

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Mack Williams

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The draft is very timely in addressing the longer-term future for Australia of the role of China and its interaction with Australia in such a succinct way. I realise only too well that you have to lay down some finite boundaries to a daunting menu as this and hope the following comments will not broaden the scope too much.

- I am seriously concerned that the horse may have bolted in regard to the last two points of your introductory outline of Australian interests – the opportunity for independent policy assessment free from foreign influence. As I set out in a recent piece for *Pearls and Irritations*, the agreement at AUSMIN 18 to establish a “joint work plan” with the United States has taken us a significant step towards even more linkage with US strategic policy objectives – and potentially away from developing our own national interests policy on China. Beyond the already deep embedment we have in the US Indo-Pacific Command and the like:

“The Secretaries and Ministers emphasized both nations’ strong and deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific. They made clear their commitment to work together – and with partners – to shape an Indo-Pacific that is open, inclusive, prosperous, and rules-based. A key outcome of discussions in Palo Alto is a joint work plan that advances our shared strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, which has diplomatic, security, and economic dimensions.”

This has been reinforced by the DFAT Portfolio Budget statement which elevated the importance of the joint work plan. Sadly, Bill Shorten’s Budget Reply speech contained barely a word on foreign policy (except the continued aid cuts) as the Opposition maintained its now long running tactic of clinging lymph-like to the Coalition’s strategic policy. There has been no sign that they would be prepared to move back from a “joint work plan” with the US.

- While we need to do so much more in building Australian knowledge of China, we also should be likewise expanding our understanding of the situation of the significant number of Chinese living outside the PRC and Taiwan throughout all of Southeast Asia. Controlling so much of the business in those countries, these communities (often complex in themselves) have sensitive relations with Beijing and constitute the main basis for China’s soft power successes in that region. The failure of the massive US intelligence machine (which similarly influenced Canberra) to comprehend the enormous reach of Chinese soft power in the South China Sea struggle was a clear case in point. We must do a lot more to understand those communities and their linkages to Beijing and each other.

- In the broader debate in Australia, people from these communities are usually lumped under the rubric “Chinese community”. Yet there are so many differences within that broad description that Australians should be conscious of and realising that the one size fits all approach is not appropriate.
- The vexed issue of dual nationals is one which needs closer consideration. This is not the first time we have had to address this issue. Classic examples are to be found in the experience of military service of young men in our Italian and Greek communities who were forced into national service enlistment in the countries of their parents if they stepped foot back there. I cannot recall all the details but I think it became accepted generally that if they went back as dual nationals into those countries, they became subject to that country’s rules. We probably need to work through that issue better so that PRC dual nationals revisiting China realise that they are subject to PRC law when there with little we could be expected to do to help.
- Australia must accept that in a community of the Chinese size (even if only PRC-born are concerned) that there will be a host of organisations of all shades as well as those who feel more obligation to Beijing than to Canberra. We must do what we can to foster their Australian ties – not force them into ghettos. Many foreign countries have long established and well-accepted programs to foster their dual nationals’ (even those with family ties) interest in their country of origin. Some are more political than others. The Republic of Korea funds an Australian branch of its National Unification Committee to counter any Democratic People’s Republic of Korea influence and keep the community “informed” of government policies. Australian politicians from both sides regularly attend their events without any public outcry. But the Israelis and some others do likewise.
- We have reached a silly point now where not one Chinese-Australian received an Australian Award in the latest list of hundreds. I have been monitoring these lists for years to see how representative they are of multicultural Australia (not very!). In recent years there has been a trickle of lower awards to Australians of Asian heritage with a slow rise for Indians. This year there are a few Chinese-Australians who gained awards for their (usually) professional services but none for community work which many Asian minority groups received! It is hard not to draw a conclusion that the Australian “system” (largely politicians and big business) were hesitant to encourage and back Chinese nominations – from our large community. Surely that must be fixed (and I have made some personal pleas to MPs on it!)
- From my 7 years as chair of UTS Insearch which has a joint venture campus (3,500 students impressively doing the UTS Bachelor of Business in English) with Shanghai University it was fundamental that we had to work with the Communist Party executives at the University (owned by the Shanghai Government). The City carried a great deal of influence in Beijing when we needed Ministry of Education approvals for course changes etc. The Party parallel structure within the University also needed to be involved. We simply could not have achieved the success (ranked several years as the best foreign university operation in China) without a sensible working relationship with them.

- The paper is absolutely correct in calling for better Australian assistance to the thousands of Chinese international students in Australia. We recognised that the hundreds of Chinese students here in Sydney studying pathway courses into UTS with Insearch needed far more than the usual university assistance to settle into the Australian environment. Their fees are not insignificant for their families and supporters in China.
- The scrutiny of the Chinese government, Party or private investment in our universities certainly needs to be close. Like many others I was not attracted to the Confucius Institute program because the scheme appeared too close to the Party. I was also cynical about the big dash for cash many universities became involved in as a means to meet their own depleted funding – more because of serious doubts about the origin of the money in the rich Chinese pockets than their alleged Party connections. This in turn could make them prey to determined political pressure from Beijing.
- As I have discussed recently with senior academics, foreign investment in Australia's universities has long been, and should continue to be, of considerable value. US government and private investment has been a feature: culminating in the US Studies Centre at Sydney University which reportedly receives some State Department funding but in the various scholarship programs and joint research funds etc. So too from the British and others. And Australia funds programs in foreign universities – especially through the Australian Studies programs. So why not let Australian universities consider Chinese funding with appropriate caveats?

Mack Williams is a former senior Australian diplomat. He served as Australia's Ambassador to the Philippines (1989-1994) and to the Republic of Korea (1994-1998).