

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Michael Smith

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The independent observational standpoint afforded China Matters in its stewardship of this narrative in the national interest is a clear strength. So too is the openness of China Matters to the widest catchment of contributions to advance the new narrative in the guise of a national address by the Prime Minister. This inherently governs the viable degree of nuance and complexity in the narrative. I am mindful of this in the following observations, directed to Australia's throw-weight as a middle-level normative power in its evolving relationship with China.

First, as to the tone of the narrative in representing Australia's identity: it could be rendered more confident. This is important both within Australia, and beyond. This goes to the abrupt differentiation of 'values and national interests' early in the draft narrative. Perhaps, better put as '*national* values and interests'; and some further basic explanation of their nature and strong interrelationship, rather than operating in discrete spheres of national life.

The 'values' mentioned, and the catalogue of 'wants' are surely intertwined (e.g. we want to live in a free, open and prosperous society). The catalogue of interests as 'wants' is needy, and suggests an overall deficiency of what pertains now. The rules based liberal order may be under stress in certain areas, but much persists and functions well. Moreover, 'interests' are not just advanced and protected through our foreign policy, but the entire panoply of national civil and executive institutions, which desirably are to be engaged through the narrative. Foreign policy is inherently formulated on the basis of pressure from others, if not coercion. That is why we have foreign policy, surely.

Secondly, the importance of national confidence goes to how China and other nations in the region perceive us. Presumably, there is some official interest from China in both the open development of the narrative and the outcome (and maybe even some input). China on any reading of its rise to material strength and prosperity, and also its enhanced normative power and authority regionally and globally, projects confidence through its national sovereignty and identity. That is the same resolution that Australia ought to project in its relationship with China.

Respect engenders respect. This is especially relevant to enhancing Australia's leadership standing as a regional middle power in the vanguard of shaping political and legal international norms of appropriate behaviour.

The narrative should be wary in stating that we will call out any country whose actions we find unacceptable. Australia is not always beyond reproach from others' perspectives. A more nuanced (less high moral ground) phrasing is likely to serve our interests better.

In essence, the new China narrative for Australia ought to project, with realism, that Australia matters. It is a wonderful initiative.

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