

China's Scottish Energy Connection

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In 2006, the Scottish government published ‘Scotland’s strategy for stronger engagement with China’, a call for aligning policies and objectives in response to China’s rise. It captured the government’s sense of urgency created by a rising China, emphasising that “the speed and scale of China’s growth means that the stakes are rising: the benefits will be higher if we get our response right.” Scotland was one of the first countries to recognise China had been in ascendancy for some time and changing the world – and this would present Scotland with an array of opportunities.

Links between Scotland and China are already established. [outline the realm of the UK]

Trade between the two nations has been steadily increasing. According to the Scottish government sources published in 2019, overall export figures show exports from Scotland to China were worth £625 million in 2017 – rising from £590 million in 2016.

The Chinese Consulate has been in Edinburgh for over 20 years and Scottish Development International has offices in Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Shenzhen. Glasgow is twinned with Dalian – and since 1985, Edinburgh has been twinned with Xi’an, the ancient capital gateway to the Silk Road. In 2006, the Strathmore Woollen Company and the Scottish Tartans Authority formally created and launched the Chinese-Scottish tartan, incorporating colours of the Saltire and Chinese flag, representing the friendship between the two nations.

The Scottish government is clearly committed to further strengthening relations with China. Since 2007, there have been 13 Scottish Ministerial visits to China. In 2017, Scotland welcomed Chinese Vice-Premier Liu Yandong. The following year, Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon made a successful visit to China, in which she carried out a wide range of engagements, including a meeting with Vice Premier, Hu Chunhua.

In the same year, the Scottish government published its third and latest detailed engagement strategy setting out its ambition for Scotland to become a preferred trade and investment partner in China. It recognised that China’s ambitious plans such as the monumental Belt and Road Initiative, “offer valuable opportunities for Scotland’s businesses and institutions” – and emphasised Scotland’s commitment to build cooperation with China on renewable energy and environmental issues.

The Scottish government recognises “renewable and low carbon energy will provide the foundation of our future energy system, offering Scotland a huge opportunity for economic

and industrial growth” – and with its policy, ‘Climate Change Emissions Reduction Targets Scotland Act 2019’, the government aims to generate 50% of Scotland’s overall energy consumption from renewable sources by 2030, and to have decarbonised Scotland’s energy system completely by 2050. Scotland’s target of net-zero emissions by 2045 is five years ahead of the rest of the UK – and is firmly based on what the independent Committee on Climate Change advise.

China is several steps ahead with its many renewable energy commitments. According to the Global Wind Energy Council the world’s offshore wind farm capacity could grow eightfold by the end of the decade powered by a clean energy surge led by China. In January 2021, Bloomberg reported that “China blew past its previous record for renewable energy installations last year with a massive – and surprising – addition of wind power.”

In 2016, Nicola Sturgeon welcomed the set-up of new offices of Red Rock Power Limited, a subsidiary of State Development & Investment Corporation (SDIC) in Scotland. SDIC, a Chinese state-owned investment holdings company planned to invest further in renewable developments in Scotland, building on its existing offshore wind projects. Today, Red Rock Power Limited is actively involved in a number of energy projects in Scotland, including 25% ownership of Beatrice Offshore Wind Farm – a 588 MW offshore wind farm and 15km off the Moray Firth Coast in North of Scotland. It became fully operational in June 2019. As well as being Scotland’s largest offshore wind farm, ‘Beatrice’ is also the fourth largest in the world and is apparently capable of providing enough wind powered electricity for up to 450,000 homes.

Although the Scottish government believes a strong Scotland-China relationship will create significant opportunities for Scotland, serious concerns have been raised. In July 2020, the Scottish newspaper, ‘The Herald’, warned “China has a dangerous foothold in the UK nuclear power sector” and “Huawei presents security concerns when it comes to Britain’s telecoms infrastructure.” In December 2020, ‘The National’ reported that the Scottish National Party MP, Ian Blackford, called for cross-party action to tackle human rights abuses in Xinjiang province – adding, “Scotland and the UK have enjoyed good relationships with China with potential to co-operate further on trade, education, tourism and science, but we have to hold states to account when it comes to human rights.” In the same month, the newspaper penned another article headlined, “Scotland must be wary of China’s bid to spread its influence.”

Covid has stalled many planned projects and operations with China – and has had an impact on some existing agreements with China. In December 2020, the ‘Sunday Times’ reported Edinburgh Zoo may have to return two giant pandas, Tian Tian and Yang Guang, or Sweetie and Sunshine, back to China due to financial pressures caused by Covid.

However, despite Covid and criticisms, new joint projects are still being considered. In December 2020, ‘The Scotsman’ reported plans had been unveiled to construct a large-scale renewable energy park in the north east of Scotland, with the potential for harnessing deep geothermal energy, designed to deliver up to 200 megawatts of environmentally friendly power to the Scottish grid. The company and developer, Edinburgh-based Holistic Energy, has completed a feasibility and evaluation study of what is claimed will be the UK’s “first holistic low carbon energy facility”. Holistic Energy will work with several partners in the design, civil engineering and construction phases, including Aberdeen-based companies Wood Group and XL Group, Will Rudd Davidson and Bell Ingram Design. The company hopes to commence construction of the facility in 2023 and be operational by 2026.

Chinese investors back the project, with North China Power Engineering investing £800 million.

In 2019, the Global Commission on Geopolitics of Energy Transformation confirmed China was set to become the world leader in renewable energy. With Scotland's decision to go green with China – with a clear focus to develop renewable energy together – both nations can take the lead in saving the planet.

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Featured image: Scottish First Minister meets Chinese Vice Premier. (Source: The Scottish Government)

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