

# UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2021

## Australian views on the Australia-China relationship

### *Executive summary*

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# Executive summary

The Australia-China political relationship has been enduring significant difficulties since 2017, with the last year a particularly turbulent period. Chinese economic coercion has started to bite and Canberra's pushback against Beijing has reached a new intensity. In both Canberra and Washington there now appears to be a solid consensus across party lines on the need to respond to China's rise more forcefully. Against that backdrop, this poll by the Australia-China Relations Institute and the Centre for Business Intelligence & Data Analytics at the University of Technology Sydney takes the Australian public's pulse on current aspects of, and recent events in, the Australia-China relationship with a view to better understanding this immediate past and some of the trends which may shape its future.

A complicated picture emerges. Australians are clearly still trying to make sense of this period of tumult and understand a constantly evolving strategic situation. While Australians are concerned about both the downward spiral in relations and China's new assertiveness, they are not yet willing to give up on the relationship entirely, recognising some of its benefits. Only future polls will reveal whether these results precede a tipping point in one clear direction or whether this ambiguity can persist despite the current unprecedented strain.

## 1. Overall views on the Australia-China relationship

**Support for building stronger connections and ties, a strong relationship:** Approximately six in 10 Australians (61 percent) believe

that Australia should continue to try to build strong connections and ties, and have a strong relationship with China.

**Concerns:** Approximately three-quarters of Australians (74 percent) express concerns about Australia's relationship with China.

**Benefits:** About six in 10 Australians (62 percent) also say they see the benefits of Australia's relationship with China.

**Mistrust of the Chinese government:** The majority of Australians (76 percent) express mistrust of the Chinese government.

**The Australian government's management of China relations:** A minority of Australians (32 percent) say that the Australian government is managing Australia's relationship with China well.

**A harder Australian government line on China:** Approximately six in 10 Australians (63 percent) believe that the Australian government should take a harder line with respect to its policies dealing with China.

**Changing views:** Australians' views on China have generally become more pessimistic over the last year, with the majority of Australians (62 percent) saying that their view 'has become more negative following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic'.

**Responsibility for improving the Australia-China relationship:** A clear majority of Australians (80 percent) agree that 'The responsibility for improving the relationship between Australia and China lies with both countries'. Pressed on an either-or proposition, more Australians agree that the responsibility lies with China (48 percent) rather than Australia (30 percent).

**Future outlook:** Australians are not optimistic about the short to medium term prospects for improvement in relations between Australia and China, with just over one-quarter of Australians (27 percent) saying that 'The Australia-China relationship will improve in the next three years'.

## 2. Political communication

**A vocal stance:** A minority of Australians (28 percent) say that 'The Australian government should not publicly call out actions by the Chinese government that Australia disagrees with'.

**Call for an international COVID-19 investigation:** About seven in 10 Australians (72 percent) agreed that 'The Australian government was right to publicly call for an international investigation into the origins of COVID-19'.

## 3. The United States

**Balancing act:** Most Australians believe that Australia can maintain good relations with both its key security partner and its largest trading partner simultaneously, with approximately six in 10 Australians (63 percent) saying that 'Australia can enjoy a good relationship with both China and the United States at the same time'.

**Influence in the region:** The majority of Australians (65 percent) believe that 'China has more influence than the United States in Australia's regional neighbourhood'.

## 4. Trade and investment

**The economic relationship overall:** A clear majority of Australians (80 percent) say that 'Australia is too economically

reliant on China'. About six in 10 Australians (63 percent) note that 'Without close engagement with China, Australia would not be as prosperous as it currently is'. With respect to how to characterise the Australia-China economic relationship overall, Australians are fairly divided. Just over half of Australians (53 percent) say that 'Australia's economic relationship with China is more of an economic risk than an economic opportunity'. Australians are divided, too, about how the Australian government should approach the economic relationship, with almost half (49 percent) saying that 'The Australian government needs to be supportive of having closer economic ties with China'.

**Trade case study – Tourism:** Approximately three-quarters of Australians (74 percent) believe that 'Tourists from China provide a major economic benefit to Australia'. About six in 10 Australians (63 percent) believe 'Australia should continue towards making Australia an attractive destination for Chinese tourists'.

**Trade case study – Education:** Just over three-quarters of Australians (76 percent) say that 'International students from China provide a major economic benefit to Australia.' But most Australians (81 percent) also say that 'Australian universities are too financially reliant on international students from China'.

**Foreign investment:** While half of Australians (50 percent) agree that 'Foreign investment from China has created job opportunities in Australia', general support for foreign investment from China is lacklustre with approximately three in 10 Australians (29 percent) saying that 'Foreign investment from

China should be supported by Australians'. Just over half of Australians (51 percent) also believe that 'Foreign investment from China is more detrimental than beneficial to Australia'.

**Investment case study – Agriculture:** Australians express concerns about Chinese investment into Australian agricultural assets. Sixty-five percent of Australians say that Chinese ownership of agricultural assets (e.g., land, food processing facilities) in Australia is 'more concerning than ownership by companies from other countries', and a majority of Australians (70 percent) also believe that it 'presents a threat to Australia's food security'. A minority (29 percent) say that 'Chinese ownership of agricultural assets is more beneficial than detrimental to Australia's interests'.

**Investment case study – Residential real estate:** Australians also express concerns about Chinese investment into Australian residential real estate. About three in 10 Australians (33 percent) say that 'Chinese investment in Australian residential real estate brings a lot of benefits for Australians (e.g., construction, new dwellings, jobs)'. A clear majority of Australians (82 percent) say that 'Foreign buyers from China drive up Australian housing prices'. Approximately seven in 10 Australians (69 percent) say 'Chinese investors in Australian real estate have made it difficult for first home buyers in Australia to enter the market' and that 'Chinese investors have negatively affected the rental market for residential real estate in Australia' (69 percent). The majority of Australians (78 percent) believe 'Australia should restrict the amount of investment in residential real estate that is

permitted from Chinese investors'.

**Business ties:** Australians are generally supportive of business ties between Australia and China continuing to be forged. About six in 10 Australians (61 percent) say 'Australian companies should continue to pursue business opportunities with China'. But Australians also express reservations, stemming from the Chinese government's domestic policies, about business ties, saying Australia should not do business with China because of its 'record on human rights' (43 percent); 'domestic censorship of media, internet and other forms of communication' (42 percent); and 'record on environmental practices' (32 percent).

## 5. Military and security

**Security and stability:** Sixty-seven percent of Australians say 'China is a security threat to Australia'. At the same time, just over half of Australians (52 percent) also contend that 'Australia's relationship with China contributes to regional stability and security'.

**Conflict over Taiwan:** Just over half of Australians (53 percent) say that 'In the event of conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan, Australia should remain neutral', with 29 percent undecided and 18 percent disagreeing. Pressed on whether Australia should lend military support to the United States in the event of conflict between the US and China over Taiwan, 45 percent of Australians agree with the statement, with 43 percent undecided and 13 percent disagreeing.

**Cybersecurity:** Half of Australians (50 percent) believe 'Australia should ban Chinese-owned apps such as TikTok and WeChat'.

Older Australians aged 55+ (57 percent) are more likely to agree and younger Australians aged 18-34 (36 percent) are less likely to agree.

**The Belt and Road Initiative:** Just over half of Australians (53 percent) believe that 'The Australian government is right not to sign up to/participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative'.

## 6. Society

**The Australian-Chinese community:** Approximately six in 10 Australians (63 percent) say that 'Political tensions in the Australia-China relationship are negatively impacting Australians of Chinese origin'. About four in 10 Australians (39 percent) say they believe that 'Australians of Chinese origin can be mobilised by the Chinese government to undermine Australia's interests and social cohesion'. Thirty percent of Australians disagree with this statement, with 31 percent undecided.

**Interference and influence:** About seven in 10 Australians (72 percent) believe that 'Foreign interference in Australia stemming from China is a major problem'. This is compared with about four in 10 (37 percent) who believe that 'Foreign interference in Australia stemming from the United States is a major problem'; and about five in 10 (47 percent) who believe that 'Foreign interference in Australia stemming from Russia is a major problem'. Almost half of Australians (46 percent) say 'Australian values and traditions are being undermined by Chinese government influence in Australia'. Thirty-five percent of Australians believe that 'The Australian government is successfully responding to Chinese government interference in Australia'.

**Arbitrary detention:** About seven in 10 Australians (72 percent) say that 'The risk of arbitrary detention is a concern when considering travel to China'. Approximately seven in 10 Australians (68 percent) also believe that 'China is willing to detain/arrest Australian citizens without any legal basis to punish Australia over political disagreements'.

**International students:** While the majority of Australians (76 percent) acknowledge the economic benefits of Chinese international students studying in Australia, about six in 10 Australians (58 percent) also say that these students 'help strengthen the people-to-people links between the two countries'. A minority (40 percent) express concern that students 'are potentially reducing the quality of education at Australian universities' although an effectively equal number (41 percent) disagree with this statement. Four in 10 Australians (42 percent) are concerned that 'International students from China mean there are less places for domestic students to study in their choice of Australian university'.

## 7. University and research

**Freedom of academic speech:** Nearly half of Australians (48 percent) say that 'Australian university ties with China compromise Australian freedom of speech'.

**Research collaborations:** Australians are not quite convinced (48 percent) that 'Research collaborations between academics from Australia and China makes Australia more competitive internationally'. Pressed on scientific research

collaborations in particular, approximately seven in 10 Australians (68 percent) say 'It is beneficial for Australian scientists to have research connections to China'.

## 8. Global and regional cooperation

The majority of Australians see the benefits of Australia working cooperatively with China to tackle global and regional issues. Nearly three-quarters of Australians (74 percent) believe that 'It is beneficial for Australia to work with China on global issues, such as climate change and global health' and an almost equivalent number (72 percent) that 'It is beneficial for Australia to work with China on regional issues, such as ending malaria in the Pacific'.

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