

UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2022

The Australia-China
relationship: What do
Australians think?

Executive summary

Elena Collinson and Paul Burke
May 2022

Australia-China Relations
Institute
澳中关系研究院



Executive Summary

Now in its second year, the *UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2022* 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.

It examines how views have changed since the inaugural 2021 poll and lays out divisions in opinion within four demographic areas: age groups, state/territory of residence, geographical location (urban or rural) and how the respondent voted in the 2019 federal election.

The mixture of views revealed by the *UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2022* suggests that the presentation of the Australia-China relationship through a binary lens or a zero-sum prism does not completely align with perceptions in the wider community. There remains a divide between government views and much analytical commentary on the one hand, and popular attitudes on the other. However, in tracking the change in attitudes in some areas between this year and the last, it might also be said that the dominance of the elite narrative does appear to be slowly becoming more entrenched in the public consciousness.

Nonetheless, public opinion with respect to Australia-China relations remains in a state of flux. The results do not paint a neat picture. But by their very complexity they play a critical role in charting the intricacies of the bilateral relationship and helping think through the challenges. All in all, they serve to underline that this is the most challenging period Australian diplomacy has faced since Japan threatened the East Asian order in the 1930s.

Note: Responses for the UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2022 were collected before news regarding China's security agreement with the Solomon Islands broke. The flow-on effects of this development will be measured in the 2023 Poll.

1. Overall views on the Australia-China relationship

Support for building stronger connections and ties, a strong relationship: Six in 10 Australians (60 percent) believe that Australia should continue to try to build strong connections and ties, and have a strong relationship with China. The level of support for this sentiment has effectively remained the same since 2021 (61 percent).

Australian Capital Territory residents are most supportive of this sentiment (72 percent) compared with those residing in other states and territories, as are Australian Labor Party voters (66 percent) relative to those who voted for other political parties in the 2019 federal election.

Concerns: Concerns about the relationship are high, with nearly three-quarters of Australians (73 percent) expressing misgivings about Australia's relationship with China. The sentiment remains more or less steady from 2021 (74 percent).

Older Australians aged 55+ (82 percent) are the most concerned about the relationship. Liberal/National voters (78 percent) also express more concern than those who voted for other political parties in 2019.

Benefits: Over half of Australians (58 percent) also see the benefits of Australia's relationship with China, but the level of perceived benefits has fallen slightly from 2021 (62 percent).

Mistrust of the Chinese government: The majority of Australians (73 percent) express mistrust of the Chinese government, although the overall level of mistrust has decreased slightly from 2021 (76 percent).

Liberal/Nationals voters (83 percent) and older Australians aged 55+ (81 percent) are more mistrusting, while younger Australians aged 18-34 (64 percent) are less mistrusting.

The Australian government's management of China relations:

About one-third of Australians (34 percent) say that the Australian government is managing Australia's relationship with China well, with 43 percent disagreeing. There has been little change in overall approval of government management since 2021 (32 percent).

A harder Australian government line on China: More than half of Australians (58 percent) express support for a harder line to be adopted by the Australian government with respect to its policies dealing with China, down five points from 2021 (63 percent).

Changing views: Six in 10 Australians (60 percent) say that their view on China 'has become more negative following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic', a continuation of views expressed in 2021 (62 percent).

Older Australians aged 55+ (68 percent) are more likely to confirm a downturn in opinion on China, while younger Australians aged 18-34 (52 percent) are less likely.

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'. Pressed on an either-or proposition, more Australians believe that the responsibility lies with China (45 percent) rather than Australia (32 percent).

Future outlook: The pessimism expressed last year by Australians about the short to medium term prospects for improvement in relations between Australia and China in 2021 has remained steady, with 28 percent of Australians saying they believed bilateral relations 'will improve in the next three years'.

2. Federal election 2022

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

Australians are evenly split on which major political party will best manage Australia's China policy. Thirty-six percent nominate the Liberal/Nationals while 35 percent nominate the Australian Labor Party.

China policy – Impact on voting behaviour:

Four in ten Australians (40 percent) say that the Australian government's management of China policy is an issue that will have an impact on their vote in this year's federal election.

The Australians who say that China policy will have an impact on the way in which they vote are more likely to express overall concerns about Australia's relationship with China (81 percent) and mistrust of the Chinese government (78 percent), as well as alarm and apprehension about Australia-China relations in other survey areas. These include statements such as:

- 'The Chinese government is willing to use its trade and investment ties with Australia to punish Australia over political disagreements' (84 percent)
- 'Foreign interference stemming from China is a major problem' (81 percent)
- 'Australia is too economically reliant on China' (80 percent)
- 'Australia should place sanctions, such as travel and financial bans, on Chinese officials and entities involved in human rights violations' (77 percent)
- 'The risk of arbitrary detention is a concern when considering travel to China' (77 percent)
- 'China's artificial island-building in the South China Sea is a threat to Australia's security' (77 percent)
- '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' (72 percent)

3. Political communication

A vocal stance?: While only a minority of Australians (27 percent) say that 'The Australian government should not publicly call out actions by the Chinese government that Australia disagrees with', with 48 percent disagreeing with the statement. Australians (63 percent) also believe that 'The Australian government's disputes with the Chinese government are better communicated through diplomatic channels rather than public statements'.

Diplomatic boycott of Beijing Winter Olympics:

Nearly six in 10 Australians (58 percent) agree that 'The Australian government was right to participate in a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February 2022'.

Call for an international COVID-19 investigation:

Australians remain supportive of the Australian government's 2020 call for an inquiry, with about seven in 10 (69 percent) agreeing that 'The Australian government was right to publicly call for an international investigation into the origins of COVID-19'.

4. Military and security

China as a security threat: Nearly three-quarters of Australians (73 percent) say that 'China is a security threat to Australia', up six points from 2021 (67 percent).

Australians who voted for the Liberal/Nationals (83 percent) at the 2019 federal election are more likely to agree compared with those who voted for other political parties.

Support for an increase in Australia's defence spending:

Seven in 10 Australians (70 percent) say that 'The Australian government is right to increase defence spending, to balance, among other considerations, China's growing military might'. Only eight percent disagree.

Australians who voted for the Liberal/Nationals (85 percent) at the 2019 federal election are more likely to agree.

Regional stability and security: Half of Australians (50 percent) say that 'Australia's relationship with China contributes to regional stability and security', a general continuation of views expressed in 2021 (52 percent).

Conflict over Taiwan: Australians are this year more inclined to support Australian engagement in military conflict should Taiwan become a military flashpoint compared to 2021, especially if the US is involved.

In the event of military conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan, about four in 10 Australians (42 percent) say that 'Australia should remain neutral'. This is an 11-point decrease from 2021 (53 percent). More than half of Australians (56 percent) say that in this scenario 'Australia should lend military support to the United States'. This is an 11-point increase from 2021 (45 percent). Twenty percent disagree.

About four in ten Australians (39 percent) say that 'If China launches a military attack on Taiwan, Australia should send troops to go to Taiwan's defence'. Thirty-four percent disagree.

Cybersecurity: A clear majority of Australians (81 percent) agree that 'The Australian government is right to publicly call out any Chinese state-sponsored cybersecurity attacks on Australia's digital systems'.

Nearly seven in 10 Australians (68 percent) believe that 'The Chinese government is monitoring the communications of Australians closely with apps such as WeChat' and almost half (47 percent) believe 'Australia should ban Chinese owned apps such as TikTok and WeChat'.

The Belt and Road Initiative:

More Australians now believe 'The Australian government is right not to sign up to/participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative' (57 percent) compared with 2021 (53 percent).

The South China Sea: Nearly two-thirds of Australians (64 percent) say that 'China's artificial island-building in the South China Sea is a threat to Australia's security', up five points from 2021 (59 percent).

5. The United States

Balancing act: ‘About six in 10 Australians (61 percent) believe that ‘Australia can enjoy a good relationship with both China and the United States at the same time’.

Influence in the region: Australians are slightly less convinced that ‘China has more influence than the US in Australia’s regional neighbourhood’ this year (61 percent) compared with last year (65 percent).

6. Trade and investment

The economic relationship overall: About three-quarters of Australians (74 percent) say that ‘Australia is too economically reliant on China’, a six-point decrease from 2021 (80 percent). The majority of Australians (77 percent) also continue to express ‘extreme worry’ about China’s trade restrictions on Australian exports.

About four in 10 Australians (42 percent) say that ‘The Australian government has been successful in efforts to diversify trade, reducing Australia’s economic exposure to China’.

While six in 10 Australians (60 percent) acknowledge that ‘Without close economic engagement with China, Australia would not be as prosperous as it currently is’, about half of Australians (51 percent) say that ‘Australia’s economic relationship with China is more of an economic risk than an economic opportunity’.

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP):

Australians are lukewarm about supporting China’s bid to join the agreement, with about three in 10 Australians (31 percent) agreeing that ‘The Australian government should support China’s bid to join’ the CPTPP. Australians express stronger support for Taiwan’s bid, with two-thirds (66 percent) saying ‘The Australian government should support Taiwan’s bid to join’ the CPTPP.

Trade case study – Tourism:

Against the backdrop of COVID-19 and continuing restrictions on travel, seven in 10 Australians (70 percent) say that ‘Tourists from China provide a major economic benefit to Australia’, although Queensland residents (63 percent) are less likely to agree compared with residents in other Australian states and territories. About six in 10 Australians (62 percent) say that ‘Australia should continue towards making Australia an attractive destination for Chinese tourists’, and slightly more than half of Australians (53 percent) believe that ‘Encouraging tourism from China needs to be a post-COVID-19 priority for Australia’.

Trade case study – Education:

About two-thirds of Australians (67 percent) say that ‘International students from China provide a major economic benefit to Australia’, a nine-point decrease from 2021 (76 percent). Three-quarters of Australians (75 percent) agree that ‘Australian universities are too financially reliant on international students from China’, a six-point decrease from 2021 (81 percent). Forty-six 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: While just over half of Australians (53 percent) agree that ‘Foreign investment from China has created job opportunities in Australia’, general support for foreign investment from China remains fairly low, with just under a third of Australians (30 percent) saying that ‘Foreign investment from China should be supported by Australians’. Almost half of Australians (49 percent) think that ‘Foreign investment from China is more detrimental than beneficial to Australia’.

Investment case study – Port of Darwin:

Six in 10 Australians (60 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’.

Investment case study –

Agriculture: There is little fluctuation in Australian views on Chinese ownership of agricultural assets, with 2022 representing a continuation of the fairly high levels of concern expressed in 2021. 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’. Almost seven in 10 Australians (69 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. Nearly in eight in 10 Australians (79 percent) say that ‘Foreign buyers from China drive up Australian housing prices’. About seven in 10 Australians say that ‘Chinese investors in Australian real estate have made it difficult for first home buyers in Australia to enter the market’ (71 percent) and that ‘Chinese investors have negatively affected the rental market for residential real estate in Australia’ (69 percent). A clear majority of Australians (80 percent) believe ‘Australia should restrict the amount of investment in residential real estate that is permitted from Chinese investors’, with Australians who voted for the Liberal/Nationals (90 percent) at the 2019 federal election in strongest agreement.

Business ties: Australians are still 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 increasing reservations, stemming from the Chinese government’s domestic policies, saying Australia should not do business with China because of its ‘record on human rights’ (49 percent,

up six points from 43 percent in 2021); ‘domestic censorship of media, internet and other forms of communication’ (42 percent); and ‘record on environmental practices’ (36 percent, up four points from 32 percent in 2021).

7. Society

The Australian-Chinese

community: Fifty-nine percent of Australians say that ‘Political tensions in the Australia-China relationship are negatively impacting Australians of Chinese origin’, a four-point decrease from 2021 (63 percent). Australian Capital Territory residents (74 percent) are more likely to agree with this statement compared with residents in other Australian states and territories. Just over four in 10 Australians (42 percent) say ‘Australians of Chinese origin can be mobilised by the Chinese government to undermine Australia’s interests and social cohesion’, a three-point increase from 2021 (39 percent). Australians who voted for the Liberal/Nationals (50 percent) in the 2019 federal election are more likely to agree compared with those who voted for other political parties.

Interference and influence: About two-thirds of Australians (67 percent) say that ‘Foreign interference in Australia stemming from China is more concerning than foreign interference from other countries’, with 69 percent stating that ‘Foreign interference in Australia stemming from China is a major problem’. A comparable number of Australians (65 percent) also state that ‘Foreign interference stemming from Russia is a major problem’. Nearly half of Australians (48 percent) say that ‘Australian values and traditions are being undermined by Chinese government influence in Australia’.

About a third of Australians (31 percent) say that ‘The Australian government is successfully responding to Chinese government interference in Australia’, four points down from 2021 (35 percent).

Support for sanctions legislation:

Sixty-five 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’.

Arbitrary detention: About two-thirds of Australians (66 percent) agree that ‘The risk of arbitrary detention is a concern when considering travel to China’, down six points from 2021 (72 percent). Sixty-five percent say that ‘China is willing to detain/arrest Australian citizens without any legal basis to punish Australia over political disagreements’.

International students: Just over half of Australians (54 percent) say that ‘International students from China help strengthen the people-to-people links between the two countries’, four points down from 2021 (58 percent). In terms of concerns regarding international students, nearly one-third of Australians (32 percent) say that ‘International students from China are potentially reducing the quality of education at Australian universities’, eight points down from 2021 (40 percent). About four in 10 Australians (42 percent) say that ‘International students from China mean there are less places for domestic students to study in their choice of Australian university’.

8. University and research

Freedom of academic speech:

Half of Australians (50 percent) say that ‘Australian university ties with China compromise Australian freedom of speech’.

Research collaboration (General):

Nearly half of Australians (49 percent) say that ‘Research collaborations between academics from Australia and China makes Australia more competitive internationally’. About six in 10 Australians (61 percent) agree that ‘Academics from Australia should continue to partner with academics from China to undertake research projects’.

Research collaboration (Science):

Nearly seven in 10 Australians (69 percent) agree that ‘Australian scientists working with Chinese scientists is beneficial for Australia’, five points up from 2021 (64 percent).

9. Global and regional cooperation

A slightly lower proportion of Australians see the benefits of Australia working cooperatively with China to tackle global issues compared with 2021. Sixty-nine percent of Australians say ‘It is beneficial for Australia to work with China on global issues, such as climate change and global health’, five points down from 2021 (74 percent). Support for bilateral cooperation on regional issues remains steady, with 72 percent of Australians saying ‘It is beneficial for Australia to work with China on regional issues, such as ending malaria in the Pacific’. Australians who voted for the Australian Labor Party (81 percent) in the 2019 federal election are more likely to agree with this statement.

Published by

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

© The Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) 2022

The publication is copyright. Other than for uses permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without attribution.

australiachinarelations.org

✉ acri@uts.edu.au

🐦 [@acri_uts](https://twitter.com/acri_uts)

ISBN 978-0-6452063-5-7

UTS CRICOS 00099F