

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Ric Smith

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The draft represents a very worthwhile effort to set out Australia's interests in the relationship with China and to describe a balanced approach to their management. This is an interesting and constructive approach and I am happy to support it. That said, I do want to offer a specific comment on the draft.

I don't agree that "people-to-people ties are the glue that binds our two countries together" (page 7). Others will differ, but in my view if our two countries are 'bound together' it is because of our respective interests – not our people. 'People-to-people' is part of the ballast we have to build in around interests. Allow me to elaborate.

First, international relationships are multifaceted, embracing in most cases a range of interests. As a general principle I don't like the idea of one facet being the 'glue'. I doubt the value of the term 'glue,' but if it is to be used it must surely apply to the totality of the interests.

Second, I don't think that the 'people-to-people' facet or aspect of the Australia-China relationship is all that strong. Yes, there is a large and influential Chinese community in Australia, but that's a separate matter to the 'people-to-people' aspect of the relationship – and quite complex, given for example that not all Chinese Australians have a positive view of the government in Beijing. And yes, tourist and student numbers are impressive, but they are aspects of the economic relationship and again not what is usually embraced under the heading 'people-to-people.'

It could even be argued that the 'people-to-people' aspects of the relationship complicate it at some points – e.g. when Chinese-Australians and Chinese visitors are portrayed as agents of the Communist Party, or Australians visiting China are harassed and gaoled by agencies of the Chinese government.

So, if you want to identify the most important aspect of the Australia-China relationship, it is surely the shared set of economic interests. I could wish that the 'people-to-people' relationship were stronger and would encourage its growth – but for the present, in my view, it's well short of being the 'glue' in the relationship, and in terms of importance, far short of our economic interests.

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