

Australia-China Relations
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UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2023

The Australia-China
relationship: What do
Australians think?

Executive summary

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July 2023

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Now in its third year, the *UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2023* 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 prominent aspects of, and recent events pertinent to, the Australia-China relationship. Through so doing it hopes to build a better understanding of the relationship's immediate past as well as the trends which may shape its future.

It examines how views have changed over the years since the inaugural 2021 poll. It also tracks opinions in relation to five demographic areas: age groups, state/territory of residence, education, geographical location (urban or rural) and which political party the respondent nominated as best placed to handle Australia's China policy.

This year's results reflect the view that the Australia-China relationship has made progress towards stabilisation, but aspirations for the future of the relationship continue to lie alongside apprehension and anxiety.

Four key themes appear to emerge from this year's results.

The pragmatic thread in Australia-China relations endures but it continues to find itself under strain.

The fundamental desire for a strong relationship with China remains despite persistently high levels of mistrust in Australia towards the Chinese government, ongoing and acute fears that Beijing poses a security threat to Australia, and majority support, although decreasing over the years, for a tougher government line towards the PRC. Moreover, Australians have expressed a clear preference for strengthening the bilateral relationship and continue to identify its benefits, particularly in tourism and higher education. There is a certain optimism, too, that the relationship will continue to improve, with responsibility for improvement lying with both nations, although many still believe the onus to make that happen remains with China.

The Albanese Labor government's policy of 'stabilising' the relationship with Beijing appears to be aligned with public sentiments.

The Australian Labor Party is gaining domestic political advantage from being seen as the better party to manage the relationship, and statecraft is perceived as preferable to megaphone diplomacy in terms of how the relationship is conducted in public. At the same time, there is no real

groundswell of support for much movement in the relationship beyond stabilisation. The poll results revealed only lukewarm support for China's membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), continued encouragement for Australian businesses and companies to diversify their trade, ongoing deep suspicion of Chinese foreign investment, and a belief that the Chinese company Landbridge should be compelled to sell the Port of Darwin back to the government.

Australians continue to approach the regional environment with a mixture of apprehension and ambivalence.

Many see China as a threat, feel anxious about its intentions and military build-up, especially in the South China Sea, and believe war is possible within three years. At the same time, half of those polled believe a stable Australia-China relationship is a net positive for achieving what Foreign Minister Penny Wong has called a 'regional strategic equilibrium'. The poll results also suggest Australians are still thinking about who carries the most influence in the region. Australians do worry, however, that the choice they have long wished to avert – that between its largest trading partner and its closest ally – may well be coming. Most believe that it will be Beijing that forces Australia's hand, but an increasing proportion believe it will be Washington. Just over half of the respondents said that if America is engaged in a war with China over Taiwan, Australia will be there. But 49 percent advocate neutrality. It suggests that an Australian government could not count on blanket popular support in the event of making the decision to join a US-led war with China over Taiwan. And Australians are still thinking about the decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) security partnership, with opinions divided as to whether the plan will help keep Australia secure from military threat from China – 44 percent agree and 33 percent disagree.

The residual fears and concerns about China continue to permeate public opinion.

Such concerns took deeper root in the Australian psyche at the height of the downturn in bilateral relations from 2017-2022. These are clearly reflected in the poll findings which show ongoing reservations about Australian business ties with China – concerns that many respondents linked to China's human rights

record. There is anxiety, too, that the Australia-Chinese community could be mobilised to serve Beijing's ends; that foreign interference remains a live issue. Many Australians believe that the Australian government should sanction those Chinese officials and entities involved in human rights abuses; that Chinese social media platforms such as TikTok and WeChat should be banned; and that Chinese ownership of Australian agricultural assets and residential real estate remain problematic. Some of those polled still judge Australia to be too economically reliant on China. However, most continue to believe that the relationship offers more economic opportunities than risks.

1. Overall views on the Australia-China relationship

Support for building stronger connections and ties, a strong relationship: 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. This represents a continuation of sentiment from 2022 (60 percent) and 2021 (61 percent).

Concerns: Concerns about the relationship still remain high, with sixty-seven percent of Australians expressing concerns about Australia's relationship with China. However, this sentiment reflects a six-point decrease from 2022 (73 percent) and a seven-point decrease from 2021 (74 percent).

Benefits: The number of Australians who also see the benefits of Australia's relationship with China is at a three-year poll high (63 percent). This is a five-point increase from 2022 (58 percent) and slightly higher than the sentiment expressed in 2021 (62 percent).

Mistrust of the Chinese government: The majority of Australians (70 percent) express mistrust of the Chinese government. This sentiment, while remaining high, has slowly declined over the past three years, down three points from 2022 (73 percent) and six points from 2021 (76 percent).

The Australian government's management of China relations: There has been a small uptick in Australians' perceptions of the Australian

government's performance with respect to China relations. About two-fifths of Australians (39 percent) say that the Australian government is managing Australia's relationship with China well, a five-point increase from 2022 (34 percent).

A harder Australian government line on China:

Fifty-five percent of Australians support the Australian government adopting a harder line in its dealings with China, a steady decrease from 2022 (58 percent) and 2021 (63 percent).

Responsibility for improving the Australia-China relationship:

A clear majority of Australians (78 percent) agree that 'The responsibility for improving the relationship between Australia and China lies with both countries', a continuation of views expressed in 2022 (78 percent) and 2021 (80 percent).

Of the two, more Australians believe that the responsibility lies with China (46 percent) rather than Australia (31 percent).

Future outlook: While Australians' views about the short to medium term prospects for improvement in relations between Australia and China remain largely pessimistic, this year a slightly higher percentage of Australians (32 percent) say they believe bilateral relations 'will improve in the next three years', a four-point increase from 2022 (28 percent) and five-point increase from 2021 (27 percent).

2. Politics and political communication

Political party best placed to handle Australia's China policy:

The near-majority of respondents nominated the Australian Labor Party (49 percent) as the political party best placed to handle Australia's China policy, a 14-point increase from 2022 (35 percent).

Twenty-nine percent of Australians say the Liberal/National coalition are best placed to handle Australia's China policy, a seven-point decrease from 2022 (36 percent).

Australia's China policy – Impact on voting behaviour:

Just over a quarter of Australians (27 percent) say that the Morrison-led government's management of China policy had an impact on their

vote in the 2022 federal election. The majority of Australians (56 percent) say that the issue did not have an impact.

A vocal stance? About six in 10 Australians (59 percent) say that ‘The Australian government’s disputes with the Chinese government are better communicated through diplomatic channels rather than public statements’, a four-point decrease from 2022 (63 percent).

3. Military and security

China as a security threat: Nearly three-quarters of Australians (72 percent) say that ‘China is a security threat to Australia’, a general continuation of views from 2022 (73 percent), which increased from 67 percent in 2021.

The possibility of military conflict with China within three years: Just over half of Australians (51 percent) say that ‘Military conflict with China within three years is a serious possibility’. Twenty-four percent disagree and 25 percent express neutrality.

Australians who nominate the Liberal/National coalition (71 percent) as best placed to handle Australia’s China policy are significantly more likely to agree with this statement.

Support for an increase in Australia’s defence spending: Sixty-seven percent of Australians say that ‘The Australian government is right to increase defence spending, to balance, among other considerations, China’s growing military might’. This represents a three-point decrease from 2022 (70 percent).

Older Australians aged 55+ (84 percent) and Australians who nominate the Liberal/National coalition (87 percent) as best placed to handle Australia’s China policy are significantly more likely to agree, while younger Australians aged 18-34 (45 percent) are significantly less likely to agree.

However, when asked whether the Australian government is right to increase defence spending ‘even if it means budget cuts in other areas’, support dropped 17 points, with half of Australians (50 percent) agreeing.

Acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS: Just over four in 10 Australians (44 percent) say that ‘The Australian government’s plan

to acquire nuclear submarines under the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership will help keep Australia secure from a military threat from China.’ Thirty-three percent disagree and 23 percent express neutrality.

Forming trade and security blocs that exclude China: Four in 10 Australians (40 percent) say that ‘Australia should form trade and security blocs with other countries that deliberately exclude China’, a slight decrease from 2022 (41 percent) and 2021 (43 percent).

Regional stability and security: Just over half of Australians (51 percent) say that ‘Australia’s relationship with China contributes to regional stability and security’, a general continuation of views in 2022 (50 percent) and 2021 (52 percent).

Conflict over Taiwan: Australians remain fairly evenly split since last year between agreeing and disagreeing with the statement ‘If China launches a military attack on Taiwan, Australia should send troops to go to Taiwan’s defence.’ Thirty-seven percent of Australians agree, a two-point decrease from 2022 (39 percent). Twenty-eight percent express neutrality and 36 percent disagree, a two-point increase from 2022 (34 percent).

When American involvement was added to the scenario, respondents were more inclined to agree. Just over half of Australians (52 percent) say that ‘In the event of a military conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan, Australia should lend military support to the United States’ a four-point decrease from 2022 (56 percent) but still up from the low of 2021 (45 percent). Forty-nine percent of Australians say that in this scenario ‘Australia should remain neutral’.

Northern Territory residents (85 percent) are significantly more likely to support Australian neutrality in the event of conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan.

Country-wide TikTok and WeChat ban: The majority of Australians (61 percent) now say ‘Australia should ban Chinese-owned apps such as TikTok and WeChat’, up 14 points from 2022 (47 percent).

Older Australians aged 55+ (75 percent) are significantly more likely to agree. Younger Australians aged 18-34 (44 percent) are significantly less likely to agree.

Ban on TikTok on government devices: About three-quarters (76 percent) of Australians are supportive of the Australian government's recent moves to ban TikTok on devices used by Australian government employees.

Removal of Chinese-made surveillance equipment from Australian government buildings: The overwhelming majority of Australians (79 percent) support the Australian government's decision to remove Chinese-made surveillance equipment from Australian government buildings.

The Belt and Road Initiative: Just over half of Australians (54 percent) say that 'The Australian government is right not to sign up to/participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative', a three-point decrease from 2022 (57 percent) and a rough return to 2021 levels of agreement (53 percent).

The South China Sea: Australians' threat assessment of China's artificial island-building in the South China Sea is steadily increasing, with 70 percent saying it is a threat to Australia's security, up six points from 2022 (64 percent) and up 11 points from 2021 (59 percent).

4. The United States

Balancing act: About six in ten Australians (61 percent) say that 'Australia can enjoy a good relationship with both China and the United States at the same time'. Australians who nominate the Australian Labor Party (71 percent) as best placed to handle Australia's China policy are significantly more likely to agree. About a third of Australians (34 percent) say that 'Australia's relationship with China weakens our alliance with the United States.'

However, the belief is growing among Australians that either the United States or China will eventually force Australia to choose between them. Forty-seven percent say the United States will force that choice, a five-point increase from 2022 (42 percent) and an eight-point increase from 2021 (39 percent). Fifty percent say such a choice will be forced by China, a four-point increase from views expressed in 2022 (46 percent) and a return to levels of agreement in 2021 (51 percent).

Influence in the region: Over the last three years, Australians have become progressively less convinced that 'China has more influence than the

United States in Australia's regional neighbourhood'. Just over half of Australians (56 percent) agreed with the statement this year, a five-point decrease from 2022 (61 percent) and a nine-point decrease from 2021 (65 percent).

5. Trade and investment

The economic relationship overall: About seven in 10 Australians (72 percent) say that 'Australia is too economically reliant on China', reflecting a steady decrease from 2022 (74 percent) and 2021 (80 percent). In parallel, there has also been a steady decrease in agreement with the statement that the Australia-China economic relationship is 'more of an economic risk than an economic opportunity', with 47 percent of Australians in agreement this year, down four points from 2022 (51 percent) and down six points from 2021 (53 percent).

Australians are also slightly more confident (44 percent) that 'The Australian government has been successful in efforts to diversify trade, reducing Australia's economic exposure to China', up from 42 percent in 2022.

There has been also been a steady decrease over the years in agreement with the statement that 'Without close economic engagement with China, Australia would not be as prosperous as it currently is'. Fifty-seven percent of Australians agree, down three points from 2022 (60 percent) and down six points from 2021 (63 percent). Australian Capital Territory residents (73 percent) are significantly more likely to agree that Australia's prosperity is closely linked with economic engagement with China compared with residents in other states and territories.

About six in 10 Australians (63 percent) note that 'Trade with China has created job opportunities in Australia'. However, Australians are less likely (47 percent) to say that 'The Australian government needs to be supportive of having closer economic ties with China' compared with 2022 (51 percent).

China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA): Just over half of Australians (55 percent) believe that ChAFTA has been 'beneficial for Australia'. Australians who nominate the Australian Labor Party (63 percent) as best placed to handle Australia's China policy are significantly more likely to agree.

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP): Australians remain lukewarm about supporting China's bid to join the agreement, with just over a third of Australians (35 percent) agreeing that 'The Australian government should support China's bid to join' the CPTPP, a four-point increase from 2022 (31 percent). Australians still express stronger support for Taiwan's bid, with about six in 10 Australians (62 percent) saying 'The Australian government should support Taiwan's bid to join' the CPTPP, although this represents a four-point decrease from 2022 (66 percent).

Australians who nominate the Liberal/National coalition (77 percent) as best placed to handle Australia's China policy are significantly more likely to support Taiwan's CPTPP bid.

Trade case study – Tourism: Against the backdrop of world borders opening up again following the COVID-19 pandemic, just over seven in 10 Australians (72 percent) say 'Tourists from China provide a major economic benefit to Australia', a general continuation of views from 2022 (70 percent) and 2021 (74 percent).

Just over six in 10 Australians (62 percent) say that 'Australia should continue to work towards making Australia an attractive destination for Chinese tourists', a continuation of views from 2022 (62 percent) and 2021 (63 percent). Australian Capital Territory residents (79 percent) are significantly more likely to agree with this statement.

About half of Australians (51 percent) say that 'Encouraging tourism from China needs to be a post-COVID-19 priority for Australia'.

Trade case study – Education: Sixty-nine percent of Australians say that 'International students from China provide a major economic benefit to Australia'. At the same time, more than three-quarters of Australians (77 percent) believe that 'Australian universities are too financially reliant on international students from China'.

Forty-five percent of Australians say that 'Encouraging international students from China to return to study in Australia needs to be a post-COVID-19 priority for Australia'.

Foreign investment: About half of Australians (49 percent) say that 'Foreign investment from China has created job opportunities in Australia',

down four points from 2022 (53 percent). However, general support for foreign investment from China remains fairly low, with just over half of Australians (51 percent) saying that 'Foreign investment from China is more detrimental than beneficial to Australia'. Western Australia residents (33 percent) are significantly less likely to agree with the latter statement compared with residents in other states and territories.

Investment case study – Port of Darwin:

Australians are increasingly concerned about the ownership of the Port of Darwin. About two-thirds of Australians (64 percent) say that 'The Australian government should force Landbridge, the Chinese company that bought the 99-year lease to the Port of Darwin in 2015, to sell the port back to the government', a four-point increase from 2022 (60 percent).

Investment case study – Critical minerals: When presented with the broad statement, 'The Australian government should limit foreign investment from other countries (e.g., US, UK, Canada, Japan, South Korea, India, China) in Australia's critical minerals industry', 58 percent of Australians expressed agreement. However, when the statement was narrowed to 'The Australian government should limit foreign investment from China in Australia's critical minerals industry', nearly three-quarters of Australians (73 percent) expressed agreement.

Investment case study – Agriculture: The 2023 survey saw a repeat of the fairly high levels of concern about Chinese ownership of agricultural assets expressed in 2022 and 2021.

Only thirty-two percent of Australians say that 'Chinese investment in agricultural assets (e.g., land, food processing facilities) in Australia is more beneficial than detrimental to Australia's interests'. On the other hand, two-thirds of Australians (66 percent) believe that 'Chinese ownership of agricultural assets (e.g., land, food processing facilities) in Australia is more concerning than ownership by companies from other countries'. Queensland residents (77 percent) are significantly more likely to agree with the latter statement.

Moreover, nearly seven in 10 Australians (68 percent) say that 'Chinese ownership of agricultural assets (e.g., land, food processing facilities) in Australia presents a threat to Australia's food security'.

Investment case study – Residential real estate:

Australians also continue to express strong concerns about Chinese investment in Australian residential real estate.

Only 29 percent of Australians say that ‘Chinese investment in Australian residential real estate brings a lot of benefits for Australians (e.g., construction, new dwellings, jobs)’, down four points from 2022 (33 percent) and 2021 (33 percent).

Less Australians (73 percent) say that ‘Foreign buyers from China drive up Australian housing prices’ compared with 2022 (79 percent) and 2021 (82 percent). However, the belief that ‘Australia should restrict the amount of investment in residential real estate that is permitted from Chinese investors’ remains steady, with nearly eight in 10 Australians (78 percent) agreeing, continuing on from 2022 (80 percent) and 2021 (78 percent).

Nearly seven in 10 Australians (68 percent) say that ‘Chinese investors have negatively affected the rental market for residential real estate in Australia’. New South Wales residents (84 percent) are significantly more likely to agree with this statement compared with residents in other states and territories.

Business ties: Australians remain generally supportive of maintaining business ties with China. Just over six in 10 Australians (63 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, although some of these reservations have decreased slightly this year. Australians say that Australia should not do business with China because of its ‘record on human rights’ (43 percent, down six points from 49 percent in 2022); ‘domestic censorship of media, internet and other forms of communication’ (42 percent, the same level as in 2022 and 2021); and ‘record on environmental practices’ (32 percent, down four points from 36 percent in 2022).

6. Society

The Australian-Chinese community: Fifty-six percent of Australians say that ‘Political tensions in the Australia-China relationship are negatively impacting Australians of Chinese origin’, a steady decrease from 2022 (59 percent) and 2021 (63

percent).

Forty-three percent of Australians say that ‘Australians of Chinese origin can be mobilised by the Chinese government to undermine Australia’s interests and social cohesion’, a slight increase from 2022 (42 percent) and 2021 (39 percent). Australians who nominate the Liberal/National coalition (56 percent) as best placed to handle Australia’s China policy are significantly more likely to agree with this statement.

Interference and influence: Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of Australians say that ‘Foreign interference in Australia stemming from China is more concerning than foreign interference from other countries’, down three points from 2022 (67 percent).

Sixty-four percent of Australians also say that ‘Foreign interference in Australia stemming from China is a major problem’, down five points from 2022 (69 percent), but still higher than concerns about foreign interference stemming from Russia (62 percent) and the United States (43 percent), which were used as country comparisons.

Support for sanctions legislation: Sixty-eight percent of Australians say that ‘Australia should place sanctions, such as travel and financial bans, on Chinese officials and entities involved in human rights violations’, up three points from 2022 (65 percent).

Arbitrary detention: More Australians (72 percent) now believe that ‘The risk of arbitrary detention is a concern when considering travel to China’, up six points from 2022 (66 percent).

About six in 10 Australians (61 percent) state that ‘China is willing to detain/arrest Australian citizens without any legal basis to punish Australia over political disagreements’. Australian Capital Territory residents (81 percent) are significantly more likely to agree compared with residents in other states and territories.

International students: Fifty-five percent of Australians say that ‘International students from China help strengthen the people-to-people links (e.g., family, friendships, business contacts, tourism) between the two countries’, a general continuation of views from 2022 (54 percent), but down from the high of 58 percent in 2021.

Just over one-third of Australians (35 percent) harbour concerns that ‘International students

from China are potentially reducing the quality of education at Australian universities’, a three-point increase from 2022 (32 percent) but still down from the high of 2021 (40 percent).

Half of Australians (50 percent) express the concern that ‘International students from China mean there are less places for domestic students to study in their choice of Australian university’, an eight-point increase from 2022 (42 percent) and 2021 (42 percent).

7. University and research

Freedom of academic speech: About half of Australians (49 percent) are concerned that ‘Australian university ties with China compromise Australian freedom of speech’, a general continuation of views from 2022 (50 percent) and 2021 (48 percent).

Research collaboration – General: Australians have maintained a steady level of support for Australia-China university research collaboration, with about six in 10 Australians in 2023 (61 percent) and 2022 (61 percent) saying that ‘Academics from Australia should continue to partner with academics from China to undertake research projects’. Australians who nominate the Australian Labor Party (70 percent) as best placed to handle Australia’s China policy are significantly more likely to agree with this statement.

Just over half of Australians (51 percent) also say that such research collaborations ‘makes Australia more competitive internationally’.

Research collaboration – Science: Just over two-thirds of Australians (68 percent) say that ‘It is beneficial for Australian scientists to have research connections to China’. This is nearly matched by the percentage of Australians (65 percent) who say that overall ‘Australian scientists working with Chinese scientists is beneficial for Australia’.

8. Global and regional cooperation

Even as Australians express a number of concerns regarding threats emanating from China, levels of support for Australia working cooperatively with

China to tackle global and regional issues have remained high and fairly steady over the last three years. Just over seven in 10 Australians (72 percent) say that ‘It is beneficial for Australia to work with China on global issues, such as climate change and global health’, a general continuation of views from 2022 (69 percent) and 2021 (74 percent).

Just over seven in 10 Australians (71 percent) also say that ‘It is beneficial for Australia to work with China on regional issues, such as ending malaria in the Pacific’, a general continuation of views from 2022 (72 percent) and 2021 (72 percent).

Published by

Australia-China Relations Institute
University of Technology Sydney
PO Box 123
Broadway NSW 2007
Australia

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ISBN 978-0-6452063-9-5

UTS CRICOS 00099F