



Rethinking China with Bill Birtles

In China Matters' monthly lecture series: 'Rethinking China', speakers with diverse expertise and background are asked to describe how they see the People's Republic of China, why they see it that way, and on that basis share their thoughts on what kind of China strategy Australia should pursue in the medium to long term. Our inaugural lecturer was the ABC's China correspondent Bill Birtles together with moderator John Keane, Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney.

Below are some of Bill's key observations.

"It was kinda hard to imagine back in those glory days, in 2010, or even 2015, just how bad things would get between Australia and China but sitting there watching it in Beijing, it kind of felt to me like there was no way it was going to continue on the path it was on."

"Australia will never feel comfortable about China's rivalry with Australia's main ally, or its authoritarian system, or its increasing military build-up. There are many differences, but it is naïve to ever think that they weren't going to become problems. Kind of like a stock market surge, there was always going to be a correction, and that's what we've seen from both sides for the past few years."

"I see the Chinese state for what it is. It's efficient, it's effective, it's authoritarian, it's ethno-nationalist, and it's determined to put its interest first. By contrast, I suppose you would describe the Australian state as not particularly efficient, somewhat effective, free and open, multicultural and at times a bit complacent at putting its own interest first"

"There is an us vs them mentality in China which I fear fuels the expectation that overseas Chinese will help contribute to the great rejuvenation of the motherland, that's the actual rhetoric. The Chinese government never clearly defines whether "overseas Chinese" includes Australian citizens of Chinese descent."

"The communist party leader Xi Jinping in recent years has elevated nationalism to almost a form of a quasi-state religion...I am concerned that the expectation for political loyalty for Chinese abroad, whether they like it or not, will likely rise."

"I feel it puts Chinese Australians or recent migrants between a rock and a hard place because the flip side, of course, is that bigots in Australia seize on Beijing's expectations of political loyalty to accuse



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Chinese-Australians of disloyalty, or to place extra obligations on them to condemn the communist state, obligations which non-Chinese Australians don't face."

"There has also been a fair bit of reporting out of Canberra in recent years that appears to take the word of Australia's security agencies, or government sources, or even US sources at face value...It's not that these stories shouldn't be done, they should if they have merit, but the sources pushing these stories, their motivations need to be questioned too."

"It is a real problem to have a foreign government creating a digital ecosystem to control the narrative of some Australians in Australia. China pioneered the decoupling of the internet within its borders, and through WeChat censorship, it is continuing to promote a restricted information world for some Australians here."