



UTS:ACRI address: China's Ambassador to Australia Discussion

Speaker: H.E. Mr Xiao Qian, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Australia

Moderator: Professor James Laurenceson, , Director, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney

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Professor James Laurenceson:

Thank you, Mr Ambassador, for that address. Ladies and gentlemen, let's begin by giving the Ambassador one more round of applause. Look, I'll go off script a bit. The easiest thing in the world for the Ambassador to have done today would've been to not accept our invitation to attend a public event. He could have stayed in the walls of the Chinese Embassy in Canberra comfortably, but he's come today. I thank you for the respect that you've extended to us, Ambassador, and I will now move into a period of conversation, some of the questions not being so simple or easy.

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

Well, thanks, James, for your welcome and for your opening remarks. It's a very important occasion. As I said in my speech, it's a mutual communication.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Right.

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

I'm here to share with you my views, and at the same time, listen to your views. I think it's good to have an open discussion. There's no wrong questions. There could be only wrong answers. I'll try to be a bridge as Ambassador to link between our two countries, between two peoples.

Professor James Laurenceson:

I think my own view is that I think the Ambassador, in the public's eyes, I think the fact that you've come here today will certainly enhance the public's view of you and what you're trying to do here in Australia.

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

Thank you for encouragement and your confidence.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Alright. Well, let's get started. Look, just a reminder, and I want to be transparent with our audience, the questions that I'm putting to the Ambassador will not come as a surprise to him. I have flagged those with his office beforehand. They included some de-identified questions that the audience submitted during the registration process. I hope we get to as many of those as we can. But can I also be clear that I alone had responsibility for formulating and selecting these questions? And I thank again, Mr Ambassador, to you for accommodating that request so we could engage in genuine dialogue.

It's a shame our friends aren't still with us because if they hung around, I feel quite confident that after this question and answer session, they too would've agreed that this discussion we're going to have is not just a series of Dorothy Dixter questions. We're going to be delving right into some matters of substance in the debate. Mr Ambassador, let me get started.

Look, I'd like to tackle some challenging issues front on, if I may. In the not so distant past, it was in early 2020 that the breakdown in senior political dialogue between Canberra and Beijing began, and when Australia's exports started being disrupted. From that time, the message delivered to the Australian public by the former Morrison government was that Beijing had changed. China had changed and become hell-bent on punishing Australia, simply because Canberra had the temerity to call for an independent, international inquiry into the origins and global spread of COVID-19. Well, to be frank, in my assessment, there was a significant change in China's behaviour.

I remember prior to 2020 telling people that for all the political fallout since 2017, the fact was ministers on both sides were still meeting and trade continued to flow smoothly. Mr Ambassador, my guess is that 95 percent of Australians would consider a call for an independent, international inquiry into COVID-19, a devastating global pandemic, to be a fair and reasonable thing. And so if indeed that was what Beijing was responding to, I think most Australians would think that was unreasonable. So my question for you is: is there more to the story, is there a fuller explanation for why Beijing responded the way it did?

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

Well, thank you, James. Well, before I come to the question, can I just say a few words about the statement you make? Actually, you make several points I think are very important. I'll touch on those points first. Well, thank you for your kindness for flagging some of the questions you're going to pose to me this, but sorry for my bad memory, I don't remember those questions. But anyhow, this is occasion for mutual understanding, to be informative and it's not a test of IQ, give me some surprise 'how quick you can react'. And if I'm prepared, I can share with you in a more comprehensive, more meaningful way. Surprising anybody doesn't make much sense. But I'm not surprised if you give me any new questions.

As for the point that you made remarking on how China has changed, I would rather say that a lot of changes have happened in China in the past several decades, especially the past four decades since the start of the reform and opening up in 1978. But the one thing [that] doesn't change is our foreign policy, policy of peace development, and the policy of friendship between us [and] Australia. This remains unchanged.

As for the COVID-19 virus issue, it is our policy. It's our public policy that we should find out where the virus coming from, where it's going, the purpose to prevent such virus to happen again in the future. This is a public statement by our President [made] publicly in the international forum. But it's one thing to talk about this, to

find out source, origin of the virus, and that's for the scientists to make their conclusion, to make studies. This is a scientific issue.

But if somebody or [a] certain country declares the COVID-19 virus as the so-called China virus, or they accuse China publicly saying that the Chinese laboratory is creating, inventing this new virus and by mistake, it's leaked to the market and causing the spread of the pandemic in China and globally, that's absolutely unfounded. That's absolutely nonsense. This is absolutely something the Chinese people, 1.4 billion people, cannot accept. So if that happens, I think it's fair and reasonable for 1.4 billion Chinese people to be very angry about. As for the so-called punishment, I'm not sure is there any punishment on the part of Chinese government. I know there is a very strong reaction among the Chinese public. If you search the internet at that period of time it is very, very strong. Very, very strong. And now your question is for more explanation, I think the current issue is that, the question about the sourcing the original COVID-19 is scientific issue but what happened then between the previous government of this country with China, with Chinese people, was something more complicated.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Right. Okay. So I take from that, the interpretation in Beijing was that this was not simply a scientific call for an independent, international inquiry into COVID-19. The interpretation, whether correct or not, that was the interpretation, was a political attack was at play. That's my words, I won't pin those...that's my interpretation of your comment. Thank you.

Look, let's now go to the end of 2020, November 18 to be precise. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the Chinese Embassy, before your time of course, had arranged 'a deliberately leaked document' that 'listed 14 disputes' that 'appeared aimed at pressuring the Morrison government to reverse Australian's position on key policies'. A coercive threatening element was included in the story in the form of a quote from a Chinese government official, who said: 'China is angry. If you make China the enemy, China will be the enemy'. And so that framing led to that 14-point list to become commonly known as the 14 demands. Now, what I've always found somewhat interesting about that list is as a list of disputes, there's nothing particularly remarkable there.

All of the things on that list is something that I could have told the Australian public were things that the Chinese government was annoyed by. Even the quote, 'if you make China the enemy, China will be the enemy', is in one reading just a statement of the obvious. And in fact, it's actually a direct word-for-word quotation from Australia's former Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer. So a quote that he used himself.

So to put my question bluntly, Mr Ambassador, in Beijing's mind, does Canberra need to, for example, this is on the list, reverse 'the decision banning Huawei technology and ZTE from the 5G network in order for broad ministerial dialogue to be reinstated and for trade to start flowing freely again'. Fundamentally, I think the question is, in Beijing's view can an improved trajectory in Australia-China relations be charted through more cautious, respectful, careful diplomacy or is it going to take policy concessions?

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

Well, first of all, about this so-called the 14-points list, I don't have a list. I haven't ever seen a list of 14 points and that happened before I came here as Ambassador. But I would like to share with you that, according to what I've been told, is an informal discussion between the embassy staff with a media [representative] and the embassy staff was upon request to explain what are the major concerns from the Chinese side. And then eventually the concerns were being reported in the twisted way as the so-called preconditions, as demands. This is not true. That's not true. And well, there have been communications between China and Australia, various channels, a diplomatic channel for example, if the Australian side expressed their concern on a

certain thing to the Chinese side, I'm not going to categorise it as a precondition. It's just their concern, these concerns, and we're going to talk about this.

As I said in my address, when we have differences, when we have disputes, it's the time for us to sit down and talk and distribute our views and try to find out how we can minimise the differences and perhaps enlarge our common grounds. And twisting reports doesn't help. It's not constructive.

For the Huawei issue, there have been views that, it's the chicken-egg problem. Who's the first who started all this and who's the one to take first actions to improve. I think, as a matter of fact, so far as I learned about this, the previous government in this country made certain policies, took certain actions, that virtually stopped the normal business cooperations and relations between Huawei and their counterparts in Australia, between ZTE with other Australian counterparts and also between some of the other Chinese companies with their counterparts in this country. That has caused heavy casualties, I mean, losses economically. And Huawei is almost virtually out of this market, at least out of this 5G market. And that perhaps could be described as the first shot that has really damaged our normal business relations.

As for the future, as I said, we are open for joint efforts from Chinese side, from Australian side, by taking concrete actions to create an environment for the business to resume their normal relations. And you have to admit that, once something has happened to Huawei, then other Chinese companies are surprised and they're concerned that this is happened to Huawei today, what about tomorrow? Is it happening to me, to my company? So some of the companies choose to move to other countries, some of them choose to wait and see what will happen next. That's really causing the change of the atmosphere in our business relations.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Okay. So it sounds to me that the description of that list as the 14 demands, at least the message that's being communicated now, is to say that a list of 14 demands is not accurate and nor do they represent preconditions for dialogue going forward. So I think that's a significant point to make as well.

Okay. Let's move on to another question. Mr Ambassador, I'd like to share with you a general gripe, a general complaint I often hear from members of the Australian public. And it goes something like this. Some people will say that Australia and China have different systems and the different ways that Australia and China operate give China an unfair advantage in relationship dealings. For example, when I invited you to this public address, I did not ask permission from the Australian foreign minister. I hope you don't mind, Vice-Chancellor, but I will share I did not even ask the Vice-Chancellor for his permission either.

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

But with his support.

Professor James Laurenceson:

After the fact. The event invitation was sent first.

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

I'm sure, with his support. That's important.

Professor James Laurenceson:

So the point is there was no expectation from them or from me that I would need their permission. And so here we are. Now, some people will say that's not fair. The Chinese Ambassador has been given a platform at

an Australian university to put forward Beijing's views to the Australian public in an unfiltered way. That same opportunity is not available to Graham Fletcher, the Australian Ambassador in Beijing.

Another example, just a quick one. A few weeks ago, I signed an open letter with a number of other Australian academics calling for the new government in Canberra to take a more diplomatic approach to the management of China relations. Chinese state media outlets picked up on the letter and drew attention to it in their reporting. Again, I did not even ask my immediate supervisor's permission to sign that letter, let alone the Vice-Chancellor. But I find it almost impossible to imagine a similar letter from Chinese academics, based at Chinese universities, calling for Beijing to, for example, re-establish broad diplomatic dialogue with Australian counterparts, remove tariffs on Australian barley or wine, or free Australians detained in China.

That difference can cause feelings of resentment amongst the Australian public, and lead for calls for Canberra to insist on greater reciprocity. Can you understand those feelings and policy calls? And in your view, are they unreasonable?

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

Well, James, you pose the one question, but within the question you made a number of remarks. Again, can I just touch on those remarks -

Professor James Laurenceson:

Of course.

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

- before the question? Yeah. Well, I think it is a fact, and you would agree, that I come here at your invitation. And it's a platform for me to share my views. It was also a platform to listen to views, including some of these noises. And if, James, you say, you would take back your invitation, I'm going to leave right now.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Please don't.

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

There's nothing like, it's a reciprocal kind of thing, it is a special kind of privilege. I say this privilege. My privilege to be here. But really, this is a platform for mutual communication instead of a one-sided communication.

And secondly, for the Chinese intellectuals, whether they invite their, well, for example, Australian Ambassador in China, to a certain event, whether or not they would like to do that is their choice. Whether or not they would like to write a letter calling for something is their choice. But I personally believe that if they would like to write a collective letter, they're going to call for the Australian government to take different policies towards China, to look to China in a more objective way, and to help move the relationship back to the normal.

If you look at the internet in China, the overall atmosphere in China is absolutely different from what you see here in this country. I think the atmosphere in both countries needs to be improved. That's a fact. Just like what I feel here in the past five months. If you look at the newspapers, television, and internet, well, there are so many news about China, sometimes on the top lines, on the front page. But the news about China is always negative. It's always negative, and nothing but negative. That's not a true picture about China. That's not a balanced approach, a balanced view about a country.

And I understand there's a process that we should improve this atmosphere. And for Chinese atmosphere, I think it's also we need to improve by the joint efforts from both governments. So that people from our two countries will have a better feeling about each other, as we have been in past several decades. That's very important.

You also touched upon the tariffs and the sanctions. Can I just say -

Professor James Laurenceson:

Sure.

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

- people have been talking about the Chinese sanctions: 'Leave the sanctions' and 'That's not fair, [inaudible], unfounded'. I should say that this is an issue of complexity. It all started from some of the policies and actions taken by the previous government in this country. And there are reactions from the Chinese side. And these reactions could be categorised on several types, if I may. For example, the tariffs, the tariffs [inaudible] something the government has done. The tariffs have been increased because there were dumping concerns. And there were complaints from the Chinese businessmen who are dealing with the similar business about the dumping from Australia. So the government has to react to that. Now the case is already in [the] WTO, and China and Australia, we are all members of WTO. Let's follow the rules and laws, and see what we can do in the WTO.

A second type, perhaps can I say, is a reaction from the Chinese public. When people are not happy, they don't buy your products. They go to a different store, buy the similar products. And that happens. That happens in our relationship with other countries as well. In case of the recent situation, I think there are a lot of Chinese people who are not happy by some of the policies, actions, or rhetoric made by some people in this country. So, there was a change of attitudes towards the relationship. There's a natural reaction from the public, from the Chinese people.

And thirdly, the third type, perhaps, is the business, as I mentioned. They [have] become more cautious, because they're worried it might be too risky to continue the trade relations. But there's no government official sanction measures, per se, that the Chinese government have taken.

Professor James Laurenceson:

One thing I will say, you mentioned the WTO process. This is actually, I don't want to make light of it, clearly it is an area of dispute. But it's also, there is a positive angle to this in the fact that China and Australia both remain committed to the WTO process for resolving those disputes. And that's not always the case for other countries around the world.

Okay, next question.

[Interjection from the floor]

Professor James Laurenceson:

Let me just say this again. We welcome freedom of expression on this campus. That's why we're here today. Look, Mr Ambassador, if I could ask one more challenging question, I'm sorry to keep hitting you with these, but look, I think this is one I just have to ask, for my own concerns and those of most Australians. Of course, there's plenty of Australians who are concerned about their livelihood as trade is disrupted for whatever reason, but I think if I had to nominate one area of most intense concern amongst Australians, it would be

the circumstances the number of individual Australians find themselves in in China. This would include, Mr Ambassador, UTS alumnus Dr Yang Hengjun, and Cheng Lei who, like me, is a University of Queensland graduate. It would also include folks in Australia's Uyghur diaspora, who have been saying for several years that they cannot reach friends and family members because they are caught up in detention facilities in Xinjiang. Or they don't want to contact them because they are worried they are being surveilled.

Some of them themselves may have Australian permanent residency, if not citizenship. Let me give you one specific example. In March, then-Foreign Minister Marise Payne issued a statement regarding Cheng Lei. This said that 'The Australian public respects the sovereignty of China's legal system' but then went on to list a number of concerns. The details of the charge not having been provided, the Australian Ambassador being prevented from entering the court, Cheng Lei having been cut off entirely from communicating with her family, including her two young children.

Mr Ambassador, can you understand why many Australians would think, sure, we appreciate that China has sovereignty over its legal system. But if that's the nature of the legal system in China, then it would be perfectly reasonable for the Australian government, for example, to not entertain an extradition treaty with China, or to warn Australians visiting China of the risk of arbitrary detention, and so on. Surely, if a Chinese citizen was subjected to the same treatment in Australia, I imagine Beijing and the Chinese public would be up in arms. What would your message to those Australians be? Or if I could go one step further, is there any message of hope that you can give to those Australians who are worried sick right now about their loved ones?

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

Well, thanks James for the points you made, and the questions that you posed. Again, let me say that freedom of speech is different from absolute freedom.

In this world, there's no such thing as absolute freedom. Freedom is freedom within rules and laws. Just like we're having a meeting today, we're having a public event, and those who are attending should respect the law and order, keep quiet while we're speaking. So those number of people who are coming again [and] again, to disrupt the process, that's not expression of freedom of speech, in my views. So this should not be welcomed. I appreciate the point you make that this is a public event, but I do, with all my respect for you, obviously there are certain views that I, frankly speaking, I do disagree with you.

For the individual case of the Australians in China, first of all, there's been a very intense communication between China [and] Australia through the diplomatic channels, both in Beijing and in Canberra. And on these cases, these are individual cases and the Chinese relevant authorities are dealing with the cases, according to the Chinese laws and regulations. It's a judicial kind of thing. And I think it is important not only for the Chinese side, but also the Australian side, to respect the independent, the jurisdiction, the legal process of China. And secondly, the basic rights, those individuals in China are provided, have been guaranteed, according to our own laws. And some of the special measures has been taken, actually, to help them to get contact with the diplomats in China, here in Guangzhou or in Beijing, and also their families. Sometimes they may not get contacts as frequently as they wish, as perhaps due to either the pandemic, the pandemic measure policy in China is very, very strict, and that applies to everyone.

And perhaps it's because of the nature of some of the cases, when a case involves something like national security, usually it's not conducted in the way that's open to the public. That happens in many other countries as well.

As for the people in China, I think if you go to China, even during the pandemic, there are so many people from other countries, diplomats, media, tourists, businessmen, various sectors there in China, and they enjoy their life and work in China. So long as they respect the rules and laws, there's no need for them to worry.

As for Xinjiang, you mentioned, it's a virtually, it's another question of, I think you're talking about individual cases, but I don't know which particular case you're talking about. I don't have the details from you. But I would like to say that overly speaking, the question of Xinjiang is not a question of the so-called human rights or freedom or whatsoever. It's a question of national unity or separatism. A [inaudible] terrorism is a serious challenge to China's stability, national integrity, and necessary measures are being taken in the interest of both the people in Xinjiang and also the people in China. I think there's a difference. There's a difference here.

I notice there are a number of people who are here, I don't know whether these guys are either Chinese they're holding Chinese citizens, passports, or are they naturalised Australians? If you are Australians, you are loyal to the Australian government. But whether you are Chinese or Australian, I think as I mentioned in my earlier speech, that sovereignty, territorial integrity, domestic affairs, should be respected. Just like I've been respecting domestic affairs and sovereignty of this nation. I've been keeping quiet during the federal election and I'm not going to comment even today on the domestic affairs of Australia. And I absolutely support the territorial integrity of Australia. Well, it's not a good example, but Tasmania is part of Australia. No one should ever challenge that. If something happens, somebody is not happy with the government, it's individual cases. And it is not a question of, is it, people should separate this from a overall picture of a nation.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Thank you. Thank you for that. We would, I think all be thrilled if in the not too distant future, it were possible to welcome those Australians home. I know it wasn't so long ago that two Canadian citizens were detained in China and they are now back in Canada. I think we'd all be thrilled if that was possible in the case of Yang Hengjun and Cheng Lei as well.

Mr Ambassador, I might just go to a final question. Unfortunately, our time is shorter than I had hoped because of some of the disruption we had, which is a bit of a tragedy in itself. Mr Ambassador, can I wrap up with this question? This December is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Australia and the People's Republic of China. Now, reflecting on that, on one hand, the depth and breadth of those ties are truly extraordinary. Who could've imagined the extent of people-to-people ties we would have today. Trade ties, of course. And yet fears about the state and trajectory of bilateral relations, I think are at an all time high. How optimistic are you? I'm not forcing optimism on you. It's a question. How optimistic are you and what specific measures can you assure our audience today that your embassy in Canberra and the Foreign Ministry in Beijing will be advocating for within the Chinese government to ensure that 50th anniversary can be celebrated?

H.E. Mr Xiao Qian:

Well, this year really marks a very important year for bilateral relations. It is the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties and I think, personally, it's important for us to celebrate in certain ways. And celebration is not for the sake of celebrations, but celebration is an opportunity for us to think about the past. By taking stock of the past, we can perhaps show some experiences, and maybe even lessons, from the past so that we can develop our bilateral relations in future in a better way. Future decade, or even future 50 years. And the actual date is December 21st, and we still have time. And I understand this, I understand there's a new government in Canberra and there's a process from them to settle down, to make up their policies, make up their arrangement in their personals like senior ministers or secretaries. And there's a process for them to think about some of the other specific issues. And the Chinese side is ready to discuss and compare notes with their Australian colleagues in the Labor government as to what do we can do together to jointly celebrate such an important event. I think it is meaningful.

We're having some problems today. It doesn't mean we have to negate the whole past 50 years. There are a lot of successful stories in so many areas, a lot of areas where we successfully [have] been cooperating with each other and it's to the benefits of both sides. As I mentioned in my speech, it's good for both sides. It's not a one-sided kind of relationship. It's good for both sides. So I think personally, I'm still optimistic.

Professor James Laurenceson:

And I'll take that as a commitment that there will be a lot of hard work in the Chinese Embassy from now until December to make that anniversary a success.

Mr Ambassador, thank you for accepting our invitation to join us in dialogue in today's public event and engage in good faith. It's a rarity for the Australian public to have this opportunity and at a time of many challenges in the bilateral relationship, it is I think, of tremendous value for the Australian public to be able to hear your thoughts directly.

Members of our audience, thank you for coming today. I hope you found the discussion informative, and please join me in thanking the Ambassador to the People's Republic of China, His Excellency Mr Xiao Qian.

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