

Huawei exposes critical weaknesses. We need the infrastructure to engage with China

Written by Alice de Jonge, Senior Lecturer, International Law; Asian Business Law, Monash University

The European Commission has [decided to ignore US calls](#) that its allies keep Chinese tech giant Huawei away from significant telecommunications infrastructure. Britain, France and Germany had already made the same decision. So had Asian allies [Thailand and India](#).

Australia, along with New Zealand and Japan, is among the few to follow the US lead, excluding Huawei from participating in building new 5G networks.

Read more: [***Huawei or the highway? The rising costs of New Zealand's relationship with China***](#)

Is it right to endorse US national security concerns that Huawei poses an espionage threat – with US prosecutors also alleging it has stolen intellectual property and conspired to flout sanctions against technology sales to Iran?

Not necessarily.

But nor should we be naive about [China's strategic ambitions](#), and the part Huawei potentially plays in realising those ambitions.

We need to acknowledge the nuances and complexities that will characterise Australia's relationship with China for the foreseeable future.

To weigh the pros and cons of each issue, the infrastructure we need to invest in is the knowledge to engage with China. Right now, too many Australian businesses and political

leaders just don't sufficiently understand China's culture, economics and politics to make an informed assessment.

Party connections

Some of the concerns about Huawei stem from the company's connections with Chinese government structures. The company's founder Ren Zhengfei served as an engineer in the Chinese military. Like any successful company in China, Huawei maintains good relationships with China's Communist Party.

Besides that, China's national intelligence laws require all organisations and citizens [to support and cooperate in](#) national intelligence work.

Ren has stated [he would defy any demand](#) that Huawei hand over information, and also that he loves his country [and supports the Communist Party](#). Chinese citizens, wherever they are on the globe, live their lives in high awareness of and constant negotiation with [the demands and expectations](#) of the Party/state.

It is not an experience easily understood by citizens of a multi-party liberal democracy such as Australia. How, then, should we understand the words and actions of Ren or others? And once interpreted, what would be the best response?

Threats and nuances

Billionaire fund manager and "open society" advocate George Soros [told the World Economic Forum](#) in Davos in January that China might not be the only authoritarian regime in the world, but it was the wealthiest, strongest and technologically most advanced. It had clear global ambitions, to which Chinese technology companies were inextricably connected:

My key point is that the combination of repressive regimes with IT monopolies endows those regimes with a built-in advantage over open societies. The instruments of control are useful tools in the hands of authoritarian regimes, but they pose a mortal threat to open societies.

The threat is illustrated by the treatment of entire groups, such as the [Uyghurs in the Xinjiang](#) region, and of individuals such as Australian-Chinese writer Yang Hengjun, who was [detained in China](#) on espionage charges in January.

Read more: [*Australian-Chinese author's detention raises important questions about China's motivations*](#)

Though no one seriously believes the accusations are credible, the Australian citizen could be detained for six months before police are even obliged to [formally arrest him](#).

Language literacy

But we need to keep our fears in perspective. It is true China is ruled by an unabashed authoritarian keen to enforce ideological conformity. It is true the government is investing heavily in surveillance infrastructure. Yet the fact remains that for all the Chinese state's efforts, Chinese society is less and less susceptible to being brainwashed into patriotic subservience. Not even the Chinese Communist Party is homogenous.

Read more: [*China's Uyghur re-education centres in Xinjiang will not produce a loyal and obedient population*](#)

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Australia needs to appreciate these nuances, but is handicapped by often knowing only a translated China – all too often via partisan interpreters. To better know China, and Asia more generally, we need to take language literacy seriously.

There have been attempts to push for more teaching of Chinese and other Asian languages, but they all [proved unsuccessful](#). Earlier this month former NSW premier Bob Carr lamented that nationally [just 4,000 students](#) are learning Mandarin in high school; of those with a non-Chinese background, it's just 380.

Universities have cut programs in in classical Chinese, historical studies and other subjects which might serve to enhance longer term understanding of Australia's place in the region and the world, but which are seen to have no immediate practical benefits.

Without greater Chinese literacy, we in Australia are at a disadvantage in understanding China. We cannot appreciate why asserting itself as a major power after a “[century of humiliation](#)” is so important to Chinese identity. We cannot be sure it means to be called a “good friend”. We will remain deaf to Chinese tone and inner meaning.

Alice de Jonge does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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