

DIPLOMACY

Ed Miliband's visit to China

Between 15-19 March, Ed Miliband, the UK's Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, visited Beijing to reinstate formal bilateral discussions on energy and accelerating climate action between the British government and Chinese leadership.¹ This visit marked the first formal energy talks between the UK and China in nearly eight years, as both countries aim to enhance cooperation in tackling climate change.^{2 3}

On 15 March, the UK Secretary of State met Chinese Minister Huang Runqiu at the Ministry of Ecology and Environment before travelling to Tsinghua University where he spoke to students about UK action and global cooperation as part of the university's climate lecture series.^{4 5} On 16 March, Miliband visited Carbon Capture and Storage (CCUS) and hydrogen power projects in Energy Valley, also in Beijing.⁶

The formal 8th China-UK Energy Dialogue, co-chaired by Miliband and Wang Hongzhi, head of China's National Energy Administration, took place on 17 March, and various topics were discussed, including clean energy technologies, energy transition paths, and energy security.^{7 8 9} The two officials also signed a memorandum of understanding to promote partnership in areas such as electricity market reform, grid modernisation, offshore wind power, carbon capture, and renewable hydrogen.^{10 11}

On 18 March, the final day of his visit, Miliband met with Chinese Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang, with official press releases reiterating commitments to strengthen cooperation in combatting climate change.¹² In his remarks at the associated press conference, Ding emphasised that fostering a stable China-UK relationship aligns with both nations' interests and promotes global economic growth, while Miliband underscored the UK's intent to enhance engagement with China on energy security and climate initiatives.^{13 14}

In their coverage, Chinese state media positively portrayed the recent visit of the UK Secretary of State.^{15 16 17} In a sign of prominence given to the visits, flagship TV news programme Xinwen Lianbo featured both of Miliband's meetings as well as that of the London Lord Mayor Alastair King, though coverage did not extend significantly beyond official summaries.¹⁸ The visit took place within a broader flurry of UK diplomatic activity, with Chinese state media reporting on a visit of other UK mayors to Shenzhen.¹⁹ The 17 March meeting was covered in fairly general terms, talking of "consolidating momentum of improving bilateral relations" and highlighting developments in business, finance, and climate cooperation between the two nations.²⁰

The UK government press release also mentioned that the Secretary of State "took the opportunity" to simultaneously raise the government's concerns on issues including Russia, forced labour and Jimmy Lai.²¹ This was absent from Chinese media reporting, as is typically the case with sensitive issues.²²

Adarga Analysis: Ed Miliband's visit to Beijing signals a recalibration of UK-China engagement on climate and energy policy, a move which has the potential to bring significant benefits for the UK. 2024 was the warmest year on record, and the first to cross the 1.5C global warming limit, an important symbolic level since it was set in Paris in 2015.²³ In the face of worsening climate change, international cooperation in areas such as renewable energy, carbon capture, and hydrogen technology is not only desirable but necessary when faced with such a collective action dilemma.

China is a global leader in renewable energy technologies, particularly in the production of solar panels, wind turbines, and battery storage systems.²⁴ The UK, for its part, has made significant advances in offshore wind and carbon capture technology, creating a natural complementarity in expertise.^{25 26} Therefore, the signing of a MoU covering offshore wind, grid modernisation, and hydrogen power offers the UK an avenue to benefit from China's industrial scale while advancing its own energy transition goals.

For the UK, enhanced cooperation with China in these areas could yield economic dividends, ensuring access to affordable, cutting-edge technology. At a time when energy security is an increasingly urgent concern, partnerships with China on areas of mutual benefit – if carefully managed – could provide stability and cost efficiency gains. In this sense, Miliband's engagement also signals that the UK is committed to sustaining climate diplomacy as a shared global challenge, rather than allowing geopolitical rifts to hinder cooperation in an area of mutual interest.

This approach can also be situated within a broader Western recalibration toward China. Unlike some European nations that have leaned into greater economic interdependence with Beijing, the UK has typically taken a more restrained approach, aligning closely with the US and Indo-Pacific allies.^{27 28} However, the energy dialogue suggests a recognition within the UK government that disengagement is neither realistic nor beneficial in areas where collaboration is essential. While geopolitical tensions will almost certainly persist, particularly in the realms of trade, security, and human rights, the UK government's engagement with China on climate issues demonstrates a pragmatic approach, balancing the UK's strategic interests with global climate imperatives.

It is likely that the UK government's overarching approach to China will remain cautious, as it seeks to balance engagement in such areas of strategic interest with vocal concerns over issues such as human rights, Russia's influence, and Hong Kong. The fact that Miliband raised sensitive issues in private discussions follows existing precedent of UK-China diplomatic engagements and indicates that the UK is keen to assert its values while maintaining dialogue. Meanwhile, the absence of these points from Chinese media reporting is unsurprising, and indicative of Beijing's controlled messaging strategy, highlighting only those aspects of the visit that align with its preferred narrative.

Miliband's visit also occurs within the wider context of China's recent diplomatic outreach to key U.S. allies. Following recent actions of the Trump administration – both in relation to Ukraine and in applying tariffs to the European Union – Beijing has actively sought to cultivate stronger ties with European nations in recent weeks, with an uptick in diplomatic activity and public overtures by senior officials to European counterparts.^{29 30 31 32} Through these engagements, Beijing is almost certainly seeking to project China as a reliable partner and a stabilising force in international relations.

This shift in approach is also mirrored within China's official communications. It is notable, for instance, that the Chinese readout of the visit by the London Lord Mayor seemed to hint at an attempt to draw the UK into Beijing's worldview. Vice President Han Zheng reportedly said China was willing to work with Westminster to "jointly promote a multipolar world."³³ While China has consistently used "multipolarity" in its discussions with Russia, other BRICS member states, and countries in the Global South, its application to UK-China relations is a diversion from the norm. It also echoes Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks at the Munich Security Conference where he described Europe as "an important pole."³⁴ This suggests that China likely views recent events as an opportunity to advance its own interests by enticing the UK towards its preferred framework, one which dilutes Washington's influence, while simultaneously projecting itself as a cooperative partner to Western nations at a time when US-China tensions remain high.

Looking forward, the UK will need to carefully navigate this emerging dynamic, ensuring that engagement on shared interests like climate change serves its own strategic priorities rather than being subsumed into broader geopolitical rivalries. As Beijing continues to court Western allies with its multipolar rhetoric, London must strike a balance, leveraging cooperation with China where it aligns with UK interests while maintaining its close relationship with Washington. However, rather than simply mirroring the US approach, like other middle powers faced with similar challenges, the UK has an opportunity to carve out a distinct, pragmatic path that both upholds its values and maximises its influence in an evolving global order.

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ECONOMICS

Trinidad and Tobago inaugurates airport constructed by China

On 15 March, the new passenger terminal at the ANR Robinson International Airport was inaugurated.^{35 36} At the ceremony, Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister Keith Rowley expressed satisfaction with the ongoing cooperation between his country and China.³⁷ In his remarks, he noted that Trinidad and Tobago were among the first Caribbean nations to sign a memorandum of understanding with China for the Belt and Road Initiative, which he claimed has yielded significant benefits for the country.^{38 39 40}

The terminal was constructed by China Railway Construction Corporation, a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE), and the project reportedly created approximately 600 local jobs during peak periods.⁴¹ Rowley praised the advanced facilities of the new terminal, which is expected to be a significant boost to Tobago's tourism, with the capacity to accommodate up to 3 million passengers annually.⁴² This perspective was echoed by Herbert George, Head of the National Infrastructure Development Company, who highlighted the terminal's potential as a catalyst for economic growth and international tourism.^{43 44 45}

The project covers 268,000 square meters, making it the largest transportation infrastructure development undertaken by the Trinidad and Tobago government in recent years. Accordingly, it has been categorised as a key national initiative.⁴⁶ The inauguration ceremony itself attracted nearly 1,000 attendees, including government officials and representatives from the Chinese Embassy, further showcasing the significance of this development for Trinidad and Tobago.⁴⁷

Additionally, the opening of the airport was one of Dr Rowley's last official duties as prime minister before he stepped down on 16 March. Stuart Young is his successor, and a general election has been scheduled for 28 April 2025.⁴⁸ Despite this uncertainty, Rowley indicated optimism for further collaboration in his speech, stating, "We have had opportunities to work with China, and we are very happy with what we are doing".^{49 50}

Adarga Analysis: Trinidad and Tobago became the first English-speaking Caribbean nation to sign a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation agreement with China in 2018.⁵¹ It is also the host of the Caribbean's first BRI-linked project, Phoenix Park Industrial Estate, an industrial park which includes Chinese-developed 5G and AI technologies.^{52 53} Phoenix Park serves as a hub for manufacturing, logistics, and technology industries and is strategically positioned near Trinidad and Tobago's Port of Port Lisas.⁵⁴

The new airport terminal is, therefore, the latest in a series of Chinese-funded large-scale projects. These have been accompanied by deepening economic ties. Bilateral trade between China and Trinidad and Tobago had increased from USD 1 billion in 2019 to over USD 13 billion in 2022.⁵⁵

In this sense, the development of Phoenix Park, and the construction of the airport terminal likely aims to solidify China as a key partner in Trinidad and Tobago's development. It is also just one example of how China is attempting to expand its influence in the Caribbean via its BRI initiative.

China's investment infrastructure projects serve two purposes. First, they generate a sense of diplomatic goodwill by the recipient country. China is fostering positive relations with the intention it will translate into support for China in international forums. Secondly, they create economic dependencies, potentially allowing China to increase its influence over Trinidad and Tobago's policy decisions.^{56 57 58}

There has been substantial previous coverage and analysis of BRI investments, including infrastructure projects in countries such as Djibouti, Laos and Montenegro, where the argument has been levelled that such projects put host countries at a high risk of debt distress.^{59 60} Accordingly, this has raised questions about financial strain and economic and debt dependencies China's BRI investments create for its recipient countries.^{61 62}

For Trinidad and Tobago, the key challenge is ensuring that projects like the airport terminal yield long-term economic benefits, generating economic growth and job creation whilst avoiding excessive financial obligations. If successful, Trinidad and Tobago's engagement with China could serve as a model for other neighbouring countries, and influence their decisions regarding Chinese investment.

Beyond the official statements, domestic reactions have been mixed. Responding to local media questions, Tobago Business Chamber head Martin George said the organisation was "heartened", but that there is more work to be done, particularly in the hotel sector.⁶³ Meanwhile, economist Dr Vanus James criticised the facility as a 'white elephant', highlighting the lack of a foundation of associated tourism infrastructure, and expressed doubts about its ability to contribute to sustainable development on the island.⁶⁴

Finally, the strategic importance of the Caribbean to China should not be underestimated. The region's geographic proximity to the United States makes it a valuable area for China to challenge the status quo by establishing a presence and cultivating influence.

By implementing infrastructure projects across the Caribbean in countries like Trinidad and Tobago, we assess that China is not only seeking to strengthen its economic ties to these countries, but also to challenge the long-standing influence of the United States in a region it considers both strategically important and within its intuitive sphere of influence.

As a result, China's inroads are contributing to a shifting regional power dynamic and prompting geopolitical competition that could shape the future diplomatic and economic ties in the Caribbean.

ABOUT

Briefly - China in the Changing World Order

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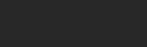
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