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The Determinants of the UK's Shifting Political Relations with China (2013-2023)

Birleşik Krallık'ın Çin ile Dönüşen Siyasal İlişkileri ve Değişimin Temel
Dinamikleri (2013-2023)

Serdar ALTUN

Arş. Gör., Kütahya Dumlupınar Üniversitesi
İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Siyaset ve Sosyal Bilimler ABD,
Research Assistant, Kütahya Dumlupınar University, Faculty of Economic and
Administrative Sciences, Department of Public Administration
serdar.altun@dpu.edu.tr

ORCID: 0000-0003-3988-0263

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Abstract

This study examines the United Kingdom's political relations with China. The bilateral affairs between the two were once claimed to have entered a golden era. However, just a few years after this promotion, the relations underwent a significant negative shift which has lasted in an increasingly worsening fashion until current times. The key focus of this paper is on the evolution of the relationship during the period between 2013 and 2023. Its primary objective is to provide a structured account of the relationship in the years covered there to understand better the UK's political/diplomatic position on China, a rising major power. In the first part after the introduction, the emergence and evolution of the so-called Golden Era along with the earlier signs of its transformation are offered. Later, the key political issues revolving around both China's aggression at home and abroad, and China-related influence and espionage efforts inside the UK are discussed. Lastly, the UK's new protective measures implemented in relation to the political issues it has had with China are discussed. In the conclusion, key findings are presented to make the current tide of the UK's political relations with China more comprehensible.

Keywords: United Kingdom Foreign Policy, British Foreign Policy, Chinese Foreign Policy, UK - China Relations, Golden Era

Öz

Bu çalışma Birleşik Krallık'ın Çin ile olan siyasi ilişkilerini incelemektedir. Bir dönem ikili ilişkilerin Altın Çağ'ını yaşadığı iddia edilmekteydi. Ancak, bu yüksek düzeyli söylemlerden sadece birkaç yıl sonra, ilişkiler olumsuz yönde önemli bir değişim geçirmiş ve bu değişim günümüze kadar giderek kötüleşen bir şekilde devam etmiştir. Bu makalenin temel odak noktası, 2013-2023 yılları arasındaki süreçte ilişkilerin geçirdiği dönüşümdür. Çalışma, Birleşik Krallık'ın yükselen bir büyük güç olan Çin karşısındaki siyasi/diplomatik konumlanışını daha iyi anlamak için söz konusu yıllardaki ilişkilerin sistematik bir anlatısını sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Girişten sonraki ilk bölümde, Altın Çağ olarak adlandırılan dönemin ortaya çıkışı ve evrimi ile birlikte söz konusu dönüşümün ilk işaretleri ele alınmaktadır. Sonrasında, Çin'in yurtiçi ve yurtdışındaki agresif uygulamaları ve Birleşik Krallık içinde Çin'le bağlantılı olduğu iddia edilen nüfuz ve casusluk faaliyetleri etrafında dönen temel siyasi

meselelere değinilmektedir. Son olarak, Birleşik Krallık'ın Çin ile yaşadığı siyasi sorunlarla ilgili olarak uygulamaya koyduğu yeni koruyucu önlemler tartışılmaktadır. Sonuç bölümünde ise çalışmadaki temel bulgular Birleşik Krallık'ın Çin ile siyasi ilişkilerindeki mevcut gidişatı daha anlaşılır kılmayı hedefleyen bir yaklaşımla tartışılıp özetlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Birleşik Krallık Dış Politikası, İngiltere Dış Politikası, Çin Dış Politikası, İngiltere – Çin İlişkileri, Altın Çağ

Etik Beyan	This article is adapted, with some revisions, from the author's ongoing PhD thesis study on the UK's relations with China between 2013 and 2023, at the Department of International Relations, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University.
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1. Introduction

The UK's relationship with China was once described as undergoing a golden era where bilateral relations were expected by both sides to reach an unprecedented level of cooperation and engagement. This period began in 2015 and was boosted with the personal initiatives of then Prime Minister, David Cameron and his Chancellor of Exchequer, George Osborne. However, following the coming of Theresa May, known then for her sceptic and prudent approach to China, to the office, the British position on China showed some signs of transformation. Yet, the shift in Britain's China policy was rooted not only in May's personality. It was driven by more complicated and various dynamics that have persisted until recent times. As a result of them, the UK's relations with China transformed so significantly that the end of the so-called golden era was inevitably declared by then-Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in 2023.

The evolution and the current situation of the political/diplomatic aspect of this relationship with China will be explored here. The main research question is how and in which ways the UK's political relations with China have transformed between 2013 and 2023. In doing so, the track record of Britain's changing policy toward China will be offered. The primary objective is to render the change in bilateral relations more comprehensible and to classify these

affairs into consistent subjects according to key developments. Making such a fresh categorization that is built upon the most recent events of the UK's political relations with China is the first contribution of the paper to the literature on UK – China relations.

The next part after the introduction focuses on the emergence of the golden era between the two countries alongside of the earlier signs of the change in this cordial atmosphere. The following two parts explain the key subjects the UK sees as problematic in its political relations with China, the Chinese aggression at home and abroad, and China-related influence and espionage efforts inside the UK. Lastly, what measures the UK has adopted under the new context of its relations with China is discussed. This part constitutes the second contribution of the paper to the literature since it treats the political measures adopted by the UK as a separate issue so that the greater political trends about China that prevail inside the minds of the UK's decision-makers can be understood better. In the conclusion part, an overall assessment of the current landscape of London's political affairs with Beijing is provided.

In this study, an exploratory approach is adopted. The paper largely benefits from process-tracing which realizes and concentrates upon the contributions of description to the scientific knowledge (Collier, 2011). It also has some limitations. First, it evidently has a constrained area of focus, namely political relations. The economic and technological aspects of the relationship, for instance, are not taken into account, being left for future research. Secondly, because the main concern is to understand the UK's policy perspective, the sources utilized there are predominantly British sources. Future studies enriched with Chinese sources and perspectives can be conducted by researchers who have Chinese language skills.

2. The Golden Era and the Initial Phase of the Transformation

Though the UK – China relations were hailed for supposedly going through a Golden Era after 2015, the affairs in the early 2010s had been preoccupied with a crisis. When Cameron and Osborne met with the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama in 2012 in London, whom China accuses of seeking to separate Tibet from China, Beijing reacted strongly to the event, with quests from Britain not to meddle in China's internal affairs (The Guardian, 2012).

However, this development was followed in the next year by Cameron's visit to China, after which he accepted to avoid further meetings with Dalai Lama (Brown, 2019: 102).

Interestingly, the subsequently improved relations were advocated by the same two people, Cameron and Osborne, who had ignited the strain just a short while ago. Moreover, the desire to get closer to China was pursued despite the opposing voices within the cabinet who prioritized security concerns centered around China's interference efforts and its human rights records over potential economic benefits, something Cameron and Osborne reportedly valued so much even at the expense of turning a blind eye to human rights controversies surrounding China (Oakeshott & Grimston, 2013). Osborne's lust for improving ties with China was so great that he even suggested on one occasion that Britain had a huge dependence on the EU since half of its exports were going to the EU market and this had to be balanced by increasing the level of alignment with China. By opening the country's economy and itself to China more, he was also expecting the UK to have a greater say and influence on the world stage thanks to the increased closeness with Beijing (The Economist, 2015a).

In 2015, the British government's willingness to enhance its engagement with China resulted, with the unsurprising lead by Osborne, in the UK's joining to Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (HM Treasury, 2015) which was established by China, who was judged to aim by the move at undermining the US-led Western global financial and economic system. Consequently, the decision drew heavy criticism from the US, Britain's special ally and China's global competitor. Nevertheless, despite the reactions and warnings from such traditional allies and some cabinet members, Osborne was so enthusiastic about becoming China's best partner in the West that some even claimed for his determined efforts to constitute an "Osborne Doctrine". The weirdness was that this so-called doctrine was also admitted containing some "economic, political and diplomatic gambles" that could born out of connecting Britain as firmly as never seen before to China (The Economist, 2015b). Challenges, weaknesses or dangers are inherent in doctrines since both the humans outlining them and the state resources to be employed cannot fully avoid constraints and fallacies. However, to define a policy as a doctrine de-

spite acknowledging that it was also filling a country's strategy with gambles is something that should have been questioned.

The UK's ever-getting closer approach to China in spite of all warnings and criticisms at home and abroad reached at its peak in October 2015 when Chinese President Xi Jinping made a high-level visit to the country following Osborne's prior visit to China in September that year. The extraordinary nature of the visit was symbolized by three events. The first one was the agreements signed between the two countries which included Chinese involvement in the building of the Hinkley Point C Nuclear Plant of the UK and business and investment deals amounting to tens of billions of pounds (Gani, 2015).

The second one was the UK's unwillingness to mention human rights accusations against China. On the government web page, the issues declared to be discussed during Xi's visit did not have anything related to such matters. Moreover, When Osborne was urged by the protests and criticisms from human rights activists to talk about the subject, he defined talking with China about those humanitarian matters as "megaphone diplomacy", and added that Britain's affairs with a country hosting one-fifth of the world's population would not be based solely upon human rights, albeit also not failing to express that this would not imply not standing up for Britain's values (Brown, 2019:104). The third event symbolizing the rapidly advancing relations between the UK and China was Cameron's taking Xi to a pub to have some drinking.

By providing media coverages with pictures showing the two leaders sharing a standing to have beer like two close friends who could talk and share many things with each other candidly, the Cameron government seemingly expected to pose as if there was a high level of trust and understanding between the two countries, not only in state-to-state senses but also at the leadership level. This is understandable for two reasons. The first one is the need to safeguard the new China policy against criticisms and warnings flooding upon the government then. They needed to convince those who were sceptical about the viability of the new China policy and the government's abilities to deal with such a major power effectively and affordably. They had to reassure the public that Cameron and his government were in control of the

developments and that there was no need to worry too much. The second cause is related to Cameron's ambition to be seen as an initiative-taking leader who could identify and affect the direction of big developments (Garnett et al., 2018:315).

The winds of goodwill and wishful thinking endorsed by Cameron and Osborne for greater engagement with China somehow faltered when the two left the office for Theresa May government. She was reported to have regarded Chinese investments in Britain's critical infrastructure as concerning even at the times when she had served as home secretary, resulting from a contrasting position to Osborne's, which was characterized by a blindfolded eagerness for Chinese money (Boffey, 2016). As Prime Minister, May displayed an evident difference from her predecessors' approach to China when she had delayed the approval of the nuclear deal made by the Cameron government with China for the building of the Hinkley Point C nuclear plant. Even though the postponement endured only for seven weeks and May later allowed the deal to be realized, the event still signaled that the open-armed manner appeared in the UK's relations with China during the Cameron era began to lose ground (Brown, 2019:110).

Her visit to China in 2018 was another significant event unveiling Britain's transforming position on China, which encompassed both continuities and changes. By that time, she had faced heavy pressure from the criticisms depicting her as incompetent in the transitional period of Brexit, which was set to culminate in a practical departure from the EU one year later, in 2019 (Buckley & Castle, 2018). Also, she had to navigate the country's identity and status crisis that emerged post-Brexit. In that regard, May's Britain needed to find fresh sources of commerce and investment outside the EU to convince the British public and elites that the country could compensate, thanks to those alternative sources, for possible losses that would be caused by the exit. Likewise, May had to promote the Global Britain brand that had appeared for a short while post-Brexit to describe for the country a new role on the global stage. This task unavoidably urged greater dialogue and alignment with great powers like China, rendering sharp divergences with such major powers unnecessary and undesired (Weidenfeld, 2018). Thus, May's China trip took place under such challenging circumstances.

Although the expectations were high prior to the visit, and May had made remarkable pledges, the results did not deliver satisfactory outcomes. Commerce and finance were the foremost areas the British public and politicians had been accustomed to checking first so that they could measure the level of achievement when it came to engaging with China. Yet, the consequential amount of trade and investment deals after the visit were seen as insufficient in comparison to those signed during Xi's state visit to Britain in 2015. Also, the agenda of the visit was largely dominated by educational, cultural, and environmental subjects, making the more urgent economic and political subjects underdiscussed (Elgot, 2018).

Furthermore, while she had initially promised to raise the human rights concerns during her meetings with Chinese officials, the topic was sidelined, weirdly leading to appreciation from the Chinese media (Mctague, 2018; *The Week*, 2018). Nonetheless, there appeared signs of her efforts to maintain the balanced posture she initially attempted to display when she resisted the compelling pressures the Chinese side put on her to sign a memorandum of understanding advocating China's Belt and Road Initiative (Weidenfeld, 2018). The years following May's service as prime minister would be characterized by greater divergences and controversies with China.

In 2019 and 2020, the Trump administration adopted a tougher stance on China, which was supported largely by other political camps in the US. Subsequently, the UK encountered heavy pressure from the US to recalibrate its mostly cordial approach to China, which was considerably boosted in the so-called golden era (Leoni, 2022:7). While these demands were influential somehow, albeit in moderate terms, to bring change, the actual drivers leading a shift in Britain's relations with China, which was wider, quicker and more consequential than the one prevailing during May's tenure, were China's repressive implementations believed to be violating fundamental human rights and freedoms, its aggressive Wolf Warrior diplomacy during the pandemic, and its influence and espionage efforts across the UK as well.

Before delving into these matters in depth, it must be mentioned that as another reason for Britain's changing China policy, it was speculated by some that Johnson's China policy in those years was also influenced by some do-

mestic needs. The post-Brexit turmoil still shaking the country had been exacerbated by the political, economic, and social troubles resulting from the pandemic. On these occasions, it was suggested, some seemingly anti-China attempts gave both the country and the prime minister the opportunity to build the national unity they urgently needed at those times (Obermann, 2021:4)

Some observers went too far in the same regard by claiming that these moves also provided the country, especially the Eurosceptic Tories who lost their basis of having an evil-other after exiting the EU, with a new sense of villain, satisfying the national identity's need for moral clarity in some regards (Crabtree, 2020). Though these comments might seem true given the current China-sceptic sentiment ever-mounting inside the UK as a consequence of the country's recently troublesome political relations with Beijing, it is hard to ground the whole change in Britain's China policy on such a simplistic argument. Like many others, the UK is a quite complex and well-organized country whose success, wealth and unity do not totally depend on having a clearly defined enemy. Moreover, as will be seen in the following pages and parts, Britain's China policy has never been driven by a wholistic sense of animosity and otherization. Rather, many of the governmental bodies have usually tried to keep the doors of and possibility for cooperation and communication with China as open as possible.

3. The Growing Chinese Aggression at Home and Abroad

In 2019, the UK's China policy, already lacking the enthusiasm of the Cameron years for greater alignment, witnessed some important developments inspired considerably by China's increasingly aggressive posture which boosted the process of deterioration almost irreversibly. The accelerating shift in this period was primarily driven by China's restrictive approach to Hong Kong protesters, which since then has been regarded by Britain as sharply incompatible with and violating the essence of universal human rights and freedoms. The negative reactions to the Chinese state in that regard increased so much that almost every month of the year was filled with several high-level governmental and parliamentary criticisms and warnings directed at China (Commons Library, 2020:16-19).

Britain has hardly refrained from its fierce opposition to China's repressive acts directed at Hong Kong protesters, and this position has had a nationwide advocacy in a bipartisan sense from all political sides. Because the UK has always seen the survival of a democratic way of life in Hong Kong, a former British colony handed over to China in 1997, as a principal pillar of its self-perceived global power and prestige. Particularly, in the times of the Global Britain narrative that was promoted to grant the country its lost sense of identity and status post-Brexit, standing firm on that topic became more important than ever. Otherwise, the UK's claims for the Global Britain to be a global force for good could severely lose its credibility and plausibility.

Around the same time, the debates over China's stance toward universal human rights and freedoms were fueled by the disclosure of further evidence of re-education camps in which the Uyghurs in Xinjiang were held against their consent by the CCP (Ramzy & Buckley, 2019). That development cast further doubt upon the prospect of greater cooperation with China within the minds of many, not only in the UK but across most of the Western countries. This further exacerbated the erosion in London's previously-held optimistic stance toward Beijing. The UK responded to China's mistreatment of the Uyghur population by pioneering an initiative alongside of 22 other countries in the UN to condemn Beijing over those acts (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2019).

In the meantime, as a result of Beijing's mishandling of the Covid pandemic, which was dominated by the aggression symbolized by the wolf-warrior diplomacy, suspicions over China's actions and intentions grew globally, and British public and decision-makers did not have the exceptional chance to remain unaffected by that changing weather. Unwilling to meet the demands from several nations about exploring the origins of the pandemic, China resorted to an aggressive communication strategy including denial and conspiracy stories in the face of the scepticism over the possibility of its faults that might have caused the emergence and spread of the virus (Xiaolin & Yitong, 2023).

The prevalence of the controversies around China's pandemic diplomacy continued to manifest itself with a series of incidents including then Foreign

Minister Dominic Raab's statement that the nature of bilateral relations would "not go back to business as usual" once the pandemic ended and "the international community would want answers from Beijing about its handling of the outbreak" (Commons Library, 2020:21). This indicated the climate of the time that was characterized largely by mistrust, suspicion, and anger.

In 2020, human rights concerns arising from China's acts remained high on the agenda of the UK's China policy. News that China was preparing to implement a new national security law that would enable the CCP to crack down on Hong Kong more effectively got swift reactions from the UK. In turn, Britain announced its plans to make a new Hong Kong British National Overseas Visa and the suspension of the extradition agreement with Hong Kong. This was accompanied by ever-increasingly mentioned concerns regarding the situation in Xinjiang, the area majority of the Uyghur people reside (Commons Library, 2020:20).

The tension kept increasing in 2021 as the Final Communiqué of the G7 Cornwall Summit, which was approved by the UK as the host country, made a call on China to respect human rights and freedoms. Despite some hesitations from Italy, Canada and the UK that they had better avoid confronting China that strongly, the US administration urged its partners to add China among the central warnings of the communiqué (Parker - Cameron-Chileshe, 2021). In turn, China's embassy in the UK blamed the communiqué for having "baseless accusations" and demanded that these countries refrain from intervening in China's internal affairs and not harm its national interests (BBC, 2021).

In April, the House of Commons defined China's moves in Xinjiang as genocide against the Uyghur people (Gallardo, 2021). Albeit non-binding for the government, the decision showed the ever-evolving anger and discontent toward China among British lawmakers. The move was followed in September by the barring of China's Ambassador to the UK from attending a reception held by the Commons. The Chinese embassy called the decision as "despicable and cowardly", also underlining its potential to damage the interests of both (Landale, 2021). Nevertheless, almost two weeks later, the same ambassador, with an effort to ease the tension and prevent the affairs from fur-

ther deterioration, urged Britain to improve communication and cooperation in such areas as trade, investment, pandemic and climate (Zheng, 2021).

Toward the end of 2022, bilateral affairs suffered another blow that seemingly reinforced the negative views towards China within the minds of the British public and political elites as it was seen as another reflection of how China badly treated humans demonstrating against it. Among protesters gathered in front of the Chinese consulate in Manchester, one man was dragged to and attacked within the consulate. Though six diplomats associated with the incident left the country, the Chinese side did not meet the government's requests for waiving diplomatic immunity of those persons and allowing the police to make interviews and an investigation. The event was reacted harshly by British lawmakers (Lau & Gallardo, 2022). Amidst these growing tensions, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee insisted that the government must transform the identification of China from systemic competitor to threat, along with a well-calibrated and well-prepared policy change that must replace the ongoing "empty rhetoric". Nonetheless, they also acknowledged the need for cooperation with China on some transnational issues (Gibbons, 2022).

The disputes revolving around China's acts toward Hong Kong remained a troublesome issue between the two countries in 2023. In January, the UK parliament published its six-monthly report on Hong Kong in which Beijing was accused of not acting in accordance with the joint declaration of 1997, targeting at every aspect of daily life with the new national security law. In response, China's foreign affairs body in Hong Kong told the UK not to meddle in the city's internal affairs and called the report "a piece of wastepaper" (Lam & Kang-chung, 2023). The debate was reignited in July, bounties were put on some Hong Kong activists a number of whom are living in the UK, and the Hong Kong leader declared they would be "pursued for life". In a similar manner, China blamed the UK for putting its security and sovereignty at risk by protecting those alleged illegals. Britain's foreign minister, in turn, reacted by warning China that the UK would "not tolerate any attempts by China to intimidate and silence individuals in the UK and overseas" (Hawkins, 2023).

At this point, it must be mentioned that the Taiwan issue rose to importance in a very similar sense to the Hong Kong issue in which the UK criticizes the CCP's policies and the CCP, in turn, warns Britain not to interfere in the affairs it considers as part of its internal politics. Because of some subsequent developments, things got even worse. In April 2023, Foreign Minister Cleverly told in a speech that any attack conducted by Beijing on Taiwan would seriously damage both the global and the Chinese economies, adding that no country could refrain from the negative impacts of any conflict in Taiwan. He also urged Beijing to be more transparent with regard to its military intentions in order to avoid possible strategic miscalculations that could bring terrible results for many (Macaskill, 2023). By mid-May, a visit by the former short-winded PM Liz Truss to Taiwan deteriorated the weather even more. Chinese embassy in London defined the move as a provocation made by "an out-of-date politician... for political self-interest" (Xie, 2023).

That was followed in June by the announcement that British security minister, Tom Tugendhat, met with Taiwan's digital minister. This act was seen by many as a rare break with one tradition of Britain's China policy which meant British senior ministers used to not meet with counterparts from Taiwan though the same was not the case for junior officers. The Chinese embassy in London expressed their country's discomfort with and opposition to the development which they believed would encourage separatist sides in Taiwan in an undesired way, underlying that China would give "resolute responses" to any attempts that could undermine its national interests (Reuters, 2023b). In August, in a parliamentary report, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee defined Taiwan as an independent country. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin rejected the independence claim, putting the blame on the report for "confusing black and white". He also made a call on the UK to abide by the 'one China' policy and not incite pro-independence tendencies in Taiwan (Lau, 2023).

In sum, the relations in political senses are undergoing serious difficulties. A great deal of British political figures, particularly lawmakers, and the public opinion are becoming increasingly upset with further engagement and tolerance toward China while it has been displaying many instances of greater aggression at home and abroad. Therefore, the current landscape of political

relations does not seem promising. The golden era and the optimism characterizing it are absolutely over. Consequently, the UK has become more vocal against China's actions it considers unacceptable.

4. Influence and Espionage Issues

Espionage and influence efforts allegedly conducted by China have been another significantly controversial aspect of the UK's political relations with China, particularly since 2022. The year began with the shocking news that MI5 warned lawmakers against a lawyer residing in the UK, Christina Lee, who engaged in efforts of political interference on behalf of the CCP (Macaskill, 2022). Strikingly, the service suggested after an investigation that the attempts she associated with were directed at some particularly selected high-level and actual figures. Moreover, it was suggested that the CCP, believed to running the influence operation behind, also intended to cultivate both promising local figures anticipated to become prominent politicians one day and those at the beginning of their political careers (Corera, 2022b). When it came to the middle of the year, the head of MI5, Ken McCallum, announced that since Britain's official processes were tightened more to disrupt the efforts of intellectual theft from areas of sensitive research, fifty Chinese university students MI5 believed to be associated with China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), left the UK (Sabbagh, 2022).

That briefing was delivered while he was holding a joint public appearance with the head of the American FBI, in front of an audience including senior figures from business and academic circles. Emerging as an in-depth and well-prepared wake-up call on Chinese efforts of influence and interference, the move got so negative reactions from China. Its spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said "British intelligence was trying to hype up the China threat theory" and it must "cast away imagined demons" (Corera, 2022a). The alerts from the security apparatuses followed each other as the head of MI6, Richard Moore, declared, just several days after the MI5 warnings, that China became the top priority of British intelligence, and that they would inform the ministers and decision-makers on such a complex issue so that they could deal with the subject more effectively (Stewart, 2022).

A few months later, another British senior intelligence officer, Jeremy Fleming, then head of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) which operates in the field of signal intelligence, became vocal along with warnings against the CCP's intentions and actions in tech-related areas (Fleming, 2022). As the bottom line, he argued that there had been a rapidly evolving national security issue that he thought would define Britain's future. He claimed that the CCP broadened the essence of national security by seeing technology as "a battleground for control, values and influence", and that China could export its different values through technology. Following a recently well-known behavioral pattern, the Chinese side responded to the expression by calling his statements baseless and counterfactual, maintaining that China utilizes technology only for benevolent causes and with mutually beneficial results (Volz, 2022).

These warnings heightened national security concerns and revealed that the British state's prominent security bodies saw the China issue from a more alerting perspective, giving greater priority to the subject than the policymakers and top governmental officials did. Nonetheless, some prominent British political figures began more frequently than before to reflect upon China in threatening terms. For instance, during the prime ministerial race, Rishi Sunak, later becoming PM, pledged in July to be tougher on what he described as the biggest long-term threat, China, and promised to ban the Confucius Institutes, a global soft-power instrument of the Chinese state, from the UK once he became PM. He also blamed previous governments for being too soft on China (VOA, 2022).

Although he did not act as radically as he had promised, he still displayed further signs of acting in favor of challenging and balancing in narrative and performative aspects. He, for instance, agreed with President Biden to confront China together, with mutual commitments to keeping support for Ukraine (The Guardian, 2022). Besides, in his first foreign policy speech, he decisively announced the end of the Golden Era, which he believed to be built upon naive expectations of closer economic ties. Talking of China's crackdown on Hong Kong protesters and a BBC journalist detained and beaten while covering a protest story in Shanghai, Sunak stressed the divergent and conflictual nature of both countries' values and interests as well. However, he also

showed a manifest antipathy toward any possible cold war rhetoric that might alienate China altogether, and cited Beijing's global significance (Mason, 2022).

In 2023, the influence and espionage efforts by China in the UK persisted to be an exacerbating factor for bilateral relations. The allegation that China was holding unofficial police stations in the UK staggered both the British public and policy elites. While the controversy was continuing, the British security minister Tom Tugendhat said the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office asked the Chinese embassy to terminate the existence and operations of those stations, and, in response, the Chinese side declared the permanent closure of all such stations (Reuters, 2023a).

The security concerns inside the country over China's moves and intentions were significantly heightened when the House of Commons Intelligence and Security Committee published its China report. The document was completely devoted to China's covert interference and influence operations within the UK, with strong assertions like that China infiltrated into almost all aspects of the British economy. The report's significance stems not only from the rich insights and records of events it provided but also from the structured framework to understand and explain the Chinese behavior as well as offering the government a strategy to counter those operations in a similarly systematic and analytical way (ISCP, 2023). This was one of the most critical developments with really huge potential to encourage the framing of China by Britain as a threat that is motivated by such objectives as constantly interfering, influencing, and disrupting Britain's security and prosperity in ways that can be met only with tighter, more robust and more confrontational manners.

However, that was not all. In September, the news that two men, one of whom was a young parliamentary researcher associated with Security Minister, Tom Tugendhat, and the Chair of Foreign Affairs Committee, Alicia Kearns, were arrested by the police over allegations of spying for China. Emerging as another blow to the relations, this development has sparked heated debates among British politicians, both ministers and MPs, and across the media. PM Sunak heard about the case while he was attending the G20 Summit in India where he later talked in high-level meetings to China's Prem-

ier Li Qiang about the unacceptability of and concerns arising from the alleged Chinese interference in British parliament (Fisher & Pickard, 2023). At the end of the day, many China sceptics in decision-making bodies and parliamentary urged the government to reconsider its China policy, and replace it with a tougher and more realistic stance (Fisher et al., 2023).

In the end, what the UK's security bodies revealed and pointed to as influence and espionage attempts made by the CCP to target the UK's security and prosperity have terrible implications for the already eroded hope inside the UK for maintaining, or building back, a largely cordial and cooperative relationship with China. Despite some thin highlights from both governmental and parliamentarian circles on China's significance as a global actor whose help is required for solving global issues, the negative views, which were boosted remarkably by China's perceived aggression toward universal freedoms and rights, are more reinforced with the influence and espionage campaigns that are seen as targeting the core of the UK's national security and sovereignty. Against such a political background, the UK also embarks on some performative and more consequential measures to counter the threat and danger it perceives from China, in addition to its expressive opposition and condemnations mentioned above.

5. The UK's Protective Measures

The UK has introduced a number of protective measures in the face of the problems it has encountered in its political relations with China. While some of these measures are directly shaped by China's relevant moves, some others display a broader coverage, being not limited solely to China's policies. The first tier of these protective measures can be described as domestic recalibrations.

In legislative senses and as part of its domestic recalibrations, the UK has enacted the National Security Act 2023 for the broader purpose of countering what it calls state-led hostile activities posing threats to its security, prosperity and values. The act is supposed to give the UK's judicial, police and intelligence agencies greater and updated authorities to identify, prosecute and eliminate such malicious efforts more effectively. The set of offences it covers includes the subjects of "espionage, sabotage, foreign interference and influ-

ence, prohibited places and financial property". It is introduced by either repealing or updating some former similarly-motivated acts (Ministry of Defence, 2024). The causes and effects of this act are not simply concerned with the deteriorating relations with China. Any power conducting the offences described under the act is subject to its authority and enforcement. However, as the level of the influence and espionage efforts associated with the Chinese state has been rising across the UK, both the Act's emergence and the inherit enforcements will heavily impact the direction of the UK's political affairs with China.

As another instance of the domestic recalibrations, the UK introduced the British National Overseas (BNO) Visa for Hong Kong residents in 2021. Following London's announcement in 2020 about the suspension of the extradition agreement with Hong Kong (Commons Library, 2020:20), the decision came amidst the controversies surrounding the protests, the Chinese crackdown on the protesters and the disputed national security law granting China with sweeping powers over Hong Kong.

BNO was a kind of British citizenship launched in 1985 in order for people living here to sustain their ties with the UK by applying to it before the territory's handover to China in 1997 was completed. People with BNOs could come to and stay in the UK for a maximum of 6 months without asking for any residence permission, though this did not mean they could live and work in the UK as if they had full citizenship (GOV.UK, n.d.). The new BNO Visa for Hong Kongers is built upon this framework. Accordingly, persons who previously obtained BNO status can apply for a visa that allows them, along with their eligible family members, to live and study in the UK for five years. Once this five-year period is spent, they can ask for a permanent settlement. Following an extra one year of staying in the UK after the application, they this time can apply for full citizenship (Home Office, 2022). As it was estimated that 5.2 million people in total met the whole criteria, a huge flow to the UK was expected. China and the Hong Kong government respectively, reacted to the decision by canceling the validity of BNO passports on their territories as travel or identification papers (Hale, 2021).

The measures aforementioned are narrowly designed and field-specific ones. However, as part of its domestic recalibrations in the face of the mounting challenges in relations with China, the UK also has sought to outline a broader strategic framework to respond to these challenges and to bring clarity to the confusion prevailing within the minds of the British government and public. As the new landscape of Britain's affairs with China became more evident in 2021, the UK published an Integrated Review (IR) on March 16 where it set out its multi-domain overarching national strategy of the actual and future times. The relatively more definitive language used there to describe China signaled a truly turning point in bilateral relations with Beijing, with hard security concerns coming to the fore. In that document, Britain identified China as "the biggest state-based threat to the UK's economic security". Moreover, the Indo-Pacific region was regarded as a new area Britain must commit greater attention, presence and resources to (HM Government, 2021).

Nevertheless, London also devoted further sentences to the areas where it sees the cooperation and collaboration between the two countries as indispensable. This assumed need for a balanced approach was expected to be characterized by neither a blind-eyed engagement nor fierce confrontation. Even then Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, who once in 2020 asserted the UK would not go back to business as usual with China, stated that a hawkish approach tending to ignore the subjects where cooperation with China was deemed compulsory for both national interests and the global good must be avoided (Wintour & Sabbagh, 2021). Despite these efforts to have a balanced posture, some negative reactions were gotten from the Chinese side, as it was the case with an analysis appearing immediately after the publication of IR on the pro-government *Global Times* in which the move was described as "an immature decision to counterweight China" (Hui & Yusha, 2021).

Britain's search for a plausible and effective China strategy continued in 2023, which manifested itself with the publication of 'The Integrated Review Refresh 2023' where the UK's official China policy is set out more broadly than it was in IR 2021 (HM Government, 2023). Given that the British government delivered two consecutive national strategy papers in just two years, obviously there was an urgency within the British government to be clearer-eyed and well-prepared, and to delineate a more structured roadmap about

China. For a great deal, this urgency had much to do with China's rapidly intensifying aggression, not only in the UK but in a multi-regional sense though. Due to the ongoing discord and tension with China that had been accelerated by that rising offensive, the government was forced both by domestic actors and the rapidly changing external conditions to come up with a broader and more concise China strategy. The part committed to China in IR2021 was failing to meet those expectations. Therefore, the Refresh 2023 has provided a relatively more structured and well-prepared framework for the China policy.

Besides the fresh policy outlines, the China-centered urgency also engendered extra efforts for national capacity building. In this vein, the government announced increased funding for the China Capabilities Programme which was expected to provide the governmental officers focused on China with greater skills and knowledge about the subject (FCDO, 2023). This was accompanied by the government's pledge to level up military spending by \$6 billion in the following two years (Bray, 2023b).

Alongside domestic calibrations, another part of the UK's measures against China has taken the form of demonstrations of multilateral solidarity and international partnerships. Among them first comes the deployment of the UK's Carrier Strike Group, led by HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier, to the region the UK calls Indo-Pacific. Planned as a set of visits to 40 countries en route, including Singapore, Japan, South Korea and India, the move was presented by Britain as a reflection of its power and influence, and that of engagement with its friends (Royal Navy, 2021). When the desire for the deployment was announced at the beginning of 2021, China denounced the UK's plan saying that everyone should avoid making the South China Sea an area of great power rivalry dominated by weapons and warships (Wong, 2021). Besides, as the Carrier Strike Group was approaching the region, some commentaries appeared on Global Times, seen by many as a mouthpiece of the Chinese government, warned the UK against any improper moves, underlining the combat readiness of People's Liberation Army Navy (Gardner, 2021).

As another international step, in March 2021, the UK imposed sanctions, together with the US, Canada, and the EU, on senior Chinese officials in-

volved in internment camps where the Uyghurs in Xinjiang were held forcefully, and this was an unprecedentedly concerted move by such major western powers against China which had not seen before in the last several decades (Wintour, 2021a). China responded by retaliatory sanctions on some British MPs, lawyers and scholars (Wintour, 2021b).

In September 2021, Britain made its boldest move up until then for balancing China. A cooperation pact revolving mainly around the transfer of nuclear submarine technology from the US and the UK to Australia was announced. Named after AUKUS the acronym derived from the country names of all sides, the pact unveiled that Britain has really been committed to the Indo-Pacific and the concerns emanating from China in there. It is expected, on the British side, to provide greater realization of Global Britain vision in terms of serving its willingness for greater engagement with like-minded countries and the US, of offering more diplomatic leverage and say against China globally and regionally, and of granting some evidence to be used to prove and promote the viability of Britain's capability to project power in the geopolitical hotspots beyond its border (Germond, 2021).

More interestingly, this attempt came into existence at the expense of France, a close NATO and European partner for both the US and the UK, as the prior nuclear submarine deal Australia had made with it was terminated because of the realization of AUKUS. France's anger resulted in the recall of its ambassadors from Canberra and Washington. As for the Chinese reaction, Beijing adopted a relatively moderate language in official expressions, suggesting that it "may trigger the risk of nuclear proliferation, induce a new round of arms race, and undermine regional prosperity and stability" (Deng, 2021). Nonetheless, pro-governmental media outlets had maintained the use of accusative expressions and tended to depict the move as a conspiracy initiated by the US to undermine China's security and prosperity by containing and challenging it, with turning a blind eye to the role China's aggressive moves across the region played in the occurrence of the development (Girard, 2021).

Strengthening the defence relations, joint capabilities and interoperability between the parties involved are the key priorities of AUKUS. The trilateral

pacts' initial mission was defined as ensuring that Australia would get a conventionally armed and nuclear-powered submarine fleet. However, the areas of increased cooperation exceeded the sole realm of nuclear submarine capabilities. In addition to the initially declared fields of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities, they were also expanded in 2022 to include hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities, electronic warfare capabilities, innovation and information sharing. Later in 2023, collaboration on an advanced space radar system was put on the agenda as a further matter as well (Brooke-Holland, 2024:5-6). Given this wide-range and structured nature of AUKUS, the pact was seen by some experts as a successful step signaling that the UK, extremely preoccupied with the post-Brexit mess both in its domestic and international politics, was still capable of launching innovative and well-prepared partnerships in controversial regions beyond its borders, particularly against China (Rogers, 2022). Besides such expectations, the UK's prestige and influence appeared to be increasing more concretely thanks to AUKUS once it was heralded that the British-proposed designs would be used in building the AUKUS projects of nuclear submarines (Submarine Delivery Agency, 2023). Such rhetorical and material gains that have come with AUKUS are very likely to increase in the future.

In terms of alliance building, Britain stepped up its international efforts to have greater leverage against China in 2023. The acceptance of a major defence pact between the UK and Japan which allows both sides to deploy troops to each other's soil and to hold joint military exercises was a telling example (Commons Library, 2023). The move was reflected upon by PM Sunak as a sign of "democratic societies continuing to stand shoulder to shoulder as [the UK] navigate the unprecedented global challenges". The declaration was also seen by some as enhancing the possibility for Japan to one day join the AUKUS alliance (Bray, 2023a).

Nevertheless, despite all these events which appeared to be driven by the logic of counterbalancing and divergence, the efforts of senior British government officials to avoid a rigid disengagement with China still survived. Then Foreign Minister James Cleverly was one of the most prominent voices advocating a more nuanced and balanced China strategy. On one occasion, for ex-

ample, he warned China-sceptics within the ranks of the Conservative Party that embarking upon a cold war mentality which favored for a great alienation of China would be terribly harmful to Britain's national interests. Likewise, he suggested engagement, not isolation, would be better serving British interests (Gallardo, 2023).

A few months later, on his way to China, which was the first official high-level visit to there in five years, he reiterated the government's belief that a full-scale decoupling from China was fruitless and unnecessary. He was also frank about the direction of the relationship which he admitted would not be changed with "one phone call, one visit, one meeting", expecting that improved communications would have a positive impact anyway. Yet, he did not fail to underline the priority that was given to the security concerns over economic relations with China in the UK's agenda as well (McDonnell et al., 2023). Cleverly's visit was different from May's in that he was more realistic in expectations and pledges regarding the nature and result of the expedition. Prior to arriving in China, he did not build his arguments upon grandiose hopes and slogans. Rather, he was totally realistic as he said one meeting was far from being enough to change anything. However, when it comes to the consequences of the visit, it has satisfied neither the public, nor the political and media circles across the UK.

6. Conclusion

The UK's relationship with China was declared to enter a golden era during the Cameron administration. Since 2019, however, Britain's political relations with China has been suffering from serious blows, resulting in a radical turn in the affairs. There are a number of determinants behind this shift. First of all, particularly because of China's mishandling of the pandemic and the subsequent assertiveness conceptualized as wolf warrior diplomacy, the mistrust and anger toward the CCP rose significantly. Secondly, its crackdown on Hong Kong dramatically changed the once optimistic international and British domestic weather in which the golden era was pursued. Thirdly, the insistent and constant warnings from security bodies with regard to China's covert influence and interference efforts within the UK soil and around the world have made things worse in the same regard. Currently, the relationship is in

serious trouble. Despite some high-level governmental efforts on the British side, the majority of British political figures, particularly lawmakers, and the public opinion is becoming increasingly upset with further engagement with and tolerance toward China while it has been displaying many instances of heightened aggression at home and abroad.

Therefore, the current landscape of bilateral relations does not seem promising and is dominated by growing mistrust and anger towards China on the UK's side. The golden era and the optimism characterizing it are absolutely over. The UK has become moral vocal against China's actions it considers unacceptable. Its opposition is not limited to expressive objections. Rather, it also adopts many domestic recalibrations and international engagements which will be largely influential in the actual and future direction of the relations, and in mitigating and managing the matters the UK sees problematic and dangerous in its political interactions with China.

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