

Shifting the post-Brexit alliances? Britain's China policy between American fervour, European ambiguity, and global British ambition

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the main trends and events in British foreign policy towards China from 31 January 2020 to mid-February 2021. The guiding question is how the bilateral relations between the United Kingdom (UK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) developed after the UK left the EU. The paper seeks to explore to what extent Britain's China policy post-Brexit supports the narrative of a "Global Britain" – a self-proclaimed international human rights champion and supporter of global free trade. In analysing English media coverage and UK government announcements, including the 2021 "Integrated Review", the paper suggests that the three main concerns of British China policy in 2020 were Huawei, Hong Kong, and human rights. These three topics are not self-contained; in fact, the survey shows that they are, to a large degree, mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, a chronologically and topically structured approach serves to conceptualize the political thicket of UK-PRC relations, pinpointing areas in which Britain's China strategy differs from the policy of the EU. The paper concludes that "post-Brexit" is the least important attribute of the current China policy of the UK. Instead, the UK-China relationship continues to be characterized by pre-Brexit frictions, the gravity of which is exacerbated by the increasing geostrategic rivalry between Beijing and Washington – "Global Britain's" indispensable geopolitical and technological ally in the post-Brexit world.

Introduction

According to the March 2021 Integrated Review of British Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, "China's increasing power and international assertiveness is likely to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s."¹ The report understands China's "growing international stature" as the "by far most significant geopolitical factor in the world today" and warns that "China also presents the biggest state-based threat to the UK's economic security".² In acknowledging the "systemic challenge" that China poses to post-Cold War international order, the authors of the Integrated Review describe the rise of China as example par excellence for current geopolitical and geo-economic shifts.³ Thus, the official title of the document, "Global Britain in a competitive age" can be interpreted as a direct reference to the Chinese challenge, which underlines the central role of China as international competitor for British foreign policy overall.

Commensurate to the significance of the systemic challenge, the UK's China policy is a yardstick for the success of "Global Britain". On 3 February 2020, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab coined

¹ Ref. to Her Majesty's Government (2021): "Global Britain in a competitive age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy", p. 26.

² Ibid., p. 62.

³ Ibid., p. 15.

this term when he laid out his plans for the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy before Parliament.⁴ According to Raab, the UK should be both a global free trade nation and a worldwide human rights champion. Yet the example of China illustrates how difficult it could be to realize both aims simultaneously. While Britain seeks to “pursue a positive trade and investment relationship with China”,⁵ the Integrated Review lists the UK's criticism of Chinese treaty breaches in Hong Kong and the situation of the Uighurs in Xinjiang as important achievements in the government's “efforts to defend human rights and support vulnerable people”.⁶ London carefully navigates its policies between normative assertiveness on the one hand and geostrategic rationality on the other, also in part because of the need to coordinate its China policy with partners and allies in Europe and North America.

This paper therefore tries to explore the relationship between the ambitions of a post-Brexit “Global Britain” and its foreign policy towards China. Its focus lies on London's perspective towards Beijing in the time-period following the legal conclusion of Brexit.⁷ Naturally, the UK's China policy in 2020 is to be examined against the background of a broad range of independent variables, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, US-China relations, the 2020 Taiwan elections, new revelations about the human rights situation in Xinjiang, technological developments in commerce and telecommunication, as well as changing domestic politics in the PRC.

To assess the long-term geo-strategic consequences of Brexit in the light of these challenges, the paper is divided into four parts: 1) The first section of the paper provides a succinct historical overview of Sino-British relations from the 1980s until the mid-2010s. 2) The second section concerns itself with the U-turn in Britain's China policy under Boris Johnson which represents, at the time of writing, the determining structural feature of British China policy post-Brexit. 3) The third section provides a fine-grained empirical account of different leitmotifs influencing Britain's China strategy. Its three subsections offer a topically and chronologically structured synopsis of the main policy drivers from 2020 to early 2021: the Huawei controversy in spring, the Hong Kong security law in the summer, and the Uighur human rights dispute which has been escalating over the winter. 4) The subsequent section revisits the notion of “Global Britain” in light of post-Brexit British China policy and concludes the paper with a look to the future of UK China policy.

⁴ UK Parliament, “Dominic Raab MP tells MPs of plans for a Global Britain”, 3 February 2020, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2020/february/statement-on-global-britain/>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

⁵ *Integrated Review*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷ This essay does not specifically focus on the many challenges of EU-China relations or the period between the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the end of the negotiation period in 2020. For an overview of the latter refer to Tim Summers, “Imagining Brexit: The UK's China Policy After the Referendum,” in *A new beginning or more of the same? The European Union and East Asia after Brexit*, eds. Michael Reilly and Chun-Yi Lee, 2021.

Historical context: From Thatcher's Hong Kong deal to Cameron's "golden decade"

Since the Opium Wars, UK-China relations have fluctuated between two extremes, and the thermometer of Britain's China policy rises and falls according to the surrounding geopolitical environment. The last three decades have been witness to an ever increasing economic and political exchange between Beijing and London, the apogee of which was reached with Tory dreams of a "golden decade" in UK-China relations in the 2010s. Hopes for an ever-closer British Chinese relationship seemed to materialize not long after the 2008 financial crisis shattered the world economy. However, Brexit has put an end to such hopes.

On 19 December 1984, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration about the future of Hong Kong.⁸ The document stipulated that the island of Hong Kong and the peninsula of Kowloon (permanently ceded from the Qing empire to the British crown), as well as the so-called New Territories (leased to Britain in 1898 for 99 years) would return to China. On 1 July 1997, the PRC assumed sovereignty over the former colony.

Following Hong Kong's return to the PRC, the "one country, two systems" principle was implemented in the former colony: freedom of speech, Hong Kong's partly-free elected legislative council, and its autonomous judicial system should remain unaltered for 50 years. Thatcher hoped that the PRC would reform its political system by the time it was scheduled to assume full control over the "Special Administrative Region" (SAR) in 2047. In the meantime, British businesses hoped that Thatcher's deal with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would pave the way for lucrative trade and investment opportunities in the world's fastest growing market.

For the most part between the late 1980s and the early 2010s, British-Chinese relations developed smoothly along the lines set out by the Joint Declaration. Reflecting global trends, the main components of the UK's China strategy were economic liberalisation and a growing bilateral trade volume. However, over time the significance of Hong Kong for Chinese GDP gradually declined as cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou grew in importance, and in the early 1990s reunited Germany overtook the UK as China's largest trade partner in Europe.

British openness for economic engagement with China peaked in the premiership of David Cameron. Against the background of increasing uneasiness with the European project within the Conservative Party, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne remarked on the beginning of a "golden decade" in UK-China relations during a visit to Beijing in 2015.⁹ In fact, British exports to China tripled in the decade following the financial crisis of 2008, and the UK secured twice as much Chinese invest-

⁸ James Griffiths, "The secret negotiations behind the Hong Kong handover," CNN, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/18/asia/hong-kong-handover-china-uk-thatcher/index.html>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

⁹ George Parker, "Osborne hails 'golden decade' in Sino-British relations," *Financial Times*, September 20, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/6d107dc4-5fae-11e5-a28b-50226830d644>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

ment as the next European recipient. Regarding Chinese investments, the UK therefore emerged as Europe's frontrunner: despite US warnings, the UK joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), expressed its interest in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and considered joining the Transpacific Partnership Agreement (TPP). But soon the golden decade was regarded as a "golden error".

Boris Johnson's U-turn

The recent paradigm shift in Britain's China policy is closely related to Boris Johnson.¹⁰ Britain's first post-Brexit Prime Minister was initially optimistic about enhanced UK-China relations after 1 February 2020. In fact, the prospects of more profitable cooperation with emerging economies like China had been one of the promises Conservative Brexiteers had made to convince the public of a hard Brexit.¹¹ This rhetoric was also directed against the EU, as Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond threatened that after Brexit, the UK would turn into a "Singapore-on-Thames" – a low-tax, lightly regulated economy only 20 miles from the shores of the Single Market.¹² However, instead of a reinforced partnership between London and Beijing, Johnson has to manage what appears to be the worst UK-China relationship in the last 30 years.¹³

Johnson's U-turn was facilitated by both domestic and geopolitical considerations.¹⁴ On the one hand, in trying to retain the "special relationship" with the US, Johnson was well-advised to follow the American lead and limit Huawei's business opportunities in Britain. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo left little doubt that a British decision in favour of Huawei would be unacceptable to the US.¹⁵ On the other hand, there was increasing domestic pressure to ban Huawei. This pressure was institutionalised by the foundation of the China Research Group, an association of parliamentarians and PRC experts which seeks to inform the British debate about China policy.¹⁶ Furthermore, the image of an assertive China amidst the coronavirus pandemic equally served Johnson's goal to unite his party and rally support for his government, which was struggling with the double-challenge of Brexit and COVID-19.

Exacerbated by the US trade war with China, American geopolitical pressure on Downing Street thus led to the exclusion of Huawei from the British 5G network. At the same time, scepticism about China was growing in Parliament and among the British public too. In the summer, the Chinese National Security Law for Hong Kong prompted the Prime Minister to adopt a tougher stance on Beijing. Since

¹⁰ James Crabtree, "Boris Johnson's Remarkable U-Turn From Sinophile to China Hawk," *Foreign Policy*, March 08, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/03/boris-johnson-sinophile-china-hawk/>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

¹¹ Refer to the works of Gerard Lyons, Johnson's economic advisor when he was Mayor of London.

¹² Jill Rutter, "Singapore on Thames is dead, long live Singapore on Thames," UK in a changing Europe, 2020, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/singapore-on-thames-is-dead-long-live-singapore-on-thames/>, accessed 3 March 2021.

¹³ Justin Harper, "How strong are Britain and China's economic ties?," *BBC*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53468925>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

¹⁴ Thomas Des Garets Geddes, "UK-China Relations: From Gold to Dust," *The Diplomat*, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/uk-china-relations-from-gold-to-dust/>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

¹⁵ Stephen Castle, "Pompeo Attacks China and Warns Britain Over Huawei Security Risks," *The New York Times*, August 05, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/08/technology/pompeo-huawei-britain.html>, accessed 9 Feb 2021.

¹⁶ Ref. to China Research Group, <https://chinaresearchgroup.org/>, accessed 8 Feb 2021.

then, the dispute over Hong Kong has spilled over to other aspects of Britain's China policy and complicated the bilateral relationship between London and Beijing.

Yet the Hong Kong security law only brought a disillusionment with China to the fore that had already existed for some time. During the "golden era" of the Cameron years, British dependence on China had risen significantly. A study by the Andrew Jackson Institute suggests that the UK is strategically dependent on China for 229 out of 831 categories of traded goods.¹⁷ In the words of former MI6 deputy chief Michael Inkster, "there was a misapprehension and a lot of wishful thinking about what China really was."¹⁸ Thus, Johnson's post-Brexit China euphoria from early on did not sit well with the UK's geo-strategic constraints. While these constraints are not necessarily caused by Brexit, they nevertheless determine the boundaries within which post-Brexit Britain operates.

The sudden British awakening to China's (allegedly) true ambitions in the UK was enhanced by Beijing's "wolf-warrior diplomacy" during the early stages of the pandemic. In the first half of 2020, the PRC displayed a diplomatic assertiveness that was a surprise to the West. As former MI6 chief Sir John Sawers remarked in October, "the last six months have revealed more about China under President Xi Jinping than the previous six years."¹⁹

Just like the UK, the year 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic have become a watershed moment for EU-China relations as well. While it is true that Brussels, for a long time, could not effectively counter China's mask and vaccine diplomacy, it remains to be seen whether the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) will be better poised. The joint sanctioning of Chinese officials by the EU, the US and Britain in March 2021, and the prompt Chinese answer, show that Brexit did not mean a fresh start in UK-PRC relations. Thus, even more than it did before Brexit, London has to carefully navigate between popular opinion at home and the expectations of international partners abroad.

Synopsis of the main drivers of British China policy in 2020

In the following, the international role of "Global Britain" is explored in three case studies which reflect the key motivations of Britain's China policy in 2020: Huawei, Hong Kong, and human rights. Each of these three is not only a main concern for British foreign policy, but also gives the UK a chance to prominently position itself towards three meta-topics of current international politics: technology (Huawei), the liberal international order (Hong Kong), and human rights (the Uighurs in Xinjiang). While, for historic reasons, in the case of Hong Kong it was in the UK's own national interest to stand

¹⁷ James Rogers et al., *Breaking the China Supply Chain: How the 'Five Eyes' can decouple from strategic dependency* (2020).

¹⁸ Jonathan Ford and Laura Hughes, "UK-China relations: from 'golden era' to the deep freeze," *Financial Times*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/804175d0-8b47-4427-9853-2aded76f48e4>, accessed 1 Feb 2021.

¹⁹ Jonathan Ford and Laura Hughes, "UK-China relations: from 'golden era' to the deep freeze," *Financial Times*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/804175d0-8b47-4427-9853-2aded76f48e4>, accessed 9 Feb 2021.

up to China and preserve British self-esteem, the situation is less clear in the case of Huawei and Xinjiang. In short, pressure from the US played a key role in the decision to phase out Huawei technology in the UK. As far as Xinjiang is concerned, the American stance had an impact on the UK, too, yet it coincided with new revelations about gross human rights abuses against the Uighurs, a deteriorating perception of China in the West, and the increased promotion of “Global Britain” as international human rights champion that after Brexit seeks to re-formulate its bilateral relations with vast parts of the world.

Spring 2020: The Huawei bill and the China Research Group

The Huawei debate best illustrates the mentioned strategic restraints of British China policy. Pressure from the US and China, as well as diverging economic interests and concerns about China in Westminster, limits the government’s space for manoeuvre. “5G” has become a cypher for this problem. Can Britain be technologically autonomous? Or can it at least make independent decisions about which technology it wants to procure and use?

The US had banned Huawei in the course of President Trump’s trade war with China. The EU assumed an ambiguous position, with different countries introducing different measures to deal with Huawei. For the UK, this flexibility could have been attractive as well, but the importance of financial services – which hinge on a modern digital infrastructure – does not allow the UK to be as ambiguous as the EU in this regard. London’s favourite post-Brexit security alliance, the “Five-Eyes”, imposes further obligations on London. For the US, the use of Huawei technology constitutes a security risk, an opinion which is shared by a growing number of British MPs.

On 10 March, the government narrowly defeated a Conservative backbench rebellion that sought to ban Huawei from the British 5G market.²⁰ Although the initiative was unsuccessful, the demands of the anti-Huawei MPs for a concrete timetable to phase-out any high-tech equipment by non-secure vendors were taken up by the government.²¹ Aware of this, on 6 July China’s Ambassador Liu Xiaoming threatened the UK would “bear the consequences” if it treats China as a “hostile” country in deciding whether to allow Huawei a role in UK 5G networks.²²

The government was thus forced to take a decision between alienating China and jeopardizing its “special relationship” with the US. Due to the UK’s dependence on the US in the technological and security realm, there was no real choice. American pressure increased in early 2020²³ until Downing

²⁰ Norman Smith, “Huawei: Government wins vote after backbench rebellion,” *BBC*, October 03, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-51806704>, accessed 2 Feb 2021.

²¹ Dan Sabbagh, “Promise of Huawei phase-out is not enough, say Tory rebels,” *The Guardian*, April 03, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/mar/04/promise-of-huawei-phase-out-is-not-enough-say-tory-rebels>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

²² Laura Hughes and Helen Warrell, “China envoy warns of ‘consequences’ if Britain rejects Huawei,” *Financial Times*, June 07, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/3d67d1c1-98ff-439a-90a1-099c18621ee9>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

²³ Clea Skopeliti, “UK sovereignty in jeopardy if Huawei used for 5G, US warns,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/27/uk-sovereignty-in-jeopardy-if-huawei-used-for-5g-us-warns>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

Street succumbed to the demands. Reversing a January decision, on 14 July the UK government banned Huawei from building up the UK's 5G infrastructure.²⁴ The UK has hence clearly positioned itself on the side of the US and assumed a critical position towards Huawei.

Instrumental in pushing for this change in British Huawei policy was a group of anti-Huawei MPs that had been defeated in March. In April, many members of the informal grouping were among the founders of the China Research Group (CRG). Nominally a Conservative group, CRG is a bipartisan movement that was established to raise awareness for Chinese foreign policy objectives in the UK. A source of inspiration for the creation of CRG had been the Mercator Institute for China Studies (Merics) in Berlin. According to CRG founder and chairman of the foreign affairs committee Tom Tugendhat, Britain was lacking a network for political debate about China that other European countries had already established.²⁵ In this regard, the EU could be seen as a role-model for the UK.

In other regards, especially in curbing the influence of Chinese money and big-tech, EU member states serve both as role models but also negative examples. In the words of MP Tugendhat, "there are countries that have been way ahead of us on this, like France, which has a much more clear-eyed view on China. [...] Then there's other countries like Italy, which [has] Chinese money so deep into its system that it is very difficult to see how it can get out."²⁶ A more coherent foreign policy approach towards China might therefore be one of the main advantages that the UK has compared to the EU, which has not yet formulated a common position towards Huawei.

Summer and fall 2020: The Hong Kong security law

If the Huawei debate and the UK's growing suspicion of Beijing's influence had strained the British-Chinese relationship, the Hong Kong security law of 30 June led to the escalation.²⁷ Under Art. 23 of the 1997 Hong Kong Basic Law, Hong Kong's legislative council was commissioned to enact a security law. But since the security law from 30 June was drafted by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in Beijing, not the Legislative Council in the SAR, the law was perceived as a violation of Hong Kong's Basic Law and the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Under the new regulations, Beijing effectively expanded its jurisdiction to Hong Kong. According to Hong Kong's last British governor Chris Patten, the adoption of the Hong Kong Security Law sealed the end of the "one country, two systems" principle²⁸ – and forced Britain to react.

²⁴ Hadas Gold, "UK bans Huawei from its 5G network," CNN Business, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/14/tech/huawei-uk-ban/index.html>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

²⁵ Ailbhe Rea, "Meet the former soldier who's changing Britain's China policy," *The New Statesman*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2020/07/meet-former-soldier-whos-changing-britains-china-policy>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Nemo Buschmann, 2021 "How has the 'Global Britain' idea shaped the United Kingdom's Hong Kong policy after Brexit in 2020?", BRIFPO Paper, London: LSE European Foreign Policy Unit.

²⁸ Chris Michael, "Chris Patten: China's security laws a betrayal of Hong Kong people," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/23/chris-patten-chinas-security-laws-a-betrayal-of-hong-kong-people>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

Furthermore, the new law was accompanied by a media campaign accusing the UK of promoting Hong Kong's independence, so that on 23 June the British embassy in Beijing felt compelled to refute the disinformation.²⁹ On 1 July, Prime Minister Johnson declared in a parliamentary session that the security law constituted a clear and serious breach of the 1984 Joint Declaration and pledged to offer the three million British Nationals Overseas (BNO) in Hong Kong a way to full British citizenship.³⁰ In fact, in perhaps the most noteworthy move of British China policy post-Brexit, on 22 July the government opened a new visa scheme for Hong Kong BNOs which came into effect on 31 January 2021.³¹

Despite the symbolism of the issue, the UK was reluctant to confront Beijing on its own and thus sought to transfer the problem onto a multilateral level. Crucially, Britain managed to link Hong Kong to other points of criticism against the PRC. On 25 September, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, the British Minister for the United Nations and Human Rights, condemned the Chinese violation of the Joint Statement as well as Chinese Human Rights violations in Xinjiang.³² Shortly afterwards, on 6 October, the UN ambassadors of the UK and Germany read a joint statement in the Security Council where they condemned the new security law for Hong Kong as well as China's suppression of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang.³³

Next to the UN, the UK also rallied diplomatic support through other international channels. Following Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab's criticism of the expulsion of twelve (democratically elected) lawmakers from Hong Kong on 12 November,³⁴ the Chinese ambassador to London was summoned a day afterwards.³⁵ Shortly after that, the foreign ministers of the "Five Eyes" coalition jointly condemned the violation of the Joint Declaration by the PRC.³⁶

Thus, lacking the sufficient political and economic heft to confront the global Chinese superpower, post-Brexit Britain continues to act through multilateral forums. As the recent announcement to

²⁹ British Embassy Beijing, "UK and Hong Kong: refuting disinformation," *GOV.UK*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hong-kong-hong-kong-myth-busting-article>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

³⁰ William James, "UK says China's security law is serious violation of Hong Kong treaty," *Reuters*, January 07, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-Hong-Kong-protests-britain-idUSKBN2425LL>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

³¹ UK Visas and Immigration, "British nationals (overseas) in Hong Kong," *GOV.UK*, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/british-nationals-overseas-in-hong-kong>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

³² Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, "UN Human Rights Council 45: UK statement on China for item 4 general debate," *GOV.UK*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-45-uk-statement-for-the-item-4-general-debate>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

³³ United Nations Web TV, "Christoph Heusgen (Germany) and Jonathan Allen (United Kingdom) - Joint Security Council Media Stakeout (6 October 2020)," United Nations, 2020, <http://webtv.un.org/watch/christoph-heusgen-germany-and-jonathan-allen-united-kingdom-on-the-human-rights-situation-in-china-xinjiang-region-and-hong-kong-media-stakeout-6-october-2020/6198023703001/>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

³⁴ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "Foreign Secretary declares breach of Sino-British Joint Declaration," *GOV.UK*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-declares-breach-of-sino-british-joint-declaration>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

³⁵ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "Chinese Ambassador to the UK summoned to the FCDO," *GOV.UK*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chinese-ambassador-to-the-uk-summoned-to-the-fcdo>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

³⁶ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "Hong Kong joint statement: November 2020," *GOV.UK*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-hong-kong-november-2020>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

renew and enlarge the British nuclear arsenal has shown, there is no Brexit-dividend for the British taxpayer. On the contrary, the UK is likely to invest more time and effort into shaping the foreign policy debate among its allies than it did before Brexit.

Winter 2020/2021: Xinjiang, genocide, and a media battle

In the winter of 2020/2021, criticism of the human rights violations in China's Western-most province of Xinjiang evolved as the leitmotif of Britain's China policy. While Beijing's treatment of the Uighur minority had caused widely shared international indignation since the first reports about so-called re-education camps were leaked in summer 2019, only the US government had taken robust actions and introduced the "Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act" on 17 June 2020.³⁷ In contrast to the EU – which on 31 December 2020 concluded the "Comprehensive Agreement on Investment" (CAI) with China,³⁸ appearing to overlook the problems in Xinjiang – the UK shifted to the more rigid American stance on the Uighurs.

The most likely reason for the British policy shift is a combination of the desire to demonstrate a distinct and determined foreign policy path after leaving the EU, the shock following BBC reports about systematic rape in Xinjiang's "re-education camps", and to reinforce the geostrategic American-British alliance. In a phone call between the two foreign ministers on 27 January,³⁹ Anthony Blinken and Dominic Raab agreed on the need to "hold China to its international commitments."

Initially, the British reaction to the accusations against China were vague. On 20 July, the government suspended its extradition treaty with China due to the situation in Xinjiang.⁴⁰ On the same day, the UK extended its arms sales embargo to Hong Kong and suspended its extradition agreement, yet Boris Johnson warned of sanctions against China and stated the UK should continue to engage with the PRC.⁴¹ As mentioned above, on 25 September and 6 October, UK diplomats raised the issue in the UN. However, these attempts were either not solely British or touched upon Xinjiang only in passing, while primarily focusing on Hong Kong.

The turn came on 12 January 2021. Attending a meeting of the Counter Terrorism Committee of the UN Security Council, the British MP James Cleverly urged the Security Council to remind China

³⁷ *Uyghurs Human Rights Policy Act of 2020* (29.12.2020), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-116publ145/html/PLAW-116publ145.htm>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

³⁸ Magnus Obermann, "Victory for all? EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment Trends Toward Multipolarity," *The London Globalist*, January 27, 2021, <https://thelondonglobalist.org/victory-for-all-eu-china-comprehensive-agreement-on-investment-trends-toward-multipolarity/>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

³⁹ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "Readout - Foreign Secretary call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken," *GOV.UK*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/readout-foreign-secretary-call-with-us-secretary-of-state-antony-blinken>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

⁴⁰ Adam Taylor, "U.K. suspends extradition treaty with Hong Kong amid public outrage over human rights in China," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/07/20/uk-britain-suspend-extradition-treaty-hong-kong-china-human-rights/>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

⁴¹ Rob Merrick, "Boris Johnson says UK must 'continue to engage with China' and hints sanctions unlikely," *The Independent*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-china-extradition-treaty-hong-kong-a9628131.html>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

to respect human rights when fighting terrorism.⁴² Later in Westminster, Foreign Secretary Raab delivered a detailed speech about the UK's concern of Chinese actions in Xinjiang.⁴³ Putting his words into action, the Foreign Secretary presented new measures seeking to ensure that British businesses neither participate nor benefit from human rights violations in Xinjiang.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, despite the ambitious plans, reluctance prevails in the government when it comes to legislation. A recent example of this is the so-called "genocide amendment" of a potential UK-PRC trade agreement which failed in Parliament on 18 January.⁴⁵ If adopted, the law would have required the British government not to enter into trade agreements with countries that are committing genocides. The stumbling block and reason for the rejection was the provision that British courts,⁴⁶ not the government, should decide whether a country was committing a genocide or not.

From the government's perspective, it seems understandable to retain the prerogative over the definition of genocides. Yet, this practice contradicts the government's own argument that only British courts could establish the existence of a "genocide",⁴⁷ and therefore the UK government could not follow the US's lead and recognize China's human rights violations in Xinjiang as a genocide.⁴⁸

Perhaps seeking to heal this contradiction, on 2 February the House of Lords voted for the bill to be amended to include the genocide prevention clause.⁴⁹ A week later, on 9 February, rumours that Tory ministers planned to link the vote on the "genocide amendment" to Labour sponsored amendments to the Trade Bill caused bipartisan protest.⁵⁰ The outcome of the new vote in the House of Commons is still pending – but could determine the direction of British trade policy with China in years to come.

⁴² Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, "Adapting to prevent terrorist threats and the need to protect human rights," *GOV.UK*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/adapting-to-prevent-terrorist-threats-and-the-need-to-protect-human-rights>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

⁴³ Cabinet Office, "Human rights violations in Xinjiang and the government's response: Foreign Secretary's statement," *GOV.UK*, December 01, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-on-the-situation-in-xinjiang-and-the-governments-response>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

⁴⁴ Department for International Trade, "UK Government announces business measures over Xinjiang human rights abuses," *GOV.UK*, December 01, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-announces-business-measures-over-xinjiang-human-rights-abuses>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁴⁵ Ewelina Ochab, "The Genocide Amendment: Why is the UK Government dragging its feet? (Part I)," Oxford Human Rights Hub, 2021, <http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/the-genocide-amendment-why-is-the-uk-government-dragging-its-feet-part-i/>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁴⁶ William Adkins, "Boris Johnson declines to match US on Uighur 'genocide' declaration," *POLITICO*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-uk-us-uighur-china-genocide-declaration/>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

⁴⁷ Jitendra Joshi, "US, UK Vow Action After Report Of Sexual Violence Against Uighurs," *International Business Times*, 2021, <https://www.ibtimes.com/us-uk-vow-action-after-report-sexual-violence-against-uighurs-3137964>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁴⁸ "US: China 'committed genocide against Uighurs'," *BBC*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-55723522>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

⁴⁹ Patrick Wintour, "Lords defeats government over UK courts' role in genocide rulings," *The Guardian*, February 02, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/feb/02/lords-defeats-government-over-uk-courts-role-in-genocide-rulings>, accessed 10 Feb 2021.

⁵⁰ Patrick Wintour, "UK ministers accused of 'engineering' vote on genocide claims," *The Guardian*, September 02, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/feb/09/uk-ministers-accused-of-engineering-vote-on-genocide-claims>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

In the slipstream of the domestic debate about the role of UK courts in Britain's China policy, the dispute between the UK and the PRC ultimately entered the media realm. At the same time the Lords rejected the government's trade bill, the BBC published an investigation into sexual violence in Xinjiang which revealed systematic rape in Xinjiang's detention camps.⁵¹ As had been the case with earlier reports by Western media about Xinjiang, Chinese officials and state media refuted the allegations and questioned the credibility of the sources. Two days later, on 4 February, UK communications regulator Ofcom withdrew China Global Television Network's (CGTN) license to broadcast in the UK.⁵² It concluded that CGTN was ultimately controlled by the CCP rather than the actual holder of the licence, a company called Star China Media Ltd., and was therefore violating British laws.

More than anything, the Sino-British media battle over CGTN and the BBC shows how interconnected British and EU China policies remain even in the post-Brexit era. In a reaction to the BBC's publication of "fake news" about human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the management of COVID-19 in China, as well as the UK ban of CGTN, the PRC banned BBC World News from broadcasting in China on 11 February.⁵³ The EU was quick to denounce the BBC ban and call for a revision of the decision.⁵⁴ Even more painful for China, due to the long-standing membership in the EU common market, the British decision to withdraw CGTN's licence had consequences for Chinese propaganda dissemination in other EU countries. In Germany and France, for example, the distribution of CGTN was stopped by operators until the legal status of the channel could be clarified.⁵⁵

The China policy of "Global Britain" – leading by example?

UK foreign policy towards the PRC since 31 January 2020 tries to live up to the promise of a "Global Britain". Before Brexit, proponents of the British exit from the EU tried to promote the idea of a prosperous island nation, no longer bound to onerous bureaucratic rules made in Brussels, but instead revitalizing its old international ties and striking lucrative trade deals with fast-growing economies across the world. The idea was that the UK should be leading by example as a force for good in the

⁵¹ Matthew Hill, David Campanale, and Joel Gunter, "Their goal is to destroy everyone': Uighur camp detainees allege systematic rape," *BBC*, February 02, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-55794071>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁵² Ofcom, "Decision – China Global Television Network," 2021, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/bulletins/content-sanctions-adjudications/decision-china-global-television-network>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

⁵³ "China bans BBC World News from broadcasting," *BBC*, December 02, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-56030340>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

⁵⁴ European External Action Service, "China: Statement by the Spokesperson on the BBC ban," EEAS, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/93092/China:%20Statement%20by%20the%20Spokesperson%20on%20the%20BBC%20ban, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁵⁵ Linda Lew, "German state pulls plug on China's CGTN channel after Britain revokes broadcasting licence," *South China Morning Post*, February 13, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3121642/german-state-pulls-plug-chinas-cgtn-channel-after-britain>, accessed 13 Feb 2021.

world.⁵⁶ One year after Brexit, however, it seems that the UK is more dependent on China and its other international partners than ever before.⁵⁷

Two reports published by the China Research Group in November⁵⁸ and December⁵⁹ underline the scope of the challenge, with the latter calling for the establishment of a “Democratic 10” (D10) to supplement the G7. In fact, the extension of invitations to South Korea, Australia, and India to join the June 2021 G7 summit in Cornwall⁶⁰ showcases the UK’s geopolitical agency, but also illustrates London’s increased dependence on (new) international alliances.

While Boris Johnson’s Conservative government has signed an unambitious free trade agreement with Japan⁶¹ and applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) on the day of Brexit,⁶² the prospects of bilateral British-Chinese relations look dire. Twelve months after Brexit, the UK and the PRC do not appear to have a common agenda for the development of their future relationship. Instead, London and Beijing are engaged in a fierce dispute about the future of Hong Kong, the British 5G network, and minority rights in Xinjiang. They have even banned each other’s most important media outlets. Chinese investment in the UK has dropped since 2017⁶³ while the EU (or EU-associated markets) continues to account for 60% of the UK’s trade.⁶⁴

The low point in the relations between London and Beijing might be due to a range of reasons specific to British China policy – Hong Kong, Huawei, human rights. Yet the current disenchantment in UK-China relations is emblematic of some of the structural problems of the idea of a “Global Britain”. Britain’s China policy is the most obvious illustration of that. It proves the still existing global outreach of UK foreign policy, but it also showcases that Brexit has limited the UK’s political and economic clout on the world stage. In fact, the UK in most instances operates within a broader multilateral framework when approaching China, and perhaps most importantly, its China policy remains to some degree connected to the EU while becoming increasingly dependent on the US.

⁵⁶ Foreign & Commonwealth Office, “Global Britain is leading the world as a force for good: article by Dominic Raab,” *GOV.UK*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/global-britain-is-leading-the-world-as-a-force-for-good-article-by-dominic-raab>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁵⁷ Amy Borrett, “Can Britain afford to turn down Chinese investment?,” *Newstatesman*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/business/finance/2020/12/can-britain-afford-turn-down-chinese-investment>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

⁵⁸ Charles Parton, “UK Relations with China: A “Values War” — China Research Group,” China Research Group, 2020, <https://chinaresearchgroup.org/values-war>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁵⁹ “Defending Democracy in a New World,” *China Research Group*, January 12, 2020, <https://chinaresearchgroup.org/research/defending-democracy>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁶⁰ The Prime Minister’s Office, “UK to host G7 Summit in Cornwall,” *GOV.UK*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-host-g7-summit-in-cornwall>, accessed 11 Feb 2021.

⁶¹ British Embassy Tokyo, “UK and Japan sign free trade agreement,” *GOV.UK*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-japan-sign-free-trade-agreement>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁶² Dharshini David, “UK applying to join Asia-Pacific free trade pact CPTPP,” *BBC*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-55871373>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁶³ Kerstin Braun, “Chinese foreign investment trends in the UK,” Open Access Government, 2020, <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/chinese-foreign-investment/80965/>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁶⁴ Tom Edgington, “Brexit: What trade deals has the UK done so far?,” *BBC*, August 02, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47213842>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

Therefore, the extent to which the UK's China policy can serve as a role model seems debatable. To some, the last few months have created the impression that British China policy is incoherent.⁶⁵ "Global Britain" promises to be a front-runner in advocating for human rights and its bid to grant citizenship to three million Hong Kongers could, in fact, be seen as a step towards more international maturity in dealing with the CCP. On the other hand, when dealing with China the UK relies on the support of its European allies, the "Five Eyes" and, above all, the US. Out of all major European countries, the UK's China policy over the last 30 years is probably the most erratic one – either enthusiastically seeking economic benefits in China or drastically condemning the moral and legal shortcomings of the CCP. The above presented elements of Britain's post-Brexit China policy illustrate this observation as if magnified under a burning glass.

Conclusion

British-Chinese relations are a crucial aspect of the UK's foreign policy, both before and after Brexit. Before Brexit, the dream to conclude lucrative trade deals with the PRC and transform London into a "Singapore-on-Thames" was prevalent among staunch Brexiteers. After Brexit, the PRC serves as an ideological opponent of a more normative British foreign policy. The British-Chinese disputes over Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Huawei represent opportunities to display Britain's global role.

According to Henry Kissinger, the fundamental duty in Confucianism is to "know thy place".⁶⁶ Another basic principle of Confucianism is the "rectification of names" (正名), described in chapter 13:3 of the *Analects*. According to Confucius, if names are not rectified, then language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accordance with the truth of things, then work cannot be accomplished.⁶⁷ As "Global Britain" is trying to find its place in the post-Brexit world, it seems that at least with regards to its China policy some aspects of its "global" ambitions ought to be rectified.

Except for the new visa scheme for overseas citizens in Hong Kong, the promise of a "Global Britain" has not yet materialized. Instead, the UK is moving further into the orbit of US China policy, replacing the Europeans with a transatlantic alliance. While still seeking close cooperation with former EU partners, London is increasingly dependent on decisions taken in Washington D.C. Combined with China's attack on the freedom of Hong Kong, this has put London on a more China-critical trajectory than Paris, Berlin or Rome, a scenario less likely if the UK were still a member of the EU.

Overall, the conclusion seems fair that London's post-Brexit China policy is neither a frontrunner nor an underdog compared to Brussels and other European capitals. The British agenda is ambitious

⁶⁵ David Green, "The U.K.'s Incoherent China Strategy," *World Political Review*, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29387/boris-johnson-s-approach-to-china-uk-relations-is-incoherent>, accessed 12 Feb 2021.

⁶⁶ Henry Kissinger (2010): "On China", p. 15.

⁶⁷ Confucius, *Analects*, Book XIII Chapter 3, author's translation.

but not unique. In fact, the German supply chain law and similar considerations across the EU demonstrates that full autonomy over trade regulations is no prerequisite to act as a human rights champion.

In other areas in which a “Global Britain” possess comparative advantages vis-à-vis the EU, such as the financial industry sector, Britain’s greatest strengths could also be its main weaknesses. For instance, the leading role of the City of London as European hub for financial services in an age of e-commerce and digital economy will be an asset for post-Brexit Britain. But at the same time, given Huawei’s exclusion from the UK’s 5G network, it also means a challenge for UK-PRC relations. The EU, too, has a role to play in this game, as financial services are not covered by the EU-UK Christmas agreement of 2020, and thus far access to the European Single Market is not guaranteed.

The creation of the China Research Group is an illustration of the fact that in the first year after Brexit, the UK’s China policy remains influenced by developments on the continent. In geopolitical terms, however, the UK is moving closer to the US – a rational decision in the face of the UK’s own global weight. In doing so it has not rendered its foreign policy more “independent” but rather deepened its strategic dependency on the US. At the time of writing, it seems debatable whether gesture politics in human rights and trade policy, seeking to portray the power of a “Global Britain”, compensate for a creeping loss of Britain’s geopolitical influence. The UK appears to confront China normatively, but it finds it hard to do so alone.

The final assessment of the UK’s China policy in 2020 is thus twofold. On the one hand, the offer of full British citizenship to (almost) the entire population of Hong Kong was a powerful symbol of the aspirations of “Global Britain”. The UK acted quickly and decisively in a way that left no doubts about its geopolitical ambitions. Admittedly, it remains to be seen how ready the British society really is to welcome new immigrants not long after a relatively hard Brexit has finalized the 2016 anti-immigration referendum. Hong Kong is thus part of Boris Johnson’s gesture politics.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the UK has reaffirmed its international presence and occupies a central place on the world stage on this issue.

On the other hand, the debate over the “genocide amendment” suggests that Britain’s China policy sometimes is almost self-contradicting. The problem seems inherently connected to the notion of “Global Britain”: how can commercial interests of a trading island be combined with its desire to be a global human rights champion? This question is likely to become ever more important as the UK tries to enter free trade agreements in the Indo-Pacific, one day maybe even with China. Even in the age of e-commerce, the traditional dilemma of norms vs. interests will not completely disappear. Yet the EU, and even the US, will equally have to navigate their relations with China between upholding international norms and remaining open for economic contacts. Twelve months from 31 January 2020, it thus seems that “post-Brexit” is the smallest challenge of current British policy towards China.

⁶⁸ Ref. to page 16 of the *Integrated Review*.

Timeline

19 December 1984	Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong
10 March 2020	Anti-Huawei rebellion in Westminster defeated by British government
30 June	Hong Kong National Security Law
01 July	Boris Johnson condemns security law
14 July	Huawei barred from build-up of British 5G network
20 July	UK suspends extradition treaty with China over situation in Xinjiang
22 July	UK announces new visas for British Nationals (Overseas) in Hong Kong
25 September	UK ambassador at UN criticizes China
06 October	British-German statement in the Security Council
12 November	UK declares China has violated Joint Declaration
18 November	'Five-Eyes' coalition condemns breach of Joint Declaration
12 January 2021	Foreign Secretary Raab announces new business measures for Xinjiang
18 January	The "genocide amendment" fails in Parliament
31 January	New visa scheme for Hong Kong BN(O) opens
04 February	CGTN loses broadcasting licence in the UK
12 February	BBC World Service banned in China

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