

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Mike Lyons

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This new narrative is well formulated, comprehensive, informative and factually accurate. However, for it to be referred to as a “new narrative” one would expect to discover some new thinking about Australia’s relationship with China and even some “breakthrough” in what is being proposed.

The narrative largely continues to toe the line and presents no bold initiatives. I make the following observations:

1. Although the narrative refers to the different Australian and Chinese values and ideologies, there is no suggestion that the Chinese values and ideologies are in no way inferior to our own. Indeed, the only inference to be drawn is that we tolerate these other values and ideologies (not necessarily respect them) because it is practically necessary to do so to ensure our “constructive relationship” with PRC. As John Keane observes in his book *When Trees Fall, Monkeys Scatter: Rethinking Democracy in China*, Chinese champions insist that the PRC model is a higher form of democracy, above all because its leaders are selected on merit, rather than through voting, and therefore they get things done. Keane refers to the presumption by Western observers that “liberal democracy” is the highest standard by which PRC politics is to be measured. However, as the book argues, democracy made in China is likely to survive and thrive, confounding the claims of those who judge it to be a regime in need of liberal democracy. If we in Australia are to succeed in building a genuine two-way relationship with China, it would be a helpful starting point to recognise that there is much to be said for China’s “post democratic” system of government. After all, it enjoys the overwhelming support of the Chinese people – and that is what really counts.
2. The narrative refers more than once to our “constructive relationship”. There is nothing in this description which remotely suggests a hand of friendship. Rather it is indicative of a reluctant acceptance of the need to accommodate this indispensable trading relationship. The Chinese will see this for what it is. On the other hand, the narrative refers to the United States as our ally of nearly seven decades and goes on to talk of our alliance with the US as a critical element of our security. Quite apart from questioning the reliability of this ally, it is important to bear in mind that one of the primary meanings of the word “ally” is “a state formally cooperating with another for military or other purposes”. The paper acknowledges that China is challenging the United States for supremacy in this region and that this is something which the United States is unwilling to concede. From a Chinese perspective, our “hand of friendship” would have to be seen for what it is. There is ample authoritative literature about the decline of the West, the Asian future and the rapidly growing strength and economic power of China (and other nations in the East).

3. Then there is the question of China's assertiveness and willingness to pressure countries economically and to use coercion. There is nothing new or surprising about a global power using its muscle. One need only recall Great Britain's colonisation of much of the world and the willingness of the US to exercise coercion, to impose sanctions virtually at will, to walk away from internationally recognised treaties, and to seek to overthrow governments in various jurisdictions including, for example Iraq, Syria and most recently Venezuela, to name but a few. It is inconceivable to even think that the PRC leadership would behave in anything approaching this scale of assertiveness or coercion. Even in the South China Sea, China's actions to date have not been belligerent, and its militarisation of pockets in this Sea can better be described as consistent with defensive action taken against the threats imposed by the United States' military installations in the region, not to mention its freedom of navigation patrols. Imagine the American reaction if China were to undertake similar freedom of navigation patrols in the waters of Hawaii or the Florida coast. It is strongly arguable that, having regard to China's geography, its leadership would be grossly irresponsible were it not to take sensible defensive measures in the South China Sea.
4. It is all very well to criticise violations of human rights and to point to the Uighur story. This ignores Australia's dismissal of equally significant human rights abuse when it comes to our treatment of asylum seekers and their extraordinary "imprisonment" without relief in places such as Nauru. While open commentary and the expression of differing viewpoints is unobjectionable, perhaps we should consider drawing the line at interference in the internal affairs of others – in just the same way as Australia objects to such interference in its affairs.
5. Australia's decision not to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative is yet another thorn in the side of the China-Australia relationship. It will do us no good. Toeing this US line is counterproductive, economically harmful to Australia and clearly not supported by Australian business. I respectfully suggest this issue be vigorously pursued in the narrative.
6. As well, Australia's decision to exclude Huawei is not only damaging to Australia's technological development but will clearly be a source of growing irritation in the Australia-China relationship. It is noteworthy (and should thus be noted in the narrative) that Britain is not blindly following the USA on this, and moreover, New Zealand's Prime Minister has made it clear that there is no New Zealand ban on Huawei – and furthermore, that New Zealand is supportive of the BRI.

Thus, to conclude I suggest that there is an opportunity to ameliorate some of the language used in the narrative, and the issues referred to, and perhaps to embellish the narrative's conclusions by referring to:

- Australia's willingness to build a genuine relationship of true friendship with China;
- China acting assertively but responsibly and in a measured way; and
- China's spectacular progress achieved through their system of government – one made in China.

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