

## **A new China narrative for Australia**

### **Submission by Darren Lim**

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One of our strengths as a free and open society is that Australia can have serious and substantive policy debates in public, where all sides to an argument put forward their positions and engage. This does not just benefit Australia; it is a global public good. For citizens and policymakers in societies in which, for various reasons, an equally open and forthright debate is less possible, being able to observe our debate can help inform and frame similar policy challenges they face. This reason alone is sufficient to found my support for the “China narrative” project.

Nevertheless, I am sceptical of the value of a new “narrative” if it is to be intended as a functional guide to policy. In their policy brief arguing for a new narrative, FitzGerald and Jakobson write that “[t]he poor state of the [PRC] relationship is a result not so much of what Australia has done as what Australia has said and signalled”. The implied counterfactual is that with a “better” narrative, the Australian government would not have “mismanaged its reaction” to the PRC’s growing assertiveness. Proposing a new narrative therefore seems intended, at least in part, to influence policy; yet I remain unconvinced of the authors’ implied counterfactual.

Accordingly, I would like to know more about the intended mechanism that links a narrative to policy. The term “narrative” is not one with which I am familiar in foreign policy scholarship. FitzGerald and Jakobson say the new narrative will “provide the basis for developing Australia’s China policy and serve as a guide for politicians and public servants to explain the PRC to the public”. I note that at the launch event Jakobson sought to distinguish between a narrative and a policy, but if the document is to inform how leaders should talk publicly about the PRC, it inevitably engages directly with policy questions. Policies are required to balance trade-offs; a narrative ought similarly to wrestle with pros and cons. What is this narrative *not* saying? What element of the status quo does the narrative explicitly reject? Who or what is it arguing against?

**Suggestion 1: Explain how the narrative explicitly corrects for past mistakes and demonstrate how it would link to future policymaking.**

Australia of course already has such a document: the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (FPWP), which one might say contains both a narrative and a conceptual analytical framework for understanding our external challenges and formulating policy. Is the “poor state” of the PRC relationship because the government followed the (by implication, flawed) framework outlined in the FPWP? Or perhaps was it because that framework was not actually followed in the first place? Asked differently, should we understand the proposed narrative as advocacy for the

need for a White Paper on bilateral relations with the PRC, with the narrative intended to serve as a starting point? If not, to what extent is it intended to modify policy built upon the FPWP framework?

**Suggestion 2: Explain how the narrative should be read alongside the FPWP.**

Australian policy towards the PRC is messy and imperfect, as with all areas of policymaking in democratic societies. Perhaps lessons can be found in the experience of others; are there nation-states around the world that have gotten their PRC policy “right” in recent years? Germany might be one answer, Singapore might be another. If so, what features of each country’s policymaking processes contributed to this success? Do these nations have a better “narrative”, or is it something else? Can these features be replicated in Australia? Or might it be true that the structural differences between Australia and these two examples (in terms of strategic landscape re: Germany; and domestic political structure re: Singapore) mean that replicating such purported success is not feasible?

**Suggestion 3: Identify how narratives have successfully guided policy in other contexts.**

There are also potential costs associated with, for example, a hypothetical Prime Minister promulgating a new narrative in a declaratory statement. It might reduce policy flexibility if strategic circumstances change; it might cause a loss of “face” and provoke the PRC; it might trigger charges of hypocrisy (or containment) if the worldview implied by the narrative is not consistently followed in all of Australia’s external relations. These costs might be well be worth paying—but they should be identified and explicitly balanced against equally identifiable benefits.

These queries should not be taken as implying there is no merit to this process for policymaking (as I began, the broader merit for public debate is patent). The divisions within public discourses regarding the trade-offs in managing relations with the PRC also exist inside government. There are those who emphasise the benefits and believe the risks are manageable, and those who are far more concerned with the risks and do not mind sacrificing benefits as a means of risk-management. Part of the reason for this is different parts of the government specialise in different parts of the policy challenge. Think of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Each touches a different part of the elephant. Each is convinced by his own experience. Each is aware of others fumbling around at the periphery; but their conflicting reports are hardly compelling.

It is therefore useful to sketch “the entire elephant” from time-to-time so that each part of the system is aware of the whole—the entire nature of the policy challenge. Doing so can serve practical purposes, such as informing government of what it should be collecting facts about,

and what policy areas are receiving relatively too much attention and too little. In the debate and negotiations surrounding their drafting, narratives can also serve to highlight the differences in conceptual frameworks that different parts of the system utilise when formulating policy.

Perhaps the starkest policy divide in government on the PRC is between clusters of policymakers whose baseline framing is based upon economic theory, and those who adopt a frame based upon national security. These two camps see very different parts of the “elephant”, and have been mostly unable to engage with each other’s arguments directly. They speak past each other.

Foreign policy emerges from the interaction of these clusters, each embodying distinct interests and worldviews. A degree of contestation is positive, but only if the most robust elements of each perspective are allowed to contribute towards a unified whole. A major benefit of this narrative project may be to clarify fault lines and hopefully identify common ground—to contribute towards the construction of a unified framework, or at least an agreed set of baseline assumptions, on how to understand the trade-offs inherent in the relationship, and to order policy priorities. There needs to be greater mobility between “economics” and “security” policy clusters, and the PRC relationship is the most fertile frame around which to foster this capacity.

**Suggestion 4: Leverage the information and experience gained through drafting the narrative towards building an analytical framework, to accompany the narrative, regarding how trade-offs in the relationship ought to be conceptualised and prioritized.**

On a personal note, the narrative text offers a useful teaching tool. The document (or parts of it) could be provided to students to dissect, critique and respond with alternatives. Each student’s reaction will be a function of her underlying experiences, assumptions and biases, which can in turn be examined and contrasted. Similarly, the process of drafting the narrative may be ultimately prove as beneficial as the result. Through the leadership of organisations like China Matters, with the credibility and trust within the system to convene stakeholders and elicit their input, the cross-fertilisation necessary to build a more integrated framework is made possible.

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