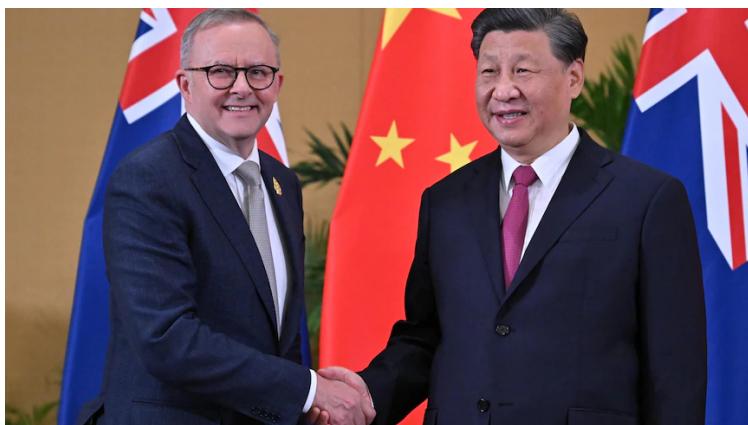


ANALYSIS

With dialogue re-established, the Albanese government has a chance to reset the China relationship

7.30 / By [Laura Tingle](#)

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Australia's relationship with China has "stabilised" after Prime Minister Anthony Albanese met this week with Chinese President Xi Jinping. (AAP: Mick Tsikas)

Dialogue, Anthony Albanese observed this week, is always a good thing.

And as many people observed after [his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Tuesday](#), the most important thing to be said about the meeting was that it took place at all.

Six years is a long time between drinks for national leaders to meet, especially when you are talking about the leader of the country which accounts for nearly a third of our trade and whose rise agitates so much of our national policy discussion.

There was an unbecoming rush by journalists to know what would immediately materialise from this meeting: would there be ministerial visits? Would two imprisoned Australians be released? Would trade embargoes be lifted?

All fair enough questions. But it is indeed worth reflecting — if just for a moment — on the value of dialogue, for its own sake, before racing ahead to the next thing.

The talk from the prime minister — and foreign minister Penny Wong — was all about "stabilisation" of the relationship, no more.

"There are many steps yet to take. We will cooperate where we can, disagree where we must, and engage in our national interest," Albanese said.

For a country that has always been so desperate to "get a seat at the table" — everywhere from the Versailles peace talks after World War I to international forums including the UN to the G20 — we seemed to descend very quickly in recent years to a world where we didn't seem to really be on anyone's Friday afternoon drinks lists.

It wasn't just the Chinese: the Pacific; the region; Indonesia. Anyone we hadn't already managed to offend in recent times, we managed to offend with the AUKUS deal.

A new government has been determined to address this. A new government, of course, also offers the opportunity on both sides to reset the relationship.

Wong's message to the Pacific

But given the continuity of many parts of our foreign policy — other than perhaps its blatant misuse in domestic politics — it was not certain that this would necessarily happen.

Penny Wong has visited 21 countries since Labor came to office in May. Much of her travel has attracted relatively little attention.

Her message to the Pacific has been about listening and cooperating, rather than lecturing and directing.

Similarly, she has spent a lot of time in South-East Asia, and on boosting the "centrality" of ASEAN, an institution which some argue is not a particularly robust one.



Penny Wong was instrumental in setting the groundwork for Albanese's meeting with Xi this week. (Reuters)

There is also now a considerable Australian investment in linking into the many regional bodies that are linked to ASEAN.

Showing respect to ASEAN gives Australia the opportunity to acknowledge that countries in the region do not enjoy the feeling of having to choose between China and the United States, a binary choice which seems to have haunted our own thinking in recent years.

"We are more than just supporting players in a grand drama of global geopolitics, on a stage dominated by great powers," Wong said in a speech in Singapore in July.

"[ASEAN provides] an order framed by a strategic equilibrium where countries are not forced to choose but can make their own sovereign choices, including about their alignments and partnerships."

Sean Turnell's release shows material benefits of dialogue

For those looking for material benefits from dialogue, there was no clearer one this week than [the release of Australian academic Sean Turnell from Myanmar](#).

Notably, on Friday, Wong singled out regional partners, and especially members of ASEAN who had advocated for Turnell's release.

"We are grateful for the efforts of Cambodia and Brunei Darussalam, the ASEAN Chairs over the term of his detention, and the Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair on Myanmar," she said.

Turnell's freedom has been a major priority for the foreign minister. She resisted pressure for more sanctions on Myanmar to achieve it, and pursued the issue as she travelled around the region.



Foreign Minister Penny Wong speaks of bringing Sean Turnell home

Our Pacific relationships have been neglected

It is notable that so much of the domestic discussion we have had in the past couple of years about both the Pacific and South-East Asia has been through the prism of our alarm about China: whether China was moving into "our" neighbourhood in the Pacific; seeking to pressure other countries in the region to confront China.

This, at times, seems to have blinded us to the need to treat these relationships as significant and of value in their own right.

Apart from anything else, the alarm about China has meant policymakers in Canberra would dearly like it if Australian business developed a more diversified export strategy in the future.

There was some frustration this week that some of the business leaders travelling with the Prime Minister were waxing so lyrically about the potential benefits to business of the meeting with Xi.

"We don't want them to get lulled into the view that everything in China will just fall back into place," one said.

Wong was instrumental in setting the groundwork for Albanese's meeting with Xi this week.

After her initial [meeting with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in July](#), she set about moving to a meeting of leaders during summit season, and the arrangements were finally put in place by phone last week.

China, of course, has its own reasons for re-engaging more with the world and Australia, particularly post-Ukraine, but facing significant COVID and other economic problems.

As long-time international analyst, and former Wong staffer Allan Behm wrote in his book, *No Enemies, No Friends*, earlier this year, "China is certainly capable of self-defeating ham-fistedness".

"But the problem is more multidimensional and multifaceted than that. Australia's political leaders have been much given to hysteria and hyperventilation in their commentary about China.

"And for its part, China knows only too well that it loses no skin in South-East Asia by beating up on Australia. We have managed to squander our diplomatic capital in the region as recklessly as we have in China, and no one is disappointed to see arrogance reap its own reward."

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Australia is at least at the table

But even if this is true, it is not clear whether China's actions against Australia have gained it much and, with its own economy now under pressure, it has an interest in shoring up its markets and supply lines.

Some analysts have noted the growing pressures over the supply of lithium — a commodity which grows in importance by the day with the mass development of electric vehicles.

A number of countries are developing critical mineral security policies. [Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio signed a critical minerals partnership](#), as well as a joint declaration on security cooperation, on a recent visit to Western Australia.

Australia is a major supplier of lithium.

The focus on China — and the spectacular deterioration in our relationship — has overshadowed much of the repositioning the new government has been doing on foreign policy, and in international meetings.

In Egypt this week, Australia, along with India, has been playing a key role at the COP27 climate talks, negotiating to replace a \$US100 billion agreement — never really honoured — under which rich countries promised in 2009 to deliver huge investments in developing countries to build clean energy infrastructure. The agreement expires in 2025.

Whatever the outcome of the talks, Australia is at least at the table and making a contribution, instead of being seen primarily as a climate pariah.

We may not yet have done enough to address climate change to satisfy our Pacific neighbours, for example. But we are back in the game.

Laura Tingle is 7.30's chief political correspondent.