

Learning Truth from Facts: Britain's evolving relations with the PRC

Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 from Wuhan across the globe has affected how many countries relate to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the objectives of the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership. For some states, not only democracies, the work of combatting and recovering from the pandemic now exists in parallel to another equally strategic challenge; how to frame new policies towards the PRC that protect against harms as well as making use of opportunities. This process has been particularly evident in Britain. For some years, the UK's China policy had been focused on strengthening economic ties with China, on the assumption that its leaders would, in due course, become more liberal. This view persisted alongside growing evidence to the contrary, and the CCP took full advantage of Britain's continuing openness to advance its competitive aims. But recently, openly aggressive PRC activity world-wide has confirmed the need for a more robust approach.

The Foundations of Recent Sino-British Relations

Two issues- Hong Kong, and an apparent inability (or unwillingness) to grasp the inherent existential challenge posed by the CCP's core objectives- are fundamental to understanding how the UK-China discourse has been transformed since 2019.

Hong Kong

For the CCP, Britain's history in Hong Kong embodies colonial injustices which the CCP must strive to redress. In 1982 Deng Xiaoping told Margaret Thatcher that he could retake Hong Kong in a day if Britain tried to complicate Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty.¹ Secret plans were in place to do so.² The UK government then applied its best efforts to negotiating the terms of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Decla-

ration (JD) in the hope that Beijing would honour Deng's dictum that Hong Kong 'would not change for 50 years'.³

Lord Patten, then the last Governor of Hong Kong, responded to local calls for more democracy but was reviled by the CCP as 'a lame duck and the triple violator rampant', his approach taken as proof that the UK was nurturing a 'subversive base' in the territory to promote liberalism in the mainland after the 1997 handover.⁴

Then, as now, the CCP refused to guarantee rights and freedoms emanated by the people of Hong Kong themselves. It set to work ensuring that the post-handover Hong Kong Government would dilute the JD commitment to deepen democratic reforms. Given British responsibility under the JD to monitor the health of Hong Kong's autonomy, this erosion of democracy became increasingly disruptive. Bilateral tension with the PRC on the issue gradually worsened, coming to a head in 2020. But until then, this was not sufficient to throw the wider relationship off course.

UK Public and Policy Discourse on China before COVID-19

Like other Western countries, Britain imagined that as the PRC grew richer it would gradually relax its authoritarian grip.⁵ In this hope, the UK's China policy increasingly focused on closer economic engagement. Possible risks, highlighted mainly by independent China experts and human rights activists, failed to temper this optimism.

The advantages of economic engagement were not evenly distributed. Promises of increased market access in China often failed to materialise, while intellectual property (IP) theft was then, and remains, a major problem.⁶ UK imports from the PRC increased year on year, in some sectors undermining indigenous production

and creating dependencies.⁷ UK zeal for inward investment provided China with stakeholdings in Britain's strategic national infrastructure.⁸ In parallel, government under-investment in science and technology left research institutions to seek funds from overseas, enabling the PRC to drain Britain's innovation at source.⁹ PRC engagement was also welcomed by UK technology businesses and financial, property and legal entities. Avoidable risks were largely ignored.

In large part, the failure to address risk was based on misunderstanding the CCP's strategic aims and methods, which were laid bare in 2013 in a classified CCP paper now known as 'Document 9'. Issued under Xi Jinping's name, it outlines a new doctrine of 'struggle' (douzheng) against the core values of liberal democracy.¹⁰ Leaked and publicised abroad, it was generally regarded as an assault on nascent liberalism at home. But the values the CCP wants to eliminate were presented as infiltrating from abroad. Document 9 shows how the CCP governance model seeks to supplant the open society we have today. CCP struggle against liberal ideas entails permanent struggle with the West (and by extension, other open societies as well).

This transactional view of Britain was exposed during UK Prime Minister Cameron's visit to China in December 2013, when state media dismissed the UK as 'just an old European country apt for travel and study'.¹¹ But this glimpse of reality was soon occluded by notions of a bilateral 'Golden Era'. During this period, CCP overseas influence operations painted a rosy British future in alliance with the nascent PRC superpower. 'Confucius Institutes' opened all over the UK to disseminate low-grade propaganda.¹² Supporters of various PRC agendas, which had proliferated in the UK over decades, facilitated PRC access to sensitive technologies, high-level political influence, and the power to

silence anti-China criticism. Though the UK government now categorises the PRC as a 'systemic competitor', as of early 2021, no coherent policy has yet been designed and implemented to limit the damage caused by CCP influence operations in Britain.

Resistance and Capture

UK media sometimes noted efforts to stifle debate on Taiwan, Tibet, and other CCP 'red lines' and to eulogise Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). But prevailing illusions about China made such messages easy to market. In 2012 a new senior post at the University of Cambridge was reported as funded by members of a former Chinese Premier's family and used as a platform for CCP propaganda.¹³

As the CCP intended, generous funding for target UK institutions created both financial dependency and incentives to self-censorship, particularly in universities reliant on large numbers of PRC students. Staff and students willing to criticise China were silenced by their own system. This and associated issues were later investigated by an influential Parliamentary Committee.¹⁴

UK bodies researching sensitive new technologies courted funding and offered places to scholars from the PRC who could thus drain strategic UK-owned IP directly.¹⁵ The CCP targeted UK centres of excellence to China's advantage gains. Risks to Britain's security and prosperity increased, unchallenged until very recently.

The CCP also sought to influence opinion- and policy-shaping circles. This coincided with a tendency among some UK think-tanks to minimise discussion of problematic issues, or to assign them to pundits inclined to present a 'balanced view' of the PRC. Some senior public figures and others with relevant business links routinely endorse key PRC projects such as Huawei involvement in 5G networks, and the BRI.¹⁶ The 'Golden Era' in due course culminated with Xi Jinping's state visit to Britain in 2015 and the bilateral agreement then signed - the 'Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' (GCSP).

With the GCSP signed the Chancellor of the Exchequer accompanied Xi round the National Graphene Institute (NGI) at Manchester University. The NGI concurrently entered into a partnership with Huawei.¹⁷ Graphene is a revolutionary material with numerous dual-use applications. Not long afterwards a talented young research scientist from China completed his PhD at the NGI. On his return home, a military publication said he had made excellent use of his opportunities in the UK and was now engaged on 'two of China's most sensitive military projects.'¹⁸ Hundreds like him, many affiliated to PRC institutions with military connections, have enjoyed similar opportunities in the UK during the last decade.

At this time, the UK government aspired to be the PRC's 'best partner in the West' in pursuit of mutual benefit.¹⁹ 'Win-win' was the leitmotif of Xi Jinping's 2017 Davos speech promoting a new China-led order, better for developing countries than ruthless US capitalism.²⁰ This notion probably found resonance in some UK policy circles keen to keep clear of a worsening trade war with China, particularly in the run-up to Brexit.

Dissonance and Divergence

In late 2017, British ministers welcomed a new phase in the Golden Era characterised by 'new collaboration between the UK and China in the fields of research, energy, artificial intelligence and clean growth.'²¹ In the same time-frame, Beijing announced that the Sino-British Joint Declaration no longer had any binding significance.²² Large-scale incarceration of Xinjiang's Uyghurs began in April 2017.²³ A new National Intelligence Law outlining obligations on PRC individuals and entities to support national security came into force in June 2017.²⁴ This confirmed that Chinese companies and individuals were legally bound to support PRC intelligence activity overseas, contradicting high-profile claims otherwise.

An Events-led Cycle

From 2017 on, global media reported growing CCP assertiveness abroad, and

increased domestic repression. UK public interest stimulated more critical coverage and debate. Influential groups of Parliamentarians highlighted risks to national security in formal reports and debates in Parliament, while independent China experts in NGOs and think-tanks described PRC threats and recommended robust responses.

Discussion in Britain was linked to similar public and political debate overseas, notably among the Five Eyes but also in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and some European and South-east Asian countries. Shared condemnation, and changes in Allied policies to China, affected the political mood in the UK; but given government pre-occupation with Brexit negotiations, there was still no coherent policy response to the CCP challenge. Prospects for lucrative rewards from BRI engagement were still extolled.²⁵

The PRC and the Demise of Hong Kong's Democracy

As noted above, CCP interference in Hong Kong's autonomy had led to successive waves of popular unrest, ended by violent suppression and the imposition of a draconian National Security Law in 2020. This debacle, reported by world media, was condemned in Britain by Hong Kong Watch, individual members of the Democracy Movement and their influential friends in the UK (including Lord Patten and former Foreign Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind). Criticism from members of the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) and the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) created additional political impetus.

As the situation deteriorated, government leaders repeatedly spoke out against the CCP's actions. Eventually, following the 30 June 2020 imposition of the PRC's National Security Law in Hong Kong, the UK government took a dramatic step, changing the rules for Hong Kong residents with British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status to give over 3 million applicants the right to come and live in the UK and eventually obtain

full citizenship.²⁶ This major intervention challenged CCP force majeure on its own ground. Unsurprisingly, Beijing has declared that it will regard BNO visas as invalid.²⁷

Xinjiang

Media coverage of CCP abuses in Xinjiang has provoked public concern in Britain. Along with continuing oppression in Tibet, it has been taken up in Parliament by supportive NGOs and leading members of both ethnicities. Harrowing BBC coverage, rejected as 'relentless fabrication' by the PRC Embassy in London,²⁸ has compelled further political engagement. In July 2020 the Foreign Secretary condemned 'gross and egregious' human rights abuses,²⁹ and later joined in international statements on Xinjiang and Hong Kong at the UN. In January 2021 the Foreign Secretary again criticised China's actions, announcing new measures to prevent products of forced labour in Xinjiang entering global supply chains.³⁰ In April 2021, Parliament passed a non-binding resolution declaring crimes against humanity in Xinjiang to be genocide, although this assessment is not shared by the government on technical legal grounds. Similar resolutions have been passed in Canada and the Netherlands, and the assessment is shared by the US administration. As with Hong Kong, Beijing remains defiant in the face of international condemnation.

Huawei Policy Reversal

British public discourse became more critical of government temporising over allowing Huawei a role in Britain's 5G network. Apart from concerns over risks to UK security, Huawei connections to surveillance and security operations in Xinjiang were publicised by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) in 2019.³¹

Despite awareness of this and strong domestic and Allied opposition, the government decided in January 2020 to allow Huawei access to the UK's 5G network, provoking media criticism and concern at home as well as among Allies, and a significant political rebellion in Parliament.³² Separately, a project on face recognition

technology at Surrey University, involving the Home Office and the Metropolitan Police, was found to be partly funded by the Chinese government. Surrey University, whose Vice-Chancellor is a PRC scientist, had received £5 million from Huawei in return for a platform at its '5G Innovation Centre'.³³

US pressure from the highest level continued following the January decision; warnings that with Huawei in its communications infrastructure the UK might be excluded from the 5 Eyes alliance carried particular weight. In July 2020 the British Government reversed its decision, banning UK operators from buying new Huawei equipment after the end of 2020 and requiring the removal of any that had already been installed by 2027. This decision was explained as being based on a new risk assessment reflecting the impact of US sanctions on relevant Huawei products; other factors may also have played a part.

China's Pandemic; a Policy Tipping Point?

CCP manipulation of the COVID-19 pandemic has turned British public opinion against the PRC. This included the CCP withholding crucial data and lying about risk from the virus to the WHO, until it had spread beyond the PRC's borders; black-mailing Australia over demands for a proper enquiry; disinformation such as claims of a US origin for the virus; politicisation of protective equipment supplies; and grandstanding on the superiority of authoritarian systems to liberal democracy based on success in controlling the pandemic. Persecution of whistleblower doctors and citizen journalists provoked widespread UK indignation, as did later 'wolf warrior' diplomacy carried out enthusiastically by PRC officials in London. PRC brutality on the Indian border heightened perceptions of CCP threat. As 2020 progressed, this COVID-derived perspective played into existing areas of bilateral tension such as the Hong Kong crisis and the debate over Huawei.

A combination of hostile PRC activities came to a head around July 2020. This may have been a tipping-point, after which UK

government condemnation of the PRC began to be matched by actions indicating a general policy shift.

Threats to UK Intellectual Property

There are probably few areas of innovative STEM research in the UK, dual-use or otherwise, which have not for several years been supported by PRC funding and participation. PRC nationals hold numerous leading research posts. Prior to the pandemic, US and Australian experiences had led UK attention to focus more closely on CCP academic capture and draining of innovative science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) research at British universities. This was also identified as a threat to important UK technology companies, some of which were being subjected to aggressive takeover bids from PRC actors. A Parliamentary Enquiry into foreign asset-stripping of UK technology firms reported its findings in January 2021.³⁴ In late 2020 the UK government introduced new National Security and Investment legislation to strengthen oversight and protection of research on topics bearing on national security.

Steps were now taken to combat PRC appropriation of IP from UK universities. In February 2021 a report by Civitas provided the most detailed evidence to date of the level of PRC engagement in dual-use technology research at UK universities. While stressing that the report did not pinpoint conscious collaboration, it notes the risk of unwitting support, including for PRC efforts to develop new weapons of mass destruction.³⁵ Subsequent media articles indicate that around 200 UK academics are now under investigation for 'unwitting support' of this kind.³⁶

Restoring Diversity of Supply Chains

Pandemic-related concerns about economic dependency on China, initially for supplies of pharmaceuticals and personal protective equipment, led the UK government in May 2020 to initiate 'Project Defend', a new strategy for identifying and mitigating economic vulnerabilities bearing on national security. The Prime

Minister noted that protecting Britain's technology industry would be a key objective of the project.³⁷

Updating UK Geostrategy

A long-delayed Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR) was restarted in September 2020 and published in mid-March 2021. This document lays out the UK government's ambitions for Britain's role in the world, and long-term strategic aims for UK national security and foreign policy. As has been widely observed, it contains disparate elements- notably the ambition to maintain strong economic relations with China while working with Britain's Allies to contest PRC human rights abuses and threats to free trade and global security. As of late April 2021, a coherent UK China policy outlining how these potentially incompatible objectives can be achieved concurrently has yet to emerge. Arguably, this is hard to achieve bilaterally and will require effective coordinated action in cooperation with international allies and partners.

As part of the IR, in November 2020 the Prime Minister announced a large increase in defence spending (an additional £24 billion over 4 years).³⁸ Modernised British armed forces will help to deter Russia, defeat terrorism and counter China. This commitment will integrate UK geostrategy with those of its Allies and regional partners, especially in regard to Indo-Pacific security, a core concern of the new US administration.³⁹ On 1 February 2021 the UK government applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership.⁴⁰ This should provide a framework for stronger British engagement in global free trade, notably in the Indo-Pacific.

The sum of these recent developments suggests that the UK government has included components of a realistic China policy into its domestic and overseas strategies for 'Global Britain', although the work of forging these into a clear, unambiguous policy is still in progress.

Framing a Viable China Policy

The well-known CCP strategy of 'unrestricted warfare' threatens all its rivals, even in the absence of hostilities, with an asymmetric combination of military, political and economic competition, human and technical espionage, and influence and subversion operations. This begs a question for policy-makers in Europe and beyond - Have they already in place, or can they promptly implement, strategies capable of deterring the expansion of hostile CCP power?

CCP foreign policy uses bilateral relationships to increase and exploit individual and national weaknesses. Some countries, including members of powerful regional alliances, have grown used to reacting individually to carrot-and-stick tactics from Beijing. Over time and sometimes undetected, this leads to gradual adherence to the CCP's view of global governance. This seeks to undermine the open world order, to create alternatives that serve China's autocratic interests, and to achieve a gradual rowing-back from commitments to the defence of open societies.

Faced with the PRC's transactional threats and blandishments alike, few states have the power to protect their interests alone.⁴¹ Many of these interests are protected by the consensual rules of the status quo international order. Governments should thus review their national China policy from a strategic perspective, including the important role of cooperation with key allies.

Reviving Multilateral Institutions

The CCP exerts undue influence over certain United Nations (UN) institutions.⁴² For states concerned about this, decoupling from global governance merely helps the CCP and its allies to advance their subversion of the traditional world order. It is preferable to protect existing international organisations from harmful influence and to strengthen their powers of effective action where these are seen to be lacking. In particular, both the SARS and COVID-19 pandemics have shown that

the International Health Regulations, on which the world depends, have no binding legal authority, and as such are unfit for purpose.

Effective multilateral institutions are essential to guarantee free and fair economic globalisation. States which benefit from global free trade should cooperate to protect it, most importantly by supporting structures that guarantee freedom and security of navigation.

It seems that the CCP feels few external constraints on its expansionist activities at sea or on land. This expansion is in fact integral to the objectives of the CCP. Current international security structures appear unable to deter threats to global security from PRC revisionist expansionism, literally from pole to pole.

Establishing Effective Security Structures

Peace and global free trade depend on cooperation across geostrategic as well as geo-economic boundaries, including maintenance and enforcement of binding international military, commercial, legal and environmental agreements. To deliver this, existing structures need to be strengthened and new ones created, not to contest and contain authoritarian activity but to deter it. This includes reviving NATO and building comparable new political/military alliances in other geostrategic regions.

Aligned and partner states- notably Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, but also countries in South-East Asia, South America, the Pacific and areas around both the Arctic and Antarctic are in need of stronger commitments from the 'West'. Existing frameworks, particularly those such as the 'Quad' which welcome Indian participation, need to be refocused on regional and global security, not merely trade. Institutional weakness and lack of credible international deterrence, encouraging overconfident, unstable CCP leadership miscalculations, could trigger a global conflict with comparatively little warning. Cooperation across and between regional groupings will be conducive to delivering

successful resistance and deterrence. Despite the UK having left the EU, the nature of the CCP challenge to both and to the open world order on which both depend makes intensified UK-EU cooperation particularly desirable in all the areas outlined above, but perhaps especially in joint efforts to understand and mitigate the corrosive impact of the PRC's BRI agenda, and its overlap with similar systemic competition from Russia; both of which seek to undermine shared security and prosperity objectives by creating and deepening regional and intra-regional divisions and dependencies.

Strengthening Intelligence and Security Cooperation

Much of the work involved in uncovering malign threats and abuses falls to human and technical intelligence agencies. National Security Councils or their equivalents, until lately engaged mainly on countering terrorism, should increase the resources needed to identify China's threat to global security. They should invest in specialist China expertise which has long been neglected, especially in Europe. Sharing intelligence and assessments with Allies and partners, including the EU, will be a vital component of international revival.

Technology and Infrastructure; Defence against Capture

This too concerns both national and international interests. If countries within the RBIS seek to halt the oppression of ethnic and religious minorities through surveillance technology, or the proliferation of devastating new weapons, their governments should cooperate in excluding hostile actors from programmes researching relevant technologies, and block all other means, overt and covert, whereby they can drain sensitive IP.

Restoring the integrity of STEM research depends on clear government policy, guidance and support, particularly regarding areas from which hostile actors must be excluded, as well as on due diligence and transparency concerning donations. Defences should also include improved

cyber security. If competitors' funding lays IP open to exploitation, then commensurate government re-investment in secure research work and facilities will be needed. Given the strategic nature of CCP influence and penetration operations, trying to establish procedural boundaries between 'influence' and 'interference' is largely futile. The realities of CCP State coercion embodied in the PRC's National Intelligence Law, and the widespread use of civilian cover, mean that foreign governments may need to exclude PRC nationals from involvement in key national infrastructure, whether or not they are directly affiliated to PRC intelligence or defence organisations. Low-profile infiltration is a latent capability that can be directed to damaging effect without warning. Indications that leading public and private institutions are subject to endemic CCP influence should be investigated and mitigated. This too will be more effective if supported by intelligence exchanges and operational cooperation with partners.

Conclusion

Many commentators on the PRC in 'middle-sized' powers frame a binary choice; to accept the inevitable and bow to CCP supremacy, or to resist this in vain. That choice however is not inevitable, because the continued 'rise' of China is not necessarily a given; nor is there reason to despair of the potential power of collective deterrence.

The direction Xi Jinping has imposed on the people of China is not leading them to greater peace and prosperity. Leadership decisions on the new epidemic taken at the turn of 2019-20 may well emerge to have been avoidably disastrous. Aggressive posturing may look good in propaganda for this year's CCP centenary celebration, but history suggests that upsurges of nationalism have never boded well for China. When so much reputational as well as material treasure is being used up in a relentless global campaign, one must look at fundamentals; can the PRC afford to keep it going?

China's economy is portrayed as reviving post-COVID, but underlying this bounce-

back are several years of stagnation. The 'legitimacy' afforded by decades of sustained growth has long since ceased to be guaranteed even in State-massaged statistics. China still relies on exports and struggles to re-engage global markets disrupted by the pandemic. BRI adventurism and expansionist spending on the military and internal security have seriously depleted State coffers. Other existential challenges remain unresolved. Repairing the environment remains an enormous challenge. Inequality persists and is widening. Domestic debt is proving intractable, and PRC demographics are imbalanced. The CCP, built for collective leadership, no longer has one. It knows from dire experience in the 1970s that unchecked autocracy ultimately threatens the interests of the PRC.

These combined factors contain a potentially encouraging message for the open world order, which resonates with recent indications of renewed US international engagement. Decline into authoritarian dystopia is avoidable if the free world can unite, swiftly and confidently, to revitalise the values-based system on which it depends.

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