

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Geoff Miller

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Congratulations on recognising the importance of a China narrative for Australia, and on your draft of what that might be. This response to your request for comments and suggestions on the narrative so far makes a number of points, but none are intended to detract from the importance of the undertaking. Some of the points are of a general nature while others refer to specific points or wording in the draft. Points begin:

1. Our engagement with China is already fostered by a number of agreements and institutions. Early reference should be made to these, including the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, CHAFTA, and the new National Foundation for Australia-China Relations.
2. It might be worth making the point that China is now a great power by any standards, and great powers typically behave in ways that differ from medium and small powers. So, as the draft says, we can expect to deal with a China that expects to have its points of view given full weight and consideration, by its neighbours, for example.
3. Although aspects of it are referred to in the draft---for example in the 'we want to be at peace' section there is the statement that 'we will never accept that issues are viewed exclusively through a security prism'---the draft doesn't directly describe or confront the major fact of Australian attitudes towards China at present. This is the split or clash between those who are positive towards China, based on the positive aspects of our relationship---economic, government-to-government, cultural and people-to-people---and those who see China and Chinese people as a threat, not only because of China's growing strategic reach but also in its challenges to our values and perceived readiness to interfere, including through the growing Chinese population in Australia.
4. It is important to deal with this since, at least according to the media, actions by our Government taken on the basis of the potential threat posed by Huawei to the security of our future 5G network are being met with PRC obstacles to our exports of barley and coal to China, and again according to media reports a number of interlocutors in China have noticed, and wondered about the significance of, some of the anti-China rhetoric being used in the Australian internal debate.
5. The section 'set of rules for the region' in its fourth paragraph lists a number of things implied by 'deep and forward-looking engagement with the PRC'. These include how we treat Chinese students in Australia, and cooperating with China on aid projects in the Pacific. Over and above these and others listed should be put 'serious discussions about strategic issues affecting the region'---after all, we are in a strategic partnership.
6. The section on 'an independent foreign policy' states that 'Australia will not be forced into binary choices'. I'm not sure what that means, but I hope it means that Australia will not

automatically side with either the United States or China. The choices will need to be made issue by issue. As you say, the US is an ally of nearly seven decades, while China will (also) inextricably shape our future. Both are very important to us, and are much larger powers, with their own interests and concerns in regard to each other that we don't necessarily share. In making up our mind on important issues we should consult with and take into account the views of 'like-minded Asian countries', referred to in the preceding 'at peace' section---as well of course with the US and China themselves.

7. This brings me to my final point: we shouldn't replace a foreign policy that perhaps gives too little attention to China (though I doubt that) with one that gives too much. As the draft narrative points out China, like the US, is very important. But it's not the only significant country in our region: think of Japan, India and Indonesia, the last two growing fast with young populations. And countries beyond our region still matter, such as the EU countries: major trading partners and sources of technology with which we may need to develop stronger relations if Britain becomes a less relevant interlocutor. I doubt whether it's possible for 'Ministers, politicians generally, and public servants' to 'devote much more time to the China relationship than we have done' (final paragraph of the 'set of rules' section) without turning our foreign policy into a 'China policy' only. We're a very small country compared to China, though we have significant things to put on the scale in terms of mineral resources, services and agricultural products, and as a trading country we're not limited to any one region of the world. But our personnel resources, in particular, are limited, and we can't afford an over-emphasis on one country, however important. Let's certainly try to get our relations with China right, but not at the expense of a balanced and realistic foreign policy and use of resources.

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