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Britain's China policy after Brexit: Based on pragmatism or values first?

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After Brexit, Britain has vowed to build a “Global Britain”. Guided by this strategy, the Great Britain's policy towards People's Republic of China is undergoing a more dramatic adjustment, which has brought the relations between China and the United Kingdom from a “golden era” to a more turbulent and unpredictable period of today. Overall, Britain's current policy toward China is based on a range of policy tools, such as investment screening, Indo-Pacific Policy, as well as bilateral mechanisms, to catch the Chinese market for economic gain, while politically following the United States and provoking China on ideological and sovereignty matters in order to maintain its alliance with the West. Given in general the increase of negative perceptions of British public opinion of China, as well as the dramatic changes in the international situation (including the occurrence of major geopolitical events such as the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict), adjustments in the UK's policy toward China will continue for some time, which will impact the stability of Sino-British relations. In the future, based on pragmatism, Britain's China policy will maintain a flexible balance between maintaining selective cooperation with China in economy and global governance and deepening confrontation with China in the political sphere.

Keywords: China, British policy toward China, cooperation, conflict, flexible balance.

In 2016, the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union after a referendum and became an independent country with no external constraints on its sovereignty. Shortly after the Brexit referendum, the British government declared to shape a “Global

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Britain” based on sovereign independence. Although the meaning of this term has long been unknown to the outside world, it is one of the key concept in understanding the UK’s post-Brexit policy toward China. For some time, the concept of a “Global Britain” gave China an optimistic message, leading some Chinese people to believe that a post-Brexit Britain would choose to strengthen its cooperation with China in search of a larger market for economic and trade development. But as it turns out, “Global Britain” still relies heavily on the UK’s traditional strategic partners, including the US, the Commonwealth and other Western allies. After major global geopolitical conflicts such as the US-China “trade war” and the Russia-Ukraine military conflict, the UK’s policy toward China has entered a more turbulent adjustment period that has not yet ended.

Most studies have generally noticed the major shift of British China policy under the “Global Britain” strategy. They focused on the causal factors of this shift: First, reflected by the Brexit, the perception of the Britain’s identity from British political elites and the public has fundamentally changed. A desire to restore Britain’s former status and influence as a global power has risen dramatically. Provoking China on some issues is a concrete manifestation of this mentality [1, p. 1374]. Second, Britain’s view on China’s development model and trends has also dramatically changed. Some scholars believe that compared to the period just after Brexit, nowadays the UK is inclined to view China as a “security/ideological threat” rather than “economic opportunities”. It becomes increasingly difficult to balance the two sides [2, p. 121–123]. Third, the intertwining internal and external factors, from party politics and the reversal of public opinion towards China to the Sino-US power struggle and the Huawei 5G issue, have lead to complex impact on UK’s China policy [3, p. 387; 4, p. 171–174].

On this basis, this paper will furtherly analyze that how the UK defines its goals in the face of increasing internal and external pressures, and what the challenges its China policy are facing. In details to say, this paper will examine internal and external policy tools which can be used to implement these goals. At the same time, it will analyze the future challenges facing the UK’s China policy in the light of the latest situation in British domestic politics and international situation, such as the unstable Cabinet, the forming trans-party consensus towards China and the geopolitical impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Based on these analyses, this paper will contribute to elucidate what the “flexible balance” means to UK-China relations and help to understand the prospects of China’s relations with the Western countries, not only with the UK.

In consideration of this, this paper is organized by three parts: the first part elaborates the objectives and means of Britain’s China policy; the second part analyzes the potential challenges it will encounter in the future; the third part concludes with a summary of the basic features and overall development trend of Britain’s future China policy and its implication for China-West relations.

Britain’s China Policy under the “Global Britain”

In March this year, the British government released the policy paper *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, which provided a comprehensive elucidation of the UK’s foreign policy under the “Global Britain” strategy after the Brexit. According to the paper, the UK views the rise of China and its increasing influence in the Indo-Pacific region as important factors in-

fluencing the change of international configuration. It also sees systematic competition between China and the UK in terms of values, ideologies, and governance systems. Therefore, the UK proposed to deepen its understanding of China, enhance its ability to deal with the challenges of security, prosperity and values resulted from China's rise meanwhile actively cooperating with China in areas such as trade and investment and global governance on the basis of ensuring British national security and values [5, p. 24, 26].

Policy Objectives towards China

Economically, conducting cooperation with China conditionally

On one hand, the UK attaches great importance to the economic cooperation with China in a flexible and pragmatic way. In his annual speech on July 1, 2021, the then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak made it clear that the UK needs a mature and balanced relationship with China, neither severing all ties or focusing solely on commercial opportunities at the expense of its values. The UK would keep a close eye on China's growing international influence and take a principled stand when China acts against British values. He also mentioned that the UK should focus on strengthening ties between British and Chinese people and businesses, and cooperating on global issues such as health, aging, climate and biodiversity. The British government believes that the UK can pursue with confidence an economic relationship with China in a safe, mutually beneficial way without compromising their values or security [6].

While on the other hand, with a growing tendency of securitizing and politicizing Sino-British economic relations, the cooperation between two countries in this area is being tied up increasingly close together with political, security, and ideological issues. From the ban of Huawei 5G service in the British market and the introduction of the new National Security and Investment Act to the serial measures expelling Chinese companies from the supply chain on the pretext of human rights violation, a growing number of cases are showing this strengthening trend. In its "Global Britain" strategy document, the UK government clearly states that "we will continue to pursue a positive trade and investment relationship with China, while ensuring our national security and values are protected" [5, p. 22], which means that the UK increasingly views its multiple dimensions of national interests as an indivisible whole. When dealing with economic cooperation with China, the UK prefers to exert pressure on China through issue bundling rather than temporarily set aside contradictions and divergences in other areas for the pursuit of economic benefits.

Ideologically, magnifying Britain's international influence through confronting China

Unlike the relative pragmatic approach on economic relations, in the ideological sphere, the Britain does not shy away from confronting China head-on, suppressing China in the name of upholding the liberal and democratic values in order to defend its status and influence as a global power. In recent years, the UK has frequently challenged China's bottom line on issues related to Hong Kong and Xinjiang, taking the initiative to provoke ideological confrontation with China and multilateralizing related issues as a way to demonstrate its presence and expand its international influence. In the aftermath of the 2020 Hong Kong

Legislative Council Election, the UK joined with the other four members of the “Five Eyes” coalition to issue a statement pressuring China [7]. On October 6, of the same year, during the general debate of the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, the UK united with 38 other countries signed a joint statement expressing their “grave concern” about China’s Xinjiang and Hong Kong affairs. Jonathan Allen, chargé d’affaires to the British Permanent Mission to the UN, also asked the Chinese government to grant free access to Xinjiang to Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [8].

Strategically, utilizing China to consolidate the Anglo-American alliance

After Brexit, the UK is strategically close to the US and follows the US policy towards China to a certain extent in the political and security fields, thus strengthening the Anglo-American alliance and serving the Global British strategy.

Politically, Britain has continuously emphasized its common position with the US on values, placing China in opposition to the dominant Western values and using it to unite other democratic countries in an attempt to isolate China. In May 2020, the then-British Prime Minister Johnson revived the idea of establishing a coalition of democratic countries, adding South Korea, Australia and India to the existing G7 members to form a new Democratic Group (D-10) focusing on the cooperation of 5G mobile communications and supply chain stabilization in order to decrease dependence on China [9]. This proposal not only responds positively to the Biden administration’s vision of a “world coalition of democracies” at the ideological level, but also provides a vehicle for concrete cooperation among the countries involved.

On the eve of the G7 Summit last year, then-British Prime Minister Johnson and US President Biden signed *The New Atlantic Charter*, expressing the determination of the two countries to defend democratic values, freedom, the rule of law, human rights and a rules-based international order, maintain their own advantages in science and technology and rule-making, as well as strengthen cooperation in security, economy, climate, health and other fields [10]. The signing of *The New Atlantic Charter* has strong symbolic significance, presenting the determination of the UK and the US to restore the former glory of the transatlantic relationship after the twists and turns during the Trump era in the face of dramatic changes in the international landscape and tremendous shocks brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Security issues, the UK was pressured by the US to change its previous relatively moderate policy and enact a ban on Huawei 5G in British market. Given Huawei’s leading position in the global 5G sector, the UK government had a long-standing cautious and accommodating attitude towards Huawei’s participation in its home market. Huawei’s cooperation with the UK in the telecommunications sector began from as early as 2005. After more than ten years of smooth operation, there has been no evidence proving that Huawei’s products and service offered to the British market pose a threat to its national security. Although the UK has faced increased pressure since 2018 due to the escalating crackdown on Huawei by the US, the Johnson Administration initially did not want to completely ban Huawei’s participation in the UK’s 5G construction. In January 2020, the UK’s National Security Council made a relatively moderate decision to propose Huawei as a “high risk vendors” that could not hold more than 35% market share in the UK and could not participate in core components of telecommunications networks or intervene

in sensitive locations. However, on July 14, the UK government announced a ban on the purchase of new Huawei products by UK mobile operators starting from 2021 and the removal of all Huawei products from the British telecommunications networks by 2027 [11]. On November 24, the UK Parliament introduced a new draft Telecommunications (Security) Bill that continues the previous decision to ban the purchase of Huawei 5G equipment and allows the UK government to force operators to remove Huawei equipment when they launch 5G network services. The Bill also require the communication regulator, Ofcom, to carry out its oversight role and impose fines up to 10% of turnover or £100,000 per day for non-compliance [12].

The UK's policy shift on Huawei's 5G has been heavily influenced by the US. First, the US government has repeatedly lobbied the UK to take tougher measures against Huawei and even exerted political pressure on the UK. The former British Business Secretary Vince Cable publicly stated that the UK government's decision to ban Huawei's 5G equipment and services was due to political pressure from the US, unrelated to national security [13]. Second, the US' sanctions against Huawei have dealt a deadly blow to the technical performance of its products and the stability of its supply chain, making it difficult to ensure the quality of its products. It has become an important reason for the UK to ban Huawei entirely [11].

Policy Tools towards China

Internal policies

In recent years, the British government has significantly strengthened its ability to intervene in the business activities of enterprises and supply chains by promulgating legislation and administrative regulations, for the sake of restricting Sino-British economic and trade cooperation on the grounds of safeguarding national security and human rights.

For example, the latest National Security and Investment Act 2021 came into full effect on January 4 of this year. The Act gives the Secretary of State the power to investigate acquisitions that may pose national security risks. Listing 17 sensitive sectors including civil nuclear, communications, data infrastructure, etc.¹, it states that it is the compulsive requirement for the acquisitions in these areas to be notified to the Secretary of State for prior approval before completion. Under the Act, investment investigation body of the British government has the power to call in a transaction at any time within six months being aware of the transaction, or within five years after the transaction closed. The Act also allows for a retrospective review of any transaction completed after November 12, 2020. Breaches of the Act may result in fines of up to 5 % of the acquirer's global annual turnover or £10 million (whichever is greater) and up to five years' imprisonment for the responsible director [14].

While the bill mentioned above is not targeted at China, it will undeniably have a significant impact on Sino-British business cooperation. The current acquisition between

¹ 17 Sensitive Sectors includes Civil Nuclear, Communications, Data Infrastructure, Defence, Energy, Transport, Artificial Intelligence, Autonomous Robotics, Computing Hardware, Cryptographic Authentication, Advanced Materials, Quantum Technologies, Engineering Biology, Critical Supplier to government, Critical Supplier to the Emergency Services, Details see from UK GOV: *National Security and Investment Act 2021*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/25/contents/enacted> (accessed: 16.06.2022).

Nexperia and Newport Wafer Fab (NWF), the largest chipmaker in the UK, is undergoing such effects. In early July 2021, the acquisition of 100 % equity of NWF by Nexperia, a subsidiary of Wingtech Technology (a Chinese enterprise), was completed. However, this acquisition has been questioned by various anti-Chinese forces inside and outside the UK. In response, then-British Prime Minister Johnson said he had asked the national security advisor to examine whether the deal threatened UK's national security. In May this year, the British government launched a retrospective investigation into the acquisition under the National Security and Investment Act 2021 which is already in force, but had repeatedly postponed the deadline for the final decision. Currently, the British Ministry of Commerce has extended the deadline of investigation until early October, which means that this acquisition is still facing a risk of being completely rejected [15].

In addition, the UK has utilized controversial events in the field of human rights to try to exclude Chinese companies from the supply chain.

In March 2021, as the “Xinjiang cotton” disturbance continued to fester, the British Foreign Secretary announced a package of measures, including: export controls and examines of products originating in Xinjiang; the investigation of Chinese companies under the Modern Slavery Act; financial penalties under the Modern Slavery Act for companies failed to make the required annual transparency report on modern slavery; and adjustments to public procurement rules to exclude the suppliers where there is sufficient evidence of human rights abuses in the supply chain. Meanwhile, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee (BEISC) in the British Parliament has accused some British companies of lacking transparency in their supply chains and possibly being implicated in the use of forced labor in China's Xinjiang region. The Committee even released a thematic report *Uyghur Forced Labor in Xinjiang and UK Value Chains*, urging the government to take steps to stop human rights abuses by British companies. However, in its response to the report, the UK government declined to commit to a clear timeline and substantive action to implement the relevant policy recommendations [16].

Examples mentioned above shows that the British government is increasingly demonstrating its hard-line stance towards China in its policy formulation, while leaving room for specific policy implementation. This situation indicates the inherent tensions of the British policies towards China.

Foreign Policy

In terms of foreign policy, after Brexit, Britain has shifted its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific region, hoping to strengthen cooperation with important pivotal countries in the region that share the same values, enhance its own regional influence, and strengthen and consolidate the Anglo-American alliance while coping with the growth of China's regional influence.

The British government has explained its vision of the Indo-Pacific strategy in its “Global Britain” strategy document. The UK views China, India and Japan as the three key forces in the Indo-Pacific region, while also paying attention to intermediate countries such as South Korea, Vietnam and Indonesia. In the context of the “Global Britain” strategy, the UK positions itself as the broadest and most integrated presence in this region, pursuing the overall goal of mutually reinforcing security, economy and value interests, and conducting international cooperation in a variety of areas such as bilateral and

multilateral trade agreements, maritime security, climate change, development assistance, people-to-people exchanges, etc. [5, p. 21, 66–67].

Overall speaking, the “Global Britain” strategy shifts Britain’s foreign policy emphasis from Europe to Asia and focuses its efforts on building issue-oriented, flexible alliances which compose of ‘like-minded’ countries to respond to the rise of China. It also focuses on maintaining policy flexibility to balance the complexity of simultaneously competing and cooperative relations [17]. Actively engaging in the Indo-Pacific region and strengthening its presence through enhanced partnerships with pivotal countries, particularly Japan and India, could make the UK not only achieve the strategic goal of a “Global Britain”, but also strengthen the Anglo-American alliance.

In the UK-Japan relationship, the UK concentrates on conducting security cooperation with Japan, where the two countries have close interactions between senior leaders, high level consultations, many cooperation mechanisms and close cooperation and exchange between military forces. In October 2016, the US, Britain and Japan signed an unprecedented trilateral agreement, promising closer cooperation on maritime military exercises and joint patrols as well as ensuring the free flow of commerce and access to the maritime commons [18]. In January 2019, then-British Prime Minister Theresa May and then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe jointly issued the British-Japanese Joint Statement, emphasizing that the two countries highly concern about the situation in the East and South China Seas and strongly oppose any unilateral act that seeks to change the status quo [19]. In May 2022, the two sides agreed in principle on a defense cooperation pact enabling faster deployment of their troops [20].

Similarly, the UK-India relationship has also developed rapidly in recent years. In November 2015, the two sides established the UK-India Defence and International Security Partnership [21]. In April 2018, the two countries issued the *UK-India Joint Statement*, which emphasized their shared identity as thriving democracies and common objective of supporting a rules-based international order that upholds agreed international norms, global peace and stability [22]. In April 2019, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the development, production and procurement of defense and security equipment. In May 2019, the two countries released the *2030 Roadmap for India-UK Future Relations*, which elevates the UK-India relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, with cooperation in human resources, manufacturing, innovation, science, education, research, financial technology, space, defense, emerging and green technologies, clean energy and other areas [23].

Furthermore, the UK has continued to strengthen multilateral military security cooperation with major powers in the Indo-Pacific region, reinforcing its own military presence and, in particular, increasing the frequency of maritime military forces entering the South China Sea. On July 26, 2021, the British aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth and some of her escorts entered the South China Sea through the Malacca Strait and conducted joint exercises with the navies of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore [24]. The then-British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace spoke in high profile during his visit to Vietnam, saying that Britain opposes China’s claim to the ‘nine-dash line’ and offshore archipelagos, supports the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Award, and wants to strengthen its maritime forces in the Indo-Pacific region to maintain a rules-based international order [25]. From August 2 to 27, the Queen Elizabeth Carrier Strike, which just passed through the South China Sea, participated in the Large Scale Global Exercise 2021 (LSGE21) [26], a compre-

hensive, full-scale military exercise with a wide range of exercises and forces. It will help enhance the UK's ability to conduct complex military operations with the US and other regional partners and to improve mutual understanding, and raise the level of mutual trust.

On September 15, 2021, the UK joined the US and Australia in establishing the AUKUS Military Diplomatic Security Partnership, in which the UK pledged to work with the US to help Australia deploy a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines in the Indo-Pacific region. Related cooperation agreements include the procurement of cruise missiles and cooperation in artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities and quantum encryption [27]. The establishment of AUKUS not only demonstrates the growing military-security-technical cooperation between the UK, the US, and Australia, which are already members of the Five Eyes Alliance, but also indicates the intention of the three countries to enhance their ability to compete strategically with China in the Indo-Pacific region. For the UK, joining AUKUS means further following the US' military security strategy.

Bilateral Dialogue and Exchange Mechanism

Besides the UK's own internal and external policies, the bilateral dialogue and exchange mechanism established with the Chinese government is also an important part of the UK's policy tools towards China. At a time when the global international situation and bilateral relations are in turmoil, the importance of bilateral dialogue and exchange mechanisms for frank communication, narrowing differences and safeguarding the fruits of cooperation is even more prominent.

The high-level dialogue mechanisms between China and the UK mainly include: the China-UK Strategic Dialogue (established in 2005), the China-UK High-Level Security Dialogue (established in 2016), the China-UK Economic and Financial Dialogue (established in 2008), and the China-UK High-Level People-to-people Exchange Mechanism (established in 2012). To date, two strategic dialogues (the 8th and 9th), two high-level security dialogues (the 1st and 2nd), three economic and financial dialogues (the 8th to 10th), and two meetings for high-level people-to-people exchange (the 4th and 5th) have been held between China and the UK since the Brexit. These mechanisms have played an important role in stabilizing Sino-British bilateral relations meanwhile deepening and expanding bilateral cooperation in various fields.

However, since from 2018, with the increasing negative factors in Sino-British relations, bilateral cooperation has encountered significant challenges. Dialogue and Exchange Mechanisms in the above-mentioned fields have been interrupted one after another. In December 2021, Hu Chunhua, Vice Premier of the State Council and the Chinese lead of the Sino-British Economic and Financial Dialogue, had a telephone conversation with Rishi Sunak, the then-British Chancellor of the Exchequer and the British lead of the dialogue, and both sides agreed to resume the dialogue in due course this year. However, with the internal political turbulence in the UK, the then-Prime Minister announced the resignation. For gaining support of the Conservative Party in the process of competing for the new Prime Minister, Sunak changed his pragmatic attitude towards China and took a tough stance on China-related issues. With the election of Sunak as the new Prime Minister after Liz Truss' short term of office, his policy on China seems to be much tougher. It will still take time to restart the dialogue mechanisms between China and the UK.

Britain's China Policy under "Global Britain": New Challenges

Since 2015 when Sino-British relations entered the “golden era”, Britain’s China policy has undergone many changes and adjustments. Now, due to the changes in domestic political situation, as well as the rapid changes in the outside world, Britain’s existing China policy is bound to face new challenges. From the internal point of view, it is mainly the changing attitudes of key British political figures and parties towards China that are impacting the cognitive basis of the existing China policy; the transformation of the international landscape and the intensification of geopolitical competition also expose Britain to serious external influences and disturbances in the formulation of China policy.

Internal political changes are impacting Britain's China policy

The internal political changes, including the frequent changes of British prime ministers, have greatly affected the continuity of the country’s China policy. In addition, the stability of the British government’s China policy has been adversely affected by the increasingly negative perceptions of China in the British political and public opinion circles.

The cabinet's stance on China tends to be hard

After the Cold War, the British Conservative Party replaced the “New Labour Party”, the friendliness of its China policy has been continuously declining. When David Cameron was in power, Sino-British relations entered a “golden era”, and Britain was the first G7 country to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiated by China, making it the most open Western economy to Chinese investment. Cameron’s successor Prime Minister Theresa May did not veto the “golden era”, but the “golden” relationship lost much of its luster through a screen of established Chinese investments, for example, in the Hinkley Point nuclear project [28]. After May, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has almost completely ended the “golden era” of China-UK relations, and his harsh criticism and confrontation with China over the 5G network, investment projects in the UK, and China-related issues have not demonstrated the open and generous relationship with China that the UK should have as a “Global Britain” after Brexit, despite he sometimes uncharacteristic claims to be “pro-China” man.

In the latest Conservative Party leadership contest in September 2022, China suddenly became a prominent topic in the heated political debate, with both finalists becoming extreme anti-China activists. The winner, Liz Truss, who eventually became Prime Minister, had already shown her hostility toward China in an already less stable Sino-British relationship with her campaign and comments on China made while she was a minister in Johnson’s cabinet. After she came to power, she saw China as a threat to the rules-based international order, and also criticized China’s Xinjiang policy [29]. However, Truss didn’t find a chance to implement her tough policy to China because she had to resigned after a very short term. Then her colleague in Conservative Party Rishi Sunark controlled the cabinet. When competing with Truss in his first campaign for Prime Minister, Sunark had showed his tough attitude to China, especially wanting to constrict Confucius Institute in his country. When he finally came to power, he expressed some vacillation of position towards China and also change the words “China as a threat” that British government

commonly used recently to “China as a challenge”. However, this change of words has been criticized by his Conservative Party’s peers [30].

That is, regarding the trend, the Conservative cabinet has changed hands several times, but the goodwill contained in its China policy has deteriorated almost every day, while the hard-line attitudes and actions toward China have become increasingly evident. This trend would seriously alter the inherent British tradition of China policy, an inertia based on flexible pragmatism and economic interests based on reciprocity. But now, with the change of Conservative Party leader, this tradition is not sustainable as imagined.

There is a hard-line “know-China-all” faction in Parliament

Britain is a typical parliamentary country. Therefore, the changes in the cabinet’s attitude and position toward China are fully derived from the changes in the parliament’s attitude and position toward China. When Johnson was in power, a group of Conservative members of the British Parliament forced the Prime Minister to reduce Huawei’s presence in the UK 5G network to 35 % of the market share. At the same time, Johnson completely banned Huawei’s 5G presence in the UK after the intervention of the intelligence services in the cabinet [31].

Today, Parliament has become the home base for Britain’s assertiveness toward China. It has issued numerous resolutions and reports on China in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of them filled with condemnations of China. When Britain and China initiated official sanctions against each other over the issue of Xinjiang, the negative perception of China in Parliament became even more obvious.

The All-Party Parliamentary China Group (APPCG) in Parliament serves as a platform in the British Parliament to ensure that members are well informed about China and to discuss important issues in the bilateral relationship between China and the UK. Its task is to promote mutual understanding and the development of relations between China and the UK. However, its engagement with Chinese officials has become more sensitive under the accusations of other MPs, and may reduce this rare communication as a result [32].

In April 2020, a group of Conservative MPs in Parliament set up the China Research Group, headed by Conservative MP Tom Tugendhat, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament, to conduct research on China. The group was later sanctioned by the Chinese government for its involvement in Xinjiang-related issues. The group is considered a parliamentary hawk on China and has made a number of negative comments about China, advocating a tougher approach to the country. “The fact that China is an authoritarian state, with different values to ours, presents challenges for the UK and our allies <...> China and the UK both benefit from bilateral trade and investment, but China also presents the biggest state-based threat to the UK’s economic security”, they wrote in a commentary [33]. In fact, they have succeeded in keeping Huawei out of the UK telecoms system and want to ban surveillance technologies such as Hikvision and Dahua [34], and The Hong Kong and Xinjiang issues were used as a basis for imposing tougher sanctions on China [35]. They will also pose a threat to the Confucius Institute and the Sino-British cooperation on Chinese language teaching [36].

Based on the political characteristics of Britain, the discussion of China by the country’s parliament and its members will have a direct impact on the British government’s policy towards China. The rise of anti-China forces in the parliament will change the at-

mosphere of the British policy discussion on China, which makes the voices of pro-China forces weaker, thus anti-China voices stronger. This will lead to the continuous adjustment of Britain's China policy and have an impact on Sino-British relations.

*Different political parties have divergent positions on China,
but there is a growing consensus on the perception of China*

In May 2019, Dean Godson, director of the Policy Exchange, a center-right British think tank, argued that China has become “a key Conservative fault line post Brexit.” This means that the Conservative Party has been clearly divided on how the UK should approach its relationship with China before the COVID-19 pandemic began. “The Tory Party has been high on rhetoric in terms of switching gear to a more hostile attitude towards China”, a senior research fellow on China in the Asia-Pacific program at Chatham House*, a British think tank [36]. But as Britain grapples with the impact on the population's health caused by the new crown virus pandemic, these differences of opinion have been temporarily overshadowed.

However, as the health effects of the pandemic wane, the domestic debate around China within the Conservative Party will become more frequent and polarized. Reaching consensus on China appears difficult between those in the party who want to attract more Chinese investment in post-Brexit and those who see China as an economic and security threat. Conservative MPs from areas where Chinese investment is vital to local jobs will want better relations with China, and those who are not selected in constituencies without these demands will demand the opposite stance on China [36].

Although there is no widespread debate in the Conservative Party on how to deal with China, there appears to be little disagreement within the party to take a more serious view of China's influence and to take a firmer stance in areas such as human rights. Overall, a more assertive Conservative Party on China is to be expected with Liz Truss as prime minister.

As the largest opposition party in the UK, the Labour Party appears relatively silent on China issues. In the last Labour administration, then Prime Minister Gordon Brown signed a bilateral agreement to increase Chinese investment in the UK, the government representative attended the Beijing Olympics 2008, and the UK formally recognized China's sovereignty over Tibet during his administration. But in recent years, the Labour Party has also made some statements about China that cannot be described as friendly. Former party leader Jeremy Corbyn and party spokesman John McDonnell actually share to some extent the same position as the Conservative Party's China hawks [37]. McDonnell has urged the Johnson government to make the position on China be very, very clear, that let the Chinese government to comply with the Sino-UK agreement [38].

Of course to some extent this could be seen as Labour using the Hong Kong issue to put pressure on the ruling party. However, after the change of Labour leadership in 2020, the new Labour leadership seems to be interested in promoting an “anti-China” wave in the UK, rather than being motivated solely by opposition to the ruling party's policies. Party leader Keir Starmer has said he supports the cabinet's conflict with Beijing, and has urged the former to go further. Labour's former Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy

* Activities of this organization are recognized as illegal in Russian Federation.

and former Shadow Asia Minister Stephen Kinnock were prominent in influencing Labour's policy on China. They have pushed the British government to prevent Chinese state-owned enterprises from participating in the British energy sector, described China's Xinjiang policy as "genocide", called for British judges to leave Hong Kong, and so on [39].

Thus, it can be seen that the two largest and most promising political parties in the UK, although they may be divided in their positions on China, the general attitude to China they share has become more obvious, and the view of positioning China as a competitor and opponent has been generally accepted.

Social opinion is increasingly against China

As a democratic society, Britain's foreign policy can direct the focus of public opinion and influenced the perception of the general public on foreign affairs, conversely, the public opinion can also profoundly influence the foreign policy decision.

One poll in 2020 showed that 52 % of people approving the ban on Huawei, despite being aware of the damage it might have to trade relations with China, compared with just 16 percent who were opposed. Another survey conducted by YouGov in 2019–2020 showed only 18 percent of Britons having a positive view of China. Indeed, half of British people say their opinion of China has been impacted "negatively" since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Fully 60 percent now see China as a "force for bad" in the world and as a "threat" to their country. Another poll suggests that as many as 42 % of people in the UK actually want their government to adopt a stance towards China that is at least as aggressive as US President Donald Trump's [40].

The figures in 2020 already speak for themselves, reflecting the fact that the US-China trade conflict and the pandemic have made the general public's perception of China even more negative, while the increasingly negative media campaign against the Chinese government, including depictions of China's so-called "war wolf diplomacy" and coverage of issues such as Hong Kong, has succeeded in portraying China as a threat to the UK among the public. This has led many in Britain to believe that China's rise to great power is no longer a future prospect, but a disturbing reality that must be faced now.

This climate of public opinion and the general public's perception of China will determine to some extent the British government's position on China. Public opinion will be transmitted to foreign policy-making bodies through democratic institutions, including parliamentarians, social groups and elected officials, which will eventually have an impact on Sino-British relations.

The global situation is not conducive to the development of Sino-British relations

In addition to the serious impact of the domestic situation on Britain's shaping of a stable China policy, major changes of the external environment are also important factors that make Britain's China policy be challenged. These external situation include the growth of mutual confrontation in the relations between major powers, the increase of geopolitical competition, and the changing trend of globalization.

The major adjustment in major power relations

In recent years, profound changes are taking place in the relations between major powers in the international community, among which the most significant and representative change in the relations between major powers is the restructuring of China-US relations. The realignment of bilateral relations between the United States and China began in the second term of the Barack Obama administration, but the US government initiated a so-called “pivot to Asia” strategy to shift its foreign policy focus in Asia from the Middle East to East Asia, which laid the foundation for the subsequent trade wars that the Trump administration developed against China. From Obama’s eastward shift strategy to Trump’s trade protectionism against China to the Biden administration’s all-encompassing containment of China-although maintaining appropriate relations in necessary areas of cooperation, such as climate change governance-the almost escalating assertiveness of US administrations toward China has fundamentally altered US-China relations and has had a profound impact on the international community.

Against the backdrop of increasingly tough US-China relations, the United States has asked its allies to support and follow US China policy, with Secretary of State Michael Pompeo under Trump once making a “roving” anti-China trip to Europe to pressure European countries to impose sanctions on Chinese Huawei 5G products in line with the US government’s advocated “clean network program”. In fact, under the leadership of the United States, a clear anti-China group of countries has gradually formed in the Asia-Pacific region, including the Five Eyes Alliance and the QUAD. Among them, Britain is an important member or partner of these international groups led by the United States.

In this background, British policy toward China has come under pressure from the United States. The White House of America is also trying to use the need for a free trade agreement with the UK after Brexit to encourage the latter to comply with US demands in order to attract the UK to join its long-term “anti-China” strategy. Britain’s foreign policy now almost overlaps with that of the United States, whether on issues such as the Iran nuclear deal, climate change, defense spending, NATO, Russia, and of course in dealing with China [41].

Major geopolitical events

In recent years, major adjustments in relations between major powers include major geopolitical changes, among which the most significant and dramatic geopolitical event to date is undoubtedly the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict. How that event will end is difficult to predict, but it has already had a profound impact on Sino-British relations.

From the West’s perspective, Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine is seen as a serious violation of the inherent international order, which must be countered with full force. Therefore, how to define the nature of the event and what position to take on it has become an important criterion for Western countries, including the UK, to determine whether other countries are enemies or friends. For Russian-Ukrainian military conflict, China maintains an “objective and neutral” position, and it emphasizes the need for the international community to pay sufficient attention to the history behind the conflict and to systematically consider the security of each country. This position is consistent with the

position of many developing countries, including India, but is seen by Western countries such as Britain as support for Russia's "aggression of Ukraine".

Thus, this major post-Cold War geopolitical development is changing the UK's perception of China. As one of the most important external supporter of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Ukraine, the British Johnson government plays active roles. And Liz Truss showed more radical than Johnson to support Ukraine, who broke with British diplomatic practice by giving her first foreign phone call since taking office to the Ukrainian president rather than the US president. Then Sunak inherited the policies of his former counterparts, actively supporting Ukraine through visiting Kiev and providing military assistance, etc [42]. Therefore, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and its prolonged continuation will have a negative impact on Sino-British relations.

The "decline" of globalization

In the early days after the end of the Cold War, the discourse on globalization exploded like wildfire. As the "iron curtain" between the East and the West suddenly fell, the flow of capital from one country to another became possible, and globalization based on neo-liberalism and the "Washington Consensus" became the most prominent trend around the millennium, prompted by the development of high technology.

However, this trend began to decline after the US President Trump swung the sledgehammer of protectionism, which, rather than openness, has become the more fashionable term in the international community since then. The ensuing populism, geo-economic competition and even confrontation, deliberate industry chain breaks and restructuring are rapidly undermining the globalization that has emerged since the end of the Cold War, which is increasingly being replaced by economic isolationism, protectionism and fragmentation, although in the long run globalization may be revitalized.

In this context, the British government will become sensitive to its economic and trade relations with China. Past efforts to seek closer bilateral trade and economic relations are replaced by a more cautious choice, especially with regard to investments from China, which may be scrutinized more severely in order to preserve the "defense security" of the UK. As a result, this could in reality manifest a sluggishness in Sino-British investment relations and a break in their industrial chain. Tony Danker, director general of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), admits that "Every (British) company that I speak to at the moment is engaged in rethinking their supply chains... because they anticipate that our politicians will inevitably accelerate towards a decoupled world from China." He also believes that thousands of British companies are rethinking their supply chains to reorganize in response to intensifying anti-China political sentiment [43].

China-related issues

A number of China-related issues are related to adjustments to Britain's China policy, impacting on Sino-British relations. These issues are mainly related to China's sovereignty, especially reflected in the issues with Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan affairs.

Sovereignty over Hong Kong (HK) has shifted from Britain to China since 1997, and is no longer a British overseas colony. However, since around 2018, Hong Kong society

has undergone significant changes, with a wave of demands for “democratization” of the Legislative Council elections sweeping Hong Kong, which is seen by the Hong Kong establishment and Chinese central government as a “color revolution” in Hong Kong with the covert support of Western forces, which led to a split in Hong Kong society and a countermeasure by the SAR government of HK. This eventually led to the enactment of the National Security Law applicable to Hong Kong with the support of the Central Government. The British government has taken a strong interest in the series of events on Chinese soil and has condemned the Chinese government and the SAR government. The two sides engaged in a war of words over the Sino-British Joint Declaration, a bilateral agreement designed to complete the transfer of sovereignty over HK, and the UK sought to “legally” intervene in HK’s affairs through self-proclaiming the document is still “validate”, yet the Chinese government argued that sovereignty over Hong Kong has been fully transferred to China and that Britain should not intervene in Hong Kong’s affairs through this self-proclaimed “valid” document. In any case, Britain will continue to use its history with Hong Kong to interfere with China’s sovereign rights over Hong Kong, which could put Sino-British relations in occasional tension.

The second is about Xinjiang, which could have a long-term impact on Sino-British relations. The Western community’s perception that China has committed a variety of human rights abuses in Xinjiang against the ethnic minorities in this autonomous province, even committing the horrific crime of “genocide” — which has never been recognized by the United Nations — has triggered the two countries to fight over the issue in March 2021. In a rare move in Sino-British relations, sanctions and counter-sanctions were taken by two sides in that time. The British Parliament has been most active on this issue. For example, in April 2021, The House of Commons passed a motion declaring the mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang a “genocide” [44]. In July 2021, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee published a report on its inquiry into Xinjiang “detention camps”, which calls for a stronger response to “atrocities crimes” and “slave labor” in Xinjiang [45]. With the publication of a report that is not favorable for China on Xinjiang by the UN Human Rights Office in 2022, the UK could escalate its new interventionist tactics against China on this issue, putting Sino-British relations in a more acrimonious position.

As Britain develops its Indo-Pacific Strategy, Taiwan is increasingly becoming its partner in Asia. Given that the United States views Taiwan as a security partner in the region, and that the United Kingdom closely follows the US on security issues, strengthening its relationship with Taiwan will be a possibility in the future. Then Prime Minister Truss has said that NATO needs to expand its global perspective beyond its member states: “We must ensure that democracies like Taiwan can defend themselves”, she said [29].

There is also an unprecedented growth in support for Taiwan in the British Parliament. However, mainland of China will not allow this breakaway autonomous region to secede from Chinese sovereignty, and ensuring that Taiwan does not become independent from the mainland has always been the bottom line of China’s most central interest. When Britain imitates the US in potentially violating China’s bottom line, Sino-British relations will be in an extremely dangerous situation, so Taiwan affairs will be the most sensitive issue of British policy toward China.

Conclusion: Prospects of the UK's China Policy and implication for China-West Relations

From era of Theresa May's cabinet to nowadays, various British governments have gradually adjusted their policies toward China, and the "golden era" of China-UK relationship has passed in a flash, entering an era of increasing conflicts and challenges in bilateral relations. On the whole, the current British policy toward China is still in the adjustment stage, and domestic disputes and games on China policy are still ongoing. Nevertheless, the macro direction of Britain's China policy in the future should form a bilateral relationship in which cooperation is accompanied by contradictions and competition.

Firstly, despite the many contradictions, Sino-British economic and trade relations remain strong. According to the UK statistics, the UK's imports from China amounted to 67.6 billion pounds in the year 2021 through June, a rise of nearly 40 % from the previous year. That makes China the UK's third largest trading partner [46]. Their close economic and trade ties that have developed over the years will not be completely broken overnight, or else, which would be difficult for a "Global Britain" that has left the EU and is seeking to enhance its economic development in the wider international market. Furthermore, China is an important actor in international markets and the UK can use China's market to access a larger international markets. For example, UK companies have welcomed China's ratification of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement for the Asia-Pacific region, as they are interested in China's position in the RCEP, which offers new possibilities for UK traders to do business in a third market in the region [47].

Secondly, there is still a need for the necessary cooperation between China and the UK in a number of important areas, including global health cooperation and cooperation in the area of climate change. As a global power, it is a necessary option for the West to cooperate with China to address these major global issues which cannot be achieved by a single country [48] and there is plenty of scope for other cooperation in many other areas (e. g. financial services) [49]. In short, the benefits of cooperation are an important factor that makes it impossible for the UK to completely ignore China or abandon cooperation with it.

Thirdly, beyond the above-mentioned cooperation, of course, given the profound changes in the international situation, Britain's conflicts with China in the ideological, human rights and geopolitical spheres will accumulate in the coming years, and friction in Sino-British relations will increase. This will change and worsen Sino-British relations in general. Therefore, in the future, UK policy towards China will maintain a flexible balance between pragmatic cooperation in the economic, trade and global governance spheres and conflict in the political and security spheres, in order to serve the UK's overall national interests. Sino-British relations will also become unstable under this British China policy and will move forward with difficulty with instability.

Fourthly, to some extent, China-UK relations partly reflect the relationship between China and the West. At present, the overall relationship between China and the West, like that between China and the UK, is in a period of profound adjustment. This is mainly due to the fact that Western countries have adjusted their policies towards China in the context of changes of international situation. Almost all of them regard China as a "partner, competitor, rival or threat". The overall relationship between China and the West will become more complex and unstable than ever before, just like that of China-UK relations.

In this context, China and the West will maintain economic cooperation in non-security and non-sensitive areas and seek cooperation in global governance. However, the West is not a piece undifferentiated as a whole, which means there are still differences between China-UK relations and China's relations with the US, the EU or Australia. In this sense, China cannot treat the West as a whole, and needs to deal with bilateral relations with different Western countries in a different and pragmatic manners.

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