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Speech to Asialink conference marking the 50th Anniversary of Australia-China relations

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UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE (VIA VIDEO LINK)

SPEECH E&OE

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Firstly, I apologise that I can't be there with you today in person – we are in the last week of parliament for 2022, and government business requires me to remain in Canberra.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which I am speaking to you from today – the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people.

I pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and extend that respect to the Indigenous people with us today.

Like all members of the Albanese government, I reaffirm my commitment to the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the heart - Voice, Treaty, and Truth.

[acknowledgements]

Introduction

I know I'm not the first person to quote Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, who told audiences in Beijing in 1972 that 'close cooperation between our two peoples is both natural and beneficial'.

Because he was absolutely right.

In the ensuing decades, we have seen many long-standing friendships established between the peoples of our two countries.

And as the years have gone by, the personal and community links between China and Australia - whether they be in science, culture, academia, politics, business, or sport - have enriched Australia as a country.

They have made us a better and stronger nation.

I am sure that is also true for China.

I know that many of you in this room have dedicated yourselves to enriching and strengthening these people-to-people links; to deepening mutual understanding.

My message to you is that this is important work.

Business links

Much has changed in both our countries since our diplomatic relations began.

The Australia of 1972 was less outward-looking.

Asia was not very familiar to most Australians, and China even less so.

Today, one in ten Australians speaks an Asian language.

Our main export markets are in Asia.

Education is our second-largest export item – but more importantly, we're enriched by the presence in Australia of international students from across the Indo-Pacific region.

And Mandarin is the second most spoken language in Australian homes after English.

The reality of living in Asia is more present to us than ever before.

China has grown to become one of the world's largest economies, and Australia's largest trading partner.

That economic growth has delivered significant benefit to both countries.

As a consequence of China's development, hundreds of millions of people have moved out of poverty – a unique and historic achievement.

That achievement is testament to the hard work of millions of Chinese families.

And it's a testament to the importance of international trade and investment ties.

Both our countries are better off for the partnerships and economic activity these have produced.

Our countries – and business communities – are filled with creative and talented people.

Commercial ties between Australia and China run deep. Many have been forged over decades, as business endeavours have navigated China's rapid reform and development.

Australia's world-class exports, our diverse and welcoming society, and the depth of existing connections with China are important strengths.

The China-Australia Free Trade Agreement continues to deliver benefits for both countries.

And as an open, trading, nation, Australia has welcomed foreign investment, including from China, while applying a national interest test.

Because we know foreign investment will continue to contribute to Australia's growth and Australian jobs.

The people of both of our countries – and our region – have prospered thanks to the certainty, equity, and stability that rules-based trade provides.

That's why the government has been clear and principled on the need for China to remove restrictions that unfairly impede trade.

We believe the removal of impediments to Australian exports and the full resumption of our bilateral trade would greatly benefit both Australia and China.

Yet there is much to our relationship beyond trade and investment.

Cultural and community connections

Prime Minister Whitlam himself became Chair of the Australia-China Council after leaving office – a sign of the value he placed on nurturing community and personal links.

At the time it would have been hard for him to imagine the runaway success of Australian-educated Shanghai businesswoman Jill Tang's *Ladies Who Tech* network across China, connecting women in STEM in Australia, China and beyond.

Or the social media sensation that Brisbane hip hop dancer Latrice Kabamba would become when she took China by storm competing in the 2021 season of *Street Dance of China*.

Or Chinese-born painter Zhou Xiaoping, who has been collaborating with Indigenous artists in Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys since 1988 to create exquisite works that reflect our interconnectedness.

Or Brian Wallace's Red Gate Gallery in the arts district of Beijing; or restaurateur Michelle Garnaut; or the way translator Li Yao has brought Indigenous fiction works to Chinese audiences with care and sensitivity. (He also did a wonderful job translating my book, *The Golden Country*, for Chinese readers!)

These stories all feature in the *Australia China Stories* book launched by the Foreign Minister in Sydney last month.

And there are many more like them.

Mr Whitlam could not, of course, have predicted these individual stories, but he was certainly correct that the exchange of ideas and creativity benefits us all.

And in the decades since his time in office, the flow of students and visitors - in both directions - has fundamentally shaped our countries' engagement with each other.

Bilateral relationship

At the same time, the past fifty years have had their challenges.

There are significant differences to deal with.

But we firmly believe there is a benefit to dialogue.

So since taking office, Foreign Minister Wong has met twice with China's State Councilor Wang Yi. Deputy Prime Minister Marles has twice met China's Defence Minister.

And you will all have seen recently that Prime Minister Albanese met President Xi in the margins of the G20.

These are important steps.

There are many more steps to go. But talking is better than not talking.

We aim for a relationship of mutual respect and mutual benefit. Where we can manage our differences wisely.

This will take time.

Our approach will be calm and consistent.

We are ready to cooperate where we can. We are prepared to disagree where we must. And we will continue to speak out as necessary on the issues that matter to Australians and take decisions in line with Australia's national interests.

Just as China does.

Outlook

As our Foreign Minister has made clear, at this juncture Australia and China have an opportunity to pursue stabilisation.

To move forward with a better understanding of how our two countries can interact to our mutual advantage.

There are areas where we can and should work together. If China engages with Australia directly and constructively, we will respond in kind.

The National Foundation for Australia-China Relations is one important way we are working to achieve this.

The Foundation's latest grants round – valued at up to \$6.5 million – will help build understanding and showcase Australian excellence.

And there are many global issues for which China is an important part of the solution.

As just one example, we are very open to exploring further partnerships that work towards achieving our climate change and decarbonisation goals.

China is a leader in green technology, and Australia has the wind and solar resources to be a renewable energy superpower.

And we all have an interest in securing the future environmental health of our planet.

I know your next session this morning is on environment, water and collaboration. This is an important topic, and I look forward to hearing the results of your discussion.

Conclusion

2022 marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between our countries.

It is the theme for today's event.

It is a significant milestone.

It is worthy of celebration.

And as much as today is an opportunity to reflect, it is also an opportunity to look to the future.

The theme for this conference is 'building the future together' – and as we head into our 51st year of diplomatic relations, that is exactly what we must now turn to.

As Foreign Minister Wong has said, even when we have differences, by working together, and with mutual respect, we can help ensure our people – as well as those of the countries in our region and the wider world - enjoy the stability, peace, and prosperity we have been privileged to share over the past fifty years.

I wish this conference every success, as you discuss the wide range of potential collaboration available to us.

Thank you.

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