

OPINION

Could climate change help thaw relations between Beijing and Canberra?



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Even with a new diplomatic dawn breaking between Australia and China, Canberra should approach its ties with Beijing with caution. But now that the first tentative steps towards a rapprochement have been made it is an opportune time to seek common ground against a shared enemy: climate change.

[Penny Wong clinched the first face-to-face foreign minister meeting](#) in nearly three years after the freeze in contact for her predecessor Marise Payne.



Foreign ministers Penny Wong and Wang Yi met in Bali last Friday CREDIT: JOHANNES P. CHRISTO

More ministerial meetings will not bridge many of the potential pitfalls for bilateral relations, much less the profound political and policy divide between Canberra and Beijing. Any sustained and substantive improvement in ties will require much more diplomatic ingenuity from Canberra.

Deep disagreements lurk behind even the sanguine tone of the Chinese government's readout of the meeting between foreign ministers Wong and Wang Yi.

Beijing hopes that Canberra will “stick to regarding China as a partner rather than a rival ... seeking common ground while reserving differences ... not

targeting any third party or being controlled by any third party ... [and] building positive and pragmatic social foundations and public support.”

But these aspirations are likely to be quickly dashed by Canberra’s and Beijing’s irreconcilable views on so many fundamental questions.

Regarding the erosion and abrogation of political rights and freedoms in Hong Kong, China’s expansive maritime and territorial claims in the [South China Sea](#), the role of Chinese companies in Australian technology infrastructure, and many issues besides, Australia and China are at loggerheads.

Canberra sees Beijing’s behaviour as a severe threat to human rights, the rule of law, liberal democratic values, and Australia’s sovereignty. Meanwhile, Beijing interprets Canberra’s policies and statements as efforts to interfere in China’s internal affairs, limit the country’s economic opportunities, and contain it militarily.

Beyond enduring sources of tension, new and severe roadblocks for the relationship are looming.

As well as the new review of the 99-year lease of [Darwin Port](#) by the Chinese company Landbridge, there is the enduring possibility of the Australian government rejecting a large Chinese investment.

Then there is the potential use of Australia’s [Magnitsky-style sanctions](#) against senior Chinese officials implicated in human rights abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

The warmer diplomatic mood might therefore prove to be a false spring – any one of these developments could reverse or at least stall recent trends.

What can Canberra do to consolidate the upswing in relations? So far, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his ministers have picked low-hanging fruit.

Gone are the comparisons between the security challenges posed by contemporary China and the [threat of Nazi Germany](#) in the 1930s. This was one of the previous Defence Minister’s preferred rhetorical flourishes, which unsurprisingly aggravated the Chinese government.

China’s so-called “wolf warrior” diplomats sound more like puppy dogs.

The Albanese government is also toning down the language it uses to describe China’s trade restrictions. Instead of the rhetorically charged criticisms of “[economic coercion](#)”, the Prime Minister and his team have dialled down the diplomatic heat by objecting to China’s “sanctions.”

These shifts are part of the new government’s efforts to pursue a “change of tone” and avoid “chest beating,” as Defence Minister Richard Marles put it. And this shift has probably been noticed and welcomed in Beijing.

The Chinese government previously launched frequent and high-octane diplomatic attacks against Australia and made plain the coercive intent behind China's trade restrictions.

After the Australian federal election, China's so-called "wolf warrior" diplomats sound more like puppy dogs. Talk of Australia as the US' "cat's paw" has disappeared, replaced by expressions of hope that "bilateral relations [can be handled] in the spirit of mutual respect and mutual benefit."

But warm words do not a solid relationship make. To add some extra ballast in bilateral ties, the Albanese government should start thinking about new initiatives that will appeal to China without compromising on any Australian interests and values.

The logical place to look is climate change. As a first step, the Albanese government should propose rehabilitating the Australia-China ministerial dialogue on climate change, which fell into disuse in recent years.

Not only would such a dialogue allow Australia and China to explore additional practical ways to co-operate on a shared existential challenge, but it would revitalise and institutionalise ministerial engagement between Beijing and Canberra.

The Chinese government is likely to be especially receptive given Beijing's prioritisation of climate change responses and the rare alignment of Australian and Chinese interests on the issue.

As the Chinese ambassador to Australia recently said when referring to the "Labor government's [strong] emphasis on addressing the issue of climate change": "This offers even greater opportunities for China-Australia co-operation."

Rehabilitating a formalised ministerial dialogue could also be used to directly raise a broader range of critical concerns for Canberra, including consular cases, human rights, military developments, and other matters.

There is no guarantee that Beijing will embrace this initiative. But such a proposal is a low-risk option for Canberra. If the Chinese government is not receptive, the cost for Australia would be little more than eating a small serve of diplomatic humble pie.

Crucially, such an initiative would not involve compromising on Australia's security and economic interests or its commitments to human rights, the rule of law, and liberal democratic values.

Wong's meeting with the long-estranged Chinese foreign minister is not a reset. But Canberra can build on this diplomatic rapprochement by proposing new mechanisms to manage one of Australia's toughest and most critical relationships.



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