



Session I Discussion Paper

What should Australia's new China narrative look like?

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1. **A China narrative for Australia** is a comprehensible storyline that explains why we must get on with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The narrative must connect with the projections for the PRC itself. These extend to 2049.

2. An Australian narrative should assume the PRC:

- will not adopt Western-style democracy;
- will not experience regime overthrow or collapse;
- will crack down hard on opposition and dissent;
- will become moderately prosperous and accrue even more weight and influence;
- will not be moved to attitudinal or behavioural change by military pressure or megaphone diplomacy;
- will pursue unification with Taiwan;
- will not be humble;
- will not abandon ideas of Chinese exceptionalism; but
- has no military ambitions regarding Australia.

3. This is not the PRC Australians thought it to be in the 1990s or even the 2000s, and Australians must get their heads around it. **A new China narrative must:**

- explain why we must get along with the PRC, rejecting old narratives that have lost relevance and utility, including the narrative of fear;
- take the public with it, with frank assessments of what the PRC means for Australia;
 - The **positives** include
 - not just broad economic benefits but specifically jobs generated by tourism, education, agriculture, resources and in the future, health care and aged care;
 - benefits of investment from the PRC to Southeast Asia which contribute to the region's prosperity and stability, and thereby to Australia's security;
 - benefits of PRC aid, which shares the burden of development assistance, and offers potential for cooperation with Australia;
 - positives of PRC strides in science, e.g. medical research, new energy;
 - positives of certain domestic PRC policies, e.g. climate change;
 - as the PRC becomes increasingly middle class, benefits to Australia of a stable prosperous ballast astride our region.
 - The **negatives** include
 - a stronger and more confident Communist Party of China means more resources to try to influence the Chinese diaspora, PRC permanent residents, international students, and PRC-friendly groups in Australia, at times illegally;
 - bullying of neighbours when they don't adhere to Beijing's wishes;
 - attempts to erode rules, and the acceptability of universal human rights;
 - risk of corrupt practices and self-censorship creeping into Australian society.

4. A narrative must **spell out realistic, confident strategies for Australia to deal with this giant power:**

- to court war would be disaster and cannot be seriously entertained;
- this dictates that we instead use statecraft and diplomacy;
- PRC interference is unacceptable and must be met head on. However, in-your-face public confrontation is counter-productive. Use statecraft and diplomacy;
- include positive bilateral and regional initiatives, e.g. multilateral cooperation in Southeast Asia - and *listen* to the region;
- explain what kind of region we seek, not what we don't want.

5. **Moral issues of human rights:**

- condemn abuses;
- raise in ways that have the potential to be effective, e.g. together with neighbours and when appropriate behind closed doors;
- raise at highest possible level with the PRC leadership, not with bureaucrats.

6. **Is it possible to influence the PRC?:**

- acknowledge that with big powers it is difficult to have influence, but show instances where it has been possible and could be in future;
- use statecraft, including very frequent high-level visits;
- seek cooperation on matters close to the PRC's interests, e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative, aid, and try and influence PRC actions and project outcomes;
- develop regional frameworks that tie the PRC with the region – e.g. Asian food security.

7. **How to respond to 'might is right'?:**

- statecraft;
- responding in the way Australia has recently is counter-productive – and weakens capacity/opportunity to do anything effective.

8. **What about the US?:**

- a narrative must focus on the PRC but take in the realities of the US;
- 'We do not have to choose' is in reality saying we will not make or be forced into choices which damage important relationships;
- a narrative must explain this to the public, and what it means for our ties with both;
- Malcolm Turnbull has said the PRC is not a threat to Australia. This distances our PRC policy from the new US National Defense Strategy, which says the PRC is a threat. That this distancing exists and is part of an independent foreign policy must be imparted to the public.

Questions

What should Australia do to begin building a new narrative on China?

What is the narrative that enables us to pursue robust domestic and international security strategies and a positive, constructive relationship with the PRC?

Should Australia adopt a more ASEAN-like narrative regarding the PRC?



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