

No escaping an uncomfortable fact about PM's handling of China

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By Benjamin Herscovitch

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Following Prime Minister [Anthony Albanese's rapturous reception in Shanghai](#) and Beijing, the Australia-China relationship has officially stabilised.

Australia can again advocate for its interests at the apex of political power in Beijing, while it's likely to just be a matter of time before Australian exporters can again access the [Chinese market free from trade restrictions](#).

As well as welcoming these striking signs of success, we should also plainly acknowledge the Albanese government's failure to act against Chinese officials implicated in severe and systematic human rights abuses.

Before leaving for China to accompany Prime Minister Albanese, Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong said: "[W]e've reached this point [of relationship stabilisation] without compromising on what is important to us."

This might be true in the sense that the Albanese government hasn't rolled back existing Australian policies to please China. For example, there's no sign of the government reversing course on the 2018 decision to exclude Chinese companies [Huawei and ZTE from the 5G network](#) or the 2021 plan to acquire nuclear-powered submarines.

But one of the public's priorities remains missing from the Albanese government's approach to China.

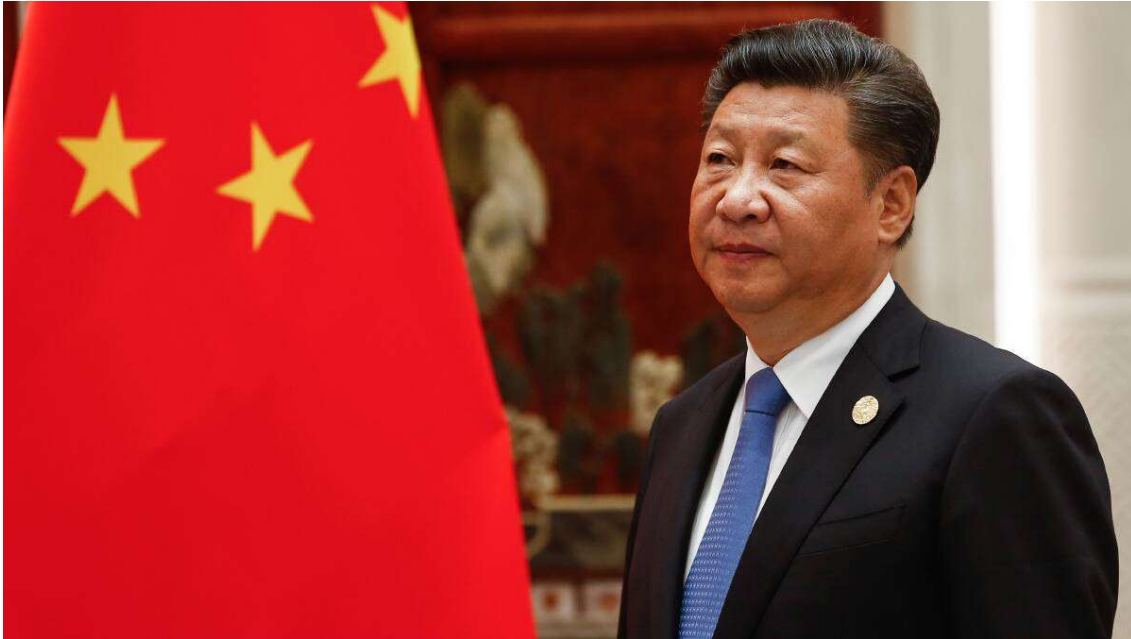
Australians overwhelmingly want to follow the lead of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and the European Union by imposing targeted sanctions on Chinese officials implicated in human rights abuses.

The Australia-China Relations Institute has found that support for "travel and financial bans on Chinese officials and entities involved in human rights violations" sat at around 65 per cent in 2022 and 68 per cent in 2023. Meanwhile, the Lowy Poll found that 82 per cent of Australians supported such sanctions in 2020.

Even Senator Wong herself has previously offered her cautious approval, saying in 2021 from opposition: "The Morrison government should ... consider targeted sanctions on foreign companies, officials and other entities known to be directly profiting from Uyghur forced labour and other human rights abuses."

Australian community support for such sanctions is hardly surprising.

Some 1 million Uyghurs are estimated to have been arbitrarily detained and subjected to political re-education, while many thousands have experienced forced labour. The Chinese government has also engaged in widespread cultural erasure in the far western region of Xinjiang, with mosques and other forms of built heritage demolished.



Xi Jinping. Picture Shutterstock

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded in 2022 that the Chinese government might be guilty of crimes against humanity considering the extent of the arbitrary and discriminatory detention.

Beijing is also implementing repressive policies elsewhere in China. In February this year, United Nations experts raised alarm about the separation of 1 million Tibetan children from their families and their forced assimilation at residential schools.

Despite strong Australian public support for sanctions against the perpetrators of these human rights abuses, the Albanese government isn't willing to deny travel and financial opportunities to the Chinese officials responsible.

Of course, policy in a representative democracy shouldn't simply reflect popularly held positions, and individuals of great integrity can disagree deeply on whether it's wise to sanction Chinese government figures.

It's possible that acting against senior Chinese officials could jeopardise the stabilisation of the Australia-China relationship. Imposing these sanctions might have prompted Beijing to not release long-detained Australian journalist Cheng Lei, as well as potentially foreclosing the possibility of wine, lobster and beef exporters regaining full access to the lucrative Chinese market.

There's equally no guarantee that such sanctions would substantially ameliorate the lives of the millions of who are currently at the mercy of the Chinese Communist Party.

And yet to not sanction is to refuse to use available tools to punish human rights abusers, while also leaving open the possibility of those individuals and their families visiting and investing in Australia.

Then there's the damage to Australia's reputation. The government has shown itself willing to impose sanctions when the economic blowback and diplomatic costs are minimal, including in the cases of Russia, Iran and Myanmar, while refusing to do the same when it comes to egregious human rights abuses in China.

On balance, not sanctioning Chinese officials might still have been the best path for pursuing the Australian national interest.

But there's no escaping an uncomfortable fact: Prime Minister Albanese and his ministers have chosen to not take concrete and targeted action against those responsible for violating the human rights of millions of Uyghurs, Tibetans and members of other communities.

The Albanese government has presided over a period of remarkable relationship repair between Australia and China.

This is likely to lead to more diplomatic and trade gains for Australia.

Still, we shouldn't pretend that this achievement has come at no cost to Australia's commitment to defending the basic rights and freedoms of all.

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