

World Peace Forum Beijing – Reshaping Relations among Major Powers

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the kind introduction Professor Yan Xuetong.

Delighted to be speaking here today.

Particularly at event hosted by Tsinghua, one of China's leading universities.

Tsinghua's partnerships with the UK are really extensive, cooperating on the most pressing global challenges facing us today, such as urbanisation and air pollution, managing demographic changes, and biomedical science.

And a treat to be back in Haidian speaking to Chinese students of international affairs.

As a student at Beijing Normal University (Beishida) in the late 1990s I have fond memories of my time in Haidian studying Chinese and getting to know Chinese student life here.

I remember the friends I made and conversations with other fellow students.

I remember the intellectual curiosity and hunger for interactions with foreigners.

I remember bright ideas about China's great potential and the paths it could tread in the world.

And as I return as British Ambassador I'm beating a path throughout your vast and alluring country.

I've visited eleven provinces and three municipalities in my first nine months.

Every journey a thrill.

Every interaction a delight: from Party Secretaries and titans of industry to ordinary people on the train.

As a diplomat, it is a duty and a pleasure to connect with your host country in its entirety: in its complexity and in its nuance.

Haidian may be full of knowledge and intellect, but staying in Beijing is no substitute for seeing and hearing, and very often eating and drinking, the real China.

Ambassador Wilson delivered a speech during a panel discussion at the World

Peace Forum 2021 in Beijing.

PART 1 – UK ROLE IN THE WORLD

In my time here I have also tried to bring some of the UK to China.

Today, as I address a room full of students, scholars and experts on international affairs, it is only right that I seize this opportunity to talk about the UK's role in the world, and what it means for China.

Britain is known for its literary contributions to the world.

Among them is the writer John Donne, whose writings explored our shared humanity.

In this pandemic his words about one person's death being everyone's loss resonate more strongly than ever.

Over four hundred years ago he wrote that "no man is an island".

And in doing so he captured something that still rings true in British foreign policy today.

Britain is a collection of islands.

But Britain knows it is not entire of itself.

British foreign policy has global concerns.

As a nation that has connections around the world, whose economy is built on trade.

As a nation who has historical links around the world, whose interests and obligations are global.

Britain takes a truly global perspective.

And this year the British government set out its strategy for British foreign policy over the next decade.

The Integrated Review speaks of Britain being a 'Force for Good' in the world.

It sets out the Prime Minister's vision for the UK in 2030 as a more secure, prosperous and resilient United Kingdom.

Under that vision we are working to create new foundations for our prosperity, lead in green technology and step forward as a science and technology superpower.

We are adapting to a more competitive world, seeking to lead in security, diplomacy, development and poverty reduction.

Aiming to solve problems and share burdens, and take a global perspective.

We are chairing the G7 this year, and recently hosted leaders in Cornwall for the annual Summit.

And with thanks to my French and US colleagues here today, we're helping set the agenda for how the world can Build Back Better after the pandemic.

UK expertise has developed the world's most widely distributed vaccine, made by Oxford University and AstraZeneca at cost price, and distributes over 500 million doses in 168 countries via COVAX.

And we are leading the push for action on climate change, committing in April this year to the world's most ambitious climate change target of cutting emissions by 78% from 1990 levels by 2035.

With a doubling of support for international climate finance – reaching £11.6bn by 2025.

And later this year we will host international leaders at COP26.

Our commitment to acting as a 'Force for Good' sees us routinely ranking amongst the top five global aid donors – this year spending £10bn on international aid – double China's average yearly aid spending – and doing so through cooperative multilateral mechanisms, not through bilateral or private agreements.

Our interests are global, and we know we share them with many others.

And the evidence of our ability to work with other nations to achieve them is obvious. It's more than just words, it is our practice.

PART 2 – CHINA'S ROLE IN THE WORLD / MULTILATERALISM

So in a sense, discussing how we should reshape relations between major powers misses the point a bit.

Instead of paying lip service to multilateral cooperation and spending our time focusing on how major countries relate to one another, we need to think about the tone and substance of how we can cooperate with all countries.

We need to recognise that these challenges – in health, climate change, and development – affect us all.

And we should understand that the international system, in which China plays a vital role, needs to deliver for people.

Reform to perform.

That there's no zero-sum in the grand challenges we face today.

No country emerges from the pandemic until every country emerges from the pandemic.

No country thrives despite climate change unless all countries avert its worst impacts.

No country is, in fact, an island entire of itself.

Certainly not that continental-sized country, China, that I'm so proud to have as my home for the next several years.

And solutions to global problems that do not include and involve China are not realistic.

So China's readiness to cooperate – and its readiness to lead – on transnational challenges will define whether we can successfully overcome them.

So just like the UK, China is faced with decisions about what sort of global power it wants to be.

What does global leadership mean to China?

Some such as Professor Yan (Xuetong) talk about China exercising “benevolent authority” (王道 wang dao) rather than “hegemony” (霸道 ba dao).

I wonder if that quite captures it...

Leadership is not about establishing authority.

Leadership is about effecting change.

And in a world of interdependence, change comes through cooperation.

And cooperation puts a premium on trust and goodwill.

Good leaders lead by listening, and not dismissing genuinely held views and concerns.

By not responding to scrutiny with fragility.

By setting the right tone and injecting the right substance for international engagement.

As President Xi himself recently said China should communicate openly and confidently, with modesty and humility.

PART 3 – CALL TO ACTION

China's economic success is unquestionable.

But economic might does not automatically qualify as global leadership on its own.

And so in the next era, China faces a decision – an opportunity.

As the world looks on for it to set the tone and substance of its global

leadership.

Leaning in on climate change would help the world reach an agreement at COP26 that accelerates action to reduce emissions, strengthens adaptation and resilience to climate impacts, scales up support and finance, and protects and restores nature.

Delivering on global health commitments by increasing funding for the COVAX Advanced Market Commitment would support equitable global access and strengthen the global health system, including through a pandemic treaty.

Championing sustainable development by redoubling efforts to work together in the developing world, would build on the successes of the Sustainable Development Goals and tackle the aspects where our record is more mixed.

This year's World Peace Forum is about international security cooperation after the pandemic, and how we advance multilateralism.

To achieve these lofty goals, and support world peace, we need to engage with the difficult questions too.

The UK wants to shape international rules that serve the common good, as international leaders must do.

Is China prepared to work with others in support of common rules in new frontiers?

For instance by acting as a responsible cyber power – working to shape a positive vision for a free, open, peaceful and secure cyberspace.

To respond to common and urgent international priorities, match the interests of the international community and prioritise the shared interest?

This is the real test for international leadership – whether a leader can listen, share a common vision, and realise change.

On my journeying, I like to learn chengyu.

Each one a window into Chinese civilisation that dates back so many years.

And which has incorporated so much accumulated wisdom.

And are there more apposite chengyu for today's age than these three?

□□□□ (huannan yugong – come and go together through thick and thin)

A friend in need is a friend indeed.

And good friends are prepared to be frank with each other.

□□□□ (kaicheng xiangjian – be candid and open with one another)

The task is challenging and will take courage.

But it is our duty.

□□□□ (zewu pangdai – to be duty bound)

Whatever our differences: on specific issues or in our very different political systems... countries that have the wherewithal to achieve a global impact must work together to solve the great challenges of our time.

These are the responsibilities that we cannot hand down to the next generation.

Thank you.