

## Best foot forward

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There is a prominent view in the Australian commentariat that bilateral ties between Australia and China are fragile. Or put more dimly, the differences in political systems and strategic preferences between Canberra and Beijing mean that 'stabilisation' is simply 'not possible'.

According to this view, the bilateral relationship's dysfunction of 2020-22 was not an aberration. Rather, it is now the 'new normal'.

Yet it's worth remembering that while the state of official ties has experienced ups and downs since the diplomatic relationship was established in 1972, never had it sank as low as it did during the last two years of the Scott Morrison government.

Under the Anthony Albanese government, Australia-China relations have been on a positive trajectory, albeit a cautious one, for more than two years now.

On Sunday, Chinese Premier Li Qiang arrived in Australia. His visit is a reciprocal one, following Prime Minister Albanese's trip to China last November.

Both are the first leaders to visit in more than seven years.

These visits point to a future in which both sides continue to recognise their differences but agree to manage them with calm and professional diplomacy so that the benefits from cooperation in areas of mutual interest can continue.

Since Prime Minister Albanese extended an invitation for a Chinese leadership visit, neither side would pretend that bilateral relations have been smooth sailing.

Last November, for example, the Australian government described actions by the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy in the East China Sea as 'unsafe and unprofessional'. The same words were used after an Australian Navy helicopter encounter with a PLA Air Force fighter plane over the Yellow Sea last month.

The Chinese government sharply rejected these comments, warning Canberra against making 'rude and irresponsible accusations'.

Yet beyond plainly stating their differing positions, in none of these incidents have Canberra or Beijing sought to escalate their responses or use them to prosecute a domestic political agenda.

Following confirmation that Premier Li would have stops in Canberra, Adelaide and Perth, Prime Minister Albanese described the visit as ‘another important step in stabilising our relationship with China’.

Defence Minister Richard Marles said that Premier Li’s visit was ‘very much welcome’.

Peter Dutton, the leader of the Opposition, remarked that he, too, would ‘very much welcome’ Premier Li’s visit, adding that his intention was to ‘build the relationship with China’ and that this would be ‘a very important part of the manifesto that we (the Opposition) will take to the next election’.

Asked whether he was ‘pro-panda’ like Albanese, Dutton responded that he was ‘pro-China and the relationship that we have with them’.

All of this is not to say, of course, that a new rupture in the relationship is impossible, or that Australia’s elites and general public are unswervingly upbeat about ties with China.

With the two countries’ militaries regularly rubbing up against each other, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario, perhaps sparked by an accidental incident, that might quickly become difficult to contain.

Still, what the balance of evidence points to is that the ‘new normal’ both sides are settling into is not, in fact, without some resilience.

Looking ahead, Canberra and Beijing will have their own challenges to manage.

The Albanese government faces domestic interest groups opposed to its current policy course.

Since winning the May 2022 election, a coalition of ‘national security cowboys’ have become increasingly vocal, berating the government’s goal of ‘stabilisation’ as a ‘fraud or at least a furphy’ and of being ‘deeply damaging to our national interests’.

The key political point for the government to grasp is that, while noisy, the views of Australia’s China hawks do not represent the mainstream of public opinion.

Polling released last week by the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney shows that nearly two-thirds of Australians express concerns about the relationship with China. But nearly the same proportion contend that Australia should try to build strong ties with China, assessing that the relationship also delivers significant benefits and that areas of differences are best managed through deepening engagement.

Only a small minority (12 percent) believed that Australia could not enjoy a good relationship with both China and the United States at the same time.

The Albanese government also received a net positive approval rating for its management of China relations, a reversal of the Morrison government’s performance in 2021 and 2022.

Beijing can play a constructive role, too. The more consistently restrained its foreign policy behavior, and the quicker that all the trade restrictions imposed in 2020 are removed, the more inclined the Australian public will be to look positively on bilateral ties.

And both sides have an ongoing responsibility to rebut lazy analysis, or at the very least not promote it.

It would be useful, for example, if Beijing made clear to the Chinese public that Canberra does not always just follow Washington in its foreign policy decisions.

For example, when the Donald Trump administration unilaterally imposed additional tariffs on Chinese goods in 2018, Australia’s then Trade Minister Simon Birmingham immediately put on the record that Canberra did not support the move.

In a similar vein, when the Joe Biden administration imposed export controls restricting China's access to advanced semiconductors in 2022, Trade Minister Don Farrell described them as 'draconian'.

Meanwhile, over the past year Australia and China have resolved three of their trade disputes under the auspices of the World Trade Organization.

The Albanese government has also reiterated that it has no plans to follow the US in forcing the sale of TikTok, owned by Chinese software company Bytedance.

The second half of 2024 contains two important 10-year anniversaries: the signing of the China-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the successful conclusion of negotiations for the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement.

If the diplomatic approach of the past two years is maintained, there is no reason why these anniversaries cannot be celebrated, and the bilateral relationship put on an even firmer footing than it is today.

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