

World Peace Forum Beijing – China and Europe Panel Session

Thank you for that introduction.

It's great to be on a panel with Nicolas and Luca.

And to have someone as well-versed in European affairs as Professor Zhou to keep us in order today...

In fact I'm sure your wisdom lies behind the makeup of this panel, Professor Zhou.

Because you will have heard my Prime Minister say on many occasions that Britain has left the European Union but it hasn't left Europe.

That would be impossible. Culturally, geographically and politically.

So I speak today as a proud European.

Representing NATO's leading European member state: the biggest defence budget of NATO's European members.

And this year, of course, my country holds the Presidency of the G7.

As Luca's holds the Presidency of the G20.

And our two countries share a responsibility later this year for bringing the world together to act on climate change at the Glasgow COP.

So I'm looking forward to this discussion and to your questions.

Actually it's all about the questions... asking the right questions.

Because if you don't ask the right questions you don't get meaningful answers.

We've been asked to talk about opportunities and challenges.

So I want to explore some of the questions posed by the opportunities and challenges we have.

I've been in China now for nearly a year as Ambassador.

I'm lucky to have seen a great deal of this country since my arrival.

And as I travel, I love collecting ☐☐.

One famous one I was reminded of recently is ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ (saiwengshima, yanzhifeifu)

Professor Zhou, neither you nor most of this audience will need me to explain the story that lies behind this saying.

But for those who haven't run across it..

the story begins with a man who has a prize horse that runs away.

His friends try to console him, but he says maybe out of this bad situation will come something good.

And indeed, in time, the horse comes back to him, accompanied by another fine horse from a far off land.

Ambassador Wilson delivered a speech during a panel discussion at the World Peace Forum 2021 in Beijing.

OPPORTUNITY IN CHALLENGE

Our hero is wise: out of challenging situations can come opportunities.

So perhaps that's the first question: how we, the countries, represented on this panel (and I include China in that) create opportunity from the global challenges we face?

Because there is no doubt this is an era of global challenges.

PANDEMIC

And the most immediate challenge stares us in the face.

The novel format of this conference is a reminder to us all of the shared challenge posed by the pandemic.

And the pandemic speaks to a very basic feature of the world in the 21st century: our interconnectedness.

No country will escape Covid until all countries escape Covid.

For our part, the UK – working with European countries and China – has created one of the workhorse vaccines: AstraZeneca.

Easy to store, quick to distribute and available at cost price.

Over 500 million AstraZeneca vaccines have been administered in 168 countries.

That's 96% of the doses distributed to developing nations by COVAX, the global alliance that the UK helped establish.

With UK leadership, the G7 is now engaged in the biggest and fastest vaccination programme in history, designed to protect the whole world by the end of next year.

This is just the beginning. Europe and China are going to have to work together.

So that science liberates humankind from this pandemic and wider threats to global health.

That means a Pandemic Treaty to strengthen international cooperation and prevent future pandemics.

That means, all countries who can – and let me be frank, China can – stepping up to ensure vaccines are available to the poorest through COVAX.

That means as governments supporting science with sound frameworks on IP protection and appropriate data rules to facilitate their research.

I've seen UK/China science cooperation in action.

It's impressive. Last month I visited the Oxford University -Suzhou Centre for Advanced Research.

I saw ground-breaking UK and Chinese research on a rapid, portable and cost-effective test kit for COVID-19 that has been deployed in airports across the UK and Hong Kong International Airport.

Don't we need more, much more, of the same?

CLIMATE

The pandemic is the near-term threat.

But one of the risks is it distracts from the urgency of tackling climate change.

The British environmentalist, 95 years young, David Attenborough describes it as the greatest threat we face in thousands of years.

He's right.

Climate change is a man-made disaster of a global scale, and without action the consequences will be catastrophic.

This year, the World Economic Forum (WEF) placed environmental degradation as the top long-term global risk for the second year in a row.

I have witnessed myself the risks to China's coastal and river areas from climate change and heard in Wuhan about the massive challenge from flooding. We have a joint responsibility to work together to adapt and improve.

If we do not act now, the science tells us these effects will become more frequent and more brutal. That we will witness a scale of global catastrophe, the likes of which the world has not seen.

Over the last thirty years in the UK we have grown our economy by 78 percent, whilst cutting emissions by 44 percent.

The UK was the first major economy to enshrine in law a commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Earlier this year, we set the world's most ambitious climate change target: cutting emissions by 78% from 1990 levels by the year 2035.

Now every country in the G7 has promised to achieve net zero by 2050.

This year the UK and China have a shared opportunity to take decisive action to address the growing climate and biodiversity crises.

UK, Italy and China must support each other through this year's COP26 and COP15, and push for action in vital areas like power generation, clean transport, and halting deforestation.

DEVELOPMENT

And then there is the challenge of global poverty. There is an impressive story to be told of how, in a generation, 100s of millions of Chinese people have lifted themselves out of poverty.

But hundreds of millions in the developing world still live in poverty.

Their plight is exacerbated by COVID.

So it is vital that we achieve the sustainable development goals.

The estimated increase in global poverty in 2020 is devastating, with the total COVID-19-induced new poor in 2020 estimated to be between 119 and 124 million. COVID is disproportionately impacting the world's most vulnerable, including women and girls.

The UK is the largest donor to the World Bank's IDA19 round supporting economic development around the world.

Before the pandemic, more than a quarter of a billion children were excluded from education – 95% of them in lower-income countries, and half of them girls: COVID-19 has exacerbated this issue with more than 168 million children seeing the closure of schools for almost an entire year. We are investing more than half a billion dollars in girls' education worldwide, alongside co-hosting this year's Global Partnership for Education Summit.

Health, climate and girls education: these were top of the agenda at the G7 summit which Britain recently hosted.

And it's right that the wealthiest nations take a lead.

But they can't lead alone. The world's second largest economy has much to contribute to this agenda.

So yes... challenges can become opportunities when we work together.

As XJP said to the PM last year – “in the face of increasing global

challenges we should work together to shoulder more responsibilities.”

MUTUAL TRUST

But working together requires trust.

And that, I think, is the fourth challenge to highlight.

Let's be frank.

We live in a competitive world. In some arenas European nations and China must compete.

And we have different political systems.

The right kind of competition is healthy.

It spurs us on to greater achievements.

The innovation of Chinese companies spurs British business to accelerate R&D.

But competition has to be grounded in respect.

I'm sure many in the audience are following keenly the European football championships.

I know fellow Ambassadors are – On Tuesday, the German Ambassador invited me to watch the Germany v England.

We were both cheering loudly for our teams but we did so from a spirit of friendship, mutual respect, and love for the game.

The phrase “mutual respect” comes up a lot in Chinese official discourse about Europe. But what does it mean?

It cannot mean airbrushing out our differences.

I can assure you my German counterpart and I did not agree on who should win the match on Tuesday and were not shy of saying so!

But we had two things: a mutual understanding and a respect for the rules of the game.

The answer to building mutual trust is, I believe, building mutual understanding.

We must avoid 鸡同鸭讲. Literally a chicken speaking as a duck!

Or talking, but without communicating. Part of that is understanding our different points of view.

CCP celebrated its centenary this week.

There is a need for more understanding in Europe of the long history of this

fascinating country, especially the past century. 1921 and before it 1911 were foundational times for modern China.

But our continent, our countries too have foundational moments, the implications of which are poorly understood here in China.

Across Europe, the era after World War II was foundational.

Two horrific wars within a generation.

People said never again.

That countries and peoples need to work together, grounded in some basic rights of the individual.

Western European countries were prominent amongst the original signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and followed it up with the European Convention on Human Rights to ensure these rights were respected.

In the UK, we have some foundational moments that go even further back. The Magna Carta of 1215 was a foundational moment for the UK.

It said that kings were not divine, the powerful could not just run roughshod, that rules and law were the basis of society.

Those are strong sentiments in the UK to this day.

Every country likes to boast about its prowess in this that or the other.

One of the UK's most credible boasts is that we are the best in the world at queueing, at lining up.

Rules are deeply engrained with us.

As is a sense of unfairness when rules are broken.

A desire for respect of the rules of the game is human nature.

We believe that applies as much in the international arena as in everyday life.

In a competitive world, rules and norms are vital.

It's why the UK champions vital international agreements from the Paris Accord on Climate Change to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

It's why we stand up for the Sino-British Declaration on Hong Kong; an international treaty between our countries.

It's why we speak out when we assess fundamental human rights are being violated, as in Xinjiang.

These are foundational matters that are central to us.

And so people shouldn't misunderstand and think that our references to human rights are some geopolitical game that should be stopped by power politics.

They go much deeper to who we are. I think mutual respect involves recognising that.

But I do not believe these values reflect some unbridgeable gap between us.

It is said that at its most basic level, the idea underpinning early European conceptions of individual rights is the so-called Golden Rule from Jesus's teachings: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Well, what did Confucius say? 己所不欲，勿施于人 jǐ suǒ bú yù, wù shī yú rén What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.

The challenge is not one of values but a lack of trust.

Research conducted by the British Council and Ipsos MORI published this week shows that while two-thirds of young people in China say that they trust the UK people (67%) and the UK government (65%).

Only 31% of young people in the UK say they trust the people of China, and just 16% trust the government of China.

How do we overcome that trust deficit?

Some people say that the answer is not to talk about our differences. To sweep them under the carpet. But I say that cannot work – we ignore the need for respect and understanding.

Some people say that the answer is to step back, to recognise our differences are too big, to decouple. But I say that cannot work – it would be to shirk our responsibilities.

Some people say that a cold war is inevitable or even desirable. But I say that would be a failure of leadership and there's plenty of leadership to go around.

Because ultimately the question isn't about opportunity and challenge.

It is about shared responsibilities in a shared world.

Shared responsibility to help the world build back better from this devastating pandemic.

Shared responsibility to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

Shared responsibility to help the poorest around the world.

How do we do that?

Respect for one another based on understanding through dialogue.

Respect for the rules of the game.

And recognition that our countries will generate global trust by what they contribute to global good.

We will be judged not on words but on actions.

This has to be the foundation for the relationship between China and Europe.

And it has to be the foundation for the global role in the world that all our countries must be ready and able to fulfil.

In that way we can channel the wise old man with the horses.

☁☁☁☁☁☁ is sometimes translated in to English as “every cloud has a silver lining.”

There are some dark clouds over our world right now.

Europe and China in recognising our shared responsibilities can find the silver lining.