

Time for China-Australia ties to embrace positive momentum

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‘China is our partner. China is not our enemy. Let’s get that very straight.’

Australia’s China hawks will recoil at the description, claiming that it amplifies a Beijing talking point. Earlier this month, China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, argued that the crux of the problem in Australia-China relations was that ‘some political forces in Australia insist on treating China as an adversary rather than a partner.’

But the above insistence does not stem from any interference by Beijing.

Nor was it delivered to an Australian audience by a Sydney or Perth-based business leader in thrall to the lucrative Chinese market.

Nor was it uttered in an earlier, more benign era.

The occasion was October 2020 and the speaker was Sir Angus Houston, the decorated former Chief of the Australian Defence Force.

Nearly one year had passed since Beijing had suspended dialogue with senior Australian political leaders. Australian exports of barley and beef to China had already been hit with disruption too.

Yet Houston was urging Canberra to quickly find a ‘circuit-breaker.’ Not only did Australia ‘need China’ as a vital economic partner, it was ‘not going to go away.’ Rather, China was ‘going to get stronger...So we’d better work out the best way to work with them.’

The recently ousted Australian government led by Scott Morrison never did find a ‘circuit-breaker.’

Worse, in the last 18 months of his term, Morrison threw diplomatic caution to the wind, calculating - incorrectly, it turned out - that hairy-chested posturing towards China would yield a domestic political payoff.

In contrast, the new Australian government led by Anthony Albanese is already demonstrating it gets what Houston was driving at.

There has been a swift restoration of professional diplomacy. Efforts from both sides have meant the green shoots of an improved relationship trajectory are already apparent.

Since his arrival new Chinese ambassador, Xiao Qian has consistently spoken about the bilateral relationship in up-beat terms. Earlier this month he said he was ‘ready to compare notes’ with the new Albanese government to ‘see what we can do together.’

Chinese premier, Li Keqiang, sent a congratulatory message to Albanese upon his election's victory. Albanese welcomed the gesture and reciprocated with a note expressing appreciation.

A similar exchange took place between new Australian foreign minister, Penny Wong, and Wang Yi.

And then last weekend, in the first ministerial-level meeting since November 2019, defence minister, Richard Marles sat down for a more than hour with Chinese defence minister Wei Fenghe on the sidelines of an international security summit in Singapore.

For Marles, seizing the opportunity was not without political risk. During the election campaign he had been singled out for attack, including in the form of an outrageous slur by Morrison that he had previously engaged in 'advocating for the Chinese government.'

The meeting finished, Marles said, with 'both of us feeling that we wanted to get the relationship...in a better place.'

He emphasized that going forward 'we will engage with China with respect, and acknowledging China as a country with whom we have very significant interests.'

And unlike former defence minister Peter Dutton, Marles refused to get drawn into hypotheticals on the sensitive issue of Taiwan. What he did put on the record was that Australia's One China policy had not changed, including that 'We do not support Taiwanese independence.'

It was disappointing news then that trade minister Don Farrell's request for a meeting with China's Commerce Minister, Wang Wentao on the sidelines of the World Trade Organization ministerial in Geneva this week was not accommodated.

After the collapse in political trust in recent years, it is understandable that Beijing remains sceptical about Canberra's intentions.

Albanese's repeated declaration that 'it is China that has changed' might particularly grate. After all, Washington's Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific had stipulated a 'desired end state' was for China to remain forever subordinate to the US in its own region. And since 2020, the Morrison government had given strong indications of lining up in support of that objective.

Still, while the new Australian government also insists, rightly, that it will not shy away from taking policy positions it judges to be in the national interest, there is little evidence to conclude that Canberra is now any more antagonistic towards Beijing than a host of other capitals across the Asia-Pacific that have their own challenges to manage.

Yet these capitals' requests for broad ministerial-level engagement are accommodated and trade involving their businesses is not being sanctioned.

And unlike Canada, which has had its citizens returned, Australians Yang Hengjun and Cheng Lei remain detained in China.

Now is the time to embrace the positive momentum, not retreat to the self-defeating corners that Canberra and Beijing had occupied until last month.

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