

POLICY FORUM OPEN ACCESS

The China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA): Assessing Outcomes a Decade on

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ABSTRACT

The China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) was signed in June 2015. Unlike other deals that Australia struck with Japan and Korea around the same time, ChAFTA's passage through the Australian parliament was vigorously contested. This Policy Forum begins by recounting the claims of ChAFTA's Australian proponents and critics. It then uses these to structure an assessment of outcomes a decade on. The weight of evidence favours ChAFTA's proponents. A review of Chinese perspectives on the other hand points to different metrics and a more ambiguous assessment. Nonetheless, ChAFTA's net benefits have been sufficient to secure ongoing governmental and broader public support.

1 | Introduction

In June 2015, after 21 rounds and more than a decade of negotiations, the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) was signed in Canberra by Australian Trade and Investment Minister Andrew Robb and his Chinese counterpart, Commerce Minister Gao Hucheng. Addressing the Chinese side that had gathered there, Prime Minister Tony Abbott was exuberant, declaring that Australia would 'seize this opportunity of more trade and more investment with China' and that the deal would 'change our countries for the better, it will change our region for the better, it will change our world for the better' (Abbott 2015). The Business Council of Australia contended that it would 'be transformative for the Australian economy' by ensuring 'a competitive edge' for the country's leading trade sectors (BCA (Business Council of Australia) 2015).

Australian proponents emphasised three key elements. First, at the time of ChAFTA's signing, just eight percent of China's 8198 import product lines were tariff-free (Laurenceson 2015a). Yet within 5 years of ChAFTA's enactment, 95% of China's product lines were slated to be tariff-free for Australian goods, and this

would rise to 97% after 15 years and full implementation (MOFCOM (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China) 2015). Second, for some agricultural goods covered by Chinese import quotas, like wool, Australia was extended a country-specific tariff-free allocation that would increase over time. Third, China's market access commitments extended beyond goods to include some services. A most-favoured-nation (MFN) clause was also included such that if China later made even more favourable services market access commitments to other trade partners, then these would automatically be extended to Australian companies too.

Yet despite its trade and income-creating potential, and unlike deals struck with Japan and Korea around the same time, ChAFTA's passage through the Australian parliament was vigorously contested. The opposition Australian Labour Party under the leadership of Bill Shorten initially labelled ChAFTA a 'bad agreement' (Shorten 2015a) and a 'dud deal' (Kenny 2015), albeit insisting that Labour remained in support of the broader principle of free trade and that 'governments from both sides of politics' had worked hard to land an agreement with China (Shorten 2015b).

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The campaign against ChAFTA was multi-pronged, but by far the most prominent criticism was around its labour mobility provisions. Pointing to clauses in the treaty that Australia would ‘not impose or maintain any limitations on the total number of visas granted’ or ‘require labour market testing, economic needs testing or other procedures of similar effects as a condition for temporary entry’, Shorten challenged the government’s position that ChAFTA would ‘not allow unrestricted access to the Australian labour market by Chinese workers’ (Shorten 2015a). Labour market testing (LMT) imposes an obligation on domestic employers to test the availability of Australian workers before seeking to recruit them from overseas. Trade union leaders contended that ChAFTA’s provisions would lead to a ‘radical altering of the labour market’ and that in ‘nearly every sector of our economy...jobs will be offered to Chinese nationals rather than locals’ (Conifer 2015).

A related claim was that workplace safety standards would be eroded. This owed to an Australian commitment to remove mandatory skills testing for visa applicants from China in 10 occupations, including electricians. The national secretary of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) declared that the changes meant, ‘it’s not a matter of if, but when, someone is killed’ (Mather 2015). Shorten himself raised the prospect that unqualified plumbers from China ‘might come and work on your house’ or Chinese electricians ‘might go into your roof’ (Senate 2015).

Another criticism was that rather than promote risk-mitigating trade diversification, ChAFTA would instead lead to China’s ‘economic domination’ of Australia. Beijing would then use Australia’s greater trade exposure to the Chinese market to further its ‘strategic influence’ and ‘global strategic aims’ (Wade 2015). In 2014, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had warned during a visit to Australia that more trade with China ‘makes you dependent, to an extent that can undermine your freedom of movement and your sovereignty, economic and political’. She also described a 630-strong Australian business delegation led by Minister Robb to China that year as ‘a mistake’ (McGeough 2014).

ChAFTA’s passage through the Australian parliament was finally secured 4 months after its signing. The compromise deal between the Coalition government and the Labour opposition involved no changes to the treaty’s text. Instead, the government agreed to three regulatory ‘safeguards’ the opposition had proposed around temporary labour migration (Coorey 2015). In response, the president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) lamented that ‘the proposed changes simply don’t go far enough’. Another union figure said Labour’s backing amounted to ‘capitulation’ (Kinnaird 2015).

This Policy Forum uses the above claims made by Australian proponents and critics to structure an assessment of ChAFTA’s outcomes a decade on. It then considers Chinese perspectives on the same issue.

2 | Trade Outcomes

A free trade agreement (FTA) is not a prerequisite for a strong economic relationship. Nonetheless, reduced tariffs and the

removal of other barriers raises awareness of underlying economic complementarities and potentially aids households and businesses taking advantage of them (Productivity Commission 2024). Prior to ChAFTA’s enactment, economic modelling by independent researchers (Qi and Zhang 2018), as well as that commissioned by government (Mai et al. 2005), concluded that ChAFTA would deliver, positive trade and income-promoting benefits for both countries, albeit not on the scale being touted by the deal’s more enthusiastic proponents.

Subsequent trade data reveal that, despite beginning from an already large base, in the decade that followed ChAFTA’s enactment Australia’s total trade with China grew from \$145 billion to \$326 billion, a 125% increase. This compared with a 77% increase with the rest of the world. Exports rose from \$85 billion to \$213 billion, a 150% increase, compared with 86% to the rest of the world (Figure 1) (DFAT [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] 2025a, 2025d). On the other side of trade equation, total imports from China grew from \$60 billion to \$113 billion, a 90% jump. This compared with 69% from the rest of the world (Figure 2). The Chinese market outperformed across almost all categories of goods and services exports and imports. Of course, ChAFTA was not the only, or even necessarily leading factor behind these outcomes. For example, China’s economy more than doubled in size between 2014 and 2024. This jump in Chinese purchasing power fuelled increased demand for goods and services from most countries, including those without an FTA with China. Still, consistent with ChAFTA having positive marginal effects, Australia’s share of China’s total goods imports rose from 4.4% in 2015 to an average of 5.7% in the decade that followed (International Trade Centre (ITC) 2025).

Despite ChAFTA’s liberalising measures and the impressive trade growth recorded to date, scope for further removal of trade barriers and deeper Australia-China economic engagement remains. For example, while ChAFTA saw all Australian tariffs on Chinese goods eliminated by 2019, in keeping with its WTO accession protocol Beijing retains import quotas on rice, wheat, maize, sugar and vegetable oil imports and with in-quota tariffs ranging from 1% to 15%. China also imposes ‘safeguard’ tariffs on Australian beef of 12% when import volumes in a given year exceed a specified threshold, as they did in September last year (Myers 2024).

3 | Labour Market Outcomes

In 2014–15, Australia granted 3522 primary temporary resident (skilled) visas to Chinese nationals (Figure 3) (DHA (Department of Home Affairs) 2024). This was just seven percent of all such visas granted and was trivial in the context of total employment in Australia of nearly 12 million (ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2025a). Despite the modest starting point, and contrary to the critics’ claims, after ChAFTA was enacted both the number of visas extended to Chinese nationals and their proportion of the total fell. In 2023–24, these numbers stood at just 2033 and four percent, respectively. By then, total employment in Australia exceeded 14 million.

That temporary labour migration from the China did not surge following ChAFTA’s enactment is, in fact, unsurprising.

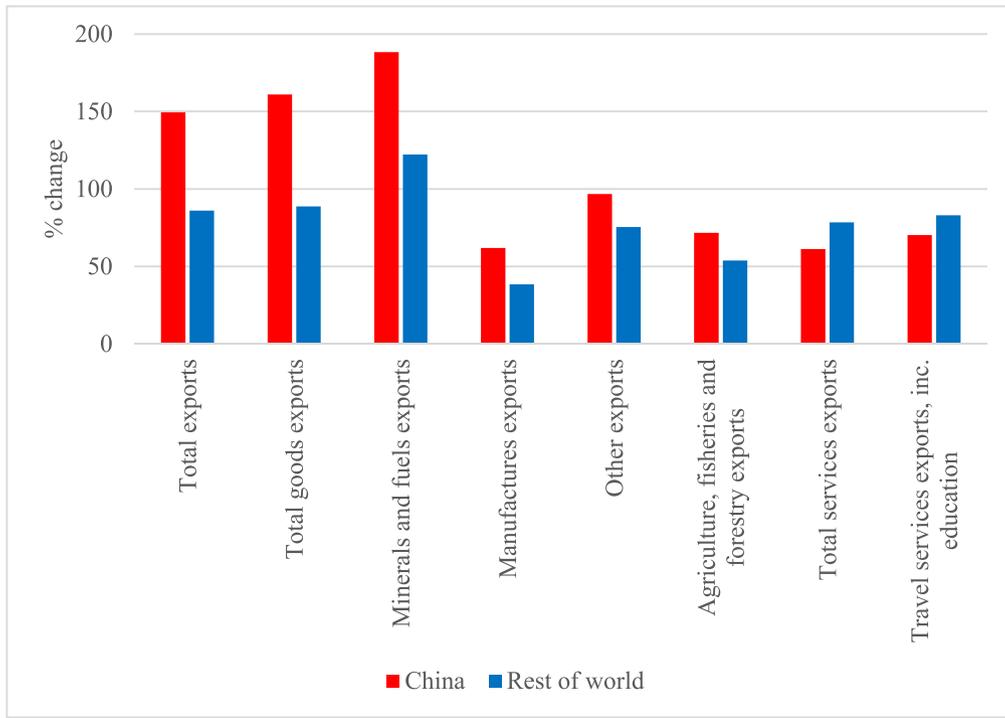


FIGURE 1 | Growth of Australia's exports to China, 2023–24 versus 2014–15.

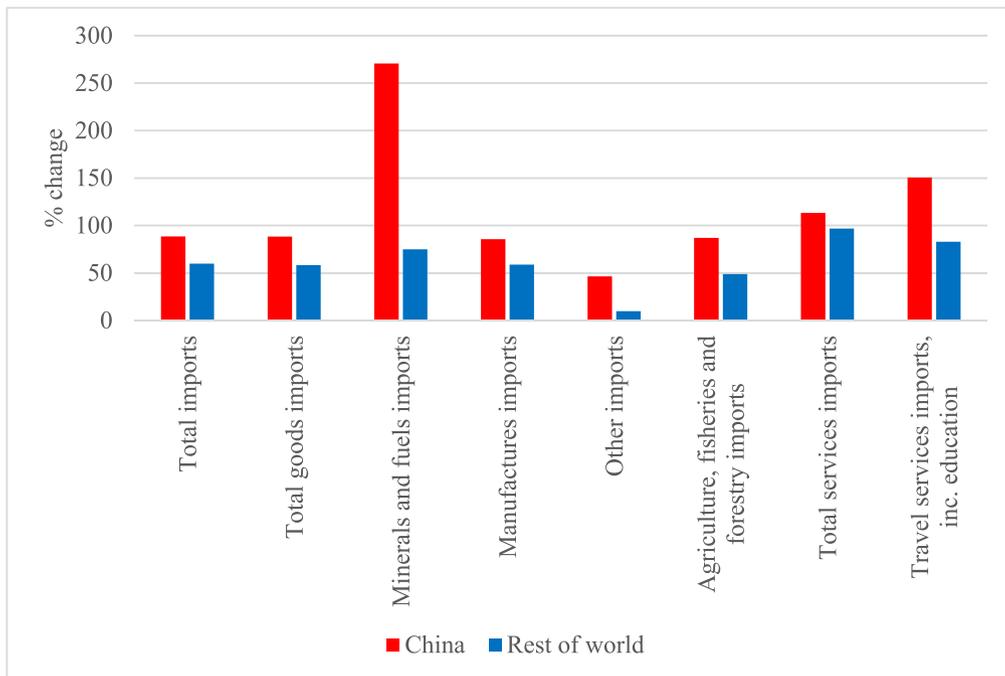


FIGURE 2 | Growth of Australia's imports from China, 2023–24 versus 2014–15.

First, the labour mobility provisions in ChAFTA were only modest extensions of what was already being applied (Laurenceson 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). Agitation that LMT would no longer be applied to Chinese nationals missed the broader context that it had been abolished from Australian legislation entirely in 2001. It was only reintroduced by the outgoing Labour government on the last parliamentary sitting day before the 2013 federal election was called, and even then, only covered a limited number of mostly trades-based occupations (O'Connor 2013). After the Coalition won government, and 7 months prior to

ChAFTA's signing, it issued a legislative instrument that exempted nationals from countries with which Australia had an FTA from LMT (Cash 2014). These included seven of Australia's then-top 11 trading partners—the US, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia. The step was necessary because the commitments in these existing FTAs were deemed to be inconsistent with requiring LMT. Despite being Australia's largest trading partner by far, China was the odd one out. In any case, by extending an exemption from LMT to Chinese nationals in the affected occupations, the practical impact would barely

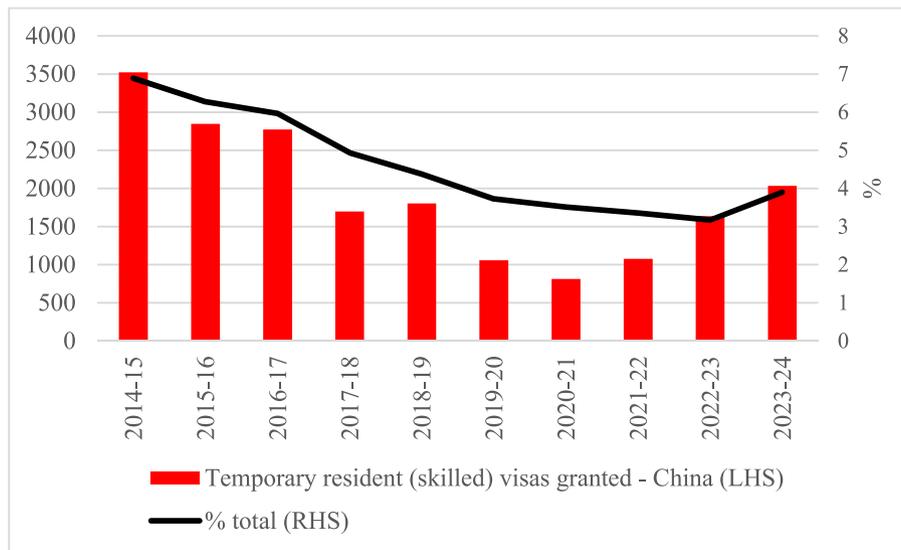


FIGURE 3 | Primary temporary resident (skilled) visas granted to Chinese nationals.

register. In 2014–2015, there had been only 353 such visas granted to Chinese nationals, accounting for just four percent of the total (DHA (Department of Home Affairs) 2024).

Second, as was also the case in many of Australia’s other FTAs, the commitments in ChAFTA were couched in terms of five specific categories of temporary entrant. These included: Business Visitors, Intra-Corporate Transferees, Independent Executives, Contractual Service Suppliers and Installers and Servicers. Only the latter two categories raised possible concerns. No Australian government, for example, would consider limiting the number of Chinese nationals temporarily entering Australia on a business visa. A Contractual Services Provider is defined as someone ‘who has trade, technical and professional skills and experience and who is assessed as having necessary qualifications, skills and work experience accepted as meeting Australia’s standards for their nominated occupation’. Their visa possibilities, however, are limited to circumstances where they are an employee of a Chinese company contracted to supply a service within Australia, and which does not have a commercial presence or where they are engaged by a company that does. Contractual Service Suppliers had also already been exempted from LMT in previous FTAs with New Zealand, Thailand, Chile, Korea and Japan. In none of these cases had there been a subsequent flood of temporary labour migration. As for Installers and Servicers, such visas were limited to installing and/or servicing machinery and equipment when such tasks are a condition of purchase. Their entry was also restricted to being less than 3 months (DFAT [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] 2015).

Third, ChAFTA contained an overarching labour market protection. This said that Australia’s grant of temporary entry would be contingent on meeting eligibility requirements within Australia’s migration law and regulations ‘as applicable at the time of an application’. Even ChAFTA’s critics conceded this meant that after its enactment there remained ‘sufficient flexibility and scope...to include labour market testing...’ (Howe 2015).

Finally, Australia’s existing laws—specifically, the Worker Protection Act 2008—meant that companies would still have to

offer foreign workers the same wages and conditions as local workers, reducing any incentive for employers to wade through the fees and administrative processes necessary to access overseas workers. The latest employment data show that, in fact, there are more jobs in Australia’s manufacturing sector now than when ChAFTA was enacted.

Claims that ChAFTA would also erode workplace safety standards were similarly not situated in the requisite context. While committing to remove mandatory skills testing for visa applicants from China, including electricians, there were 20 other occupations that remained unaffected. More importantly, what the change did was simply bring China into line with the way that temporary labour migration visa applications were processed from more than 150 other countries. Previously, China had been on a list of just 10 countries whose citizens were subject to mandatory rather than discretionary skills assessments. When a senior Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) official was asked by the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties whether China possessed ‘any other risks compared with those other 150 countries’, the answer was ‘no’ (JSCOT (Joint Standing Committee on Treaties) 2015). The DIBP further confirmed that while it would no longer be a routine part of the visa application process, the assessing officer could still require a verification of skills if they considered it necessary. Further, upon arrival an electrician from China would need to satisfy any licencing and registration requirements at the federal and state levels, including passing any tests and skills assessments, before performing work. Otherwise, their visa would be cancelled after 28 days. In every year since 2014–15 the number of Chinese electricians granted temporary work visas has been less than five (DHA (Department of Home Affairs) 2024).

4 | Strategic Outcomes

After ChAFTA was enacted, Australia’s trade with China increased as a proportion of the total, from 21% in 2014-15 to 26% in 2023-24 (Figure 4) (DFAT [Department of Foreign

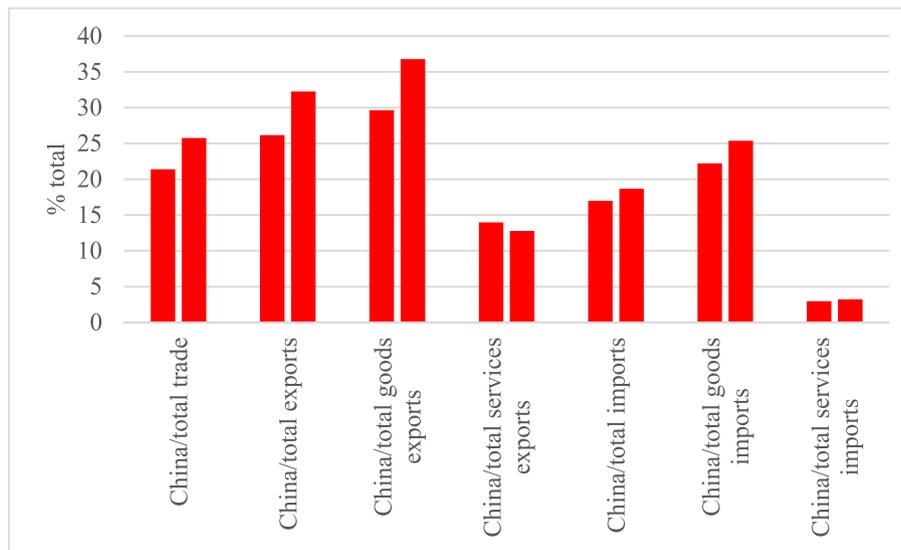


FIGURE 4 | China's share of Australia's trade, 2014–15 versus 2023–24.

Affairs and Trade] 2025a). That said, it would be difficult to make the case that ChAFTA has seriously distorted Australia's geographic trade playing field. This is because by 2023-24 Australia had FTAs with its top 11 trading partners, which collectively accounted for 71.5% of total trade (DFAT [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] 2025b).

Nonetheless, there remains the question of whether a larger trade exposure has conferred on Beijing an ability to exert 'economic domination' and advance its 'strategic interests' at Australia's expense. There is little evidence to support an assessment that it has.

Shortly after ChAFTA's enactment, the Australian government began hardening its political stance towards Beijing. In 2016, this included Canberra taking a prominent position in supporting an international arbitration decision that had declared Chinese land reclamation activities in the South China Sea to be illegal under international law. The following year Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull again riled Beijing by citing 'disturbing reports about Chinese influence' when introducing strict new foreign interference laws (Murphy 2017). Beijing responded by putting Australia in the diplomatic deep freeze, including by refusing to issue visas for government ministers (Hewett et al. 2018). This did not, however, stop Canberra from leading the world in banning Chinese technology companies from participating in Australia's 5G telecommunications rollout in 2018 (Slezak and Bogle 2018). When political relations collapsed in 2020 owing to ructions around the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhou and Laurenceson 2022), Beijing responded not only by again cutting off senior political dialogue but also embarking on a campaign of trade disruption. Yet Canberra still did not adjust policy course. If anything, it spurred a stronger balancing impulse in Australia's foreign policy settings, as illustrated by the signing of the AUKUS partnership with Washington and London in 2021 (Curran 2024; Kelly 2024).

Since coming to power in 2022, the Labour government under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has not reversed any substantive policy position taken by previous Coalition governments related to the challenges that China's rise presents

to Australia's interests. Indeed, in some areas, such as contesting Beijing's influence in the South Pacific, it has been more active. In 2024, Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Birmingham acknowledged and endorsed the government's policy continuity (UTS:ACRI (University of Technology Sydney and Australia-China Relations Institute) 2024). The Albanese government's critics nowadays mostly reproach it for what they perceive to be the avoidance of new policy actions that could jeopardise the trade links with China that have been restored since 2022. For example, in 2023, some members of the opposition criticised the government for brokering deals around the removal of barley and wine tariffs rather than insisting that the WTO deliver an adverse public judgement against China. However, the relevant opposition shadow ministers for foreign affairs and trade (UTS:ACRI 2024), as well as the leader of junior Coalition partner, the National Party of Australia (Collinson 2025), supported the government's approach owing to it bringing faster relief to Australian exporters.

What Labour has changed to pursue its policy of 'stabilisation' with China is to abandon the previous Coalition government's muscular rhetoric. It has also instituted messaging discipline such that commentary around relations with China is overwhelmingly delivered by Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong. Such discipline, however, does not equate to what some observers have described as 'public silence' (Callick 2024). By the end of the Albanese government's first term, Wong had issued 34 official statements critical of Beijing, a rate of one a month, covering topics from Australians detained in China to instances where Canberra deemed that Beijing had not acted in accordance with international law (Laurenceson 2024).

ChAFTA did not entirely restrain China's behaviour. Owing to a souring of political relations, by the end of 2017 Beijing had ceased engaging with Canberra on ChAFTA's institutional mechanisms, such as the various committees it established to review progress on implementation and discuss possibilities for further liberalisation. In 2020, around a dozen Australian goods saw their access to the Chinese market disrupted. Trade Minister Simon Birmingham said at the time that Beijing was acting in a way that was contrary 'to the letter and spirit' of its

ChAFTA and WTO obligations (Hurst 2020a). Other commentators went further, asserting that ChAFTA was ‘not worth the paper it’s written on today’ (Hurst 2020b). Yet most Australian goods continued to enter China at lower tariff rates than their international competitors. Beijing also continued to implement tariff reductions and quota increases that were scheduled in ChAFTA throughout the period of acute political tension (Webster et al. 2021). In 2024, the remaining tariffs on beef, cheese, butter and yoghurt were eliminated entirely and the country-specific, tariff-free quota allocation on Australian wool exports was again increased on schedule (Farrell 2024a).

It proved the case, too, that Beijing remained more sensitive to being seen to adhere to international trade rules than the world’s other superpower, the US. In three of their recent bilateral trade disputes, both Australia and China agreed from the outset to defer to an independent adjudicator. This saw exceptionally high Chinese tariffs on Australian barley and wine removed in 2023. Similarly, when China won a case against Australia in 2024, Trade Minister Don Farrell stated that the Australian government ‘accepts the ruling of the WTO panel’ and committed to ‘engage with China...to implement the panel’s findings’ (Farrell 2024b). After a 6-year hiatus, Beijing also began re-engaging with ChAFTA’s institutional mechanisms. In April 2024, a second meeting of the Joint Commission overseeing ChAFTA’s implementation was held in Canberra, and seven of the eight ChAFTA committees have now recommenced discussions (DFAT [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] 2025c). At the conclusion of Prime Minister Albanese’s 6-day visit to China in July 2025, both sides committed to a formal ChAFTA review.

5 | Chinese Perspectives

A review of Chinese perspectives at ChAFTA’s commencement points unsurprisingly to a different set of assessment metrics to those that pervaded Australia’s public debate. The trade and income-creating potential of ChAFTA that was touted in Australia was also recognised in China (Jiang and Huang 2017). Chinese manufacturing sectors were expected to benefit most, such as the textile and garment industry (Zhao et al. 2019). As shown in Section 2, trade data support an assessment that Chinese exports of goods and services to Australia have outpaced those from the rest of the world.

However, in Australia there were few concerns about a surge in imports from China displacing domestic production and causing job losses. This was because Australia’s tariff rates were already low. For China, however, such concerns were more salient, particularly in agricultural products processing sectors including wool, dairy products and livestock (Cao et al. 2020).

For China, the benefits foreshadowed by ChAFTA included liberalised access to Australian assets for investors. Canberra committed to quadrupling the dollar threshold for Chinese investors needing approval by the Foreign Investment Review Board, thus bringing them into line with the way investors from the US, Japan, Korea and several other countries were treated (Uren 2020). Beijing’s broader expectations for investment liberalisation were also spurred by comments from then-Prime

Minister, Tony Abbott on his first trip to China in 2014. Abbott emphasised that, ‘Australia has never rejected any investment application from a Chinese SOE and recently approved a large SOE investment in critical infrastructure’ (Murphy 2014). Yet following ChAFTA’s enactment, Canberra began blocking high-profile, proposed Chinese investments with increasing frequency, including several, such as a cattle station and dairy and drinks manufacturer, that had no apparent connection to national security. In July 2021, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg justified blocking an increasing number of Chinese investment proposals by claiming he had ‘increasingly seen foreign investment applications that are being pursued not necessarily for commercial objectives but strategic objectives’ (Crowe and Bagshaw 2021). He did not, however, provide any supporting evidence. This saw Australia receiving criticism in Chinese state media for ‘deviating from the commitment in the ChAFTA...to provide convenience for each other’s investment and continuously lower the threshold for investment review’ (Xinhua News 2020). Whatever the merits of the accusation, Canberra’s investment policy direction has contributed to the stock of Chinese investment in Australia falling by 20% since 2021 and now stands at just one percent of the total (ABS [Australian Bureau of Statistics] 2025b).

Another benefit China expected from ChAFTA was that fewer Chinese goods would be vulnerable to onerous anti-dumping tariffs. This was because in 2005 Canberra had agreed to confer ‘market economy status’ on China as a precondition for ChAFTA negotiations. An Australian Senate Committee made clear what effect the ‘market economy’ designation would have: ‘Chinese imports will now be judged no differently for anti-dumping purposes to imports from the US and the EU’ (Senate 2005). Throughout the first half of the 2010s the Australian government had been ramping up its use of anti-dumping tariffs and China was the most common target, accounting for around 30% of all measures in force on the eve of ChAFTA’s enactment (Productivity Commission 2016). However, contrary to China’s expectations, for most of the last decade Canberra continued to treat China as a ‘non-market economy’ when calculating remedial tariffs. It did so by using what international trade law scholars have described as a ‘creative approach’ to skirt WTO strictures (Zhou and Laurencson 2022). In 2021, Beijing instigated a WTO action to test the measures and in 2024 this ruled there were inconsistencies between Australian practices and international trade rules (WTO [World Trade Organisation] 2024).

6 | Conclusion

This Policy Forum has shown that after ChAFTA’s enactment, trade has grown in a manner consistent with the forecasts touted by the deal’s Australian proponents, while the claims advanced by its critics have overwhelmingly not materialised. Chinese perspectives have been more ambiguous on the relative benefits that ChAFTA has delivered. Nonetheless, a decade on and ChAFTA’s net benefits have been sufficient to secure ongoing support from government ministers and officials on both sides (UTS:ACRI [University of Technology Sydney and Australia-China Relations Institute] 2025).

The Australian public have also delivered their verdict. At the end of 2014, shortly after it was announced that ChAFTA negotiations had reached a successful conclusion but before the text was released, the public were broadly supportive with 44% approving of signing the deal, while 18% registered disapproval (Essential Research 2014). After the campaign against ChAFTA gathered pace, however, the numbers narrowed. A poll conducted the following August found 40% thought it was 'a good thing', while 31% did not (Morgan 2019). Following ChAFTA's enactment, however, public opposition mostly receded. A 2017 poll found a higher proportion of Australians looked upon increased trade with China more favourably than with the US (Jackman and Flake 2017). Even during the depths of Beijing's campaign of trade disruption against Australia in 2021, nationally representative polling found that 52% of Australians considered that ChAFTA had been beneficial for Australia, compared with just 13% that disagreed with the proposition. These percentages remained consistent throughout 2022–2024 (Collinson and Burke 2024). Nowadays 44% of Australians consider China a more reliable trading partner than the US. This compares with just 26% who take the opposite view (Chambers and Ferguson 2025), likely reflecting that the US tariff wall on Australian goods is now nearly 10 times higher than that imposed by China (Laurenceson 2025). For all the concerns that Australians continue to harbour about China's rise, ChAFTA is evidently not one of them.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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