

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Colin Mackerras

26 April 2019

My basic reaction to the “new China narrative” is very positive. It is balanced, wide-ranging and mostly fair. It takes into account the multifaceted aspects of Australia’s relations with China. I agree strongly with the main conclusion: that China matters very much to Australia. I also strongly agree with the idea of working out a China narrative to present to government.

There are a couple of areas where I have a slightly different perspective.

At the beginning you say we must maintain our interests in engaging with China. I agree, but think the list of interests does not give enough recognition to how greatly the world, and we, have changed. The wish “to formulate our foreign policy independently of pressure or coercion from other powers” overlooks the fact that the ANZUS Treaty remains to this day a cornerstone of our foreign policy. Personally, I think we should downgrade it, though not abrogate it. It was signed in September 1951 at the height of the Korean War, when Chinese and Australian troops were fighting on opposite sides. The situation could hardly be more different now, when China is our top trade partner. Of course, we are an independent country, but I think the “pressure” from the United States is too great.

Is narrative the same as policy? I would have thought that a narrative would be the basis of a policy, rather than a policy itself. Here there is a great deal of description/analysis, but the thrust seems to me to be advocacy, which is more like policy.

You say there is definitely no Cold War. I think it depends how you define the term. However, in the last few years there has definitely been a breakdown of the positive arrangement Henry Kissinger reached with Zhou Enlai in 1971, and which has persisted under various administrations and governments until the last couple of years. There is a long-term shift taking place in the balance of power that favours China. It’s that situation that Australia has to confront. Personally, I agree with Hugh White that we should be less inclined to side with the United States against China than has been the case up to now. In the podcast of the launch event, Julie Bishop said she thought Chinese officials had believed Australia smart to sign an alliance with the United States. Maybe it was smart then. It is not so now. You hint at this in the “narrative”. But I think it should be more explicit and clearer.

For the free debate in the universities and society as a whole you say “we will confront foreign interference head-on”. Fine, but I do not share the implication that this foreign interference is coming mainly, let alone only, from China. Of course, China wants to increase its influence. So do a range of other countries. Are Australian values and free discussion in the universities under threat from China? I doubt it very much. We hear a lot about the threats from “political

correctness". As one who has worked in universities for about half a century, it's my impression (and only an impression) that there are more constraints on what it is sensible to say openly than there used to be. But I really doubt that Australian values of free speech and discussion are under serious existential threat, in universities or anywhere else, from the Chinese state, or from the forces of political correctness.

You mention that President Xi Jinping wants to tell China's story better, and take the Uighur case as a bad story that deeply concerns you. It deeply concerns me too. However, I think it's worth mentioning as part of the China story that it perceives itself as facing a terrorist threat to its west. Personally, I think the historical record suggests that it does indeed face such a threat.

Overall, it's a great idea to develop a new narrative. China does indeed matter to Australia. This new narrative is a highly perceptive, brief summation of the situation and an excellent guide to government policy.

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