

Strengthening Our Bonds with China

Submission to the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper

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[This submission is an excerpt from pages 187—189]

Introduction:

Australia needs to rethink its relationship with China across the board. This means thinking big – thinking strategically and for the long term. It is an undertaking that requires the full engagement of Australian society: politicians, public servants, military officers, business, education, youth and community associations. What is needed now is a comprehensive, consistent strategy built on the three pillars of engagement: principles, prosperity and security.

Recommendations:

1. Australian governments and businesses should jointly support the establishment of a long-term, extensive exchange program for the next generation of Australian and Chinese rising stars. Australian participants should be senior state and federal officials, promising backbenchers and future CEOs, among others. China's participants should include vice-governors and provincial deputy party secretaries, deputy mayors of major Chinese cities and future business leaders.

Held twice a year, once in Australia and once in China, this intensive program would provide firsthand experience of both countries' political and economic landscapes and create professional networks and personal friendships. For Australians, it will mean interacting with men and women who in the next ten years will rise to paramount positions of power in China. It is in Australia's interests that at least one of China's top leaders in 2027 has an intimate knowledge of Australia.

2. Australia needs a national peak body with a mandate to advance the Australia–China relationship as it enters an unpredictable and challenging era. This organisation should serve as an honest broker and a reliable safety net, even when inevitable tensions put enormous pressure on the relationship. With people-to-people ties as its focus, its activities should include a national lecture series, workshops, retreats and educational programs in Australia and China. It should draw together the experience and knowledge of innumerable Australians and Chinese who have over the years created the remarkable dynamic between the two countries.

Such an organisation would be useful to Australia because it would offer a trusted but unofficial forum for visiting Chinese leaders to engage with Australian experts and the broader public. It could even assume responsibility for the Australia–China High-Level Dialogue and other fora to ensure frank discussions in an informal setting. Its funding should derive from both government and private sources, including corporations and foundations. Strong statutes and a mandate for autonomy should be put in place to keep this body independent of either government.

3. Asian literacy needs to be institutionalised. Learning about Asian cultures and societies should be made compulsory from Year 1 onward. This initiative is not merely about learning Asian languages – though this is a critical component. Rather, this big idea has as its aim that every Australian child and young adult, regardless of their talents and particular path, should gain a deeper knowledge of the cultures and societies of Asia – Australia’s home region. An Asian literacy course should also be compulsory for all university undergraduate students.

Within the Australian curriculum, Asian literacy ought to be embedded as a stand-alone subject within the Humanities and Social Sciences learning area. This will prepare Australians for a future in which Asia, and China in particular, will be of overwhelming significance. Another outcome of this ongoing Asia education would be to counter potential xenophobia and racism grounded in ignorance.

This big idea does not focus specifically on China. But a richer understanding of Asian cultures and societies will inescapably generate a deeper appreciation among Australians of China's historically prominent influence as well as its role and ambitions in the region today.