

China policy may be the death of Australian diplomacy

Australia's current approach to China will leave future Australian governments with little room to move in the making of their foreign and defence policy.

That's the premise of a major public lecture to be held at Australian Catholic University's North Sydney campus on Monday 21 February.

Professor James Curran will argue Australia needs to rethink its approach to China when he delivers the inaugural Sir Peter Cosgrove lecture *The Costs of Fear and Greed: Past and Present in Australia's China Story*.

The China 'threat' narrative has become so hard-wired into the Australian outlook that Canberra's choices have been narrowed, viewed only through the prism of what they mean for countering China," said Professor Curran.

In his lecture, Professor Curran will contend that the Government has cast aside the embrace of the countries and cultures of Southeast and North Asia on their own terms, which has been central to the pursuit of trust and acceptance in the region.

"Because a world without American global leadership is beyond Australia's imagination, Australia has increasingly locked itself into the American grand strategy for Asia.

"This region, vital to Australia's economic future and defence, has been overshadowed in policy making by the China threat and is now viewed solely through the prism of resisting Beijing. The intensity and perceived urgency with which Australia seeks to confront Chinese influence and pressure has isolated it from its near neighbours."

Professor Curran will argue that the narrative often presented by government ministers and hawkish analysts – brave Australia standing up to a bullying China – is half-right. Viewed from another angle, it amounts in part to an acquittal of recent Australian governments in their clumsy and guileless management of the China relationship.

"There are legitimate and serious concerns raised by Xi's growing authoritarianism and his prosecution of an assertive brand of Chinese nationalism. But, Australia does not come to its relations with China empty handed. It brings over a century of historical, cultural and racial baggage in its relations with Asia, and China in particular. Does Australia have the courage to look in the mirror?"

Professor Curran said current debate around China was short-sighted.

"We have been lulled into thinking that the tensions began in 2017. But it's been difficult since 1949 and in particular since formal diplomatic relations began in 1972. We have lived with a fear of China just under the surface of the national skin for so long that we struggle to locate another model for relating to China when difficulties arise."

Professor James Curran is available for interview

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