

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Merriden Varrall

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Proposing a new China narrative is an innovative and constructive contribution to Australia's foreign policy. The world is changing, and looking realistically forward, especially in regards to our relationship with China, is critical for Australia.

Following are some thoughts and suggestions for the next draft that I hope will be of some use.

- Proposing a 'new China narrative' presumes there's something not working with the existing narrative, and missing from this piece is a clear explanation of what the problem is that it seeks to address. What is the narrative we have, and what's wrong with it?
- It would be useful to explain why 'engagement' is the best policy approach, as set out in the Narrative – at this moment, many stakeholders do not see engagement as the best option for relations with China, and without their support, any new policy narrative would lose legitimacy and influence.
- How values and interests underpin foreign policy is presented as neutral and non-contentious. Without overcomplicating, it would be useful to explain why values and interests do and should (presuming that's the case) provide the foundation for foreign policy, and how they interact in specific and complicated ways when it comes to our relationship with China.
- From an audience point of view, the Narrative's focus on six areas that resonate with everyday people works. However, there is a lot of rhetoric that could be cut down and tightened to make the Narrative more immediately relevant and compelling. More on the substance of the Narrative and less on the background.
- The six points of Australian interests are useful to start setting out what it is Australia stands for, rather than just referring to a commitment to the 'rules-based order' or 'Australian values' – but more specifics would be good. Can we say with clarity what we want the world to look like, and the region, and Australia? Until we know that, and can articulate it, it's hard to stand for it, or be clear about how China may impact it.

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