

How Chinese citizens see the world — and Australia

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Speaking at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, [Prime Minister Anthony Albanese struck a balanced note](#) in his articulation of who we are in the world. He reiterated his view of Australia as a middle power and former British colony, one now trying to facilitate dialogue among ASEAN and Pacific nations in an effort to ‘bring together nations in a more coherent way’.

While wishing to improve relations with China, Albanese nevertheless signalled a strategic commitment to the US. [As one commentator observed](#), Australia has ‘well and truly picked its side in the strategic competition between the US and China’.

Notwithstanding official aspiration, public sentiment appears more complicated. A 2022 [Lowy Institute poll](#), for instance, found that while most Australians distrust Russia and see China as a threat, they had ‘warmer’ feelings about New Zealand, Canada, the UK, Japan, France, Ukraine and Tonga than about the US.

Understandably, governments of nations on the ‘other’ side — usually imagined as our enemies — also seek to keep in touch with public sentiment. In countries such as China, which is ruled by a single party, the government’s political legitimacy rests on the support of its citizens precisely because they do *not* get to vote. Polls about public sentiment are conducted regularly in China, although data from such polls are mostly for ‘internal reference’ not public consumption.

That is why a study of Chinese citizens’ global perceptions conducted by [Professor Reza Hasmath](#) and his team at the University of Alberta’s [China Institute](#) in Canada is important. Not only does it yield interesting insights about how ordinary Chinese citizens see the world, including Australia, but it also gives us a sense of how ‘we’ are seen by the ‘other’ — a valuable exercise for anyone not wanting to be interested merely in their own worldview.

Influential global powers

According to the survey report, ‘[How China Sees the World in 2023](#)’, Chinese citizens see the US, Russia and the European Union (in descending order) as the most influential global powers. In contrast to Albanese’s vision of Australia’s middle-power role, Chinese citizens see Australia, alongside Japan and India, as the least influential globally among the 10 jurisdictions canvassed in the survey, and as having the least long-term importance to China.

Chinese and Australian publics see the US as the biggest global power. But for Chinese respondents, Russia is the most trusted and important nation, and the US and Japan are the least trustworthy. Australia (along with Canada and most other jurisdictions) is somewhere in the middle, although respondents reported knowing

much more about the US, Russia and Japan than about Australia, so their ‘middling’ level of trust in us might be pushed lower or higher if they felt they knew more about our nation.

The survey was conducted in January, on the heels of China’s relationship with Australia having deteriorated under the Coalition government. It was also after Russia had invaded Ukraine. One of the researchers, [Dr Ye Xue](#), had until a month ago been an Australian resident and is still a [scholar](#) of Australia-China relationships. He pointed out that although the Chinese public is aware of anti-China rhetoric in Australia, no country could surpass the US and Japan as China’s imaginary enemies.

Unlike those Australians who feel ‘warm’ about Japan and regard it as an important strategic ally, Chinese citizens view Japan as least trustworthy, and most likely to engage in military conflict with China in the next decade. Xue believes this to be the consequence of China’s long-standing nationalist education featuring Japan’s historical atrocities against the Chinese during World War II.

While Australia — the government and public — sees China as the nation’s biggest threat, and believes China may invade Australia at some stage in the near future, Chinese respondents believe China is most unlikely to engage in military conflict with Australia, Russia, the UK, France, Germany, the EU or Canada.

Economy, research and tourism

In economic terms, Russia was ranked as China’s most preferred business partner, whereas Japan — one of China’s most important trading partners — was ranked lowest. Australia and Canada were also middling on this question, although respondents ranked them higher than the US.

For technological and research collaboration, Russia again came out on top; India and Japan are at the bottom, with Australia and Canada in between. Surprisingly, although the new cold war being fought on technological fronts is mainly between the US and China, Chinese citizens still see the US and the UK as preferable partners to Australia and Canada.

The most popular destination as a place for travel, work or migration was Russia, while the most favoured destination for studying abroad was the US. Interestingly, while Australia and Canada were ranked much lower than the US, the UK, France, Germany and Russia as tertiary study destinations, Chinese students comprise the highest percentage of international university enrolments in both these nations.

In terms of places to visit, France ranks the highest, followed by Russia, Japan and the UK, and then Australia. This means Chinese citizens see Australia as a more favourable tourist destination than (in descending order) Germany, Canada, the EU, the US and India. Thus while they see Japan as the least trustworthy and hostile nation in military terms — on par with the US — they would nevertheless prefer to visit Japan than any nation other than France or Russia.

The Chinese citizens who participated in the survey revealed a clear capacity to separate their geopolitical perceptions from their personal preferences — or perhaps it was deep ambivalence. For instance, although Australia, along with Canada, is perceived to be of least importance and influence to China, respondents ranked Australia and Canada to be their preferred destinations for migration. Similarly, despite China’s worsening relationships with the US and the UK, respondents still nominated these two countries as their preferred places to study abroad.

Engaging China

Despite obvious differences — Australia’s biggest trading partner being China and Canada’s largest trading partner being the US — the two countries are roughly equal in the imagination of the Chinese survey respondents, both geopolitically, and as places of attraction. Hasmath believes this is an important point for both Australia and Canada:

While Canada/Australia and China have distinctively different governance systems that have, in part, led to underlying diplomatic tensions in various areas, the Chinese citizenry does not perceive cultural and value differences as a significant barrier to collaboration. This is significant. It suggests that there

can be common ground at an ideational level, which, if appropriately leveraged, could facilitate greater consensus regarding common global policy goals with China and Canada/Australia.

Hasmath acknowledges that the issues presented in the survey are highly politicised in Canada, and full engagement with China could be difficult given the current geopolitical climate, but he believes this makes the study all the more important.

At the top echelons of Canadian bureaucracy, there is an understanding that the survey evidence suggests there is much room to engage with China. In fact, decoupling from China is counter to Canadian interests, and at a basic level reduces our ability to meaningfully engage/influence China on core common issues of interest.

Despite Chinese and Australian citizens' diametrically different views on some issues, the take-home message for Australia's top echelons may well be similar.

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