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China: How Labour should respond to a growing strategic threat

NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

TOP LINES

- China's geopolitical, economic and military ascendency is undeniable. The UK, along with other Western powers, must adapt and respond to an increasingly aggressive, uncooperative and autocratic Communist Party regime.
- Labour must urgently develop a comprehensive and coherent China policy, based on distinction, security, ethics, realism and multilateralism.
- Responding to one of the greatest political challenges of our time is not only prudent for a government in-waiting, but also an opportunity to hold the Conservative government to account for its failure to agree on a robust approach towards China.

BACKGROUND

National security risks

The UK increasingly recognises China as a security risk, and the US has been even more proactive in challenging increased Chinese military aggression. In Parliament, various cross-party MPs have raised concerns about proposals to use Huawei to build the UK's 5G network, which could have compromised sensitive information and national security.

There are a number of security threats posed by China:

- 1) The threat of cyber-warfare and use of military technology to frustrate critical communication infrastructure in the West. For instance, there is evidence that state-backed Chinese hackers targeted UK technology firms in July 2020.
- 2) Increased military aggression in the South China Sea, where China lays claim to certain islands and Taiwan. While the UK would not be a direct target, the UK's allies including Japan and the US may become involved, giving Britain a choice about how to respond. Similarly, there are increased tensions, including violence, at the China-India land border.
- 3) The dependence of UK infrastructure, investment and technology on Chinese companies, which are ultimately under the control of the Beijing government. This includes 'micro' dependence, where specific technologies including defence technologies depend on Chinese supply chains, and 'macro' dependence, where the economy as a whole is dependent on trade and investment from China, giving Beijing potential leverage. Research shows that the UK is highly dependent on China for 229 goods.

The persecution and internment of ethnic and religious minorities

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a rigid classification system for state-recognised religions and ethnic minority groups. This has sometimes meant that religious organisations and non-Han ethnic minorities suffer disadvantage and persecution. A most notable example is the ongoing persecution and internment of the Muslim Uigher population in Xinjiang, on China's Western front.

The CCP claims that the police presence and 're-education camps' in Xinjiang are designed to counter terrorism and encourage national 'harmony'. However, it is estimated that between 1-3 million Uighers are detained in camps without charge or legal representation, where they receive political indoctrination and live in poor and cramped conditions. There are also widespread reports of torture and indications that many people have died in the camps. Evidence suggests that the Xinjiang camps are the largest mass incarceration of a racial or religious group since the Holocaust.

In addition to the persecution of Uighers, the CCP has also cracked down on other forms of religious expression in recent years. One particular target has been Falun Gong, a popular religious movement with links to Buddhism and Maoism, which the CCP does not recognise as a legitimate religion. This has led to reports of imprisonment, torture, organ harvesting and abusive psychiatric measures. The CCP has also persecuted Christians, with recent reports of arrested pastors and the forced closure of underground churches, in addition to longstanding restrictions on private and public religious practice.

The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an ambitious political and economic project which aims to connect China with countries in Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. Launched in 2013 by President Xi, the BRI should be understood as not just an infrastructure project (though there is a significant infrastructure component), but also a way for China to promote its soft power, legal system and economic interests abroad. Perhaps significantly, the BRI aims to shift the locus of the global economy away from the Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Pacific, and towards places which are geographically and politically closer to China.

While China's economic and political engagement with the wider world is in many ways welcome, there are a number of reasons for the UK and other Western nations to be cautious about the BRI. Any increased dependence on China, in terms of infrastructure, trade or investment, carries with it a potential security risk as China increases its military aggression. China has demonstrably used the BRI, and particularly the significant purchase of African debt, to help achieve geopolitical objectives. For example, China financed over 80% of government debt in Djibouti and used this as leverage to establish a significant naval base in East Africa. There is evidence of similar arrangements for military bases in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. While Europe is unlikely to be a target for military bases, China has explicitly courted Eastern European investment opportunities and economic ties with Italy as part of the BRI.

The cornerstone of China's expansion of its economic statecraft into Europe has been its purchase of the Greek port of Piraeus, which is now the second largest port in the Mediterranean. This makes the Western Balkans a strategic place for Chinese infrastructure investment so it can transport goods shipped in from Piraeus to the EU single market, but also as a way to gain economic footholds and influence over countries that are on the path to becoming EU member states in the mid-2020s.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong has a long history of public protest which dates back to the colonial era. The 1997 handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China took place relatively peacefully, but in recent years there has been significant public backlash towards Beijing's increased encroachment on Hong Kong's affairs. This triggered the student-led Umbrella Movement in 2014, protesting Beijing's u-turn on its promise to allow universal suffrage in Hong Kong, and more recently, against the National Security Law, which gives Beijing new powers and undermines Hong Kong's autonomy. These protests have led to police brutality, the arrest of peaceful protesters, the barring of opposition candidates in elections, and the suppression of political media.

Britain has a legal and moral duty to protect political freedom Hong Kong, as set out in the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. However, until very recently, the UK government has been reluctant to act, either because it sees China as a significant trade and investment partner and a threatening global power, or perhaps due to an awkwardness about intervening in the political affairs of a former colony. In 2020, the Conservative government agreed to extend the rights of Hong Kong's British National Overseas (BNO) passport holders.

Soft power and political interference in Western countries

China has launched a soft power offensive in many countries, designed to promote Chinese culture and encourage further trade ties. This is not in itself a problem: cultural exchange with China can help to foster mutual understanding and better diplomatic relations. This is particularly true of academic collaboration and programmes such as those organised by the British Council.

However, concerns arise about how and when soft power promotion becomes political interference. For example, there is evidence that the Chinese government has used online platforms to spread fake news about sensitive political issues, such as the protests in Hong Kong. Companies, particularly technology firms, have been under pressure from Beijing to remove sensitive content and support China's political decisions. An aggressive stance can also lead to self-censorship, as companies, politicians and celebrities avoid criticising China for fear of repercussions.

There is also evidence of more direct political interference. For example, there have been a number of claims that Australian politicians have been involved with Chinese business dealings, and encouraged to praise the CCP or defend Beijing's actions in return. Similar allegations have been made against politicians in Canada, New Zealand and the US.

A further example comes in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The EU recently found itself at the centre of a diplomatic row when it came to light that the EU Commission, at the behest of the Chinese state, had softened language in a report criticising the CCP for spreading disinformation in Europe over Covid-19.

LABOUR'S APPROACH: PHILOSOPHY

The philosophy of Labour's approach towards China should be built on five principles: distinction, ethics, security, realism and multilateralism. These principles recognise the moral imperative of engaging with China, while also acknowledging the inevitability of China's increasing dominance and the importance of political realism.

1. Distinction

It is essential to distinguish between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese people. Other actors can be further distinguished, including Chinese businesses, universities and civil society organisations. The CCP rules China without democratic legitimacy, opposition or constraints, and its methods of rule are autocratic. However, the CCP commands significant support from the Chinese population, particularly the Han majority, and has brought about relative political and economic stability since the 1980s (as well as deadly turmoil prior to this). This means engaging with the CCP requires tact and caution: it cannot be assumed that they represent the Chinese people completely, but equally it is untrue to say that they do not represent the people at all.

It is also important to recognise and evaluate the impact of policies on ordinary Chinese people and society, who are the most immediate victims of the CCP's autocracy. Sanctioning the CCP for its abuses should not necessarily mean disengaging from dialogue and relationships with other Chinese individuals and organisations, particularly universities and students. The recent histories of Hong Kong and Taiwan demonstrate the viability and importance of grassroots democracy led by Chinese people. It is therefore essential that ordinary Chinese people view the West as allies in a fight against autocracy, rather than enemies in a fight against their home nation.

2. Ethics

As part of a foreign policy with a strong ethical dimension, Labour must not be blind to the gross human rights abuses perpetrated by the CCP, most notably in Xinjiang, where the Uigher minority suffers persecution and mass incarceration. Concern for human rights, political freedom and democracy must form the backbone of Labour's approach towards China. However, these ethical motivations must be interested in outcomes as well as principles. Labour should carefully assess where it believes statements and condemnations can have a tangible impact, to aid the victims of injustice and persecution, rather than raising tensions with no beneficial outcome. Equally, Labour should be mindful of where diplomatic engagement with China offers a more effective approach.

3. Security

A cool-headed appraisal of China's ascendency cannot ignore the security risks posed to Western countries. Britain's position on the UN Security Council, as the dominant military power in Europe and a key member of NATO, demands extra vigilance in countering open and hidden aggression from Chinese military. It is also important to recognise the potential trade-off between security and the economy. Protecting key supply chains and reducing infrastructural reliance on Chinese investment may well damage UK GDP, but it forms an essential part of the UK government's duty to protect the British people.

4. Realism

China's increasing military and economic power is an undeniable fact. China's population dwarfs that of all Western nations combined. If China reaches American levels of GDP per capita, its economy will be 4 times the size of the US's. Labour's approach towards China must recognise this: ignorance of China's rise, or an assumption that it can be stopped, are both likely to lead to

bad policy outcomes. Instead, Labour must recognise the need for the UK to build a relationship with a powerful China in the future. Working with China will be essential to confronting shared challenges, including global warming, biosecurity and the risks posed by emerging technologies. However, this need not be a cosy relationship. China will also need to live alongside neighbours who feel threatened by its rise and are critical of its record on human rights. Western countries, including the UK, are not without powerful tools to influence and protect themselves from China's rise. Realism towards China does not entail appeasement or war, but equally it cannot allow complacency.

5. Multilateralism

The UK is at its strongest when it stands alongside its allies. Multilateralism must be at the heart of Labour's approach towards China. Rarely, if ever, should the UK be striding out alone without the support of allies - particularly members of NATO, the EU and the Five Eyes alliance. Brexit hinders the UK's ability to seek a pan-European, coordinated approach towards China. A priority for Labour must be to rebuild relationships of trust, trade and military support between Britain and our European neighbours. The UK's special relationship with the US must also be preserved, though Labour must equally be cautious about blindly following Trumpian trade wars with China, which often have more to do with domestic politics in Republican America, rather than human rights in China. Building stronger relationships with democracies in Asia, particularly Japan and India, will be essential.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Labour should support reviews of the UK's reliance on trade and investment from China

China could become the world's largest economy by 2024, and will always be an important trading partner for the UK. This means complete 'decoupling' is an unrealistic ambition. However, excessive reliance on China for trade and investment, particularly in areas sensitive to national security, is unwise. Labour should also call for the government to review this relationship, with a view to reducing dependence on China, where this affects national security. To mitigate the economic impact of reduced trade and investment with China, the UK should build new trade links with other Asian countries, and shore up the EU-UK relationship. For example, the UK should explore investment opportunities, visa waiver programmes, educational exchanges and trade agreements with Japan, South Korea and other East Asian countries, as well as Commonwealth partners including India and Pakistan. Labour's trade policy should be linked up with its national security policy.

Over the years a growing number of Chinese State Owned Enterprises with strong links to the CCP have benefited from floating IPOs and raising finance on the London Stock Exchange, favouring the low levels of regulation. Labour should support increased regulatory checks on the ownership and background of foreign company directors wishing to list on the London Stock Exchange, to ensure that they are free from political interference from the CCP.

Labour should also recognise the increasing dominance of the Chinese technology sector, particularly in the important and controversial field of Artificial Intelligence. Engaging with China on AI will be essential for ensuring global safety against potential harms of emergent technologies. This can be aided through academic partnerships and cooperation on standard-setting.

Labour should put pressure on the Government to seek a united European approach towards BRI, with clear red lines on issues of national security and China-financed debt

This requires building a strong relationship with the EU and particularly Southern and Eastern European countries after Brexit. A similar approach can be taken with allies in the Middle East and India, who are affected by the BRI.

The UK must also recognise that many African countries are seeking economic ties with China because Beijing often offers more favourable investment opportunities. The UK should re-evaluate how foreign aid in Africa can be increased and/or used to decrease the reliance of African countries on Chinese-financed debt. This ties in naturally with Labour's support for an independent and well-funded Department for International Development.

The Government's merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office has already led to reports that development aid spending will be diverted to shore up the defence, intelligence, and diplomacy budgets. This decline in aid spending is likely to be at the expense of the developing world, opening up opportunities for China to expand the BRI and with it increase the number of countries reliant on Chinese-financed debt.

Labour should oppose any attempts by the Government to cut aid spending in the developing world, making the case that it will not only harm the global poor but UK interests, as China and its BRI are likely to be the main beneficiaries of any rolling back of the UK's development aid commitments.

Labour should support efforts to stabilise and unite the UK's alliances of partners who share our liberal values

Responding to China's increased geopolitical aggression will require careful diplomacy and coordination with like-minded international partners, particularly the US and the EU, but also partners in South East Asia including Japan and South Korea. This means reaffirming the UK's commitment to NATO, working with the EU to ensure information sharing and military support after Brexit, strengthening the Five Eyes alliance and building new trade and diplomatic alliances with liberal democracies in Asia - most importantly, Japan, South Korea, India, Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore and Indonesia. Examples of new initiatives which may assist this include the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade deal.

Labour should raise the profile of the treatment of the Uighurs and other religious and ethnic minorities in China, support sanctions on companies which are complicit in mass-surveillance and internment, and push for Magnitsky targeted sanctions on the perpetrators of human rights abuses

Labour must prioritise calls for an international investigation into the camps, and use multilateral diplomatic pressure (such as at the UN) to achieve this. Labour should put pressure on the UK government to work with Central Asian and other Muslim majority countries, such as Turkey, to grant protection to Uigher refugees, who are often forcibly returned to China under pressure from Beijing.

UK and foreign companies that sell mass-surveillance equipment used to intern the Uighurs and other minorities in China should be banned from UK government contracts. Labour should also push the government to sanction companies which are complicit in human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

The party should work with like-minded partners including in the US, the EU and Canada, to support Magnitsky style targeted sanctions on the perpetrators of human rights abuses against the Uighurs in Xinjiang.

Labour should encourage the Government to publish a register of companies profiting from Uighur slave labour and set up a commission with religious and civil society leaders to look at the repression of religious and ethnic minorities in China

The party should also put pressure on the UK government to undertake an audit of British companies who use slave labour from the camps in Xinjiang in their supply chains as part of the UK's review of its strategic relationship with China. The details of these companies should be on a public register, which bars them from receiving future public sector contracts or government reliefs as an incentive to stop profiting off the oppression of the Uighurs.

Labour should set up a commission with religious and civil society leaders to look at the repression of religious minorities in China, including the Falun Gong and Uighurs, with the aim of publishing recommendations on how the UK government can work with partners in international forums to pressure China to end its oppressive tactics.

Labour should support targeted sanctions against Hong Kong and Chinese officials guilty of human rights abuses under the National Security Law, ensure the Government's BNO offer is not just a policy for the well-educated and wealthy, and continue to criticise UK companies who support the draconian law

Labour should continue its opposition to the new National Security Law, which criminalises political subversion and allows Beijing authorities to control Hong Kong's political affairs. While extending the rights of BNO passport holders is a good start, Labour must call on the government to go further in using our immigration system for good. Labour should urge the government to put pressure on UK companies operating in Hong Kong not to support the new security law.

The party should continue to take a vocal position against banks and other multinational corporations based in the UK who publicly support the National Security Law. For example, HSBC and Standard Chartered should not continue to have privileged access to the UK Government or support from the UK taxpayer while they continue to support the suppression of freedom and democracy in Hong Kong.

Working with like-minded international partners, including the US, the EU and Canada, Labour should support the adoption of Magnitsky style targeted sanctions on individual perpetrators of human rights abuses in Hong Kong.

Labour should push the Government to review the susceptibility of the UK political system to foreign interference and encourage meaningful dialogue with non-CCP actors in China

Labour should put pressure on the government to review the susceptibility of the UK political system to foreign interference, particularly cyber-attacks, the spread of fake news online and media censorship. The Government should provide support for British firms which are under pressure to align with Beijing's political stances, such as those in Hong Kong, while also condemning those firms which give into pressure. The UK should work with other countries to counter these 'soft power' advances from Beijing.

Labour should support and encourage meaningful dialogue with non-CCP actors in China. This would help to strengthen civil society and academic institutions in a country where free

expression is very limited. The British Council and diplomatic missions have a key role to play in this, and need to be properly funded. The UK should also support and encourage cooperation between UK groups and non-CCP organisations in China which are devoted to tackling climate change and addressing the risks posed by emerging technologies and biosecurity.

The UK should welcome Chinese individuals seeking political asylum, including whistleblowers, Uighers and other victims of religious and ethnic persecution and encourage freer movement from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. Evidence shows that the UK public are very supportive of allowing greater immigration from Hong Kong.

Labour should support meaningful cooperation with Chinese universities, students and civil society.

The UK should continue to encourage Chinese students to study in the UK, and champion partnerships between universities, while also putting in place mechanisms to ensure these partnerships do not fall under the influence of CCP soft power and espionage, or lead to over-dependence on Chinese students and research funding from the Chinese State. Where there is an over-dependence, Labour should be ready to call for the Government to offer the academic institution interim funding to cover the shortfall, until they can attract new streams of research funding and diversify their international student market.

The USA, Australia, and Sweden are currently reviewing the increasing amount of research funding from the Chinese State in the higher education sector, as well as the role of Chinese Government run Confucius Institutions, Labour should consider calling for the UK to do the same.

Labour should support meaningful cooperation on shared global challenges

As the world's largest population and soon the world's largest economy, China will have an important role to play over the coming century in addressing shared global challenges. Most notably, China's actions could make or break the global fight against climate change. The UK must be willing to work with China to establish shared commitments on carbon emissions, beginning with the COP26 climate conference hosted by the UK in Glasgow, which has the potential to be a game-changing event on climate change. The West and China must to some extent be willing to put their differences aside to address the shared task of combating catastrophic climate change.

Similarly, China's actions will be hugely important for tackling global health challenges, including the likelihood of future pandemics. The Covid-19 crisis has exposed weaknesses in global health cooperation, and offers a blueprint for how not to handle viruses in the future. China initially refused to cooperate with the World Health Organisation (WHO), denying access to investigators, punished whistleblowers who exposed the virus, suppressing media reports, and ultimately allowing the virus to spread beyond Wuhan to the rest of the world. The US's Trump administration responded unhelpfully with political attacks against China, defunding the WHO and buying up global stocks of medicine. Rather than global cooperation on a vaccine, there is an arms race of different suppliers working to different timescales with different health standards. None of this is in the interests of global health. China must be included in global health cooperation - to leave them out of the conversation would be counterproductive and foolish. Equally, however, the Chinese Government must play by the rules and live up to their international obligations as a member of the WHO.

Finally, cooperation with China on standard-setting for emerging technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), will be essential for ensuring future safety. AI poses a number of risks to humans, as warned by experts from all around the world, and raises important ethical questions about the value of human labour, human agency, government surveillance, privacy and economic rights. The first country to master powerful AI will have a significant advantage over rivals, but equally, uncontrolled development of AI poses a risk to everyone. The solution lies in global cooperation on AI, transparency and shared standard-setting. This is impossible unless US, European and Chinese universities and research institutes, which comprise the vast majority of AI research, are able to cooperate in some way. Political sensitivities around technological secrecy means that full cooperation is likely to be impossible, but Labour should support efforts such as Partnership on AI, which encourages transparency and responsible use of AI among companies in the West and China.

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About the New Diplomacy Project:

The New Diplomacy Project aims to help develop Labour's foreign policy for the 21st Century. Our experienced network of foreign policy researchers provide expert advice to Labour MPs and Lords, from real-time reaction to global events to in-depth policy briefings on complex areas of foreign policy. We seek to expand Labour's capacity to think about the foreign policy, while complementing and bolstering the work of its frontbench team.

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