

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Michael Ahrens

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First, I commend you for putting up-front the values we hold which are pretty much non-negotiable. I agree that most of these, including the rights constituting a fair and open criminal justice system for our citizens, are non-negotiable. But I am not so sure that the full range of human rights values we hold dear will be able to be sustained in practice in the unpredictable and sometimes sensitive future relationship we will have with China.

In terms of negotiating for our interests, your narrative spells out very well that it will require all the 'statecraft' and other skills we have to withstand the growing assertiveness and pressures we all anticipate. Hopefully our leaders will be able to conduct matters, including diplomacy with our regional friends, out of the glare of publicity as much as possible.

To me the key passages in your narrative are those which stress how vital it is that as many politicians as possible (those at the helm and those aspiring) spend time in China not just as tourists but in what you describe as ongoing 'face-to-face engagement'. Combined with discussion groups here and other educational reading, a reasonable background – and hopefully much better insight – can be gained on where China stands on the relationship. Unless better equipped, I fear they will not serve us well.

The Prime Minister and the leaders of all Parties should not just call for but progressively mandate this. In the same way as the leaders in our key services and trading organisations are recognising this vital need, all those in the political arena should equip themselves with this knowledge as part of their qualifications.

Getting a grasp on the many different, changing and interacting facets of Chinese society is not easy, as you know. But it will be more important to us than it has ever been in the past.

China Matters has, I know, already played an important role in this and deserves support.

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