



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Getting China-Australia relations out of a rut

Description: The recent change of government in Australia and a less strident tone in messaging from the Chinese leadership are being taken by some as a promising turn for fractured bilateral ties. But as Australia remains caught in the great power rivalry between the United States and China, what kind of relationship can we realistically expect between Canberra and Beijing going forward? How should Australia mend fences with its greatest trading partner? And how might China itself contribute to improving bilateral relations? China watchers Dr Sow Keat Tok and Yun Jiang join presenter Jane Hutcheon to examine the road ahead for Australia. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover:

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Jane Hutcheon:

Hello, I'm Jane Hutcheon. This is Ear to Asia.

Yun Jiang:

Most Australians who speak Chinese are from a Chinese background. But there is a general distrust of those from Chinese background in foreign policy and national security policy. So what we're left with is often those people who have never lived in China, who don't speak the language of China, but they are the one's that's making policies on China, and providing public commentary on China.

Sow Keat Tok:

We cannot know China from the black and white point of view. We have to understand, we have to explore that grey area – how to deal with China? What is China thinking? What leverage China has with our regional neighbours? Unless there is an appreciation of that grey area, we will never be able to insert ourself into the region, we'll never be able to engage with our neighbours vis-à-vis China.

Jane Hutcheon:

In this episode, getting China-Australia relations out of a rut.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute. The Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Are we seeing the beginnings of a genuine thaw in relations between China and Australia? The signs may be encouraging with a fresh change of government in Canberra under the Australian Labor Party, a less strident tone in messaging from the Chinese leadership, and the end of the bilateral diplomatic freeze with

a recent meeting between the two countries' defence ministers. The legacy of recent years in which a worsening of relations brought punitive tariffs, lists of grievances, diplomatic rebuffs, and calls to prepare for war suggests ties between Beijing and Canberra have so bottomed out that the only way forward from here is up.

Yet, President Xi Jinping remains at the helm of China and looks set for a third term. The United States, meanwhile, holds firm to a muscular China policy with president Joe Biden recently declaring his country's intentions to defend Taiwan if China invades the island. So as Australia remains caught in a great power rivalry, what kind of relationship can we realistically expect between China and Australia over the next few years? Should Australia mend fences with its greatest trading partner, and how might China contribute to warming bilateral ties? Joining me to examine how Australia might walk the line between the Indo-Pacific superpowers are Asia Institute's China analyst, Dr. Sow Keat Tok, and inaugural China Matters fellow at the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Yun Jiang. Yun, a warm welcome to Ear to Asia and welcome back, Sow Keat.

Yun Jiang:

Thank you. Really great to be here.

Sow Keat Tok:

Thanks, Jane.

Jane Hutcheon:

Lovely to have you. As I said in the introduction, Australia has a new Labor government under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese one month after the Australian federal elections. What new signals are you observing in the approach to China, Yun?

Yun Jiang:

We are already seeing quite obvious differences to how the new Labor government approach China compared to the previous Coalition government. It's only been a few weeks in. The government has not changed any policy setting on China yet, but the way it talks about China has changed significantly. I think the Labor government has not shied away from the complexity and difficulty in the relationship, but what it has done is that it has acknowledged that the relationship is multifaceted and that we need to live and work with China. Compared to the previous government, the warmongering has disappeared. China is no longer being portrayed as an enemy that we are going to war with eminently and the government has emphasised on working with regional partners rather than just the Anglosphere partners under the previous government. So there has been a lot of changes from the tone, from the rhetoric, despite no changes in policy yet.

Jane Hutcheon:

Sow Keat, what are your observations?

Sow Keat Tok:

Well, I pretty much agree with Yun. Given the change over of government, there is definitely new room for working out the relationship. As Yun noted, the willingness to engage regional partners rather than solely relying on United States is a refreshing change in the way of Australia's management of its relations with China. That is something that I think is positive move. One thing important, I think we need to talk about new Foreign Minister Penny Wong's overtures towards ASEAN. I think that was definitely one of the more heartening moves that the Australian government has done for quite some time, because they are practically putting ASEAN along the same boat with Australia in the management of China relations. I think that is definitely something to take note of.

Jane Hutcheon:

But now, I just want to stay with the big picture before we get into the nitty-gritty of Australia's relations with the rest of Asia. Sow Keat, there's already been a brief meeting of the Australian and Chinese defence ministers on the edge of the Shangri-La dialogue held recently in Singapore. How significant do you see this?

Sow Keat Tok:

I see that as a move in the positive direction, but I don't think we can take too much out from it. The defence minister is not someone that is really right at the top in terms of CCP's hierarchy. Yes, he's in the central community, but he's not really someone who weighs on decision-making in the most significant sense. And on top of that, the biggest issue Australia has with China at the moment, the deep freeze is what Albanese correctly identified as the trade issue. It is quite interesting to see that the next meeting between the trade minister, China actually rejected just this morning. They will not be meeting and that is something that we need to weigh up against the meeting of the defence ministers in Singapore. I would say that while diplomatically, having talks is better than no talks at all, I think we should not harbour too much expectations in terms of how this relationship will thaw in the coming months at least.

Jane Hutcheon:

Let's talk a little bit now. Rather than talking about the current developments, let's talk a bit about how we got here. I wonder, Yun, how would you characterise the attitude of the previous Australian government, Scott Morrison's conservative or centre right government? How would you characterise the decision to frame the relationship in the way that it did?

Yun Jiang:

The Morrison's government's attitude towards China has changed over time. In its early days, trade and economics used to be much bigger focus of the Coalition government. From various messagings including up to the prime ministerial level, by and large, it was not overly positive as in the heydays of 2015, but it was still largely neutral or even slightly positive. But over time, security interests have dominated the federal government thinking on China, pretty much overriding all other interests, and especially in that last two years of the government, China has become the national security issue. I think one aspect of that is that the Coalition government believed that is an issue that it is strong on, and it can wedge the opposition on as well. So it can paint very heavily on national security, which in this sense is just China instead of the traditional issues of trade and economics, and from this, almost a very hyper masculine attitude of national security, "We must be tough."

On the other hand of the diplomacy, the diplomacy of managing difficult relationship is almost seen as a weak, the language of capitulating, almost like a feminine kind of a trait, whereas they are going for harsh, tough masculine trait of basically being tough on China. I think you'll see throughout the election campaign as well, that had a big effect, especially on Chinese Australian voters as well.

Jane Hutcheon:

We'll talk a little bit about that effect in a moment, but Sow Keat, I'd be interested to hear from you. What does the actions of the Morrison government say about the level of advice it was getting from its experts, from academia?

Sow Keat Tok:

I don't know how much those advice went into the decision making process. Within the academia at least, we tend to take less aggressive position vis-à-vis China. The idea really is that you don't undermine your own national security because of a blown-up overriding national security issue. You

still need to take care of your national interest, be it trade, be it society to society relationship, be it other forms of collaboration. But in my opinion, the breaker that actually caused the breakdown of China-Australia relationship has been in the early days of COVID when Australia took the stand to call up China for an investigation. I think that was the part which really caused a big breakdown in that relationship. In a way, it's probably a correct diplomatic move. There's a reason for everyone to know how the pandemic began in the first place, but the way that Morrison and his government reach out to China to seek investigation has been one that is really, really frowned upon by the Chinese government, because it's really just pointing China out and say that, "You are the cause of trouble. You have to investigate. You have not been transparent."

Truth aside, that is a real, real shaming for the Chinese government and given Xi Jinping's position in China today, and he's beat for a third term, you're not giving him any face to do that and it became personal in that way. That relates to my earlier point that yes, while diplomatically, they're talking, yes, but it doesn't mean that Xi Jinping is convinced that Australia is back in his good books, not necessarily. So we need to deal with a lot of uncertainties over there. I'm more inclined to think that Morrison and his government has listened a lot more to themselves rather than to their advisors that are giving them advice.

Yun Jiang:

I just like to say a little bit about the call for the independent inquiry.

Jane Hutcheon:

This is the COVID inquiry you're mentioning.

Yun Jiang:

Yes. That was one of the reasons why China was very upset at Australia. One of the things that then Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that he wanted the World Health Organisation to have a weapon inspector style powers. I thought that was quite aggressive and confrontational.

Jane Hutcheon:

Inflammatory.

Yun Jiang:

Inflammatory, yes. It brings to mind the Iraq war as well and also the fact that there are other countries calling forward inquiry into the origin of COVID. There was already EU proposal as well, which eventually China itself signed up to. So I feel that the government did not have to really go out of its way to emphasise that. It could have supported existing WHO proposal for an inquiry into the origin of COVID. I think in Australia media, this kind of nuance wasn't really teased out.

Sow Keat Tok:

Absolutely. Australia really went ahead of itself in trying to make its voice heard and that just singled out Australia as the head to smack down when it comes to speaking out against China, from Beijing's point of view and that's truly, truly unfortunate.

Jane Hutcheon:

I think what you're both saying is in a sense, the difficulty was one of nuance and language. It was almost in Australia's communication style. To your experience though, is it possible to have a different communication style with China and still to disagree on really big questions? When I say this, I think of countries like Japan who has a long history of disagreement and enmity with China, and yet seems to be able to trade and do business successfully. Sow Keat.

Sow Keat Tok:

I agree. Asian countries have a lot more experience dealing with China because of the history with China. It's not just Japan, but you look at how Taiwan, despite all the differences between Taiwan and China has a very successful trade relationship and economy relationship with China. The Southeast Asian countries, and come to mind Singapore, Vietnam in particular. Vietnam, despite having thousands of years of animosity with what they call the Middle Kingdom is treading very carefully on the way that they deal with China. They are aware of China as a threat. At the same time, they are also careful on how to manage that relationship without toppling it.

I think Australia has a lot to learn in terms of dealing with China, but that said, I am sceptical. I don't think it's the way that we misunderstood China, but rather there was this reluctance to deal with China in the way that China wants, be it an attitude that Australia brings to the diplomatic table or partly, it could also be political manoeuvrings, domestic political manoeuvrings that is dating the way that we are dealing with China rather than the lack of understanding in dealing with China.

Yun Jiang:

Just on the issue of learning from other Asian countries, I totally agree. There's a lot Australia need and should learn from other countries in the region. I think in the past, there's almost this sense of a white man's burden of Australia going to talk to those Asian countries. There's often a more of a preaching style when we communicate with these countries that there's a sense of, "Oh, did you not realise that there is threat posed by China?" Now those countries have lived beside China for a very, very long time, longer than us. They know about China more than us, but still there is a sense of almost a superiority when we go talk to those countries and I hope this will change fast. That's the only way that we can engage better with our neighbours in the region.

Jane Hutcheon:

Before we completely leave domestic issues. Yun, you have seen a difference in the way the Australia-China problem, as I think we could call it previously, played out in Australia's federal elections. Can you unpack that for us?

Yun Jiang:

Yeah. As I was saying before, China was used as a wedge issue by the Coalition on Labor because the Coalition government perceived as a strength of the government, but that strategy appeared to have backfired on the Coalition. According to the Labor campaign chief, Erickson, China was actually one of the reasons voters turned away from the Coalition. Now, usually during election, foreign policy is not the major issue. It's not the headline issue, but in this election, it was at the front and centre of election, which is quite remarkable. These voters turning away from the government due to foreign policy was even more stark in electorates with high Chinese Australian population. Many of these electorates were marginal seats as well. What we have seen is that Chinese Australian voters are seeing the previous government was very willing to see the communities as just a collateral damage in the effort to counter China.

While they pay lip service about how they value Chinese Australians. They did nothing about the rising anti-Asian racism and I think that really almost unified Chinese Australian voters to vote for Labor. Previously, most Chinese Australian voters have voted for the Coalition because they're mostly small business owners and they prefer perhaps the more conservative economic policy, but this time around, they have turned towards Labor instead.

Jane Hutcheon:

It was interesting that just before the federal election, which was held on May the 21st, the headlines broke of the Solomon Islands signing a security agreement with China. Also, we've had

China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, going on a whirlwind tour of Pacific Island nations. What is China's interest in the Pacific? Yun.

Yun Jiang:

China has actually quite a long-standing interest in the Pacific. There's quite a substantial Chinese population in the Pacific from quite a while back, and more recently, there's foreign investment interest as well. Some of the projects are linked to China's Belt and Road Initiative. And now with economics, what usually follows is security interest because when countries invest overseas, they want to ensure that their investment is also secure. On top of that, there's also diplomatic interest. The Pacific countries, even though they are small countries with small populations, for example, at United Nations General Assembly, each country still gets one vote. So for countries like China, which tries to get as many countries on side at the UN as possible. That's another consideration as well.

Jane Hutcheon:

So should Australia be trying to replicate what Beijing is doing in the Pacific or should we be competitors or should we be collaborators, Sow Keat?

Sow Keat Tok:

I don't think we have the ability. In terms of dollars and cents, I don't think Australia can beat China in any way, but Australia has a deep relationship with the Pacific Islands simply because we are in the region and we have a long-standing in our society to society, economy to economy kind of relationship with the region. It is very important that Australia drop that whole white man burden image and start engaging the Pacific on a more level ground. That doesn't mean that Australia should cease as foreign aid and everything. No. I think there should be a refocusing of our efforts towards the Pacific Islands. However, we also need to show that there is a lot more sincerity in engaging them rather than just appearing in the Pacific forum once a year and not really dealing with the Pacific on the peer-to-peer basis. I think that is one advantage that Australia has vis-à-vis China.

Yun Jiang:

So just give one example. Australia funded Telstra to purchase Digicel, a telecommunication provider in the Pacific.

Sow Keat Tok:

Yeah.

Yun Jiang:

What this deal has done basically is to enrich the Irish billionaire, the previous owner of Digicel, but it did not necessarily improve telecommunication infrastructure in the Pacific. So there are other ways that Australia can, if you want to compete with China for influence. You can compete on ways to improve services, improve infrastructure and help the population in the Pacific. Whereas if you're just thinking about competing China as end in its own, then what you end up with is enriching Irish billionaires instead.

Sow Keat Tok:

Yeah, there is absolutely no chance that Australia can outspend China in the Pacific, put it bluntly. So we need to do something more creative than just money.

Jane Hutcheon:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics, and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Jane Hutcheon and I'm joined by China watchers Yun Jiang and Dr. Sow Keat Tok. Now on that subject of Australia not being able to outspend China, given China's economy is slowing partly due to its COVID-zero policy and also to the common prosperity drive of Xi Jinping, there are already huge commitments in the Belt and Road Initiative. China also has a very large and growing external debt. One wonders how much more economic outreach can China continue to pursue. Yun.

Yun Jiang:

Yes, China is facing some economic difficulties, but so have a lot of countries around the world, including here in Australia. Perhaps with China's zero-COVID policy. It has less room to spend than before on its Belt and Road Initiative, but it can still spend more than Australia, at least. Its size of economy is still much bigger than Australia, so despite the economic difficulties, the long-term forecast for China's economy is that it will eventually overtake the United States.

Sow Keat Tok:

Yeah, everyone's talking about the slowing growth in China, but slowing growth is still growth after all. You are looking at a very healthy 4% growth compared to 2% in the United States or even in Australia. We fail to see the bigger picture here, is that. Unless you see a total implosion of China, which I don't see as a possibility at this point, well, unless you see that, China still have a lot of wealth to wield, and whether it is along Belt and Road or elsewhere. In other case, Belt and Road Initiative, while there's a bit of string in China's investments to its Belt and Road, they are actually talking about more quality investments into Belt and Road. They are focusing on certain aspects of Belt and Road. Given that kind of focus, I think they can still pull off something out of the hat at the end of the day. I think we need to temper that weakening growth with China's ability. I don't think they're that equitable in that sense.

Jane Hutcheon:

What do you make of the movement between Russia and China, particularly since the invasion of Ukraine? Sow Keat.

Sow Keat Tok:

I'm quite surprised that China didn't take the side of the international community when it comes to Russia. Yes, Russian-Chinese ties are really, really tight, especially during the Putin and Xi Jinping's era, but in a lot of way, China is undercutting its own rise as a legitimate power in the international society when it didn't condemn the Ukrainian invasion. But that being said, China was not alone in doing that. Indonesia also refused to condemn Russia and look at what we are doing with Indonesia at the moment. We are trying to rebuild our relationship with Indonesia. I think it is pretty important that from a realist point of view that Australia continues to pursue interest-based diplomacy.

Jane Hutcheon:

What do you mean exactly by that?

Sow Keat Tok:

I think it is important that Australia continue to pursue a workable relationship with its regional neighbours and with China. We can have suspicions over China's intentions, but I think we should, no matter what, try to pursue a workable relationship. It's like bottom line that we should not cross. There is no point shouting or calling out China that they are not doing this, they're not doing that and have war mongering kind of rhetorics towards China when you know that you need to work with China in order to organise regional order in order to benefit Australia overall.

Jane Hutcheon:

Yun, I want to put the question to you in a slightly different way. Interesting with the framework of Ukraine and China's moving closer to Russia, I wonder if you see the divide, I suppose, in how the world sees China. Is it something that's really based on a question of trust, who trusts China and who doesn't trust China?

Yun Jiang:

Russia and China are often seen by countries like Australia over the years as in one camp, but I don't think they are natural friends. They have a lot of common interests, but not all their interests are overlapping. For example, they both try to increase their influence in Central Asia, but what they do have interest in common is that they share, I guess an enemy in the West. They both see West as either you can call it strategic competitor or if you want to use a stronger term, an enemy. To them, it's more like, "Oh, well, the enemy of my enemy is my friend." That's why they have a closer relationship because they have a common enemy.

But I think what the West, especially under Joe Biden, the framework of a dictatorship, autocracy versus democracy and in Australia, I believe, the then Prime Minister Scott Morrison also used the word arc of autocracy, I think our framing is really unhelpful in loping the world into two camps. You either them or us. You have to choose, that kind of thing. I think that is unhelpful. I think that we should see countries as having many, many different interests.

Jane Hutcheon:

On top of that, we have President Biden making comments that his administration was quick to back away from saying that if Taiwan was invaded, the US would be there at its defence. Are we to take that at face value?

Sow Keat Tok:

I think when Biden says it once, it is a mistake, but he say three times in public addresses. I don't think that's a mistake in any way. For me, at least, Biden is trying to send a personal message to Beijing say that yes, under his administration, that is what the United States will do. Even though afterwards his advisors walk back that statement and say, "No, we are actually maintaining it..." just moving something that's over back to the grey area again, I think Biden really has that idea that if China wants to invade Taiwan at any point under his administration, that is what he would do. That's probably well taken by Beijing as in you see how Beijing has lowered its rhetorics to Taiwan in the recent months.

Jane Hutcheon:

Where do you see the roles now of security pacts and alliances like AUKUS and the Quad? How did these go forward if the language towards China is changing to be one of a more collaboration and synergy, I suppose?

Sow Keat Tok:

For me, there needs to be a new network of alliances to meet up with the challenges of the emerging order. I think that is probably moving along the right direction, but I am quite sceptical towards identifying China as the supposed enemy as you see that China has invested a lot in the current international order. In so much as it refused to condemn Russia, there is no real signals from Beijing that it's willing to disengage from the current order. I think the current alliance, we need to promote that kind of cooperative arrangements, definitely, but personally, I don't think it's a good way to single out China as the supposed enemy because it will just antagonise China further and if anything at all, it will just make China the enemy. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. It could be a self-fulfilling prophecy, I'll put it that way, and that is my biggest concern.

Jane Hutcheon:

Yun, I think at the moment, people tend to divide the world into what the US and its allies think and what China thinks. I wonder, we ignore so much of the world, for example, countries like the happiest country in the world, Finland and Scandinavian countries and the EU. Is there much more of a subtlety in attitudes to China than the very black and white, which also incidentally seems to be reflected in the division of Australian academics and commentators? This is a point Sow Keat made to me at one stage about the black and white nature of our experts and commentators.

Yun Jiang:

I think it's possible to be black and white in places like Australia, whereas if you were in some countries like Southeast Asia or in the Middle East, it is very hard to be black and white. It's very hard to say, "Well, I support the US" or "I support China." Their perspectives are very, very different. What we're seeing, for example, with the recent Summit of Democracy, for example, where some South American countries was not invited to the United States because US deemed them to be not democratic enough, I believe Mexico then pulled out because they don't think that's right. And in the Middle East, Israel or Saudi Arabia or Palestine, they all trying to use their own ways to be between both United States and China. Now the US president has said it does not like authoritarian countries, and yet it is visiting Saudi Arabia despite its murdering an American journalist.

I think for most countries, at least for people that live in most countries around the world, it is very hard to be black and white. It's very hard to be either one or the other, but I think unfortunately in Australia, because we live in a Western country, we do relate more to the United States and we have a very strong alliance with the United States and we see a lot of things from the US perspective. A lot of people can afford to be binary.

Jane Hutcheon:

Sow Keat, this was your idea that I borrowed. You should expand on it a bit further.

Sow Keat Tok:

Well, that Australia looks at things from a black and white perspective doesn't mean that we should. We have to face up reality. China is not going to go away. It's in our region. It's not going to go away. From the United States, there's still Pacific Island to shield them from the excesses of China if they want to. United States have the economy. United States have the military strength to withstand any stress coming from the other side of the Pacific Ocean. Whereas for us, yes, we are a big economy, but we are not a big country in any way. You are talking about 25 million population. Yes, we have advanced technology, military technology, but look at all the ruckus that was caused in military procurement and everything. Our military is capable, but we are not capable of extending our reach beyond our territorial waters, minimum, I would say.

Sow Keat Tok:

So we have to learn how to live with China unlike the United States. United States can go away and say, "No, we can stop our trade with China and we can still do very well," but if Australia was to stop trade with China, it means that we're going back 20 years of growth. That is not quite possible for us. China's influence does not just extend to Australia, it extends to the whole of Asia, which is within Australia's immediate vicinity. It is very easy for Australia to be the standalone guy if you see things from United States' point of view, in the black and white point of view. And on top of that in the last two to three years at least, we're seeing that black and white overspilling into policy-making into academia, and that is not healthy.

If we want to know China, we cannot know China from the black and white point of view. We have to understand, we have to explore that grey area, how to deal with China. What is China thinking? What are the kind of leverage beyond economic leverage, of course, that China has with our regional neighbours? Why do our regional neighbours stand with China at times even though they're at odd with certain values? Why so? Unless there is an appreciation of that grey area, we will never, never be able to insert ourself into the region. We'll never, never be able to engage with our neighbours vis-à-vis China, and that black and white division, dichotomy is really squeezing out the grey zone.

People like myself or Yun who is looking at the nuances of the relationship, our voice becomes submerged as a result. In the past, not just in the last three years, but in the past, when I go to China, people say that I'm anti-China, but when I speak to Australian audience, they say I'm pro-China. So who really am I? I'm really in the grey. I know certain things I agree, other things I don't. It doesn't mean that I love China though. It doesn't mean that, but it means that we need to have appreciation, a very nuance appreciation of what China is thinking and how China is acting before we can actually take that stand on how to deal with it. A black and white approach is not going to help in any way.

Jane Hutcheon:

Would you also say that that knowledge and understanding, it's fine? We do have many very fine experts who look at the Australia-China relationship and who look at geopolitics, but how important do you both think it is for the average citizen to be educated and aware of China? This has been a perennial problem for Australia that we don't tend to speak other languages, that we don't tend to be, I suppose outward looking in terms of cultural aspects. It surely isn't just a problem with academia and professional experts. Yun, maybe you'd like to weigh in on this.

Yun Jiang:

At the risk of being controversial,-

Jane Hutcheon:

Go for it.

Yun Jiang:

... I don't think it's that important for the average population to have a really great understanding of China's history, culture, language. I don't think everyone in Australia needs to be able to speak Chinese, but I do think the level of China literacy in policy-making, that's the area I work in, in policy-making is definitely not enough. For example, understanding the language should be a bare minimum for people working on China, but that's often not the case. What we are seeing is that most Australians who speak Chinese are from a Chinese background, but there's a general distrust of those from Chinese background in foreign policy and national security policy. So what we're left with is often those people who have never lived in China, who don't speak the language of China, but they are the ones that's making policies on China and providing public commentary on China. I think that is a huge problem we're facing and I think we need to better utilise Chinese Australians from all backgrounds because that's often where their expertise and China literacy and knowledge lies.

Sow Keat Tok:

I think I'll agree with Yun that the average person in Australia doesn't really need to know China that well. But unfortunately, we are back to our very, very first topic at the start of this podcast, which is the vote, which makes China a very easy boogeyman when it comes to inter-party politics. So I'm ambivalent about it. I think we're not giving Australians enough credit. From where I've been, I think Australia actually had a pretty global outlook compared to a lot of other countries, societies around the world. I think a very minimal level of knowledge about China is probably required for the average Australia public. One very simple message that I need to send across to my students every year when I teach about China, CCP is not China. It's just unfortunate that CCP wants other people to see itself as synonymous to China. Once you unpack that, I think there is no real danger about public opinions towards China. But I agree with Yun, the policy-making and think tanks, there has to be a lot more Chinese-speaking, not just Chinese-speaking. It's not just enough to know about the Chinese language.

As Yun said, it's the bare minimum. You need someone who really appreciate China in order to really understand how to make policy vis-à-vis China. I think that is something still lacking in the Australian bureaucracy at the moment, unfortunately.

Jane Hutcheon:

Before I let you both go, I've got two more questions and one is really to do... We've seen China and many Chinese cities recently being in lockdown due to Xi's COVID-zero policy. When and what will it take to bring Chinese tourists back to Australia and to the region? Is it really feasible that a zero-COVID policy can allow for international transactions and people to come in and out of the country again?

Yun Jiang:

I think it'll be very difficult for China to maintain zero-COVID policy forever because we are seeing that COVID is not really going away. It is coming back in waves and waves, and for China to continue to pursue this policy would mean that you'll have to continue to shut itself from the rest of the world. So the only feasible way forward I can think of is for China, in some way, to abandon its COVID-zero policy, perhaps for example, through mass vaccination. We know that China's vaccination rate especially amongst the elderly is remarkably low. People in China as people everywhere are very concerned about the health of the elderly people. So unless they can get elderly people vaccinated, it'll be very difficult for them to get out of this.

Jane Hutcheon:

Sow Keat.

Sow Keat Tok:

Likewise, I don't agree with the COVID-zero policy that China is doing right now, but it doesn't mean that there is no reason for them to do that. I think what their concern are is twofold. First is Xi Jinping's legacy. It's a real chip on the back for China when this pandemic begins because it started in China. Showing the world that it can control COVID is one way to redeem its own pride from Xi's perspective. Given that he's pursuing a third term in the office, it's imperative that he maintain this very, very strong policy right till at least November this year, the party congress in November this year. And likewise, Australia-China's relationship will probably get a more meaningful reset from November this year. But that notwithstanding, we also need to be aware of China's poor health institutions. The health system in China is not that advanced.

There's still a lot of issues relating to, access to medical care and old age care. All this is actually causing the policy-makers pause in opening up the country to COVID. Yun has already mentioned the

vaccination is pretty low in China, and on top of that, we are not too aware of the efficacy of the Sinovac vaccine. I have not seen figures that really convince me that it's equivalent to other vaccines yet, not transparent enough. But what we need to know is that should the pandemic explode in China, I don't think their health system is going to manage and that is something that giving a lot of the policy-makers in China concern whether or not to move forward with it. But is this sustainable? Of course, it is not sustainable. China knows that. The economy is already slowing down. You're seeing layoffs of hundreds of thousands of workers in China. You're seeing the shortages, not just in China, but with the rest of the world. I don't think this is sustainable and at some point, they have to open up, it's just when.

Jane Hutcheon:

Now, give me your final thoughts on what is it that the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese leadership wants from Australia, the Australian government right at this point in the middle of 2022.

Yun Jiang:

So in one sentence?

Jane Hutcheon:

Oh, you can have two.

Sow Keat Tok:

Okay, let me try, all right? When I say this is one thing that Beijing wants from Australia, it doesn't mean that Australia should do it. Beijing wants an apology from Australia. That will reset everything straight away, but that is not necessarily something that Australia should do. I don't think it's realistic that Beijing expects this from Australia either, but that is probably one thing that they want.

Jane Hutcheon:

Good answer. Yun?

Yun Jiang:

I think they want Australia to move back a little bit, perhaps, to not be at the forefront of what it sees to be an anti-China force. They want Australia to step back perhaps behind the US or be amongst other countries. Yeah, maybe that's what it wants.

Jane Hutcheon:

Well, Sow Keat and Yun Jiang, I've had such a great conversation with you both. Thank you so much for joining us on Ear to Asia.

Yun Jiang:

Thank you. It's my pleasure.

Sow Keat Tok:

Thanks, Jane, for hosting this.

Jane Hutcheon:

Our guests have been Dr. Sow Keat Tok from Asia Institute and Yun Jiang from the China Matters programme at the Australian Institute of International Affairs. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all

our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcasts app, Stitcher, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts. Please rate and review us. It helps new listeners find the show. And do put in a good word for us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 16th of June 2022. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons, copyright 2022, the University of Melbourne. I'm Jane Hutcheon. Thanks for your company.