

## China Expert Engagement | Open Innovation Team Workshop

16 December 2022

The purpose of this workshop was to gather views on how the UK government can improve its capabilities in managing relations with China. There were two discussion sessions - one on issues either HMG, or the UK more broadly, tends to misunderstand about China, and a second on the idea of establishing a China expert advisory group.

This was part of an ongoing cross-government programme on China capability, with a particular focus on departments which need to deal with China, but are less involved in foreign policy. The main insights from the discussions are summarised below.

### Session 1: What does HMG as a whole often misinterpret or misunderstand about China, and why?

- **The Chinese state is a complex system and its actors are not always aligned.** Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elites, provincial governments and the military can separately influence China's external relations. They can have different drivers, for example, provincial leaders' decisions can be motivated by local competition, which may diverge from CCP foreign policy aims. Some participants emphasised, though, that the CCP remains a strong centralising force increasingly seeking to align disparate actors.
- **Similarly, too much focus on centralised politics means shifts in public opinion can be disregarded.** There is a risk of treating the CCP regime and Chinese citizens as a homogenous group. Improved understanding of public issues, and the pressure this can put on the CCP, might help HMG anticipate future rifts between citizens and regime.
- **China's foreign policy can be driven by domestic challenges, rather than intent to dominate a particular region or market.** China's domestic issues influence foreign policy decisions. Experts cited climate change, corruption, regional inequality and unemployment as examples that have influenced their engagement with the international community. For example, some argued the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not necessarily, or only, about increasing China's influence in the world. It is also driven by practical, domestic considerations, such as finding sources for China's export surplus.
- **China's actions can be short-termist, contradictory, and fail to fulfil strategic goals - like any country.** COVID, the BRI and corruption were cited as

issues that can demonstrate China's lack of strategic planning and capability. Some experts emphasised that China has not successfully defined its own global role - priorities can and have been fluid.

> [REDACTED]

> **HMG should understand more about how others engage with China, and their incentives to do so.**

- [REDACTED]

- Multilateral institutions are increasingly engaging with China on international initiatives. Experts cited the UN's engagement with China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) as an example.

> **The degree to which external reputation matters to China can often be misunderstood.** Participants highlighted that China does care about its international reputation, and does in some cases respond to criticism or pressure from external forces.

> **Participants emphasised that they thought expertise on these issues and themes existed in HMG,** but not across all policy areas which involve China.

## Session 2: How might HMG establish an ongoing China expert advisory group?

We presented attendees with three strawman options:

1. A permanent group that meets regularly
2. A larger more fluid group that could be called on for specific projects
3. More informal structures, ad hoc engagement

> **Most participants agreed we should do a mix of different options.** The second option was broadly more favoured, and most groups agreed fixed membership can be unhelpful as needs and priorities change.

> **Most participants agreed a panel or advisory group could make a useful contribution to the UK China expert community, rather than just providing a service to government.** This might include providing opportunities for policy impact to ECRs and postdocs, not just established professors, and to people with diverse backgrounds. Experts also suggested providing funding for longer pieces of work by early career researchers, and/or strengthening relations with think tanks and other existing structures, like the [REDACTED]. In this way the group could be an investment in the UK China research community. Going beyond traditional panel discussions to commissioning novel research, and building up skills, including translation and the use of open source intelligence,

were also recommended as activities the group could support.

➤ **The structure and purpose of an expert group needs to be clearly defined.**

Experts recommended that the group could address more targeted issues, and that HMG report back - even if at a high level - the impact of the group's input. Participants also said we need to clearly identify the customer in government.

➤ **Participants highlighted some of the risks and considerations for members of a prospective group or panel.**

Academics who wish to do future fieldwork in China can find it difficult if they are seen as closer to Western governments. Some participants argued for more secondments into government, acknowledging the challenge of providing security clearances.

**Examples to draw on**

- The [Dutch-China Knowledge Network](#) - a network established to involve China experts and disseminate knowledge within the government of the Netherlands and beyond. It is run by a secretariat at the Clingendael Institute
  - The Australian government commissioned an expert and public consultation process to develop its ['Australia in the Asian Century' white paper](#) in 2012
- The EU External Action Service supported the [Europe China Research and Advice Network](#) (ECRAN). Officials throughout the EEAS and in member states and missions were able to request specific research from a network of experts.
- [Georgetown University's CSET](#) was cited as a useful model of a science and technology focused policy advice/expertise unit in this area.
- The [Centre for Strategic Translations](#) is a non-profit US organisation which translates strategic and political Chinese documents