

This column by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, June 28, 2022.



Opinion

A thaw in China-US diplomatic relations? We can only hope



- Recent overtures by Chinese diplomats in Singapore, Hong Kong and Sydney, as well as displays of America's friendlier side by its new ambassador to China, can't help but inspire some optimism

Tom Plate

Published: 1:30am, 28 Jun, 2022



Illustration: Craig Stephens

An unexpected invitation came via email last week that will prove either of no more import than any of the other stuff in my inbox, or instead a tea leaf to be read and analysed with care and an open mind.

It was an invitation to join an unofficial "exchange of views" with "some scholars" regarding "mainly Sino-US relations" over lunch at the large People's Republic of China consulate building in Los Angeles. I will not take the invitation lightly.

In [years past](#) – notably during the era of former president Jiang Zemin, coinciding with the second term of the Clinton presidency in the US – Beijing encouraged its diplomats to pitch China’s geopolitical and ideological positions to any perceived “influencers” who would listen, while bringing to the tasks such charm as they could.

Back then, relations with the Chinese staff were usually businesslike and often cordial. You could and would agree to disagree, but with mutual respect.

Then, roughly a decade ago – while there is no way of quantifying it – there came a new coldness out of Beijing. Here in otherwise mellow California, fellow journalists and academics were dismayed, including a few in Los Angeles I knew personally.

One journalist had in principle accepted a guest teaching role warmly extended by an internationally respected Chinese university. That was in 2014. But then the project was put on hold, where it remains today.

A year later, an academic wrote a book on China-US relations that had been contracted, paid for and expertly translated into Chinese. It was dutifully submitted for what the mainland Chinese publisher assumed would be routine approval by the government. The publisher was mistaken, and the book remains stuck in some censor’s great dark cave.

Then, a highly regarded colleague, who ran a brilliant China-US relations institute at the University of Southern California, woke up one day to a cross-Pacific cacophony of unplugged bilateral programmes and unreturned semi-personal emails. I can still recall his depressed face.

So you can see why the invitation from the consulate last week caught my eye and lifted me into potential positive territory. It pains to live without hope, for hope can inspire one to try to view events with optimism.

Here are a few other events that recently caught people’s attention: in Hong Kong, Beijing’s liaison office tendered an invitation to business-sector members to offer candid thoughts in unofficial “listening sessions”. These businesspeople no doubt have a [lot to say](#).

At Sydney’s cutting-edge University of Technology, Xiao Qian, recently appointed as China’s top diplomat in Australia, teed up an unusual [major speech](#) that was clearly calculated to propose to the newly elected Australian government that relations with China deserved better.

This career diplomat – a former director of the Asia Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – showed admirable diplomatic pluck in the face of a deliberately rude torrent of shouts from an audience that inevitably included some heckling human-rights protesters. Is this what we want?

That scene took place just two weeks after a meeting in Singapore at the annual [Shangri-La Dialogue](#) between Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe and Richard Marles, his Australian counterpart.

A former Australian intelligence boss explained that the get-together happened because the new centre-left government doesn’t “carry the baggage of the last 10 years – and that is not a criticism of the previous government. But they don’t carry the baggage of the differences in respect to the pandemic. They don’t carry the baggage of ministers incessantly talking about the potential for conflict with China. They are able to start with a clean slate.”

This significant comment, first reported by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, was picked up by Voice of America under a headline that began “Diplomatic Thaw....” This is what we want.

In Beijing now, even the Biden administration may be singing in a new key. In recent weeks, its new [ambassador Nicholas Burns](#) has posed for countless photo-ops with the relish of a politician hustling for office. For all the seeming Twitter-type superficiality, though, it is quite good to see Washington waving the friendly side of the American flag.

The ambassador post had been [vacant](#) since October 2020. Maybe the Democratic government of President Joe Biden wasn’t sure exactly how to fill it. How about, for US domestic enjoyment, with an American wolf-warrior to snarl at Beijing? Or with a lonesome [China dove](#)? But current polls for the autumn midterm elections favour Republicans, so that would be too risky.

Generally cheerful and moderate, Ambassador Burns might prove just right for the Beijing hotspot. Burns is a proper career diplomat. A graduate of the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, he has served in both Republican and Democratic administrations, including those of presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. I have similar hope for China’s Xiao Qian labouring in Australia.

Based on their remarkably similar starts, both men appear to have been instructed by their governments to help move the temperature gauge toward definite defrost.

My tea-leaf reading convinces me that both sides accept the need for a better bilateral relationship. After all, it’s easier to read the tea leaves when you’re looking down into the bottom of the cup. Which is precisely where Sino-US relations now lie.

LMU Clinical Professor Tom Plate is the university’s distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies. He is also vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute in Los Angeles