

Process-Tracing the Shift in UK's China Policy Post-2020

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Abstract

Over the past decade, Sino-British relations have shifted significantly - from the so-called “Golden Era” of 2015 to a period marked by growing strategic tensions. This paper employs a process-tracing method and a mid-level national security framework to investigate the causal mechanisms behind this policy transformation, following the logic that UK's focus on China has gradually shifted from economic cooperation to national security concerns. This shift followed a sequential logic: it began with a series of triggering events in 2020 - including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Huawei ban, and the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law - which catalysed the development of a coherent policy framework as outlined in the Integrated Review 2021. This Review then laid the foundation for UK's subsequent domestic legislative practices and enhanced multilateral security cooperation with other states, especially through the “Indo-Pacific Tilt” strategy, culminating in an overall transformation of its China policy. However, this process is not totally dominated by the UK itself, but driven by a combination of domestic political pressures, external influence - mainly from the US - and its rising anxieties over China's growing global presence. These dynamics reflect the UK's diminishing strategic autonomy in foreign policymaking and its relative decline in global power.

Keywords

Sino-British relations, policy shift, national security, Indo-Pacific tilt, process tracing

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Sino-British relations have undergone a dramatic shift, turning from partnership under the background of the so-called “Golden Era” to a period marked by strategic tensions, with the year 2020 as a critical turning point.

To understand the reasons behind the significant change, this study explores the following research question: How and through what causal mechanisms did the UK's China policy shift around 2020? Existing literature tends to attribute the shift into such international events as the China-US trade war, the outbreak of COVID-19, or the Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, these explanations are often event-driven, insufficient to elaborate the causal mechanism of this change.

Using the process-tracing approach, this research argues that the key logic of the dramatic change in Sino-British relations in recent years lies in the UK's changing focus on China from economic interests to national security concerns. This evolution follows a causal chain that begins with a series of triggering events, proceeds to the construction of a systematic policy framework, continues through domestic legislative practices and multilateral security cooperation with international partners, and ultimately leads to the full establishment of a

reoriented China policy.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Following the introduction part, Chapter Two presents a comprehensive literature review, tracing the evolution of the UK's China policy focus from the 1950s to the present and summarizing the main explanations for its recent shift. Chapter Three illustrates theoretical framework of threat construction and outlines the process-tracing methodology. Chapter Four, the main part of this paper, clearly traces the whole process of UK's changing China policy from around 2020 to the present, following the logic of the UK's changing focus from economic engagement to security concerns. Finally, Chapter Five concludes the paper.

2. Literature Review: Shift in the Focus of UK's China Policy

In different historical stages, the dominant concern in Sino-British relations differentiates. From the UK's official recognition of the newly established People's Republic of China in 1950 to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between these two countries in 1972, Sino-British relations were largely shaped by the broader context of the Cold War (Mark, 2017). In the years that followed, the primary focus of the two countries shifted to the issue of Hong Kong, which remained central until its return to the People's Republic of China in 1997 (Summers et al., 2022).

Over the next two decades, despite occasional tensions over human rights issues in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, the overall Sino-British relations steadily improved, with the key focus turning toward economic cooperation. During this period, the UK government gradually shifted the responsibility for advancing its diplomatic goals with China from traditional diplomatic institutions to economic agencies. For example, individual companies began to play a central role in fulfilling the UK's diplomatic objectives through their commercial activities (Breslin, 2004). In addition to the shift in key actors involved in post-diplomatic engagement with China, the emphasis of Sino-British relations moved from ideological concerns to free trade (Brown, 2018). As for the most eye-catching notion regarding Sino-British relations in this period - the "Golden Era", is actually proposed by the then Prime Minister David Cameron and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, to further attract Chinese investment and expand the bilateral trade (Stanley, 2024, Breslin and Burnham, 2023).

However, the so-called "Golden Era" did not last long. Following the unexpected result of the Brexit referendum and the rise of Trump-era populism around 2017, the international environment entered a period of considerable turbulence. During this time, the UK's strategic concerns began to shape its China policy as much as, if not more than, the economic considerations that had dominated in previous years (Summers & Miao, 2024). In 2020, three significant events fundamentally reshaped the framework of Sino-British relations that had remained largely stable for nearly two decades: the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law (The PRC Government, 2020), and the official ban on Huawei in UK's 5G network construction (The UK Government, 2020). One year later, the UK released its Integrated Review 2021, which for the first time defined China as a "systemic competitor" (The UK Government, 2021a). In the years that followed, a series of legislative measures - including the National Security and Investment Act 2021 (The UK Government, 2021b), the Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021 (The UK Government, 2021c), the National Security Act 2023 (The UK Government, 2023b) and the like, which further reinforced this security-oriented framing of China. In short, in this stage, while economic cooperation with China continues, the UK's overall perception has increasingly shifted from economic opportunism to national security concerns (Summers, 2021).

As for the reasons behind the UK's growing emphasis on national security in its China policy, most scholars in the field have attributed it to two main perspectives: domestic concerns and external pressure. From an external perspective, some scholars suggested that in terms of China issues, US hegemonic pressures play a prominent role in shaping the UK's diplomatic decisions (for example Stanley, 2024; Leoni, 2022). In addition to American influence, other scholars in the meantime emphasized the significance of domestic political dynamics. Summers et al. (2022) for instance, argued that the Johnson government's reversal on Huawei in mid-2020 was driven not only by international pressure but also by the risk of losing a parliamentary vote. In this sense, parliamentary resistance functioned as a key internal constraint. Moreover, the personal preferences of political leaders also influenced policy direction. For Prime Minister Keir Starmer, his previous experience as a human rights lawyer and counsellor from 1990 to 2008 made him more attuned to rights-related issues,

and thus more supportive of values-based diplomacy toward China; similarly, his Foreign Secretary David Lammy who was described as assertively pro-American, also projected his stronger clinging to US standpoint on China issues (Xu and Lu, 2024). Nonetheless, as Summers (2019) noted, despite these arguments, the UK's China policy in recent years cannot be characterized as a one-dimensional tilt toward the United States or completely autonomous; instead, it reflects a balance between UK's dependence on the "special relations" with the US and its national strategic autonomy, with different issues leading to different policy choices.

Building on the recent literature on Sino-British relations, it is evident that the evolution of UK's China policy has attracted growing academic attention. However, most of the current scholars tended to solely focus on isolated cases analysis regarding national security concerns, for instance, Huawei controversy, and on the explanatory factors in this shift - most notably external pressures from the United States or domestic dynamics such as parliamentary pressure. While these studies provided valuable insights, they fell short of uncovering the complete causal mechanisms behind the UK's policy shift, neither theorise the rise of national security concerns at a middle-level of analysis. Accordingly, this research seeks to fill these gaps by employing a process-tracing approach to reconstruct the full causal pathway of the UK's turn toward securitising its China policy, following the core logic that in the post-2020 period, UK's national security concerns are replacing economic considerations in shaping the UK's approach to China.

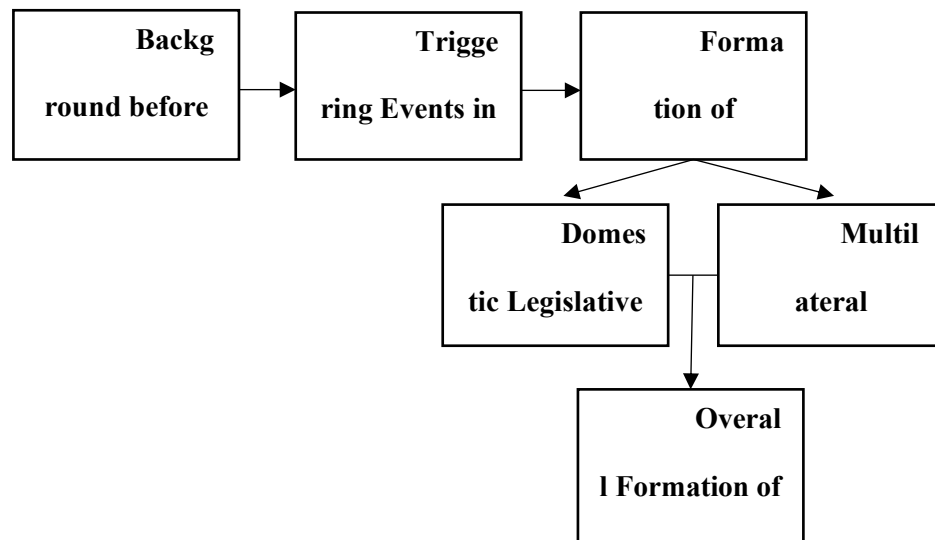
3. Middle-level National Security Theory and Process-tracing Method

A country's perception of another as a national security threat does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it is constructed through an interlocked and gradual process. In the UK's case, the securitisation of China experienced three stages: firstly, cognitive perception from triggering events around 2020, such as Huawei controversy, the outbreak of COVID-19, and the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law; secondly, domestic policy responses, including the publication of the Integrated Review 2021 and the introduction of various security-related laws; thirdly, a closer alignment with international partners, both traditional allies such as the G7, Five Eyes, and NATO, and new ones through the UK's "Indo-Pacific Tilt" strategy, and finally ended in a structural tightening of UK's China policy.

Methodologically, this study adopts a process-tracing approach to examine the causal pathway through which this securitisation unfolded, as displayed in Figure 1. Rather than merely identifying and analysing individual policies or events in these years, this research aims to provide a causal analysis of how UK's China policy evolved around 2020, following a process-tracing line from the historical background to the emergence of triggering events, then to the introduction of new China-related laws and policies at home, followed by cooperations with its international partners, and finally to the structural tightening of China policy.

The study focuses on the period from approximately 2019 to the present, a timeframe that covers all the key turning points of the shift in Sino-British relations and thus allows the causal mechanisms observable. A wide range of primary and secondary sources are used for the analysis, including official UK government statements and relevant news reports on the triggering events around 2020; major policy documents such as the Integrated Review 2021, the Integrated Review Refresh 2023, the Strategic Defence Review 2025, the National Security and Investment Act 2021, the Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021 and the National Security Act 2023, as well as broader academic literature on the topic.

Figure 1: The tracing process of UK's China policy shift around 2020



Source: the author

4. Construction of China's Security Threat to UK

4.1 Background

After the 2016 Brexit referendum, the official discourse of “Golden Era” proposed by Cameron and Osborne in 2015 to improve economic cooperations with China came under increasing pressure both domestically and internationally. On the domestic front, anti-China sentiment in Parliament began to intensify. An increasing number of MPs - not only from the Labour Party but also among Conservative backbenchers - advocated a tougher stance on China (Xu and Wang, 2025). Organized parliamentary groups such as the China Research Group (CRG) and the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) further fuelled Sino-phobic attitudes during the Johnson premiership (Stanley, 2024). Meanwhile, the number of parliamentary debates on China increased significantly from 2019 onward, accompanied by a marked shift in tone. In 2020, for example, only one debate in the House of Commons adopted a neutral stance, while all others were strongly critical or “hawkish” towards China (Summers et al., 2022). On the international front, many Western political elites had long viewed economic communications with China as a means to induce China's political reform and to align China with liberal democratic norms. However, as China rose to become the world's second-largest economy without following their anticipated path, anxiety mounted within many Western political elites, including those in the UK (Wang, 2020). In the post-Brexit era, the UK also faces increasing strategic dependence on the US to maintain its global influence (Wang, 2020), which leads to a degree of autonomy sacrifice to align with Washington's tougher China policy.

According to the framework of neoclassical realism, such external and domestic pressures are filtered through the perceptions of domestic decision-makers and subsequently shape foreign policy (Xu & Wang, 2025). In the UK's case, parliament's tough stance in China issues, China's expanding global influence, and growing pressure from the US, particularly after a series of triggering events in 2020, gradually reinforced British political elites' perception that the liberal international order was under threat (Xu & Wang, 2025), which eventually contributed to a significant shift in the UK's China policy starting in 2020. Building on the observation that the Brexit has prompted the UK political system to return more closely to the Westminster model - where the Cabinet, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, holds centralized authority in foreign policy decision-making (Baldini et al., 2022; Dudley & Gamble, 2023; Gaskarth, 2013) - this chapter primarily draws on official government decisions to identify policy shifts towards China, rather than relying on media narratives or public opinion.

4.2 Triggering Events in 2020

After taking office in 2016, British Prime Minister Theresa May reaffirmed the official discourse of the “Golden Era” during the G20 Summit in Hangzhou (UK Government, 2016). However, due to changing perceptions of China’s rise and mounting pressure from the Trump administration, Sino-British relations began to deteriorate in the later part of May’s tenure (Wang, 2022). During Boris Johnson’s premiership, particularly from the first phase (July 2019 to January 2020) to the second (February 2020 to September 2021), a marked shift towards a tougher stance on China was perceived (Xu & Wang, 2025). Nonetheless, overall, both the May and early Johnson governments maintained a relatively moderate approach towards China prior to 2020 (Stanley, 2024).

After 2020, the UK’s perceptions towards China began to sharply fall, with three events as the triggering points - the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic from January, the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law in June and the UK government’s official Huawei ban in July.

In March 2020, the UK witnessed the widespread outbreak of COVID-19, and then the Conservative government began to shift the blame towards China (Wang, 2022). It accused China of being the origin of the virus and of engaging in a “cover-up” during the early stages of the outbreak. In April 2020, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee published a report on the foreign policy dimensions of the pandemic, criticizing that China’s “disinformation” facilitated the global spread of the virus, and deliberately misled the World Health Organization and scientific communities in other countries (The UK Parliament, 2020). Later, even without direct pressure from US (Xu & Wang, 2025), the UK aligned with countries such as Australia and other European states in calling for the first phase of international investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in China (Jones, 2020), and later joined other twelve countries in supporting the second round of investigation (The US Department of State, 2021). Furthermore, China’s provision of medical assistance to other countries was also framed by UK officials as an attempt to expand its influence and establish global health hegemony (Breslin & Burnham, 2023; Stanley, 2024). These actions - alongside its earlier disputes in Xinjiang and Hong Kong issues - further strained Sino-British relations, marking COVID-19 as one of the most significant turning points in the bilateral ties. As the then British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab stated in April 2020, after the coronavirus crisis, “We can’t have business as usual” (Mikhailova, 2020).

While the COVID-19 outbreak served as an obvious turning point, actually, the UK’s concerns about China as a national security threat had already been building for several years. Beyond the disputes in the South China Sea and human rights issues in Xinjiang, long-standing suspicion was particularly evident in the debate over Huawei’s involvement in the UK’s 5G network construction. If the pandemic acted as a spark for the UK’s sudden policy shift, then the Huawei controversy represented the combustible material that had been accumulating over time, which indicates the fact that, since 2020, the UK has increasingly politicized economic issues in its approach to China (Wang, 2022).

Although concerns about Huawei’s security risks in the UK was raised as early as 2012, they were not taken seriously at that time (Stanley, 2024). However, following the escalation of US-China trade tensions after 2018, the UK increasingly found itself caught between the two powers and attempted to strike a delicate balance (Wang, 2022). In 2020, maintaining a balance between economic engagement with China and political alignment with the US became increasingly difficult for the UK, for the Trump administration was stepping up pressure on Prime Minister Johnson, forcing him to choose between continuing cooperation with Huawei and preserving the UK’s longstanding intelligence-sharing relationship with the US (Xu & Wang, 2025), which led to UK government’s official ban on Huawei to completely remove it from UK’s 5G network before the end of 2027. Therefore, it can be argued that in the Huawei case, American pressure was the decisive factor behind the UK’s eventual decision to exclude the company from its 5G network. On the one hand, as a middle power, the UK finds it increasingly difficult to exercise full autonomy in its foreign policy - especially when its choices run counter to the interests of its transatlantic hegemonic ally. On the other hand, growing US suspicion of Huawei made the UK more vigilant toward the company. Given the institutional and ideological similarities between the two countries, it was easily for the UK to convince itself that Washington’s concerns must be justified. In this process, the UK’s perception of China as a potential security threat was significantly reinforced.

In addition to increasing concerns in public health and infrastructure building, political security issues further deepened the UK’s suspicion of China as a threat to its ideological system. This was exemplified by

the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law in June 2020. In response, the UK suspended its extradition treaty with Hong Kong - a move influenced more by the positions of Canada and Australia than by pressure from the United States (Xu & Wang, 2025).

From the “Golden Era” to the present, 2020 can be regarded as a turning point in the UK’s shifting perception of China. The outbreak of COVID-19, the Huawei ban, and the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law - three major triggering events - collectively intensified the UK’s security concerns over China, if we regarded previous issues such as the South China Sea disputes or human rights in Xinjiang solely as peripheral. And from the perspective of their function in reshaping the complete structure of UK’s China policy turn, these events served as a cognitive foundation for the publication of the Integrated Review 2021, which provided a systematic framework for the UK’s post-Brexit China policy realignment.

4.3 Formation of Systematic Framework: The Integrated Review 2021

After the three major events in 2020, along with other ongoing disputes, the UK’s concerns about China gradually shifted from a focus on economic cooperation to a growing emphasis on national security. Over time, these growing concerns came together to shape a clearer policy guidance - the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (The UK Government, 2021a), which was published in July 2021, about a year after the turning point events.

The Review, on one side, is a response to the shifting international order, a process accelerated by the outbreak of COVID-19 (He, 2021), and on another side, represents UK’s effort to break free from the constraints of the EU and then reposition itself globally (Breslin & Burnham, 2023).

Firstly, as for the transformation of the international order accelerated by COVID-19, from a Western perspective, it primarily refers to China’s growing international influence. This rise is seen as one of the most significant geopolitical shifts of our time, harbouring potential threat for British ideological values, national interests, and even the broader global order (Breslin & Burnham, 2023). At the same time, there is a growing perception that China has become “politically much more aggressive than previously expected” (The UK Parliament, 2021), further intensifying concerns in the West about the future direction of the international system. In this context, the Integrated Review marked a significant shift in UK’s tone in defining China: for the first time, China was labelled a “systemic competitor” by the UK government (The UK Government, 2021a), which explicitly indicates the necessity for the adoption of corresponding China-related policies in near future to respond to such threat from China.

However, the term “competitor” does not imply a complete severing of ties or an outright adversarial stance towards China. Rather, the review described China as an “epoch-defining challenge”, not a direct “threat” - an expression that frustrated some Sino-sceptics in the UK (Stanley, 2024). After the publication of the Review, the economic cooperations between UK and China has continued, and the later 2025 figures show that China is the UK’s third largest trading partner in Europea (The PRC Foreign Ministry, 2025), a reality shaped in part by the UK’s need for diversified economic partnerships after Brexit. The Review acknowledged this complexity, calling for a delicate balance between dealing with China as a partner on some issues and as a challenger, or a threat in other cases (Breslin & Burnham, 2023). This nuanced position indicates that while the Review marked a turning point in the UK’s policy framework toward China, it did not lead to a complete breakdown in bilateral relations, for the UK now lacks the capacity to fundamentally oppose China, just as Breslin and Burnham (2023) pointed out, “the Review overstates the ability of a declining secondary state mired in economic and political crisis to effect any real global change”.

Secondly, as for the desire to move beyond EU dependence, it means that the UK is now seeking closer ties with nations beyond Europe - particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. As such, one of the core strategies outlined in the Integrated Review is the so-called “Indo-Pacific Tilt”, which emphasizes enhanced cooperation with countries in that region, and at the same time signals a deliberate effort to decentre China, a country increasingly perceived as a threat to the UK’s national interests (Summers et al., 2024).

To conclude, the Integrated Review 2021 marks a significant response to the UK’s rising concerns about China and represents an important step in its strategic realignment. Nonetheless, the shift is only partial, for as a middle power with ongoing economic links to China, though the UK is trying to reduce its reliance on China by decentring it, it currently lacks the leverage to make a complete strategic break. And from the perspective

of its function in reshaping the structure of the UK's China policy, the Review redefined China-related risks to structured national security priorities from isolated issues, and more importantly, served as a strategic guidance for the future adoption of domestic China-related laws and policies, and also for the multilateral security cooperation with its international partners, which will be discussed in the following sections.

4.4 Domestic Legislative Practices

With the publication of the Integrated Review 2021, the overall trajectory of the UK's China policy was set. And following the Review, a series of China-related policies and legislations were introduced, further consolidating this strategic shift and effectively closing the door back to its previous economy-oriented approaches towards China.

In response to the administrative decision in July 2020 to ban Huawei from the UK's 5G network, the Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021 was introduced in November 2021 (The UK Government, 2021c). This act not only authorized the removal of Huawei equipment from existing and future 5G infrastructure to ensure its complete exclusion, but also stipulated to impose hefty fines on companies that violate its provisions, which symbolized the legitimization of UK's concern for national communication system security.

In the domain of value-based security, along with the constant escalation of Western countries' accusation against the so-called "Xinjiang cotton", the UK perceived the value threat posted from China's cotton product, and therefore, in March 2021, the British Foreign Secretary announced a package of measures to exclude Chinese companies from its supply chain (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2021), not only exerted more limitations and examines on products imported from Xinjiang, but also investigated Chinese company under the Modern Slavery Act without clear evidence.

In addition to concerns over ideological values, the UK also became increasingly wary of China's growing economic influence over its sensitive assets. Unlike Russia, whose impact is mostly concentrated in the energy sector, the UK's trade dependence on China is both broader and deeper, and thus if such economic ties were ever "weaponized", the potential shock to the UK would be far more severe (Breslin & Burnham, 2023). In response, the National Security and Investment Act was introduced in May 2021 to strengthen the UK's ability to scrutinize foreign investments, particularly from major powers like China (The UK Government, 2021b). Under this Act, in October 2022, the Chinese-owned company Nexperia, which was believed to have connections to Huawei's supply chain, was subjected to a national security review and was ultimately ordered to sell its controlling stake in a UK semiconductor firm over the so-called "national security risk" (Taaffe-Maguire, 2022).

In the field of education, McCallum & Wray (2022) argued that China could gain access to core technologies from the UK and the US through joint research projects. As a result, scrutiny of academic activities involving China became increasingly important during this period. In response to such concerns, the British Home Office announced in July 2023 that it would close or withdraw funding from all Confucius Institutes in the UK (Wintour, 2023). However, due to criticism that the policy was too radical, it was later revised to focus on gradual divestment rather than full closure.

In the traditional domain of national security, the National Security Act 2023 was enacted in July 2023 (The UK Government, 2023a), which symbolized the most important refresh of British national security law framework. The Act introduced a series of new criminal offences, including espionage, sabotage, and foreign interference. It also established the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS), which requires any individual or entity acting on behalf of a foreign power to carry out political influence activities within the UK to register voluntarily. In addition, the Act expanded the powers of MI5, allowing it to investigate and intervene in activities that may pose a threat to national security.

In response to the "systematic challenge" identified in the Integrated Review 2021 (The UK Government, 2021a), these domestic policies and legal measures transformed the broader policy framework into concrete legislative practices, expanding the scope of security to the non-traditional security field, including infrastructure building, ideological values, economic assets and education and technology, which makes the turn in China policy irreversible. Nonetheless, the implementation of domestic measures must be complemented by collaboration with international partners who share similar threat perceptions of China. The following section explores how such interactions shaped the broader policy shift.

4.5 Multilateral Security Cooperations

As Breslin and Burnham (2023) have noted, the Integrated Review 2021 (The UK Government, 2021a) tends to overstate the UK's capacity to shape global order, and therefore, in reaction to the growing challenge posed by China, the UK has to strengthen cooperation with other nations through alliance. Among its traditional partners, the US and European countries would typically be prioritised. However, since the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the UK's formal departure from the EU in 2020, UK-EU relations have been in steady decline. Meanwhile, the rise of populism in the US under Donald Trump has also undermined the reliability of its traditional "special relationship".

Looking beyond Europe and the US, He (2021) argued that strategic competition in the future will increasingly centre on the Indo-Pacific region, where middle powers such as Australia and Japan are expected to play a more prominent role. This view aligns with the UK's official strategy. As stated in both the Integrated Review 2021 (The UK Government, 2021a) and its updated version in 2023 (The UK Government, 2023b), as well as the Strategic Defence Review 2025 (The UK Government, 2025), the "Indo-Pacific Tilt" remains a strategic priority. While the Review in 2021 only introduced the concept, the 2023 update declared that the UK had achieved this goal and identified the Indo-Pacific as a "permanent pillar of the UK's international policy". The Defence Review in 2025 reiterated this position, placing the Indo-Pacific alongside NATO by declaring, "NATO first, but not NATO only", which clearly reflects the increasing strategic importance of the region, highlighting the UK's need to strengthen engagement with its Indo-Pacific partners.

Within the UK's network of partners in the Indo-Pacific region, two key groupings deserve particular attention: AUKUS, established in September 2021, and the Democratic 10 (D-10), which the UK began to support around 2020 to decrease dependence on China in 5G network and supply chain (Jian & Yao, 2023). These frameworks bring countries such as Australia, South Korea, and India into closer alignment with the UK, alongside other like-minded partners including Japan and Singapore (Hosoya, 2019; Brattberg & Judah, 2020). In this circle, the UK has deliberately sought to deepen ties with these nations. For instance, India is increasingly viewed not only in relation to its regional rivalry with Pakistan, but also as a crucial partner for the West in balancing China's growing influence, for both of them regarded themselves as the so-called "victims" of China's rise (Breslin & Burnham, 2023).

However, the UK cannot completely sever ties with its traditional allies - the US and European countries. In the context of the renewed strategic rivalry between China and the US, the UK is unable to fully alienate itself from the US and the EU, particularly their efforts to "de-risk" from China. For example, in the case of Huawei, although the UK historically maintained a relatively open stance toward foreign investment, it could not remain unaffected under growing pressure from Washington (Stanley, 2024). Moreover, in terms of overall economic relations, the EU is still a bloc which remains far more significant to the UK than any individual Indo-Pacific country - or even the Indo-Pacific region as a whole (Breslin & Burnham, 2023).

Within the traditional Five Eyes alliance, the UK continues to hold considerable discursive and intelligence-sharing influence. However, in the Indo-Pacific region, its limited military capabilities and constrained defence budget prevent it from becoming a major strategic actor (Breslin & Burnham, 2023). Moreover, alliances in this region are mostly incompact and unstructured, lack of strong capacity for collective action. For instance, AUKUS, as an informal defence partnership, functions more as a "technology accelerator" for nuclear-powered submarines, artificial intelligence, and other advanced technologies, rather than as a close military alliance that could provide the UK with robust support in times of crisis, as the United States did in the past (Hall, 2022).

In a nutshell, in the context of the US-China "new Cold War", the UK's strategic role in it remains ambiguous. It appears to be driven, to some extent, by pressure from the US and European countries to adopt a tougher stance on China, and to avoid being entirely constrained by these pressures, the UK has to seek closer engagement with Indo-Pacific countries. However, this approach has not delivered the expected outcomes. Nonetheless, regardless of its effectiveness, the UK's combined efforts, whether through alignment with Indo-Pacific partners, traditional transatlantic allies, or European counterparts, more or less enhanced its security cooperation with other countries, and thus reinforced its domestic China policy with external force, and finally contributed to shaping a more comprehensive framework for its evolving approach to China.

5. Conclusion

Amidst profound global transformations, the UK has struggled to redefine its international status as a great power. Among its concerns, the rise of China becomes a central issue, not only owing to its rapid ascent, but also for the “new Cold War” between its traditional ally the United States, and China, for any misstep in balancing these two relationships risks damaging either the “special relations” with the US or its economic ties with China.

In this situation, driven by domestic political battles, international pressures mainly from the US, China’s continued rise and the clear departure of China from Western political models, the UK has gradually shifted its approach to China - from prioritising economic engagement to emphasising national security. In this process, three triggering events - the global outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the ban on Huawei, and the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law occurred in 2020 caused UK’s alarm that China as a potential threat. Combined with longstanding concerns over the South China Sea disputes and human rights issues in Xinjiang, these accumulative worries culminated in the publication of the Integrated Review 2021, which for the first time in the past decade formally repositioned China as a “systematic competitor”, and in the meantime provided guidance for UK to set laws, regulations, and policies targeting China at home and to seek for further cooperation with its international partners abroad. In the following years, through a combination of domestic legislative practices and multilateral security cooperations with other countries, the general restrictive China policy framework after 2020 was finally formed, and is expected to persist for the foreseeable future.

However, this transformation does not imply a complete rejection of China’s economic importance. In the post-Brexit era, the UK-China relationship has evolved into one characterised by both cooperation and contradiction. To be more specific, economic and trade collaboration, as well as joint efforts on global health and climate change continue, while tensions persist over ideological differences and human rights issues.

Looking ahead, the future direction of the UK’s China policy remains uncertain. Under Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s leadership since 2024, the Labour government has yet to articulate a clear strategy towards China. However, based on the “New Internationalism” proposed by Labour in 2019, it is more likely to adopt a “soft Sino-sceptic approach” - one that emphasises conflict prevention and peacebuilding through international institutions, while maintaining an Atlanticist stance and a strong legal commitment to addressing the so-called human rights issues. However, how this approach will develop in practice, and whether it can effectively balance economic cooperation with security concerns, remains an open question.

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