

Sceptics may scoff, but building trust with China is crucial

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Can political trust exist between Australia and China? I've heard several sceptical comments since publishing a Lowy Institute Policy Brief about Australia-China relations. I recommended Australia seek an annual high-level strategic and economic dialogue with Beijing with the intention of building political trust.

Only a few people have disagreed because of the differences in culture and historical experiences. But nearly all who questioned my argument see the differences in political systems as an impediment to building political trust. Can trust exist between a country in which the legitimacy of leaders rests with the voters, and transparency in decision-making is valued, on the one hand, and a country in which the populace has no say in who is in charge, and decision-making is secretive, on the other?

I've also heard scepticism about trust emerging between Canberra and Beijing because of Beijing's attempts to meddle in the affairs of other countries (precisely what Beijing says it opposes). An example is Beijing's endeavour in 2009 to stop Rebiya Kadeer, the Uighur leader, from attending the Melbourne Film Festival.

Trust refers to the confidence people or nations have that others will act as we might expect. Hence, it reflects a subjective perception of reliability of the other party.

My view that Australia's political leaders should meet more regularly with their Chinese counterparts is based on the premise that familiarity as well as shared experience and achievement do indeed lay the foundation for political trust. You cannot decide whether your counterpart is reliable or not before you get to know him on a personal basis. Let me unpack this.

First, whether or not political trust develops depends to a great extent on Beijing. I have no illusions about the hesitation of China's leaders to engage in an open and frank discussion. The basic instinct of a leader of the Communist Party of China is to keep his distance when engaging with a Western leader.

Second, my brief focuses solely on steps the Australian government can take. It does not discuss the relationship from China's perspective nor does it suggest necessary steps Beijing should take. There are indications that Beijing is interested in improving political ties with Canberra.

Third, other leaders of US allies have been able to achieve a degree of political trust among Chinese leaders. Helmut Kohl, Gerhard Schroeder and Jacques Chirac come to mind. As the chancellor of Germany (1998-2005), Schroeder kept his promise to visit Beijing at least once a year. Angela Merkel has followed suit.

Fourth, political trust is different from strategic trust. I do not suggest that trust between Australia and China as we know it today could evolve in a manner that would lead to sharing military intelligence. That would require a high degree of strategic trust, which is not possible as long as the Communist Party has a monopoly on power.

Fifth, Australia does not have territorial disputes with China. Today, disagreement over sovereignty threatens stability in China's vicinity. If these tensions escalate, it would be detrimental to Australia's national interest of a stable region, in which sea lines of communications are not disrupted.

As a geographically distant regional player, and if the leaders of China and Australia felt comfortable enough with each other to have a candid discussion about these tensions, Canberra could exert influence more impartially than many other regional actors who are directly involved in the disputes.

Sixth, a regular summit meeting would not only lead to some personal rapport among leaders, it could over time be the apt forum to discuss Australia's views on values issues and human rights concerns.

Seventh, building trust takes years of effort.

Lastly, however distasteful China's political system is, as an outsider I do not see why Australia's elites would not want to understand how Chinese senior officials think, and above all how best to have an impact on Chinese decisions and perceptions. Australia is more economically dependent on China than any other country barring North Korea and Laos. When problems arise bilaterally, as they inevitably do, familiarity and a degree of trust are essential to resolve the issues.

Considering the importance of China to Australia's prosperity, it is certainly worth trying.

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