CHAPTER 5

Imagining Brexit: The UK’s China Policy After the Referendum

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines British policy towards China from the ‘Brexit’ referendum of June 2016 to the UK’s departure from the EU on 31 January 2020. It uses a framework which examines the impact on policymaking of contrasting perceptions of China as a threat and/or an opportunity in the post-Cold War period. The premise of this analysis is that one consequence of the June 2016 Brexit referendum was a new degree of uncertainty about the future direction of British foreign policy, from its approach to relations with the EU after Brexit, to its attitude to the US, China and other emerging powers. The basic tenor of responses

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to this uncertainty from policymakers after the referendum was either to stress continuity (thus postponing decisions about any new directions until after the shape of Brexit had become clearer) or to develop rhetorical concepts such as ‘Global Britain,’ whose precise implications for policy remained to be seen, and which were sufficiently flexible to allow a multitude of policy approaches. One implication of the latter was that, between June 2016 and January 2020, the future of the UK’s foreign policy after Brexit was particularly discursive; put another way, between the Brexit referendum and the UK’s actual withdrawal from the EU, post-Brexit Britain and its foreign policy were largely ‘imagined,’ though in ways which could have important material consequences.

Ideas are important features of foreign policy. They reveal themselves in the way in which foreign policy elites position their country internationally, envisage its role and status, and approach relations with other countries. This emphasis on perception is at the heart of Scott Brown’s analysis of post-Cold War policy towards China in the US and the EU, which this chapter takes as a broad analytical framework for its discussion of Britain’s China policy after the Brexit referendum.

Brown notes that, given that the implications of the rise of China have been substantially contested, an important factor in assessing other countries’ policy towards China is to ascertain how their policymakers perceive the rise of China and its impact. This emphasis on perceptions gives foreign policy actors and their agency a central role in the policymaking process, in contrast to approaches in International Relations (such as Power Transition Theory) which suggest that responses to China’s rise are structurally determined. Brown identifies the main post-Cold War perceptions of China’s rise in the US and EU as being either of threat or opportunity, developing this into a sixfold typology: military threat or military non-threat, economic threat or economic opportunity, and normative threat or political opportunity. This allows for multifaceted perceptions to develop alongside each other and consequently for multiple policy strands to coexist in response to the rise of China.

The empirical focus of Brown’s study is a comparison of perceptions of China in the US and EU after the end of the Cold War. Across the Atlantic, he suggests that there was a common ‘fundamental objective’ of ‘ensuring China’s peaceful emergence.’ At the same time, there were clear differences between the US and Europe, the former tending to perceive China more in terms of a threat than the latter. In the case of the UK, this accords with other studies which suggest that the UK has more
consistently seen China as (economic) opportunity rather than (security) threat.10

These perceptions are clearly dynamic and influenced by multiple factors. In this chapter, the focus will be on the changing perceptions which policymakers in the UK have formed about the relative balance between political, economic and security threat and opportunity which China might bring to the UK after Brexit. The chapter is based primarily on the analysis of policy papers, statements and speeches from the government, with some reference to relevant contributions to the debate from other parts of the ‘subsystem’ of policymaking such as parliamentary committees, think tanks and media. Several issues recur and serve as good indicators of shifts in the policy mood: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) proposed by China; attitudes towards trade and investment, especially investment in the UK by Chinese companies; human rights; and maritime politics in the South China Sea.

The chapter finds a range of perceptions in policy statements, from ideas that China offers important (and for some, necessary) economic opportunities for the UK after Brexit, or is an essential partner for the UK in global governance, to a growth in views of China as a challenge to the UK. These can be collated into three broad schools of thought about the impact of Brexit on China policy. First, the idea that Brexit is an opportunity for ‘Global Britain’ to develop deeper ties with China, in particular, to benefit from economic opportunities offered by China, including through some sort of free trade agreement (FTA). This view has been particularly prominent in China itself, but also echoed in some of the British debate. Second, the idea that Brexit presents a new challenge for London’s China policy as the UK will no longer have the policy options given by EU membership. This would relate to the ability to engage in a multi-layered approach to China, the safety in numbers on difficult issues and the more substantial lobbying clout that the EU enjoys. It could, therefore, be weaker and more vulnerable to Chinese lobbying on political issues, especially given the likely desire for Chinese investment or export markets. The third is that Brexit is neutral: China policy is mainly shaped by other trends such as the rise of China (with the contested perceptions of threat and opportunity that this brings), the changing approaches of ‘like-minded’ countries such as the US, Japan, Canada and the EU, developments in China itself, and the preferences of British politicians amid domestic debate about China.
In conclusion, the chapter suggests that the ideas of economic opportunity were strongest in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum, but diminished somewhat over time as security and normative concerns became more prominent and China policy became more contested through 2019. For the most part, it has been ‘non-Brexit’ factors relating to perceptions of developments in China which have had the greatest impact on the UK’s China policy, in contrast to the common tendency to look at every issue of British foreign policy through a Brexit lens.

The UK’s China Policy and the Brexit Referendum

The legacy of Britain’s colonial history, in particular in Hong Kong, has meant that UK-China relations have long been an important part of British foreign policy. In the run-up to 1997, dealing with Hong Kong dominated China policy, but after its return to Chinese sovereignty, Sino-British relations entered a new phase. This coincided with a growing sense of the significance of China’s rise and a general desire in the US and Europe to engage China and integrate it as much as possible into the post-Cold War international system, while continuing efforts to influence Chinese society and human rights in a more liberal direction. These dynamics were reflected in British policy towards China in the 2000s, which saw a growing emphasis on trade and investment ties, and a broadening of the relationship to incorporate engagement on global issues such as climate change and the promotion of deeper educational, cultural and scientific interactions. At the same time, human rights remained on London’s agenda. The hosting of the summer Olympics in Beijing and London in 2008 and 2012, respectively, reinforced the idea—at least in London—that a relationship of equals was emerging, and the government’s 2009 policy paper on China set out the direction for developing economic opportunities, while retaining space for attempts to influence Chinese behaviour.\textsuperscript{11} There was a positive start to relations under the coalition government in 2010, part of what Oliver Turner calls a ‘partial pivot to Asia.’\textsuperscript{12} However, the prime minister and deputy prime minister’s meeting with the Dalai Lama in 2012 put official high-level interactions with Beijing on hold for 18 months (though not with Hong Kong).\textsuperscript{13} After high-level exchanges were resumed with a ‘charm offensive’ from late 2013,\textsuperscript{14} relations intensified into 2015 and the UK’s positive response to the inauguration by Beijing of the Asian Infrastructure Investment
Bank (AIIB), followed by the establishment of a ‘comprehensive global strategic partnership for the 21st century’ during President Xi Jinping’s state visit to the UK in October 2015, which heralded the start of the so-called ‘golden era’ in bilateral ties.

This was the picture as the Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 approached. Coincidentally, the vote took place the day after the EU issued a new policy paper on China, its first for a decade. As with other elements of EU policymaking towards China, the UK’s membership of the EU had been an important factor in this paper, both in the inter-governmental discussions over the EU policy document and through the presence in the EU institutions of British officials. These dynamics of EU policymaking will inevitably change following the decision in the referendum that the UK should leave the EU.

Most existing analyses of the impact of the outcome of the referendum on the UK’s China policy begin by highlighting the uncertainty it has created for British foreign policy in general. Jie Yu also draws attention to the negative impact on Beijing’s engagement with the UK as a voice in the EU which tended to be supportive of Beijing’s approach on economic issues such as Market Economy Status under the WTO, high on the agenda in 2016. During the referendum campaign, the Chinese Government had made it clear it preferred an EU which included the UK. Moreover, the absence of the UK’s generally more liberal approach to economic policy questions may shift the EU towards a somewhat more protectionist approach to China, though that assumes that all other things are equal. In contrast, the broader (negative) shift in European perceptions of China over recent years may have more of an impact on the EU’s China policy than Brexit per se.

For the UK, another dominant feature of post-referendum analysis has been that China will play an important role in the likely intensification of the UK’s economic engagement beyond Europe, including under the auspices of ‘Global Britain.’ The positive response of the British Government to the BRI (discussed below) can be seen as an indication of this. Beyond the economic sphere, Champa Patel argues that it is unlikely the post-Brexit UK will be a leading voice in human rights promotion and protection. Meanwhile, in advocating a close post-Brexit alignment between the UK and EU in foreign and security policy, Malcolm Chalmers focuses mostly on challenges in the broader European neighbourhood, with only passing reference to the UK needing to be careful in any ‘attempts to pursue a more independent, and assertive, stance
concerning major Eurasian states, such as Russia, China and Iran. Kerry Brown offers the most developed analysis in relation to China, arguing that the new challenges and uncertainties brought by Brexit heighten the need for the UK to work out more systematically and strategically how to respond to the growing need to engage a rising (or risen) China. Other recent research has looked at the mixed nature of public perceptions of China in the UK, showing that a preference for Brexit is correlated with more negative perceptions of China. Meanwhile, Paul Irwin Crookes and John Farnell argue that the opportunities for closer economic partnership with China after Brexit will be constrained by a range of political factors, from views in the EU and US to the growing controversy over China policy in the UK.

Brexit and the China Opportunity

Building on these existing studies on the impact of Brexit on the UK’s China policy, this chapter turns to examine the statements of British policymakers themselves in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. A good place to start is the speech by then minister of state for trade and industry, Lord Price, delivered on 8 July 2016 in Shanghai, shortly after the Brexit referendum. Price set an upbeat tone, stating that ‘through the new trade deals we now have the power to strike across the globe, the UK has the ability to create a second Elizabethan Golden Age of trade and investment.’ He sought to reassure businesses about the impact of Brexit and welcomed the continued commitment to investment in the UK expressed by Chinese investors; on trade, he set out as the priority ‘a new [trade] deal with the EU,’ along with the prospect of a ‘new Commonwealth trading pact.’ He also noted that the Chinese Ministry of Commerce had been quoted as ‘saying they wanted to do a free trade deal with the UK.’ Similar themes were expounded by the new chancellor (finance minister) on a visit to China later that month for the meeting of the G20 finance ministers. Government comments on an agreement later that year to increase flights between the UK and China made clear reference to the agreement’s contribution to building a ‘Global Britain’ after Brexit, with the transport secretary talking about the need to ‘continue competing on the global stage,’ and his deputy saying that Post-Brexit, improving trade links with key markets such as China will boost exports and tourism, as well as helping create jobs and strengthening
our local economies. This deal demonstrates that the UK is very much open for business.  

A similar idea was developed in more detail in comments by senior members of the government in advance of the eighth UK-China Economic and Financial Dialogue held in London on 10 November 2016. The Prime Minister, Theresa May, said that the government would ‘build a truly global Britain that is open for business’ after Brexit and that she was ‘excited about the opportunities for expanding trade and investment between [the UK and China].’ The chancellor referred to ‘mutual benefits’ and being ‘natural partners.’ A key outcome of that dialogue was agreement on a ‘stock connect’ arrangement between London and Shanghai, to facilitate trading on each other’s markets.

As far as post-Brexit policy towards China is concerned, these early statements from senior government figures reflect a perception that engagement with the Chinese economy and businesses in trade and investment would offer economic opportunities for the UK. This was not a new message. It was a key part of the ‘golden era’ argument from the pre-referendum government, and given the financial and economic responsibilities of the ministers cited above, the first to visit China after the referendum, a continued advocacy of commercial engagement is not surprising.

This advocacy was reflected in the response to the BRI, which the previous government had broadly welcomed as an opportunity for commercial collaboration. This was even though the UK looked to be well beyond the original geographic scope of the BRI, which in some formulations extended to Central and Eastern Europe but not Western Europe, and in other versions linked up to Germany (Duisburg) and ports in the Netherlands, but not beyond. The UK’s response to BRI, however, was based less on geography and more on the idea that it created new opportunities for collaboration between Chinese and British companies, mainly in third markets. London’s desire to join the AIIB in 2015 had reflected some similar thinking.

The emphasis was also on opportunities when new Foreign Office minister of state, Alok Sharma, visited China in August 2016. He evinced a desire to work with China on global issues as well as developing further economic and cultural ties. This was an approach which appeared to reflect a perception of China not just as an economic opportunity, but a ‘political opportunity’ (to use Scott Brown’s term) as a partner in
dealing with global issues. At the same time, the government continued to push other existing priorities with regard to China, for example, in highlighting concerns over human rights. When the 23rd round of UK-China human rights dialogue was held in October 2016, Sharma commented that ‘[p]romoting respect for human rights is a fundamental part of British diplomacy.’ The public reports of other areas of bilateral relations, such as the ‘high-level people-to-people dialogue’ and associated healthcare deals reached in December 2016, did not specifically dwell on Brexit, though it was a theme of parts of the discussions.

The context for these developments was a new post-referendum government led by Theresa May from 13 July 2016. The immediate China-related issue had been speculation that she would shift course on China policy, prompted mainly by her decision to review the Hinkley Point C nuclear power project in which a Chinese SOE had invested. The project went ahead soon afterwards, nonetheless, and while there may have been some cooling in tone when compared to the Cameron and Osborne years, the broad approach of engaging China looked set to continue. May visited China briefly for the G20 summit in September 2016, and by the end of 2016 the prime minister had publicly ‘reaffirmed her commitment to developing a genuine strategic partnership in this ‘golden era’ of bilateral relations,’ in a meeting with Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi where the two governments agreed to increase cooperation on security issues (such as in Afghanistan) and on climate change, themes which resonate with the idea of ‘political opportunity’ more than ‘normative threat’ or ‘security challenge.’ However, other reports suggested that there was frustration with May’s Government in China, where officials were reported as taking a ‘wait-and-see attitude following the Brexit vote,’ with some slowing in the development of a planned London-Shanghai stock exchange link. In her January 2017 speech to the Republican Party conference in the US May talked of a ‘more assertive’ China, a country with ‘little tradition of democracy, liberty and human rights,’ implying—at least for the US audience—a perception of China as both a potential security threat and a normative challenge.

May addressed Brexit more directly in her speech at Davos in January 2017. She said that the UK would ‘step up to a new leadership role as the strongest and most forceful advocate for business, free markets and free trade anywhere in the world,’ and painted a picture of opportunity now that the British people had ‘chose[n] to build a truly Global Britain.’
May described Britain’s ‘history and culture’ as ‘profoundly internationalist’ and Britain as a ‘great, global, trading nation that seeks to trade with countries not just in Europe but beyond Europe too.’ She noted that discussions on future trade ties had already begun with Australia, New Zealand and India, and that ‘countries including China, Brazil, and the Gulf States have already expressed their interest in striking trade deals with us.’ China was therefore presented as one of a number of places offering economic opportunity, but not a particular priority, and as the more active partner in seeking a trade deal with the UK, not the other way round.

Celebrating the 45th anniversary of Sino-British ambassadorial ties in March 2017, Alok Sharma—as might be expected for such an occasion—highlighted opportunities in trade, as well as global challenges such as terrorism, opportunities for the bilateral Infrastructure Alliance to ‘build the capacity of third countries’ and the space to work together in tackling ‘global health issues.’ He presented a picture of China as an economic and political opportunity. The idea of China as ‘military non-threat’ (to use Scott Brown’s term) could further be deduced from the new ‘high-level security dialogues,’ the second of which was held in London in February 2017, focusing on terrorism, extremism, organised crime and cybersecurity, among other non-traditional security issues.

The government’s messages of seeking economic opportunity and cooperation on global issues were not limited to interactions with China. The May Government also placed emphasis on developing ties with India and with Japan, where the importance of Japanese investment was highlighted, along with the message of continuity through Brexit. The approach to China was, therefore, reflective not just of a perception of the relationship with China as such, but also a consequence of a more general approach to the UK’s foreign policy in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum.

However, one China-related initiative, the BRI, continued to be used by the government to deliver a message of opportunity. In September 2016, shortly after she became Prime Minister, May had been invited by the Chinese Government to attend the first Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, to be held in May 2017. In the end, this was attended by the chancellor, whose speech highlighted the potential opportunities from greater trade, and the contribution of the BRI to achieving that goal. It is worth quoting extracts from that speech at some length:
I commend President Xi […] for setting in train such a bold and visionary project. This initiative is truly ground-breaking in the scale of its ambition … spanning more than 65 countries, across four continents … and it has the potential to raise the living standards of 70% of the global population. […] Britain, lying at the Western end of the Belt and Road, is a natural partner in this endeavour […]

And as we embark on a new chapter in our history, as we leave the European Union … we want to maintain a close and open trading partnership with our European neighbours … but at the same time, it is our ambition to secure free trade agreements around the world with new partners and old allies alike. Our ambition is for more trade, not less. China clearly shares this ambition … and I support President Xi’s target to have mutually beneficial Free Trade Agreements in place with 40% of Belt and Road countries by the end of this year […]

China and the UK have a long and rich trading history […]As China drives forward the Belt and Road Initiative from the East … we in Britain are a natural partner in the West … standing ready to work with all partner countries to make a success of this initiative.50

In other words, Brexit and the BRI came at a time when both could be used as rhetorical opportunities to strengthen economic ties between the UK and China. The Chinese response to this including labelling the Hinkley Point nuclear power station, the UK-China Infrastructure Academy and the ‘Golden Era: Sino-UK Maritime Trade and Investment Forum’ as BRI projects.51

The evidence submitted in spring 2017 by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) inquiry on relations with China gives a good snapshot of official policy towards China at that point in time.52 The overall message is that China offered an important economic opportunity for the UK, albeit with some challenges in areas such as market access; that China was a ‘key partner’ for the UK on a range of global issues, and that the UK would continue to work with the Chinese Government in ways that could shape and influence its position on global affairs; and that the UK could and did ‘promote’ human rights in China. Policy was presented as being driven by China’s re-emergence ‘as a global economic and political great power,’ characterised as ‘one of the defining geostrategic developments of this century.’ Only the last paragraph of the conclusion of the FCO’s evidence refers to Brexit, saying that after leaving the EU, the UK ‘will continue to develop our relationship with China, as part of our
“Global Britain” agenda.’ In other words, this document sent a message of strong continuity in a positive policy approach towards China.

This tone continued through 2017. In July, the Princess Royal (daughter of the Queen) visited China and launched a ‘Spirit of Youth campaign.’ The same month, the government announced record levels of inward investment in the year 2016–2017 (something which was highlighted to dispel criticism that Brexit would reduce the UK’s attractiveness as a destination for investment). The US was the source for most investment projects, a total of 577 out of 2,200, but China (including Hong Kong) was a clear second, with 160 projects, ahead of France, India, Australia and New Zealand. Later that month, however, the government announced a tighter ‘screening mechanism’ for foreign investments in the UK. While this covered all such investments, it was generally interpreted as being a response to growing investment from China, which had been attracting increased attention.53 This prompted a public intervention from the Chinese ambassador in London, saying that ‘Chinese investment in the UK is an opportunity not a threat,’ 54 language which explicitly picks up on the opportunity/threat binary, in response to what appeared to be something of a shift in balance in the British Government’s position on investment from China. As discussed further below, the domestic debate in the UK on this issue grew in the subsequent months, with a particular focus on specific areas considered as ‘critical national infrastructure.’55

That summer, the UK publicly supported the EU statement on Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo (as it did with the EU statement on International Human Rights Day in December 2017). It also commented on developments in Hong Kong twenty years after the handover, including the statement that the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 remained ‘valid,’ something that appeared to have been rejected by a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson.56 In August, as the first minister to visit China after the June 2017 general election, Foreign Office junior minister Mark Field described China as a ‘key global player and an essential partner for the UK in many areas, not least trade and investment and foreign policy,’ while the FCO noted that his talks in Beijing would also cover human rights.57 In October 2017, two Chinese warships visited London, a rare example of bilateral military diplomacy. Commenting on the visit, the Chinese ambassador tapped into the perception of shared opportunity, noting that ‘it is our shared responsibility to safeguard world peace and security.’58
Meanwhile, economic opportunity and engagement continued to be strong features of the UK’s China policy. Even as Beijing’s industrial strategy, ‘Made in China 2025,’ was beginning to attract more critical voices elsewhere in the US and parts of Europe, the British and Chinese governments organised a summit on how they could ‘work together to reach their respective goals in the manufacturing sector, in research and development and on flagship initiatives—Made in China 2025 and the UK Industrial Strategy.’59 Other areas of opportunity were promoted in the next people-to-people dialogue, held in the UK in December 2017.60 A new strategy for science and innovation collaboration and partnerships was agreed and described as supporting British industrial strategy, driving growth and jointly tackling global challenges.61 At the subsequent Strategic Economic Dialogue, Chinese banks were given direct access to foreign exchange markets in London, in what was described in the official press release as part of a ‘new phase in golden era relations.’62 These developments were all about China as an opportunity for the UK, primarily economic in nature, but with some political and even security dimensions.

**CHANGING PERCEPTIONS: A SHIFTING BALANCE**

The next major statement of the UK Government’s approach to China was the visit by Prime Minister Theresa May in January 2018. In something of a contrast to the developments of the previous few years, her remarks were somewhat more studied and less effusive in tone, though still positive overall. In comments delivered on 31 January 2018 alongside Chinese Premier Li Keqiang,63 May described the UK and China as ‘global powers with a global outlook,’ mentioning a range of issues which the two would address together, from North Korea to aviation security. She highlighted ‘complementary strengths’ of the two economies, along with their goal to work together for an ‘ambitious future trading relationship.’ However, there was also a new emphasis on language about ‘rules-based’ approaches to global issues. In advance of and during the visit, the issue which attracted most attention was whether May would sign a formal memorandum of understanding with the Chinese Government on the BRI, something which was to become a key indicator of policy intentions towards China.64 This reluctance suggested that there were limits to the UK Government’s willingness to embrace the BRI, but it also reflected a shift in the wider debate over the initiative, with concern
that the BRI might undermine elements of what was understood to be the existing international order. The compromise May reached was not to sign the MoU and to highlight a desire for the BRI to follow ‘international standards,’ while still welcoming ‘the opportunities provided by [BRI] to further prosperity and sustainable development across Asia and the wider world’ and reiterating that the UK was a ‘natural partner’ for the BRI with ‘unrivalled expertise.’ The reference to standards was reiterated in a call between May and Xi Jinping in April 2018, where it was reported the two had agreed to ‘continue to work together to identify how best we can cooperate on the Belt and Road initiative across the region and ensure it meets international standards.’

This theme, along with regular references to the ‘rules-based international system,’ became a prominent meme in the UK’s China policy during 2018 (and the subject of an inquiry by the FAC, whose findings were published in April 2019).

May’s comments alongside Li also referred explicitly to Brexit, saying that it would leave Britain ‘free to strike our own trade deals’ and highlighting a joint UK-China trade and investment review which would begin working towards new trade arrangements, also commenting that the UK would become ‘ever-more outward-looking.’ This theme was developed in a more detailed statement to a Chinese audience of what a ‘Global Britain’ might look like after the UK left the EU, delivered by May’s deputy, David Lidington, in Beijing in 2018. The speech contained familiar ideas about the UK being ‘ever-more outward-looking’ and ‘free to strike our own comprehensive trade deals with nations around the world, including, of course, China … while continuing to work together with our international partners to tackle head-on the global challenges we will face’ (ellipsis in original), though the speech made clear that the future relationship with the EU would be the top priority for the UK. Lidington also said that being ‘stronger abroad’ would mean that China would ‘remain an increasingly important partner to the UK’ (sic). He concluded by saying that the government was ‘fully committed to our [Sino-British] Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the twenty-first century, addressing rising global challenges; building thriving economies of the future; and enhancing further the already strong links between our people and our businesses.’ Overall, this was a message of economic opportunity first and foremost, but also of some political opportunity, both of which it was suggested would be enhanced by the UK’s global vision and flexibility after Brexit. Similarly, positive discourse about
the economic opportunities was promoted through 2018 by Secretary of State for International Trade, Liam Fox, who highlighted, for example, that the UK was the leading European investor in China.\textsuperscript{68}

Not long after May’s January 2018 visit, however, a sour note had entered the bilateral relationship. The UK Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson, said on a visit to Australia in February 2018 that HMS Sutherland would return from Australia by sailing through the South China Sea, that the British navy had a ‘right to do that,’ and that it was important to ‘assert our values’ in the South China Sea. This apparent move to assert ‘freedom of navigation’ in the contested waters of the South China Sea prompted a modest response from Beijing, whose spokesperson said that there was ‘no problem of freedom of navigation or overflight in the South China Sea. The situation there is also improving. We hope that non-regional countries can respect the efforts made by regional ones.’\textsuperscript{69} The announcement by Williamson was followed by several ‘freedom of navigation’ sailings through the South China Sea in 2018.\textsuperscript{70} The initial Chinese response was moderate when compared to its response to similar actions by the US, but the intensity of Beijing’s criticism grew with further such naval operations, in particular after HMS Albion passed through the Paracel Islands on 31 August 2018.\textsuperscript{71} In February 2019, Williamson gave a widely-reported speech at the Royal United Services Institute in London, which effectively identified China as a revisionist power which implicitly posed a security threat to the UK. This marked a shift in ministerial narrative towards ‘military threat’ from China, and was met with a strong response from Beijing, in the form of the postponement of a visit to China by the chancellor. Williamson also brought Brexit into his comments, suggesting that a post-Brexit ‘Global Britain’ could be a truly global player again, with permanent military presence in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{72}

Another controversial set of issues which began to move up the agenda and demonstrated shifting perceptions of China in London through 2018 were related to digital and cyber. Highlighting the opportunities in this area, minister Matt Hancock spoke in February 2018 about the ‘transformational power of new digital technology to make this golden era even more golden,’ referring to a number of relevant collaborations between British and Chinese companies, and thanking Huawei for its continued commitment to the UK, including ‘3 billion pounds of procurement.’ While this emphasised the economic opportunities from digital engagement with China, Hancock also hinted at ‘normative threat’ (or normative
difference), saying that China and the UK had different views about data protection and intellectual property. Nevertheless, his response to this was essentially to accept the differences, saying that ‘while we ask China to respect these protections, we also respect China, and the progress we have seen in mutual understanding.’

In parallel, through 2018 there was growing debate over Huawei’s presence in the UK, and in particular, whether that could be expanded into the provision of equipment for the development of 5G networks. The arguments that this led to about how to deal with the economic opportunity and potential security risks have been covered well elsewhere.

In short, the voices highlighting security risks became more significant through 2018, and the apparent leaking of a confidential decision by the National Security Council to allow Huawei to engage in the UK’s 5G network was followed by the sacking of Williamson as defence secretary in March 2019. With the US subsequently engaging in sustained public lobbying of London not to use Huawei equipment for 5G, this issue stayed on the agenda into 2020 (see below).

Meanwhile, in other areas, the perception that engaging with China brought opportunity continued to be promoted. British ministers cited the growth of the Chinese middle class, the changing nature of manufacturing and the BRI as bringing economic opportunity to the UK. A more forceful statement of these opportunities came from the minister for international trade Baroness Fairhead in May 2018. Ahead of a visit to Xi’an, she argued that the BRI ‘offers the UK huge opportunities,’ particularly focusing on the financial sector, saying that ‘we intend to position London as the premier global centre for funding and facilitating BRI projects.’ During her visit, she described the UK as ‘now the most westerly point of the Belt and Road, with the first train from Yiwu arriving in London in 2017.’ As an indication of the UK’s desire (or at least the Treasury’s desire) to engage with the BRI, the chancellor appointed Douglas Flint, former chair of HSBC, as his ‘Belt and Road Envoy.’ In terms of policy follow up, a big focus was UK-China cooperation in infrastructure in third markets, including through the bilateral Infrastructure Alliance and Academy. A number of joint seminars were held focusing on specific third countries, from East Africa to Central Asia. For example, a UK-China seminar on financing infrastructure to deliver economic growth and respond to security challenges in Afghanistan was held on 25 July 2017, with representatives from the ADB and AIIB.
conferences in Shenzhen on sustainability along the Belt and Road, in November 2016 and November 2018. All of this was a sharp contrast to the growing US rhetoric of BRI as a form of ‘debt-trap diplomacy.’

On her May 2018 visit to Xi’an, Baroness Fairhead also referred in familiar terms to Brexit, saying that she wanted ‘to reassure all of you that we’re not turning away from the world. Indeed, far from it - we are [a] naturally globally-facing nation, and that is how we intend to stay. We will continue to work actively with our friends and partners in China and across the world.’ Writing in Chinese media outlet Caixin ahead of a visit to China in June 2018, the chancellor linked Global Britain to the idea of the UK as ‘a committed and reliable partner and a proponent of open trade and free markets,’ with a particular emphasis on financial services. Revisiting China in July 2018, FCO minister Mark Field’s programme was described by the FCO as ‘reflecting the breadth and depth of business, investment and science and innovation links between the UK and China.’ Other examples of economic engagement during this period included in designing smart cities, the dairy sector, healthcare and digital solutions to healthcare challenges, innovation, the simplification of visa application processes for Chinese students and (even) sales of military radar equipment.

At the China International Import Expo in Shanghai in November 2018, British companies were reported as securing GBP 2 billion of deals. The secretary of state leading the delegation, Liam Fox, spoke in upbeat terms about Brexit and the opportunities it offered for UK-China trade ties:

And as the UK leaves the European Union in March, we will be able to fashion our own independent trade policy for the first time in more than four decades, and speak with our own voice at international bodies like the World Trade Organisation. For our exit from the EU is not a retreat into isolationism. In fact, it is quite the opposite. What we will be is a truly ‘Global Britain’ - reaching out to our partners like China across the world to build prosperity, stability and security. And we will use this opportunity to further strengthen the ‘Golden Era’ of trade that the UK and China are now embarked on.

Over the same period, there was also a steady stream of public statements from London about human rights in China, as well as a broadening of engagement with China on the ‘values agenda’ to include issues such
as modern slavery and wildlife trafficking. After the appointment of Jeremy Hunt as foreign secretary to replace Boris Johnson in July 2018, there was something of a shift in tone. Johnson had not visited China as foreign secretary, but Hunt paid a visit in his first month in the job. This visit featured much of the ‘political opportunity’ agenda of cooperation on global issues, but also gave a higher profile to the UK’s human rights concerns, symbolised by a meeting with the wives of weiquan (‘rights protection’) lawyers who had been detained by the authorities, and publicly bringing up a difficult consular case. A balance between ‘normative difference’ and ‘political opportunity’ in the approach to China was reinforced by Hunt in his press conference, when he said that ‘China and Britain have very different systems, but we do have a lot in common.’ Hunt also referred in positive but non-committal terms to a free trade agreement, saying that ‘the offer made by Foreign Minister Wang to open discussions about a possible free trade deal done between Britain and China post-Brexit [was] something we welcome and we said that we will explore.’ By October 2018, though, the growing number of reports about mass detention camps in Xinjiang led Hunt to confirm that British diplomats in China judged the reports to be ‘broadly accurate.’ By the end of the year, Hunt publicly accused China of ‘significant and widespread cyber intrusions against the UK and allies…, targeting trade secrets and economies around the world.’ The tone of statements of China policy was shifting.

**Growing Contestation over China Policy**

All of these issues continued to feature in British policy towards China through the first half of 2019 and the resignation of Theresa May and her replacement by Boris Johnson as prime minister in July. The parts of the government responsible for economic relations, in particular the Treasury and the Department for International Trade, highlighted the economic opportunities—and actual business deals—from engagement with China. However, the idea that China posed some degree of security threat or challenge to the so-called ‘rules-based international system’ was the dominant perception of the parts of the government responsible for military and security issues, and its impact on the policy debate grew. The FCO and the British Embassy in Beijing continued to highlight the need and scope for cooperation with China on global issues, while giving greater prominence over time to human rights concerns, in particular in
relation to Xinjiang. Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt was one of the few European foreign ministers to comment publicly on the ‘30th anniversary of Tiananmen Square’ in June 2019. Developments in Hong Kong added to the debate in the second quarter of 2019, though these have had something of their own dynamic to them and deserve separate analysis. The case of Huawei received growing attention, partly because it highlighted that debates about China as economic opportunity or security threat could not easily be kept separate. The maritime politics of the South China Sea also continued to feature from time to time, with the UK joining with France and Germany to express concern in late August about possible ‘insecurity and instability in the region.’

It was these issues, rather than the impact of Brexit, which dominated the growing debates about the UK’s China policy during 2019, even as the domestic controversy over how to ‘deliver Brexit’ intensified. Nonetheless, the uncertainty over the UK’s post-EU future and its policy towards the EU meant that looking elsewhere for new economic opportunities remained an important feature of government policy statements, though this had anyway been a significant part of British policy for some years, including towards China. Instead, China policy was being driven primarily by developments in China and wider shifts in perception about these developments, including the debates in the US and across the EU.

The FAC’s April 2019 report on China and the FCO’s response to that report give a picture of the issues. The FAC described the relationship with China as a ‘key issue in debates about post-Brexit foreign policy,’ though there was little discussion of Brexit in the report itself, except at the end where one witness was recorded saying that ‘the UK’s voice in China will be all the smaller as it leaves the EU.’ Other witnesses were reported noting that, ‘regardless of their own views on Brexit, strong priority must be given to the UK working with allies, including the EU, because a collective voice will often carry greater weight with China than the UK’s voice alone.’ The main conclusion of the report, though, was really about China, namely that the country was increasingly posing a threat to the ‘rules-based international system,’ and that the UK should work with other Western countries to counter this. Responding to the report in June, the FCO’s response was cautious and carefully balanced, though the language on the BRI, for example, was less positive than some of the government’s previous statements.

The FAC’s position was reiterated, in somewhat starker terms, in a subsequent report on ‘defending democracy in an age of autocracies.’
This was mainly targeted at China and Russia, and identified a possible threat to academic freedom in the UK from political pressure from the Chinese party-state, with a few anecdotal cases given as examples. This brought the issue of educational exchanges into the political debate, a potentially sensitive move given the scale of educational linkages between the UK and China and the benefits to the UK’s higher education sector, with over 100,000 Chinese students in the UK.\textsuperscript{106} The ‘autocracies’ report also commented on Hong Kong, recommending that the FCO should rethink the participation of British judges on Hong Kong’s Court of Final Appeal and that the UK should grant ‘residency’ to British National (Overseas) passport holders from Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{107}

These interventions by the FAC indicate a greater degree of domestic political attention being paid to the UK’s China policy and a higher level of contestation over how the government should approach Sino-British relations. This contestation continued through the second half of 2019, particularly in response to the escalating unrest in Hong Kong and the issue of Huawei and 5G. The situation in Xinjiang also received plenty of media coverage in the UK and was raised publicly by the British Government on numerous occasions. For example, in October, London’s representative read a statement at the UN on behalf of 23 countries expressing concern about ‘credible reports’ of the mass detention of Uighurs.\textsuperscript{108} Other human rights issues were raised publicly during the same period.\textsuperscript{109}

Meanwhile, the government continued to highlight commercial opportunities from China and the growth in trade and investment, with annual bilateral trade in goods with mainland China surpassing GBP 70 billion for the first time in 2019. The visit in June 2019 by Chinese Vice Premier Hu Chunhua—postponed due to the disagreements over the South China Sea—was used by the government to announce more than GBP 500 million in deals between British and Chinese companies.\textsuperscript{110} In August, minister for trade and investment Graham Stuart led a 200-strong delegation of businesses in technology, manufacturing, transport and education, to ‘champion the UK’s global leadership in smart technology, and attend the UK’s flagship pavilion at the Horticulture Expo in Beijing, where the UK was showcasing its leadership in clean energy and sustainable development.’\textsuperscript{111} The post-Brexit investment regime and attitude towards Chinese companies (beyond Huawei) remained uncertain,\textsuperscript{112} though the bid by a Chinese company for the floundering British
Steel again brought out the range of arguments about Chinese investment in the UK. Meanwhile, the commercial implications of Brexit for members of the British Chamber of Commerce in China featured in its survey released in late 2019, with the conclusion that Brexit would have a ‘marginal effect on their existing operations in China’ and that the ‘future benefits of a possible UK-China free trade agreement (FTA) would not have a significant impact on their current operations.’

By 2019, though, the official references to a possible FTA between the UK and China which had featured in early post-Brexit discussions had all but disappeared, and it looked as if other trade agreements would be a higher priority for London after Brexit, for example with Japan or the US. Indeed, in his first big speech after Brexit, the prime minister did not mention China among the countries with which the UK wanted to do free trade deals, though he did mention the beef exports and the scope for selling lamb to China.

China had featured to some extent in the foreign policy discussions during campaigning for the general election in December 2019, including the question of right of abode for people from Hong Kong. In a pre-election debate between the foreign policy spokespersons of the major political parties, held at Chatham House, the issues of Hong Kong, human rights and Xinjiang were raised, and the first question asked was where the UK should be in relationship to ‘three great powers,’ the US, China and the EU.

In the early days of the new post-election Boris Johnson Government, the most fraught issue relating to China was the Huawei/5G decision, which ended up being one of the final foreign policy decisions made by the government before the UK left the EU on 31 January 2020. As noted above, the debate had grown in intensity during 2018 and 2019, with the UK’s earlier economics-driven engagement with Huawei (which dated back more than a decade) increasingly challenged by voices concerned about the possible security implications of a key role for Huawei (the apparent world leader in the provision of 5G hardware) in the UK’s 5G network. The decision that emerged in January was little different in principle (though more detail was given) from the decisions which at the time were reported as having been made internally by May’s Government: in essence, a carefully-managed approach, which gave a somewhat-restricted role for Huawei in 5G. High-profile American lobbying against Huawei—led right at the top of the administration by Secretary of State Pompeo (and even the President)—had been stronger
and more persistent than any Chinese lobbying in favour of its company (delivered mainly by the Chinese ambassador in London). The British Government sought to find a middle way between the two, though the January decision continued to prompt criticism from a number of high-profile Conservative Party MPs. Brexit itself does not seem to have been a direct factor in this decision, in spite of the coincidence of timing. Moreover, given the lack of consensus across the EU about how to deal with Huawei, there was not any common EU position with which the UK could have aligned. In July 2020, however, the British Government changed its position following increased pressure from the US and new American sanctions against Huawei, and in the context of a much more critical mood in the UK’s policy debate about China. The government announced that from the end of 2020, telecoms operators would not be allowed to buy any 5G equipment from Huawei and that Huawei equipment would be removed from the UK’s 5G network by 2027.

**Conclusion**

This discussion of the UK’s China policy between June 2016 and January 2020 reveals a range of perceptions of China, from those which identified economic or political opportunity to those that saw normative or security threat. In the period from the Brexit referendum to the UK’s departure from the EU, the relative weight of these perceptions changed as the initial government emphases on economic opportunity (and even a possible free trade agreement) and on political opportunity gave way to a greater balance between the economic potential and security and human rights concerns. In the latter phase of the period under study, the UK’s China policy became increasingly contested, not least because the Huawei/5G issue brought to the surface the challenges of reconciling conflicting perceptions of the impact of China’s rise. The primary driver behind these shifts in policy does not appear to have been Brexit, but the UK’s response to developments in China and to the debates about those developments in the UK and elsewhere. In a similar vein, the impact of Covid-19 on the UK’s China policy may end up being more significant than Brexit.

It was in the area of economic policy that Brexit appears to have been most salient. The BRI served as a good example of an issue which drove perceptions in at least part of the UK Government that engagement with China offered significant new economic opportunities, and that grasping
those opportunities was more important and relevant given Brexit. This is consistent with the general narrative developed by London in dealing with the implications of its departure from the EU, namely to stress that the UK would remain as open, or even become more open, to international trade and investment, and that China would be one of many important partners in this regard. However, as noted above, while the UK Government sought to boost exports to China as much as possible during this period, it remained cautious about the possibility of a free trade agreement. Meanwhile, the question of how to manage Chinese investment became more controversial.\textsuperscript{124}

In other areas, it was developments in China and perceptions of them in the UK and the US and EU which drove policy towards China more than Brexit itself. It could be argued that in appropriating the post-Brexit imaginary of ‘Global Britain’ in the cause of a strengthened British military presence ‘East of Suez,’ and doing so in a way which painted China as a normative and security threat, politicians such as Gavin Williamson instrumentalised Brexit in the service of an agenda which was driven by considerations other than Brexit. Generally, though, in the spectra between political opportunity or normative threat and military threat or non-threat, Brexit did not feature as a key factor in shaping UK Government perceptions of China. The examples cited in this chapter also show that the argument that Brexit could reduce the space for the UK to raise human rights issues has not been borne out in the case of China policy.

In conclusion, to return to the typology of threats and opportunities developed by Scott Brown, this chapter shows a complex and shifting picture in the perceptions of China expressed by British policymakers between the Brexit referendum and Brexit itself. In the economic sphere, China was clearly seen primarily as an opportunity, with the only potential ‘threat’ coming from over-reliance on Chinese investment in the UK (though with low investment stocks that point could still be some way off). On global issues, there was much in the government’s rhetoric which described China as a political opportunity, an important and essential partner in dealing with global challenges. At the same time, there was a recognition of ‘normative difference’ and some concerns about possible ‘normative threat’ in international standards in the economic sphere and on the more political ‘values agenda.’ These concerns became more significant over time. This did not go as far as indicating any direct ‘military threat’ from China, though the idea of ‘security threat’ may be
more useful here in picking up on a wider set of challenges—from cyber-attacks to challenges to international institutions and norms—which were perceived to emanate from China. In sum, in the period after the Brexit referendum, it was developments in China and the way they were interpreted in the UK, and not Brexit, that had the biggest impact on the changing trajectory of the UK's China policy.

Notes

1. The paper does not therefore cover the impact of Covid-19, which as of April 2020 looks as if it could have a notable influence on the UK's China policy.
2. Richard G. Whitman, ‘The UK’s European Diplomatic Strategy for Brexit and Beyond,’ International Affairs 95, no. 2 (2019): 383–404; Thomas Raines, ‘Five Foreign Policy Questions for the UK’s Next Prime Minister,’ Chatham House Expert Comment, 18 June 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/five-foreign-policy-questions-uk-s-next-prime-minister. All weblinks were last accessed 22 April 2020.
3. However, ‘Global Britain’ does draw on earlier notions of the UK as a global power and more recent foreign policy concepts such as the UK as a ‘global hub’ deployed by William Hague as Foreign Secretary. I am grateful to one of the participants in the workshop at Nottingham University for this comment.
4. Xiaoyu Pu, ‘Controversial Identity of a Rising China,’ The Chinese Journal of International Politics 10, no. 2 (2017): 131–149.
5. Scott A.W. Brown, Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
6. Brown, 14.
7. Brown, 5 (Table 1).
8. Brown, 5–7.
9. Brown, 6.
10. Shaun Breslin, ‘UK-China Relations in the Context of Brexit: Economics Still in Command,’ China International Studies 6 (2017): 61–73.
11. Scott A. W. Brown, ‘Free Trade, Yes; Ideology, Not So Much: The UK’s Shifting China Policy 2010–16,’ Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies 8, no. 1 (2018): 92–126.
12. Oliver Turner, ‘Subcontracting, Facilitating and Qualities of Regional Power: The UK’s Partial Pivot to Asia,’ Asia Europe Journal 17 (2019): 211–226.
13. Tim Summers, ‘UK-China Relations: Navigating a Changing World,’ in Mapping Europe-China Relations a Bottom-Up Approach, ed.
Mikko Huotari et al. (European Think-Tank Network on China, 2015), https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/ETNC%20Report%20-%20Mapping%20Europe-China%20Relations%20A%20Bottom-Up%20Approach%20-%20October%202015.pdf. For discussion of the point on Hong Kong, see Tim Summers, ‘British Policy Toward Hong Kong and Its Political Reform,’ Issues & Studies 52, no. 4 (2016), https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/10.1142/S1013251116500132.

14. Breslin, ‘UK-China Relations in the Context of Brexit: Economics Still in Command.’

15. ‘Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Elements for a New EU Strategy on China,’ European Commission Executive Summary (Brussels: High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 22 June 2016), http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/joint_communication_to_the_european_parliament_and_the_council_elements_for_a_new_eu_strategy_on_china.pdf.

16. Tim Summers, ‘Brexit: Implications for EU-China Relations,’ Chatham House Research Paper, May 2017, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/brexit-implications-eu-china-relations.

17. Jie Yu, ‘After Brexit: Risks and Opportunities to EU-China Relations,’ Global Policy 8, no. 4 (2017): 109–114.

18. Summers, ‘Brexit: Implications for EU-China Relations.’

19. Yu, ‘After Brexit: Risks and Opportunities to EU-China Relations’; Peter Harris, ‘China in British Politics: Western Unexceptionalism in the Shadow of China’s Rise,’ The Chinese Journal of International Politics 10, no. 3 (2017): 241–267.

20. Champa Patel, ‘Human Rights in the International System,’ IPPR Progressive Review 25, no. 1 (2018): 7–15.

21. Malcolm Chalmers, ‘UK Foreign and Security Policy after Brexit,’ RUSI Briefing Paper (Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, January 2017), 7, https://www.rusi.org/sites/default/files/201701_bp_uk_foreign_and_security_policy_after_brexit_v4.pdf. Chalmers has since noted that the UK remains ‘closer to France and Germany on most key foreign and security policy issues, and more distant from the Trump administration in the US’; Malcolm Chalmers, ‘Taking Control: Rediscovering the Centrality of National Interest in UK Foreign and Security Policy,’ RUSI Whitehall Report (Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 20 February 2020), https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/202002_whr_taking_control_web.pdf.

22. Kerry Brown, The Future of UK-China Relations (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2019).
23. Wilfred M. Chow, Enze Han, and Xiaojun Li, ‘Brexit Identities and British Public Opinion on China,’ *International Affairs* 95, no. 6 (2019): 1369–1387.

24. Paul Irwin Crookes and John Farnell, ‘The UK’s Strategic Partnership with China Beyond Brexit: Economic Opportunities Facing Political Constraints,’ *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 48, no. 1 (2019): 106–121.

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36. See also the British Ambassador’s speech on China and greening global financial flows: ‘G20: How UK-China Cooperation Is Greening Global Financial Flows,’ GOV.UK, 8 September 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/g20-how-uk-china-cooperation-is-greening-global-financial-flows.

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44. Commenting on this in May 2017 in a speech at Chatham House (in advance of the general election), then opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn said: ‘When Theresa May addressed a Republican Party conference in Philadelphia in January she spoke in alarmist terms about the rise of China and India and of the danger of the West being eclipsed. She said America and Britain had to stand together and use their military might to protect their interests. This is the sort of language that led to calamity in Iraq and Libya and all the other disastrous wars that
stole the post-cold war promise of a new and peaceful world order. I do not see India and China in those terms. Nor do I think the vast majority of Americans or British people want the boots of their young men and women on the ground in Syria fighting a war that could escalate the suffering and slaughter even further.’ Available at: Jeremy Corbyn, ‘Chatham House Speech,’ 12 May 2017, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/images/events/2017-05-12-Corbyn.pdf.

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119. The debate is available at ‘UK General Election 2019: BBC–Chatham House Foreign Policy Debate,’ Chatham House, 28 November 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/file/uk-general-election-2019-bbc-chatham-house-foreign-policy-debate.

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