

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Nick Bisley

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The effort to devise a new China narrative for Australia is both timely and important. It is timely not just because there is likely to be a change in government and an opportune moment to take stock of and reframe many aspects of policy but also because it is increasingly clear that the geopolitical and geoeconomic circumstances of our region are undergoing very significant change. At the heart of those changes is the rapid transformation of the People's Republic of China from an isolated, introspective and poor country to an affluent, powerful and confident global power that is intent on have an international influence commensurate with its scale and civilisational legacy. This is going to change the region profoundly. The only question is by how much and what price we will all have to pay to make those adjustments.

For a country as dependent on the outside world as Australia — both our prosperity and security depend deeply on forces beyond our borders and outside our control — governments of both persuasions have spent insufficient time, energy and political capital explaining our international policy. Nowhere is this more evident than in our relations with China. It is fundamentally important not only to get our China policy right — and just what 'right' policy looks like is open to considerable debate — but also to make sure that the public understands that policy, supports it and understands the opportunities and the risks of our approach to China. The facile positioning of recent years — that Australia doesn't or shouldn't have to choose between Beijing and Washington — must be consigned to the past. Crucially, it also rightly points out that any political investment in messaging must come from the top, it must be directed to the Australian public and must cross the range of policy domains. The narrative presented here provides a welcome guide as to how to approach this question.

While Linda Jakobson noted at the draft narrative's launch on 26 March that there is a distinction between a narrative and a strategy, it is very difficult to have a national narrative that is separate from a China strategy. In political terms, narrative is about framing an issue, explaining its logic to the public and ultimately about selling the ends and the means. The narrative here is thus lacking in sharpness precisely because it has deliberately not pre-empted a strategy. Thus, it feels simultaneously as if it is a muted critique of existing China policy — we can't make markets diversify, we have to accept that China is going to change the region whether we like it or not — while trying to set out how to subtly reframe Australia's thinking about China. Ultimately, any national narrative about China that comes from the Prime Minister and attempts to shape the public conversation about the PRC cannot divorce itself from the larger strategic aims of the country. A new narrative will necessarily come with choices that the government will make and represents the opportunity to explain those decisions.

The decision to use interests to structure the discussion is a sound one given the decision to draw a distinction between ends and narrative. However, at times they operate at too high a level of generality. In particular, the interest that Australia wants to be at peace undersells the challenge that China presents to Australian foreign and defence policy as it has existed for the past four to five decades. Australia's core interest is not merely to be at peace but to enjoy a stable and favourable balance of power. By actively seeking to reduce America's regional role it is fundamentally threatening that interest in ways that fall short of a threat to the peace. It is this thorny issue with which a new narrative has to grapple.

A very small point that I believe others have made is that the environmental side of the narrative needs to be considerably strengthened.

Finally, the traditional distinction between values and interests, the former being enduring the latter being variable, is contested by many scholars and practitioners. Clearly, interests are more easily navigated and negotiated, but values do change and evolve over time. More importantly, we might want to think pretty hard about how we frame the values side of the equation and think through precisely how universalist and universalistic we want to be about values. This is a narrative about values not a statement of values as they are after all. How tolerant are we prepared to be about how the PRC behaves within its border? Are we prepared to sacrifice our interests to advance those values? They are very hard questions to answer but any China narrative will have to engage with them. At present the narrative parcels them up rather too neatly.

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