

Australia-China Relations
Institute
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UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2024

The Australia–China
relationship: What do
Australians think?

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The Australia–China Relations Institute (ACRI) is an independent, non-partisan research institute based at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). UTS:ACRI’s mission is to inform Australia’s engagement with China through substantive dialogue, and research and analysis grounded in scholarly rigour.

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Introduction and executive summary



Now in its fourth year, the *UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll* continues to provide policymakers and the public with a set of comprehensive insights into how Australians approach what is unquestionably Australia's toughest foreign policy challenge in generations, the Australia-China relationship.

This year's results again reveal just how deep Australians' mistrust of China continues to be. The result is not surprising: recent experience with China's economic coercion and wolf warrior diplomacy can hardly be expected to be forgotten, even as Beijing's punitive tariffs on Australian exports are gradually released and dialogue has resumed at the leadership level. A growing number of Australians believe that either the US or China will force the country to choose between close relations with Washington or Beijing, but they are relatively evenly split on which of the great powers will force the issue. Another Trump presidency is deemed likely to render that dilemma more acute.

That half of those polled believe a conflict with China is a 'serious possibility' in the next three years serves as testament to how deeply rooted is the national anxiety about China. Such a sentiment is unlikely to dissipate as countries like Australia, and others, continue to wrestle with the nature of China's military power and its strategic intentions. There is a perception, though, that US regional influence is growing.

Although some believe the bilateral relationship may improve somewhat over coming years, more generally Australians continue to adopt a guarded stance towards relations with Beijing. They are still content to reap the benefits of the economic relationship and cultivate business ties – though even faith in these dimensions is diminishing. Nearly three-quarters of those polled see Australia as too economically reliant on China and the nexus between the relationship and underlying Australian economic prosperity shows mild signs of strain.

Overall, Australians remain strongly wary of and concerned by Xi Jinping's more assertive foreign policy, particularly in the areas of foreign interference, espionage and the use of social media and communications platforms such as TikTok and WeChat. Half of those polled support higher defence spending, even if that means budget cuts in other portfolios. Support for AUKUS is inching up even as the Australia-China relationship is viewed as a net positive for regional stability and as support for a containment strategy slips.

And the number of those who believe Canberra should remain neutral in any military contingency over Taiwan where the US is militarily engaged fell to 43 percent, down six points from 49 percent last year. Washington policymakers will be keenly watching that number now and into the future.

The poll does not necessarily award high marks to the governing Labor Party for its policy of 'stabilisation' of relations with China, though it does register relatively strong support for the two countries discussing their differences via traditional diplomacy, not by picking up the megaphone.

The gap that opened up in 2023 between support for the Australian Labor Party and support for the Liberal/National coalition as the best placed to handle Australia's China policy seems to be closing this year. Forty percent of Australians nominated the Australian Labor Party as the political party best placed to handle Australia's China policy, down from 49 percent in 2023. Thirty-four percent said the Liberal/National coalition is best placed to handle Australia's China policy, up from 29 percent last year. This perhaps indicates that on some incidents the public wants a stronger government response.

The public may well be registering that when it comes to the Albanese government's formula for the relationship – 'cooperate where we can, disagree where we must' – it is hearing much more the former than the latter from its political leaders. They continue to want a tougher stance, including sanctions on Chinese officials and entities involved in human rights violations.

Still, this improved climate in political relations continues to witness concern about tensions negatively affecting Australians of Chinese origin continuing to fall. At the same time, over 40 percent of those polled believe that Beijing will be able to mobilise its diaspora in Australia to undermine national interests and social cohesion.

A selection of results from the *UTS:ACRI BIDA Poll 2024* are included below.

1. Overall views on the Australia–China relationship

- **Building stronger connections and ties, and 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. Support for this sentiment has remained more or less unchanged since the launch of the first *UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll* four years ago, remaining stable as political tensions have waxed and, tentatively, waned.
- **Concerns:** Concerns about Australia’s relationship with China remain high but have steadily decreased over the last four years. In 2024, 64 percent of Australians expressed concerns, a 10-point decrease from a high of 74 percent in 2021.
- **Benefits:** Even as Australians identified concerns about the Australia–China relationship, they identified benefits in parallel. This year, 62 percent of Australians said they see the benefits of Australia’s relationship with China, a sentiment that has remained relatively steady over four years, albeit with a dip in 2022 (58 percent).
- **Mistrust of the Chinese government:** A majority of Australians (71 percent) expressed mistrust of the Chinese government. This sentiment has remained high over four years – consistently at 70 percent or over – although this year’s sentiment is still slightly down from a high of 76 percent in 2021.
- **The Australian government’s management of China relations:** Australians’ perceptions of the Australian government’s performance with respect to China relations remain more or less unchanged from last year. Four in 10 Australians (40 percent) expressed satisfaction with the Albanese government’s management of China relations, a continuation of sentiment from 2023 (39 percent). This represents a slight uptick from views regarding the Morrison government’s performance with respect to China relations, with 34 percent having expressed satisfaction in 2022 and 32 percent in 2021.
- **A harder Australian government line on China:** Nearly six in 10 Australians expressed support

for the Australian government adopting a harder line in its dealings with China. This sentiment is creeping up again after incrementally but steadily decreasing after a four-year high in 2021 (63 percent) to a low in 2023 (55 percent).

- **Responsibility for improving the Australia–China relationship:** A clear majority of Australians (79 percent) agreed that ‘The responsibility for improving the relationship between Australia and China lies with both countries’, a continuation of views expressed in 2023 (78 percent), 2022 (78 percent) and 2021 (80 percent).

However, more Australians believe that the responsibility lies with China (48 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 pessimistic overall, there has been an incremental increase in optimism regarding improvement over the last four years. This year, one-third of Australians (33 percent) said that they believe bilateral relations ‘will improve in the next three years’, a six-point increase from a low of 27 percent in 2021.

2. Politics and political communication

- **Political party best placed to handle Australia’s China policy:** The view that the Australian Labor Party is best placed to handle Australia’s China policy is less pronounced this year, with the Liberal/National coalition closing the gap that had opened up in 2023.

Four in 10 Australians (40 percent) nominated the Australian Labor Party as the political party best placed to handle Australia’s China policy. This reflects a nine-point decrease from 2023 (49 percent), although this is still up from a pre-election low of 35 percent in 2022.

Thirty-four percent of Australians said the Liberal/National coalition is best placed to handle Australia’s China policy, a five-point increase from 2023 (29 percent), inching back to its high of 36 percent going into the 2022 federal election.

- **Management of Australia’s China policy and impact on upcoming federal election vote:** Australians are fairly evenly split on whether management of China policy will be an issue that will impact on their vote at the next federal election. Although, a slightly higher proportion of respondents said that they would factor the issue into their voting considerations (35 percent), compared with respondents who said they would not factor the issue in (29 percent).

- **Communication over areas of disagreement:** Just over six in 10 Australians (61 percent) said that ‘The Australian government’s disputes with the Chinese government are better communicated through diplomatic channels rather than public statements’. This majority view that communication of disputes via diplomatic channels is preferable to public statements has remained relatively steady over the last four years.

Older Australians aged 55+ (71 percent) were more likely to agree. Younger Australians aged 18–34 (50 percent) were less likely to agree.

Australians who voted for the Australian Labor Party (69 percent) at the 2022 federal election were also more likely to agree.

increase defence spending, to balance, among other considerations, China’s growing military might’. While support remains high, the last three years have seen a steady drop in agreement with this view – 67 percent had expressed agreement in 2023 and 70 percent in 2022.

Older Australians aged 55+ (78 percent) and Australians who voted for the Liberal/Nationals at the 2022 federal election (73 percent) were more likely to agree.

When asked, however, whether the Australian government is right to increase defence spending ‘even if it means budget cuts in other areas’, support for such an increase dropped slightly, with half of Australians (53 percent) agreeing. However, a slightly higher proportion this year supported an increase in defence spending notwithstanding budget cuts in other areas, reflecting a three-point increase from agreement with the view in 2023 (50 percent).

- **Acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS:** Nearly half of Australians (48 percent) agreed 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’, a four-point increase from when the view was first measured in 2023 (44 percent).

Victoria residents (71 percent) were significantly more likely to agree, while Australian Capital Territory residents (29 percent) were significantly less likely to agree.

- **Forming trade and security blocs that exclude China:** Just over four in 10 Australians (43 percent) said that ‘Australia should form trade and security blocs with other countries that deliberately exclude China’, reflecting a general continuation of views expressed over the last four years.
- **Regional stability and security:** Just over half of Australians (53 percent) said that ‘Australia’s relationship with China contributes to regional stability and security’, reflecting a general continuation of views expressed over the last four years.
- **Conflict over Taiwan:** Over the last three years, Australians have remained fairly evenly split between agreeing and disagreeing with the

3. Military and security

- **China as a security threat:** Nearly three-quarters of Australians (71 percent) said that ‘China is a security threat to Australia’, reflecting a general continuation of views expressed in 2023 (72 percent) and 2022 (73 percent) and still up from a low of 67 percent in 2021.

Australians who voted for the Liberal/Nationals at the 2022 federal election (83 percent) were more likely to agree.

- **The possibility of military conflict with China within three years:** Half of Australians (50 percent) said that ‘Military conflict with China within three years is a serious possibility’, a continuation of views expressed in 2023 (51 percent). Twenty-three percent disagreed and 27 percent expressed neutrality.
- **Support for an increase in Australia’s defence spending:** Sixty-four percent of Australians said that ‘The Australian government is right to

statement 'If China launches a military attack on Taiwan, Australia should send troops to go to Taiwan's defence', although agreement with the view has incrementally but steadily decreased. This year, 35 percent of Australians agreed, down from 37 percent in 2023 and 39 percent in 2022. Additionally, 35 percent expressed neutrality and 30 percent disagreed.

When American involvement was added to the scenario, respondents were more inclined to agree, although the level of agreement decreased since last year. Forty-six percent of Australians said 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 six-point decrease from 2023 (52 percent) and a 10-point decrease from 2022 (56 percent), almost meeting a 45 percent low in 2021.

This year, 43 percent of Australians said that in this scenario 'Australia should remain neutral'. Agreement with this view has fluctuated somewhat over the last four years, but this year's result is still down from the high of 53 percent in 2021.

Victoria residents (17 percent) were significantly less likely to support Australian neutrality in the event of conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan.

- **Support for banning apps such as TikTok and WeChat:** About six in 10 Australians (59 percent) agreed that 'Australia should ban Chinese-owned apps such as TikTok and WeChat', reflecting a general continuation of views expressed in 2023 (61 percent) and still up from a low of 47 percent in 2022.

Older Australians aged 55+ (66 percent) were more likely to agree. Younger Australians aged 18–34 (49 percent) were less likely to agree. Australians who voted for the Liberal/Nationals at the 2022 federal election (67 percent) were more likely to agree.

- **Public attribution of Chinese state-sponsored cybersecurity attacks:** A clear majority of Australians (82 percent) said that 'The Australian government is right to publicly call out any Chinese state-sponsored cybersecurity attacks on Australia's digital systems', reflecting a general continuation of views expressed over the last three years.

- **Espionage:** About six in 10 Australians (59 percent) said that 'Espionage conducted by China against Australia is more concerning than espionage against Australia conducted by other countries'. Younger Australians aged 18–34 (48 percent) were less likely to agree.

About the same proportion of Australians identified espionage conducted by China (67 percent) and Russia (66 percent) as a 'major problem'.

- **Foreign interference:** Fifty-eight percent of Australians said that 'Foreign interference in Australia stemming from China is more concerning than foreign interference from other countries', reflecting a steady decrease in agreement with this view over the last three years, down from 64 percent in 2023 and 67 percent in 2022.

That said, overall concern about foreign interference stemming from China remains high. Two-thirds of Australians (65 percent) said that 'Foreign interference in Australia stemming from China is a major problem', on par with concerns about foreign interference stemming from Russia (66 percent) and markedly higher than concerns about foreign interference stemming from the United States (43 percent).

4. The United States

- **Balancing Australia's relationships with the United States and China:** This year, about six in 10 Australians (61 percent) said that 'Australia can enjoy a good relationship with both China and the United States at the same time', reflecting a general continuation of views expressed over the last four years. Nearly four in 10 Australians (38 percent) said that 'Australia's relationship with China weakens our alliance with the United States'.

A belief is growing in Australian opinion that the United States or China will eventually force Australia to choose between a close relationship with Washington or a close relationship with Beijing. Just over half of Australians (52 percent) said such a choice will be forced by China, reflecting a four-year high. Forty-seven percent said the United States will force that choice, a continuation of views from 2023 (47 percent), a

five-point increase from 2022 (42 percent) and an eight-point increase from 2021 (39 percent).

- **The impact of a second Trump presidency:** Just over two-thirds of Australians (67 percent) said that ‘The Australian government’s balancing of its relationships with China and the US will be made more difficult if Donald Trump returns to the US presidency in 2024’.

Australians who voted for the Australian Labor Party at the 2022 federal election (79 percent) were more likely to agree, while those who voted for the Liberal/Nationals at the 2022 federal election (59 percent) were less likely to agree.

- **Influence in the region:** Over the last four years, Australians have become progressively less convinced that ‘China has more influence than the United States in Australia’s regional neighbourhood’. Fifty-five percent agreed with this statement this year, a 10-point decrease from a 65 percent high in 2021.

5. Trade and investment

- **The economic relationship overall:** Nearly three-quarters of Australians (74 percent) said that ‘Australia is too economically reliant on China’, reflecting a general continuation of views from 2023 (72 percent) and 2022 (74 percent), down from a high of 80 percent in 2021.

Australians have not shown much confidence over three years that ‘The Australian government has been successful in efforts to diversify trade, reducing Australia’s economic exposure to China’, with 44 percent agreeing with the statement this year, a general continuation of views from 2023 (44 percent) and slightly up from 2022 (42 percent).

There has also been a steady decrease over the last four years in agreement with the notion that Australia’s prosperity is closely linked with economic engagement with China. This year, 54 percent of Australians said ‘Without close economic engagement with China, Australia would not be as prosperous as it currently is’, down nine points from a high of 63 percent in 2021.

In parallel, there has been a steady, incremental decrease in the number of Australians saying that

‘Trade with China has created job opportunities in Australia’. Sixty-one percent of Australians agreed this year, down from a high of 65 percent in 2021.

As Australian views slowly grow more negative on bilateral economic relations, so too does agreement with the notion that the ‘The Australian government needs to be supportive of having closer economic ties with China’. This year’s poll showed that 46 percent of Australians agreed, reflecting a steady, incremental decrease from a high of 51 percent in 2022.

- **The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP):** Australians remain lukewarm about supporting China’s bid to join the agreement, with one-third of Australians (33 percent) saying that ‘The Australian government should support China’s bid to join’ the CPTPP, reflecting a general continuation of views from 2023 (35 percent) and 2022 (31 percent).

Australians still express stronger support for Taiwan’s bid, but there has been a steady decrease in agreement with this view over the last three years. This year, 58 percent of Australians said that ‘The Australian government should support Taiwan’s bid to join’ the CPTPP, an eight-point decrease from a high of 66 percent in 2022.

Older Australians aged 55+ (69 percent) were more likely to support Taiwan’s CPTPP bid, while younger Australians aged 18–34 (45 percent) were less likely to do so.

- **Trade case study – Tourism:** At this point in time, Australians are slightly less convinced about the economic merits of outbound tourism from China. Sixty-seven percent of Australians said that ‘Tourists from China provide a major economic benefit to Australia’. This figure represents a four-year low and is down seven points from a high of 74 percent in 2021.

Fifty-eight percent of Australians said that ‘Australia should continue to work towards making Australia an attractive destination for Chinese tourists’. This figure represents a four-year low and is down five points from a high of 63 percent in 2021.

- **Trade case study – Education:** Sixty-eight percent of Australians said that ‘International students from China provide a major economic

benefit to Australia', a general continuation of views over the last three years, down from a high of 76 percent in 2021. At the same time, nearly three-quarters of Australians (73 percent) believe that 'Australian universities are too financially reliant on international students from China'.

- **Foreign investment:** General support for foreign investment from China remains low, with just over half of Australians (51 percent) saying that 'Foreign investment from China is more detrimental than beneficial to Australia'. Only 16 percent disagreed, while 33 percent expressed neutrality.
- **Investment case study – Port of Darwin:** Australians are not supportive of the Australian government's decision to allow Landbridge's lease of the Port of Darwin to continue. Only 26 percent of Australians said that 'The Australian government was right not to cancel or vary Chinese-owned company Landbridge's 99-year lease of the Port of Darwin'.

Just over six in 10 Australians (62 percent) said the Australian government should force Landbridge 'to sell the port back to the government'.

- **Investment case study – Critical minerals:** While most Australians (62 percent) are broadly supportive of a blanket limitation on foreign investment in Australia's critical minerals industry, support increased by 10 points (72 percent) when a limitation on China was specified.
- **Investment case study – Agriculture:** Levels of concern about Chinese ownership of Australian agricultural assets remain high.

Only 30 percent of Australians said that 'Chinese investment in agricultural assets (e.g., land, food processing facilities) in Australia is more beneficial than detrimental to Australia's interests'. At the same time, about two-thirds of Australians (64 percent) said they believe that 'Chinese ownership of agricultural assets [...] in Australia is more concerning than ownership by companies from other countries'.

Moreover, nearly seven in 10 Australians (69 percent) said that 'Chinese ownership of agricultural assets [...] in Australia presents a threat to Australia's food security'.

- **Investment case study – Residential real estate:** Chinese investment in

Australian residential real estate continues to generate concern.

Only 28 percent of Australians said that 'Chinese investment in Australian residential real estate brings a lot of benefits for Australians (e.g., construction, new dwellings, jobs)', a four-year low. Agreement with this statement has incrementally decreased over the last four years.

A clear majority of Australians (80 percent) said that 'Foreign buyers from China drive up Australian housing prices', a seven-point increase from 2023 (73 percent), almost back to an 82 percent high recorded in 2021.

Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of Australians also said that 'Chinese investors have negatively affected the rental market for residential real estate in Australia', a six-point increase from 2023 (68 percent) and reflecting a four-year high.

The belief that 'Australia should restrict the amount of investment in residential real estate that is permitted from Chinese investors' is also at a four-year high, with 83 percent of Australians agreeing with the statement.

- **Business ties:** Australians remain generally supportive of maintaining business ties with China. Nearly two-thirds of Australians (65 percent) said 'Australian companies should continue to pursue business opportunities with China'.

But Australians also continue to express some reservations stemming from the Chinese government's domestic policies. Australians said that Australia should not do business with China, citing various reasons, including its 'record on human rights' (45 percent); 'domestic censorship of media, internet and other forms of communication' (40 percent); and 'record on environmental practices' (31 percent).

6. Society

- **The Australian-Chinese community:** Forty-nine percent of Australians said that 'Political tensions in the Australia-China relationship are negatively impacting Australians of Chinese origin', reflecting a steady decrease in agreement over the last four years, down from a high of 63 percent in 2021.

Forty-three percent of Australians said that ‘Australians of Chinese origin can be mobilised by the Chinese government to undermine Australia’s interests and social cohesion’, a continuation of views from 2023 (43 percent), with agreement having incrementally increased since 2022 (42 percent) and 2021 (39 percent).

Younger Australians aged 18–34 (37 percent) and Australians who voted for the Australian Labor Party at the 2022 federal election (37 percent) were less likely to agree.

- **Support for sanctions legislation:** Sixty-eight percent of Australians said that ‘Australia should place sanctions, such as travel and financial bans, on Chinese officials and entities involved in human rights violations’, a continuation of views from 2023 (68 percent) and still up from a low of 65 percent in 2022.
- **Arbitrary detention:** Seventy-three percent of Australians said that ‘The risk of arbitrary detention is a concern when considering travel to China’, reflecting a four-year high, although this concern has generally remained acute over the last four years.
- **International students:** Fifty-three percent of Australians said that ‘International students from China help strengthen the people-to-people links (e.g., family, friendships, business contacts, tourism) between the two countries’, reflecting a four-year low and down from a 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’.

Forty-six percent of Australians expressed the concern that ‘International students from China mean there are less places for domestic students to study in their choice of Australian university’.

7. University and research

- **Freedom of academic speech:** Forty-five percent of Australians expressed concern that ‘Australian university ties with China compromise Australian freedom of speech’, reflecting a four-year low, and down from a high of 50 percent in 2022.

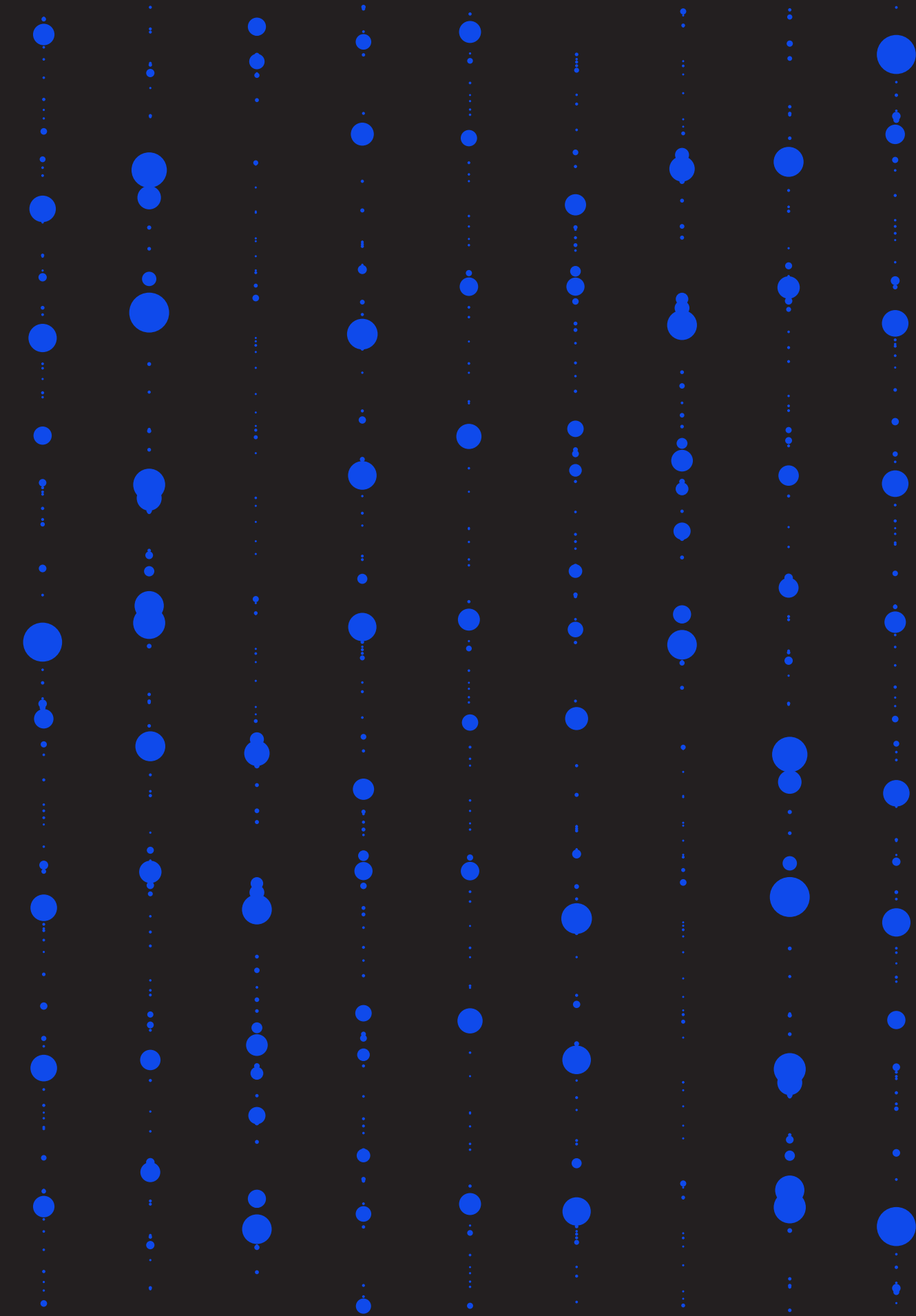
- **Research collaboration – General:** While Australians had previously maintained a steady level of support for Australia–China university research collaboration, this year 54 percent said that ‘Academics from Australia should continue to partner with academics from China to undertake research projects’, a seven-point decrease from 2023 and 2022 (both 61 percent).
- **Research collaboration – Science:** Two-thirds of Australians (66 percent) said that ‘It is beneficial for Australian scientists to have research connections to China’, reflecting a general continuation of views over the last four years. Sixty-two percent said that overall ‘Australian scientists working with Chinese scientists is beneficial for Australia’, reflecting a four-year low, down from a high of 69 percent in 2022.

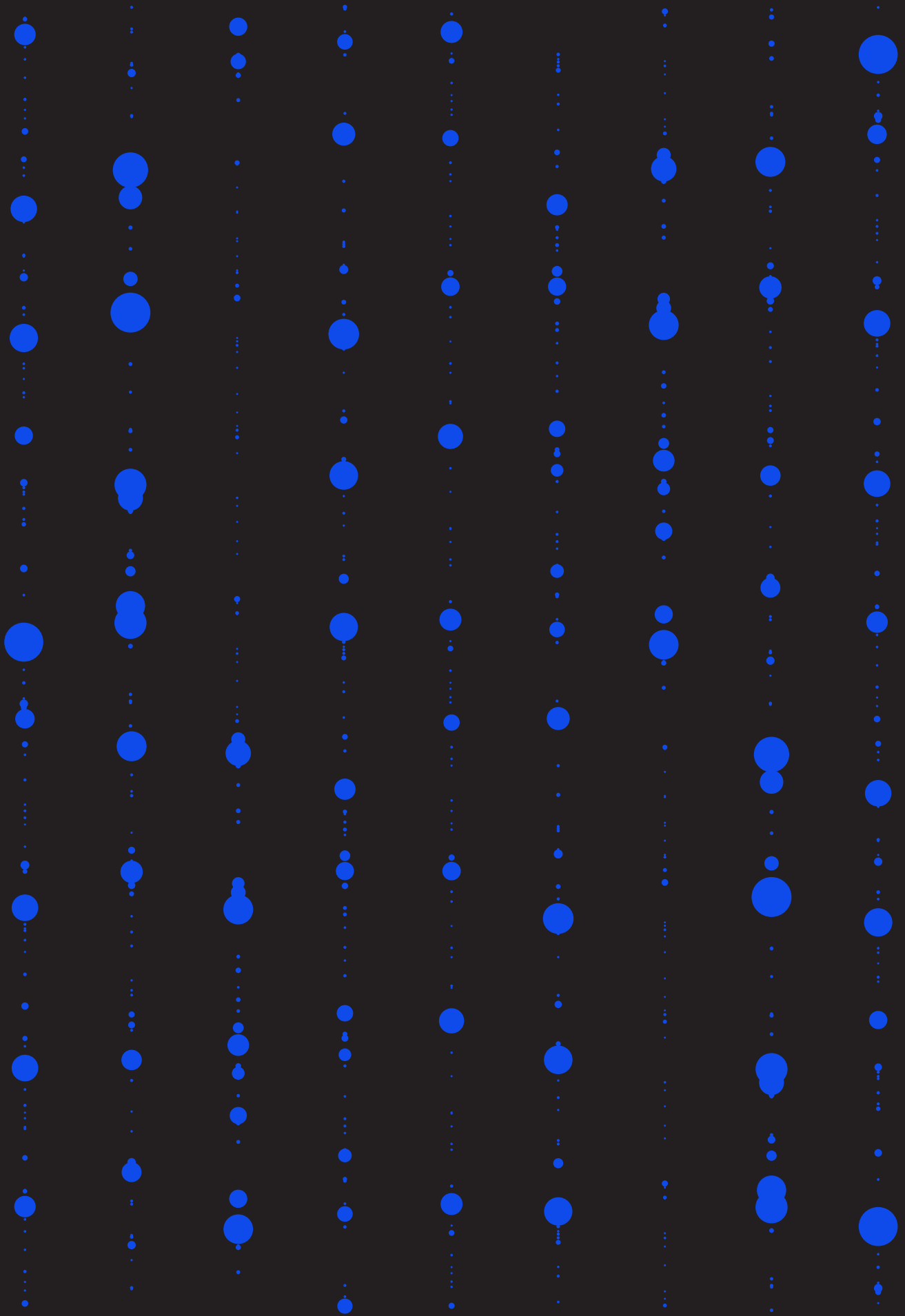
8. Competition and cooperation

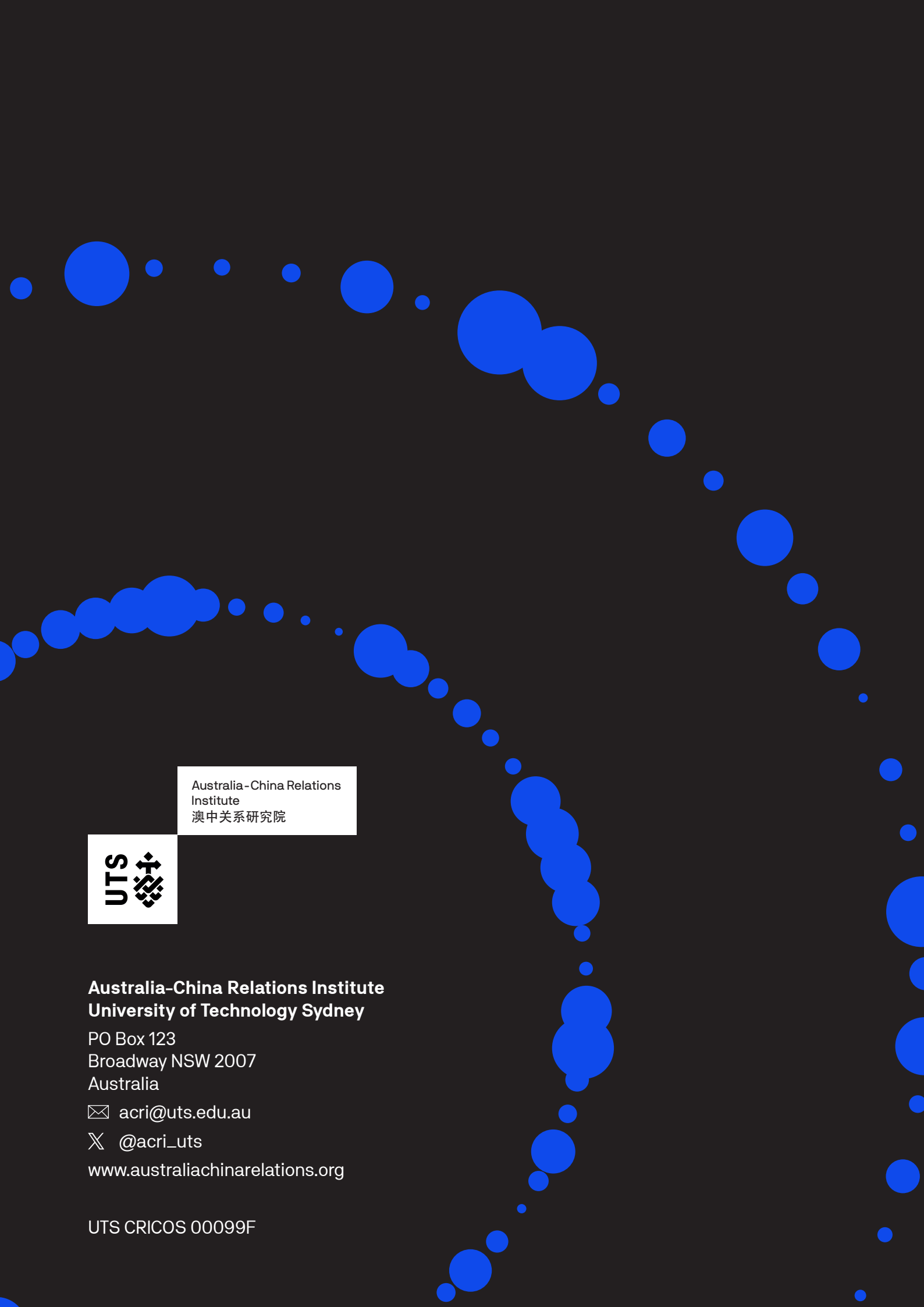
- **Building closer relationships with Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations to counter China’s influence:** There is strong support among Australians for closer ties with Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations in order to counter China’s influence. Seventy-one percent said that ‘It is beneficial for Australia to build closer relationships with Southeast Asian nations, including through increased aid assistance, to counter China’s influence in the region’. Seventy-four percent said that ‘It is beneficial for Australia to build closer relationships with Pacific Island nations, including through increased aid assistance, in order to counter China’s influence in the region’.
- **Global and regional cooperation:** Even as Australians have expressed a number of concerns regarding threats emanating from China, there remains fairly high and steady support for Australia working cooperatively with China to tackle global and regional issues.

Seven in 10 Australians (70 percent) said that ‘It is beneficial for Australia to work with China on global issues, such as climate change and global health’.

Sixty-nine percent also said that ‘It is beneficial for Australia to work with China on regional issues, such as ending malaria in the Pacific’.







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