



Opening Remarks at the Launch of Australia's new China narrative

Linda Jakobson, CEO and Founding Director, China Matters

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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests. Thank you for coming. I am delighted to welcome you to this launch of the next-to-final draft of 'A New China Narrative for Australia'. I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, elders - past - present - and emerging, on whose lands we meet today.

I want to give a very special welcome to our panelists, the Honorable Julie Bishop MP, who needs no introduction. Air Chief Marshall Mark Binskin, former Chief of the Defence Force, and Mr Jason Yat-sen Li, Chairman of Vantage Asia Holdings and also an Advisory Council member of China Matters. Professor Michael Wesley will serve as moderator. Michael is Dean at of the College of Asia and the Pacific at Australian National University, a China Matters Board Director and a contributor to the Narrative.

I would like to make special mention of the Chair of the China Matters Board, Mr Kevin McCann AM, and three other fellow board directors who are present today: Allan Gyngell, Peter Hendy and Andrew Parker.

I am really excited, not only about today's event but also about this entire project, 'A new China Narrative for Australia'. We don't pretend to have all the answers, but we provide food for thought about Australia's most consequential relationship in this region — the relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). However complex the region becomes, however

complex China becomes, and there will be times when we are truly challenged, we must engage deeply with China.

We chose to write this narrative as a speech from an Australian prime minister to the Australian people, explaining why Australia must engage deeply with China. This format constrained us, it made us disciplined. We could not simply tap out the words of analysts. We had to really think hard about the language a prime minister could use in a public speech.

Dealing with the tough China issues requires clarity, courage, and a buy-in from the Australian people. The government must do a better job of communicating this message about the need for deeper engagement with the PRC – both externally and internally.

I note that this is a narrative, defined as a clear and comprehensible story line that explains WHY Australia must engage deeply with China. A narrative does not attempt to provide the answer to HOW! This is not a new China policy, it is a narrative. Writing a new China policy could well be the next big project of China Matters, let's see. But the differentiation between the why and the how is important to keep in mind. A China policy would spell out how to make the trade-offs needed on sticky thorny issues. This narrative does not go there.

So what is new? For me what stands out is that this narrative is about engaging China, not merely managing our relationship. This narrative is about building a new kind of relationship between a middle power and a great power, with which we are already intertwined in multiple ways. This narrative is a realistic, candid assessment of ourselves and of the PRC. This narrative acknowledges that our capacity to influence is limited. Our interests have to be negotiated with clear eyes. But our values are non-negotiable.

This is still a work in progress. This is a beginning.

About 30 Australians from government, academia, business and the university sector have helped us at various brainstorming sessions to think about the issues. Six of us, with myself in the lead, contributed to formulating the text. The contributors are China Matters board directors Stephen FitzGerald, Allan Gyngell, Andrew Parker and Michael Wesley, as well as my policy analyst colleague at China Matters, Jackson Kwok.

The consultative process will continue for just over a month, until 30 April. The next-to-final draft which we today launch will be uploaded on our website, and it is open for comments and suggestions. Please send us your feedback! After that the contributors will sift through the suggestions, and revise the text. The final draft will be presented to the new government after the Federal Election.

I founded China Matters, a public policy initiative, four years ago to stimulate a nuanced and robust debate about the tough policy issues in the Australia-China relationship, and to bring business into discussions with the security establishment about the rise of the People's Republic of China in particular. We also do our utmost to keep business engaged in our discussions with ministers, politicians, and senior public servants. So this narrative project is certainly front and center about what China Matters is all about. Tough issues, and welcoming of business voices and the voices of other sectors, importantly the university sector, alongside those of the security establishment.

This is the first time we take a step into the public foray – in fact this is our first VIP public event. I thank you all for joining us.