is exercised through control of community groups active in support of the PRC government, and editorial control of community media outlets, ensuring a consistent flow of pro-Beijing news. This interference is unacceptable, but equally there may be little any authority in Australia can do to control the views of Australian residents who extol a positive message on Chinese nationalism.

The emergence of Chinese nationalism in Australia presents problems which need to be addressed. When spread by the PRC government, Australia can resist on the grounds of resisting foreign interference. But when spread by Australian residents, or PRC students at Australian universities, the best that can be done is engaging in intellectual debate and respecting the right of all to freedom of speech. In the realm of regional geopolitics, Australia must continue to maintain a line which upholds the considerations of our allies and the law in all regional disputes, while continuing to constructively engage with the PRC on other matters.

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Questions

- In what ways does state-sponsored nationalism in the PRC influence Australia-PRC ties?
- What are the implications of nationalism for the PRC's security interests, such as its claims in the South China Sea, or unification with Taiwan? How will this affect Australia's interests?
- Anecdotal evidence suggests some PRC international students return home from Australia more nationalistic than when they arrived. What can be done to address this?
- What can Australian brands in the PRC do to mitigate the waning attractiveness of their products due to increased nationalism among PRC citizens?

