

Funding for public research into foreign policy Submission to Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

Yun Jiang

19 March 2021

Funding for foreign policy research is becoming increasingly politicised in Australia. The result is projects supporting or promoting government agenda are more likely to be funded. Projects that may be critical of the government are less likely to be funded. This is not in Australia's national interest.

Politicisation of Australian Government research

Australian research funding is subject to increasing political interference, as government ministers seek to intervene in research grant decisions. Ministerial discretion on grant funding decisions are opaque and can lead to risks of censorship and self-censorship.

In 2017 and 2018, the then Minister for Education Simon Birmingham vetoed 11 Australian Research Council (ARC) grants. These grant proposals were recommended to him after strict scrutiny by a rigorous peer-review process.

The decision to veto these grant applications were not explained. It appears that a government minister had vetoed these applications because it does not align with his political views.

In late 2018, the then Minister for Education Dan Tehan implemented a "new national interest test", requiring ARC to consider the "national interest" as part of its decision.

In 2020, Minister Tehan vetoed five ARC grant projects, supposedly on national security grounds. Presumably, these five projects had already passed the “national interest test” set out by the Minister, but were knocked back after additional checks by national security agencies. In total, Minister Tehan referred 18 ARC applications to additional checks but there is no explanation why these 18 were selected.

While the decision to veto five projects was reported by *The Australian* in February 2021, there was no official announcement or any explanation provided by the Minister.

The opaque process of referring specific applications to national security agencies as well as the lack of explanation by national security agencies or the Minister on the decisions mean there is substantial scope for political interference and corruption.

As the process is not transparent and the scope for discretion is high, there is a real risk of censorship. The Minister may use grant decisions to promote only those views that are aligned with the Government. Future applicants are also more likely to self-censor as they try to guess the Minister’s intentions for vetoing projects.

Such politicisation of Australian Government research funding extends to funding for foreign policy issues.

National interest, political interest, national security

Ministers can easily promote “political interest” before “national interest” when making funding decisions. National security concerns have veto power over the broader national interest. Benefits are not weighed against risks.

National interest is comprised of different dimensions, including security, prosperity, and values. In a democracy, it is always contestable and up for debate. There are no one objective criteria for assessing the national interest.

It is therefore deeply problematic and undemocratic if only the government of the day or the minister gets to decide what is in the national interest. This can lead to abuses where the minister substitutes “political interest” for “national interest”. The risk of this happening is why it is extremely important that a full public explanation is provided if a decision is said to be made in the national interest.

However, recent trends point towards less transparency. The government has instituted a new process where ARC College of Experts and detailed expert assessors cannot even see the national interest statements provided by grant applicants. So these expert, or anyone else for that matter, are unable to scrutinise the minister's decisions supposedly based on national interest.

For ARC grants and other government grant process (especially in foreign policy), national security agencies are asked to provide additional screening after the national interest test. This demonstrates that national security concerns are overriding the broader national interest concerns. National security priorities are more important than any other government priorities. So potential benefits of research are not weighed against risks, but instead, the mentality is around minimising risks without the consideration of benefits.

Prejudices around foreign funding of research

Certain foreign government funding sources are considered acceptable and preferable in foreign policy, even when they have the potential to push a foreign government agenda on Australia's foreign policy. This can entrench the status quo in foreign policy.

Foreign governments are another substantial contributor to foreign policy research funding in Australia. Both universities and think tanks are recipients of foreign government funding. For example, the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Public Register indicates that the US Department of State, the Government of Japan, and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office are funding think tanks projects in Australia.

Presumably, these funding serves to advance the national interest of these foreign governments. Yet in most cases, they are deemed acceptable because there is an underlying assumption that Australia's national interest is perfectly aligned with the national interests of the US, Japan, and the UK.

However, this arrangement can entrench existing prejudices. If we assume that Australia's national interest is perfectly aligned with the US, we then would deem all funding from the US Government as acceptable. The US Government can then fund foreign policy research in Australia that further promote the idea that the national interests of the two countries are aligned.

On the other hand, if we assume Australia's national interest is always op-

posed to China, we then see any funding with connections to China as suspicious. The result is that projects that identify common interests between the two countries are less likely to be funded.

Implications for foreign policy issues

Ultimately funders do not necessarily influence the conclusion of research. However, they often can influence the topic and direction of research. This means funders can set the foreign policy research agenda.

Most funders (including the Australian Government, foreign governments, and private interests) likely already know the political leaning of the research organisation and the principal researchers before deciding to fund their research. In fact, it's highly likely that the organisations and researchers are chosen precisely because of their views.

The three funding issues described above indicate that the following foreign policy perspectives are more likely to be promoted in Australia:

- Agenda that is aligned with the government of the day;
- Agenda that privileges the interests of national security agencies; and
- Agenda that is aligned with some foreign governments (particularly our traditional allies and friends).

On the other hand, views critical of the Australian Government are less likely to be funded. This can influence the research direction of researchers in the future, as they are less likely to pursue projects that express views contrary to the government's view.

The risk of this is that foreign policy research in Australia may end up resembling more like an apparatus of government propaganda.

About the author

Yun Jiang has extensive experience working across government and academia on policy issues, including foreign policy and foreign interference. This submission reflects only her personal view.