

Business ties help Canberra overcome political wind

By Roland Boer

The last five years of China-Australia business relations have not been easy. The reason has been the increasingly aggressive “anti-China” line from Canberra, although this line simply did not make sense to the Australian business community. As Peter Arkell, former chair of the Shanghai-based Australia-China Chamber of Commerce (Austcham), observed in 2021, Australian companies in China have for 50 years “invested money and sweat in the bilateral relationship that has delivered in spades for the Australian economy for decades.”

The ideological turn in Canberra was like putting on “short-sighted” lenses that were detrimental to Australia’s best interests. By and large, businesses are not interested in ideology and the direction of the political wind in Canberra – unless it interferes with their primary concern: economic engagement and business relations.

That “dark cloud” now seems to be passing. As I write, the tone in the Australian business community is increasingly upbeat. In the wake of bilateral meetings by the two countries’ leaders, as well as meetings between the respective foreign and trade ministers, a steady stream of business leaders have begun making their way to China to re-start stalled projects and develop new ones.

A good way to gauge this change of tone is to consider the Australia-China Business Council (ACBC), which is the “premier bilateral business organisation in Australia dedicated to the Australia-China economic relationship.” ACBC has more than 700 member organizations, more than 20,000 professional members focused on China, and has branches in every Australian state and territory. Its regular reports keep making the case for deepening and extending ties with China. Most recently, they have been promoting their “green channel” initiative, hosting well attended events that seek to develop Australia-China collaboration in green energy, electric vehicles, green partnerships for industrial parks, and joint action on climate change. The news is full of China being “back in business” and of business and university leaders “flocking to China.” The bottom line for ACBC is “collaboration is the key.” In their eyes, China has been for many years Australia’s number-one trading partner and the two economies are highly complementary.

Why has a pragmatic and more balanced approach returned to Australia-China business relations? One reason has to be China’s successful transition from the pandemic in the last few months, but another reason is a change of government in Australia. In May 2022, a Labor government at long last took office in Canberra. There are many constraints and pressures –



Illustration: Liu Rui/Global Times

internal and external – on any government in Australia, and they usually have relatively little room to move. However, I would like to emphasize two points.

First, the Labor Party in Australia has always preferred a more independent foreign policy. In 1971, the Labor leader Gough Whitlam met premier Zhou Enlai, and when Labor formed government in the following year, one of Whitlam’s first moves was to recognize the PRC. Australia’s first ambassador to China, Stephen Fitzgerald, has more recently suggested that the Xi-Albanese meeting in Indonesia’s Bali late in 2022 is a comparable moment.

Over the years since, many in the Labor Party have found it galling that a foreign country – especially the UK and more recently the US – should set

the agenda for Australia’s foreign policy. They prefer an approach that is genuinely in Australia’s best interests. Many former leaders and senior government ministers have been vocal about the need for independent and pragmatic relations with Australia’s primary trading partner, China, and with all of Australia’s neighbours. The experience of such people has considerable influence within the Labor Party, so we can say it is in the Labor Party’s “genes” to be more independent and pragmatic in terms of international relations.

Second, from time to time the Australian business community has favored the approach of a Labor government. From an Australian perspective, this is a somewhat strange condition, since the Labor Party is not seen as the “natural”

friend of business. However, in the last few months it has become clear that the relatively new Labor government’s more pragmatic and independent approach suits the business community. Simply put, this is good for business.

At a more philosophical level, I suggest we understand these recent developments as follows: business, industry, and trade form what may be called the economic base. At this level, a win-win approach to China-Australia engagement is relatively easy, and indeed preferred by the Australian business community. Business is business, and political “winds” should not get in the way.

However, when we move to matters of culture, philosophy, politics, and so on – what may be called the superstructure – the situation becomes more complicated. At this level, understanding and appreciating each other’s cultures takes much patience and time. Of course, the situation is always complex and there are many “cross-winds” that can derail the process. But I for one hope that the return to a win-win approach at the economic base will lead over time to a renewed desire for greater cultural and philosophical understanding.

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China ready to make joint efforts with India to advance true multilateralism

By Liu Zongyi

In recent years, “multilateralism” has become a buzz word in diplomacy. The essence of multilateralism is that international affairs should be handled through consultation and that the future and destiny of the world should be in the hands of all countries working together. “True multilateralism” stresses that the actions of these countries should be based on the common values of mankind, with openness, inclusiveness, equal-footed consultation, and win-win cooperation as the basic means, the international rule of law as the guideline, and building a global community of shared future as the direction of progress. If the guiding philosophy and principles only serve a small number of countries and the ultimate goal is to continue to oppress other developing countries, it is “pseudo-multilateralism.”

India succeeded Indonesia as president of the G20 in December 2022, kicking off a yearlong presidency. The Indian government has been vigorously

advocating “reformed multilateralism” in the international community. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that India firmly believed that the “path to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity is through multilateralism.” The multilateral system needs to be more representative. “Only reformed multilateralism with a reformed UN at its center can meet the aspirations of humanity,” Modi said.

To sum up, India’s “reformed multilateralism” has three connotations: India supports multilateralism; but the current multilateral mechanism is outdated and urgently needs reform; India’s status as a great power should be recognized, and it should become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), leading multilateralism.

China and India share the understanding of multilateralism that no country can keep away from or deal with global issues by itself.

But some countries try to apply their domestic populist methods to the international political arena in the reform of

the UN, forming alliances, canvassing for votes, making empty promises to developing countries, and inciting them to push the reform of the UNSC at the UN General Assembly. However, this approach does not work.

Furthermore, the reform of multilateral mechanisms, including the UN, is definitely not about dividing the sphere of major powers, nor to engage in collusion and exclusive coterie against targeted countries in the name of multilateralism. Foreign ministers of some countries believe that the solution to globalization is decentralization. Decentralized globalization. Some observers think this logic is establishing regional police systems by seeking UN’s recognition of some regional power’s dominance over regional affairs. This runs counter to the principle of equality between countries.

China is a practitioner of “genuine multilateralism.” The media and scholars of some countries have been stigmatizing China for a long time for their own countries’ failure to become members of UNSC.

Such words and deeds fully expose their ignorance toward international law and rules, which are solely exerted as a tool to restrain other countries while benefit itself.

China stands ready to make joint efforts with India for the strengthened UN-centered multilateralism system, but more in-depth discussions are needed on the connotations of multilateralism, especially the issues concerning mutual development and common security.

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