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The United Kingdom, the Belt and Road Initiative, and policy amalgams

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Abstract

Although it never formally participated, the British government described the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and relations with China more broadly in strikingly positive terms between 2015 and 2019. Nonetheless, by late 2019 and amidst a sharp deterioration in relations, the prospect of the UK joining the BRI had more or less disappeared from the government's agenda. This article argues that there was not a ruptural policy break. While there was a turnaround, there were also significant numbers of short-run policy zigzags. The principal reason for this instability, the article argues, lies in the relatively weak character of the UK-China policy regime which was an amalgam that sought to accommodate and integrate three different ideational clusters. Such amalgams are inherently unstable and policies drawn from them are likely to change quickly in response to internal tensions as well as exogenous events and developments. Given this, British policy towards China moved quickly and erratically between a “golden era”, a repudiation of this as “naïve”, and the designation of China as a “systemic challenge”. Within this context, expressions of enthusiasm for the BRI were displaced by uninterest or scepticism.

Abbreviations

APD	American political development
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CRG	China Research Group
CGN	China General Nuclear
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
EDF	Électricité de France
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FTA	Free trade agreement

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JETCO	China joint economic and trade committee
MoU	Memorandum of understanding
UK	United Kingdom

Up until late 2019, the British government described the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's gargantuan trans-continental network of infrastructure projects, in very positive terms. Indeed, at times, they hailed the BRI as a transformative initiative and lauded the commercial opportunities that it offered the UK. As Philip Hammond, Chancellor of Exchequer in Theresa's May's government (2016–2019), said in Beijing: “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 Belt and Road partner countries to make a success of this initiative” (Reuters 2017). For her part, Prime Minister Theresa May echoed Hammond's comments, repeating the statement that the UK was a “natural partner” for the BRI (GOV.UK 2018). In 2017, the UK, together with 26 other nations, had endorsed the *Guiding Principles on Financing the Development of the Belt and Road* (UK Parliament 2019). Furthermore, comments such as these were not the prerogative of Theresa May's government but instead continued after she lost office. When Boris Johnson became Prime Minister, he stated: “We are very enthusiastic about the Belt & Road Initiative, very interested in what President Xi is doing” (Devonshire-Ellis 2019).

Nonetheless, by 2020, the mood had shifted and the prospect of joining the BRI had all but disappeared from the UK policy agenda. This article considers the reasons why policy towards the BRI, which was nested within overall policy towards China, proved so mercurial. It draws upon theories of policy change, particularly those derived from historical institutionalism, so as to argue that UK policy was an amalgam constructed on the basis of different, and conflicting, clusters of ideas. Such amalgams almost always give rise to strains and tensions during processes of implementation and development. In some instances, the article suggests that these tensions can be successfully managed by core actors. In other instances, such tensions undermine a policy regime leading it to be weakly embedded and unstable. UK policy towards the BRI and China more broadly, and much the same can be said about UK economic policy during the period that followed the Brexit referendum, is an example of the latter.

The article outlines the theoretical basis for this argument and then, on this basis, charts the different clusters of ideas around which policy was structured and the processes of contestation between them. The article thus seeks to add to both studies of policy change and accounts of western policy towards China.

Policy and policy regimes

The concept of “policy”, whether considered in either the domestic or the foreign policy arenas, lacks precision. It can after all be understood in different ways. It might be understood in relatively narrow terms as “a law, regulation, procedure,

administrative action, incentive, or voluntary practice of governments” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015). However, a definition could also incorporate the assumptions and expectations that underpin a policy and might also be broadened out so as to include the outcomes that are subsequently generated. Seen in this way policy is “the sum total of government action from signals of intent to the final outcomes” (Cairney 2012: 5). Most studies however, and this article will take its cue from them, include the cognitive and normative thinking around which a statute, regulation, or initiative is structured but draw a conceptual distinction between a policy and its impact. Indeed, this distinction is pivotal to many analyses.

Nonetheless, while policy studies constitute an extensive field, relatively little attention has been given to the relative strength of policies once they are enacted. Policies, and the regimes structured around ideas, interests, and institutions that policies create through feedback processes, can however be relatively strong or relatively weak. If we draw upon the literature associated with historical institutionalism, policy strength can be seen as the gap between the outcome had the policy not been in place and the outcome created by the institution (Brinks Daniel et al. 2019: 10). In many countries, there are plentiful examples of policy weakness insofar as the statute books include laws that are rarely, if ever, employed.

Why is this? A policy can be weak because its architects were subject to bounded rationality and failed to anticipate implementational challenges. Or a policy might have been intended as simple “window-dressing” rather than an effort to bring about substantive change. Or a policy may weaken over time if it fails to generate significant feedback effects insofar as it fails to win the backing of interests and constituencies or because it is not accompanied by a corresponding shift in the character of formal institutions that provides a basis for its implementation, maintenance, and enforcement (Brinks Daniel et al. 2019: 13–14). Or it may be that some groups of policy beneficiaries have relatively weak organizing capacities and its opponents might legitimately hope for a later rematch (Patashnik 2008: 31; Patashnik and Zelizer 2013: 1076).¹ Furthermore, as some accounts of gradual policy change processes suggest, particular policies may be vulnerable to processes that undermine them over time. If, for example, they are not updated or do not incorporate updating mechanisms to take account of shifts in external circumstances, such as the impact of inflation upon a statutory minimum wage, the overall character of a policy changes. In this case, efforts to reduce poverty would be curtailed. Such processes have been dubbed policy drift (Hacker 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2010).

There are however other reasons why a policy may have a relatively weak character. It is commonplace to describe policies as “compromises”, but the word “compromise” can be taken to suggest that there is reconciliation and acceptance. Unless actors’ preferences shift fundamentally, this is unlikely to be the case. Instead, many should be regarded as amalgams or composites constructed so as to secure backing from a range of constituencies and so built around different and conflicting clusters

¹ Regulatory policies may generate more limited feedback effects than those that are entitlement-based (Pierson 1993: 621–622; Pierson 1994: 174).

of ideas. As studies of American political development (APD) suggest, the social world is more often than not characterized by disorder rather than order. Clusters of ideas, and the institutions to which they are anchored, emerge in very different settings, involve different sets of actors, and are shaped by different configurations of forces and interests. Inevitably, therefore, as those clusters of ideas endure, there are tensions with other clusters. There will be abrasion and scarring as ideational clusters and institutional structures interact with each other. From this perspective, therefore, stability, order, and complementarities are likely to be contingent and incidental. Discomplementarities are much more common and indeed probable.

In some circumstances, actors can navigate and manage the tensions and stresses that arise. There may, for example, be later shifts and changes in the way a policy is interpreted and applied so that it is stabilized. In other instances, however, the tensions between the different sources of a policy are so profound and deeply rooted that navigation is not a credible option. In such circumstances, the policy might be abandoned or there are likely to be frequent shifts as a particular policy lurches backwards and forwards. While the UK's economy policy in the wake of the Brexit referendum offers a comparable example insofar as it was pulled between budget deficit reduction, maintaining a degree of alignment with the EU so as to facilitate trade, and the radical supply-side economics that held sway during Liz Truss's brief tenure as prime minister, this is also clearly illustrated if the UK's policy, which was nested within Britain's overall policy towards China, towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is considered.

UK policy towards the BRI and China as an amalgam

At first sight, UK policy towards China is simply a process of abrupt change. In 2015, Conservative government ministers spoke of a “golden era” for UK-China relations, and George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, asserted that Britain could be China's “best partner in the West” (Meredith 2022). Seven years later, by 2022, the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, stated that the “golden era” was over and that China posed a “systemic challenge” to British “values and interests” (Aljazeera 2022).²

Nonetheless, the shift was not simply the volte-face that it initially appears. Instead, UK policy towards China, and the BRI in particular, was throughout the period an amalgam drawing upon three principal elements and the cluster ideas within which policies are embedded. First, there were economic and social concerns stemming from what was seen as the unbalanced character of British economic development and the logics created by the commitment made by Conservative-led coalition government, which took office in 2010, to budget deficit reduction and “austerity”. Within this context, the prospect of large-scale Chinese investment was alluring. Second, there was a traditionalist and neoconservative

² Sunak later appeared to draw back from framing China as a direct “challenge” but instead representing the country more broadly as an “epoch-defining and systemic challenge” (Lau 2023).

“Atlanticist” perspective that understood China as a profoundly repressive regime still in large part governed by Marxism-Leninism principles and dedicated to quasi-imperial expansionism. Third, there was a vision of the UK that was to become encapsulated in the aftermath of the Brexit vote in the slogan “Global Britain” depicting the country as an assertive or “buccaneering” worldwide trading nation.

Reconstructing and rebalancing the UK

Within the UK, sustained long-run underinvestment had created a gap between infrastructure need and existing provision estimated to be close to £500 billion (Pincent Masons and the Centre for Economics and Business Research 2014). The 2016 UK National Infrastructure Delivery Plan noted that half of Europe’s most congested rail infrastructure was in the UK and parts of the rail network were full to capacity (Infrastructure and Projects Authority 2016: 33). Infrastructural development would, it was argued, bolster economic growth, raise productivity levels, encourage innovation, and boost international competitiveness thereby creating employment (Infrastructure and Projects Authority 2016: 7). At the same time, public funding for infrastructure projects was limited as, from 2010 onwards, the government had been committed to “austerity” and budget deficit reduction (Harris 2017: 251–252). External sources of investment were therefore required and public spending had to be used sparingly in ways that would, it was asserted, leverage larger amounts of private sector investment.

In particular, the government sought inward investment as part of its efforts to establish an economic “powerhouse” in the north of England. There had long been talk in the UK of a “north–south divide”, but the collapse of long-established industries such as mining and steel production had put much of the north at an even greater structural disadvantage. The development of transport connectivity was widely seen as an important initial step towards developing the region as a “powerhouse” although it required large-scale funding and had a long timescale. Nonetheless, China seemed at first ready to accept that the BRI could contribute to the transformation of the region and there was a commitment to bring the BRI and the northern powerhouse together during Xi Jinping’s 2015 visit to the UK (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) China, Hong Kong and Macau 2015: 5). Then, at the inaugural Belt and Road Summit in May 2017, the Northern Powerhouse was amongst a few chosen projects identified in specific terms by President Xi Jinping in his opening address:

We have enhanced coordination with the policy initiatives of relevant countries, such as the Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, the Bright Road initiative of Kazakhstan, the Middle Corridor initiative of Turkey, the Development Road initiative of Mongolia, the Two Corridors, One Economic Circle initiative of Viet Nam, the Northern Powerhouse initiative of the UK and the Amber Road initiative of Poland. (Belt and Road Advisory 2017)

Against this background, towards the end of 2016, the British government published a showcase portfolio of 13 projects worth more than £5 billion aimed at prospective Chinese investors, in particular the policy banks (GOV.UK 2016a). The projects included power generation as well as residential and office property development. Furthermore, China had by far the biggest presence at the 2017 Northern Powerhouse Conference in Manchester and over 40 representatives of Chinese organizations attended (Harper 2017).

Following the December 2019 general election, the commitment to economic regeneration and development in the north of England became more politically pressing as the Conservatives seized long-held labour constituencies in the north of England, many of which were in heavily disadvantaged areas, that they then hoped to retain in subsequent elections. The 2021 Queen's Speech, which set out the government's legislative programme, reaffirmed the commitment to infrastructural development and "transform connectivity" while at the same time promising that the government would "level up opportunities across all parts of the United Kingdom ..." (GOV.UK 2021).

While, because of its sprawling character, there are methodological challenges identifying what is, and what is not, undertaken under the auspices of the BRI, some of the UK initiatives were publicly associated with or framed as BRI projects or as elements within the BRI. In 2017, the first Silk Road Train made the journey between Yiwu in the eastern Chinese province of Zhejiang and the London Eurohub terminal. The trip took about 16 days which was about half the time taken by a ship. The train on the outward journey was loaded primarily with textiles and other consumer goods while it took back baby food, pharmaceuticals, and whisky as well as other British goods (Harper 2017; Benton 2020). There were also the beginnings of specific infrastructural projects. The UK-China Infrastructure Alliance was agreed upon during Xi's visit (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) China, Hong Kong and Macau 2015: 5). In turn, the Alliance laid the basis for two further initiatives both at home and abroad. First, there were training schemes. A private sector UK Infrastructure Academy was launched to assist in training Chinese companies and officials about investment processes in the UK (GOV.UK 2016b). There was subsequently the provision of seed money under the UK-China-BRI Countries Education Partnership Initiative so as to deepen cooperation in fields such as healthcare, food safety, renewable energy, and "global leadership transformation". The recipients included the University of Leeds and King's College London (Xing 2019). Second, in October 2019, an MoU was signed by the British Chamber of Business in Southern Africa and the South Africa China Economic and Trade Association, to cooperate on "... high quality, sustainable infrastructure that meets Southern Africa's priorities and supports the region's growth" (SA Property Insider 2020).

There were other ways in which the UK sought to secure a foothold within BRI activities. In response to claims that many of the BRI's initial projects were contributing to environmental degradation, the Initiative took a green turn that seemed to offer commercial opportunities for the UK. At the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2019, the UK-China Green Finance Taskforce

announced the formation of the Secretariat for the Green Investment Principles for the Belt and Road (UK-China Green Finance Centre 2021).³

Global Britain and Brexit

Although the slogan “Global Britain” was only adopted at a later stage, the framing and the logic that underpinned it took shape before the Brexit referendum. Although trade policy was a European Union prerogative, the prospect of opening up deeper and wider trade relations with China formed part of a broader vision of the UK looking beyond the EU towards global markets. During a visit to China in December 2013, Cameron committed himself to the construction of a “lasting friendship” with Beijing. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne had spearheaded the project and as an initial step began issuing UK government debt bonds in renminbi (Ford and Hughes 2020; Seldon and Snowden 2015: 360). Furthermore, the UK was in the forefront of countries that had rushed in 2015 to become members of the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).⁴

The highpoint came with Chinese President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Britain in October 2015. He announced that there was a “community of shared interests” between the two nations (BBC.com 2015). That summer, as trans-Pacific tensions had flared over such issues as cyber-hacking, the devaluation of the renminbi and China’s military build-up in the South China Sea, officials said David Cameron’s Conservative government remained relatively “chillaxed” about these issues. As the *Financial Times* noted, the UK and US were increasingly moving in different directions and there was unease in Washington DC about what was described as Britain’s “constant accommodation” of China (Ford and Hughes 2020).

The 2016 Brexit referendum vote, the growing understanding in the period that followed that there was likely to be a “hard” Brexit creating very significant trade barriers between the UK and the European Union, seemed to set the pursuit of “Global Britain” in stone, particularly amongst those, including many within and around the government, who did not want Brexit to retreat into nationalist populism and the protectionism promoted by the Trump administration. Indeed, while the chain of decisions that led the UK towards a “hard Brexit” was in large part driven by the immigration issue and the determination to end the free movement of labour, it was also facilitated by the belief that Britain could secure access to markets across much of the world but in particular East Asia. In January 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May conveyed these sentiments in her declaration that the British people “voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world ... I want us to be a truly Global

³ For its part, the China-Britain Business Council stressed the ways in which sustainability offered an opportunity to the UK’s financial institutions and consultancies (China-Britain Business Council 2021: 10).

⁴ The “golden era” may have also been over-compensation for the opprobrium that the Cameron government incurred after the Prime Minister met with the Dalai Lama in May 2012 (Seldon and Snowden 2015: 358–359).

Britain ... a country that goes out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike” (Heron and Siles-Brügge 2021: 733).

As a grand strategy, “Global Britain” evoked images of the country in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when, at least according to the imagery, Britain strode the world stage and asserted itself economically and strategically across the oceans. It was also about “performing a ‘post-geography’, spatio-political-economic imaginary” that rested upon a picture of the UK as unshackled from the geography and regulatory regime of continental Europe (Heron and Siles-Brügge 2021: 736). On top of that, and unlike the long-established notion of a “special relationship” between the US and UK, “Global Britain” suggested that Britain had a greater standing (Shapiro and Witney 2021: 2).

Nonetheless, although “Global Britain” built upon and bolstered an imaginary that drew upon imperial memory and representations of national freedom, hopes of translating it into some form of reality rested in large part upon hopes of securing a UK-US free trade agreement (FTA). Indeed, such an agreement was at the core of Brexit as an economic and political project. From a “Brexiteer” perspective, the US market offered vast commercial opportunities and, it was said, there were political workarounds for divisive issues such as access by US pharmaceutical companies to the National Health Service, agricultural regulation, and the Northern Ireland Protocol. Globalizing processes and new technology, it was argued, made the distance between the UK and US less of a challenge. And, as many Brexiteers stressed, there were cultural affinities with north America as well as Australasia: “The US came to be particularly totemic to this ‘post-geography’ vision, in part because of its association with the ‘Anglosphere’, an idea popular in Eurosceptic circles since the 1990s” (Heron and Siles-Brügge 2021: 733).

Nonetheless, despite this emphasis upon the “Anglosphere”, there were also serious hopes for a bilateral free trade agreement with Beijing.⁵ While there were some anxieties about the vulnerability of supply chains that were over-dependent upon China, the idea of such an agreement had been raised in loose terms during Theresa May’s January 2018 visit to China she said that Britain was seeking an agreement as well as more immediate steps to increase market access for UK firms in China (James and Blanchard 2018; Parker and Thomas 2020; Institute for Export and International Trade 2020). These hopes continued despite a souring of relations in the years that followed. As a representative of the British Chamber of Commerce in China said in 2020: “China is the UK’s second largest non-EU trading partner. We call on the UK to prioritize China in its negotiations for an FTA. The economic gain for British business will be significant. In a post-Brexit world, an FTA with China will be vital to both realizing the UK’s global ambitions and rebuilding our economies ...” (Bhaya 2020).

Against this background, there was every reason to court Beijing. Hopes of tapping Chinese markets much more extensively merged with a wish to capitalize on the BRI. Many countries and regions in Asia faced an infrastructure gap as economic

⁵ It should be noted that the UK had had a bilateral investment treaty with China since 1986 (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5802/ldselect/ldintrel/62/6210.htm>).

growth and population expansion outpaced existing infrastructural provision thereby opening up the prospect of significant opportunities for British firms.

Within this context, the City of London and some financial institutions embraced the BRI very publicly and for its part Beijing sought further funding for BRI projects beyond that which Chinese banks could provide (Maçães 2018: 160). Successive Lord Mayors of London representing the City visited China to promote links between the UK's fintech sector and the BRI (City of London 2019). Baroness Rona Fairhead, Minister of State for Trade and Export Promotion from 2017 to 2019, was charged with promoting the participation of financial institutions as well as UK firms in BRI projects and spoke at the 2018 BRI summit held in Hong Kong. The Department for International Trade announced that "whilst at the summit the minister will make the case for London's financial prowess to be at the heart of the BRI. She will highlight the City's expertise in working with the public and private sector in emerging markets" (Department for International Trade 2018).

There were solid reasons for this emphasis on finance and professional services. A report suggested that there were complementarities whereby China had strengths in, for example, construction efficiency, engineering technology innovation, and cost performance, the UK had advantages in engineering design, law, consulting and management, and financial services as well as a "... long-standing trading history with many of the 3rd markets China wishes to engage along the BRI" (Confederation of British Industry 2019). Even when the British government had pulled away from the BRI, some consulting and professional organizations continued to engage with the BRI. EY (Ernst & Young), which has its headquarters in London, reported that it had between 2017 and 2020 to have assisted around 1300 Chinese firms to develop their business along BRI routes and was in total involved in more than 18,000 projects associated with the BRI (EY 2020: 2).

Social traditionalism, Atlanticism, and China

The Conservative Party is compelled, because of the first-past-the-post electoral system used in parliamentary elections, to be a "broad church". It draws together classical liberals, social traditionalists, and populists who would, in other countries, be represented in different parties. Such traditionalists who were also defence hawks often had strong ties with the US and some of the think tanks and advocacy organizations in Washington DC. While they kept a distance from Donald Trump and the movement that gelled around the slogan "Make America Great Again", they were nonetheless allied with Republicanism and influential conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom that it created.

Such traditionalists had long been critical of China. From their perspective, it was seen as a residual communist power and strategically expansionist. It denied human rights, oppressed religious faith, and had reneged upon the commitments that it had given when Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty. There was a championing of Taiwan's independent sovereignty and an implied repudiation of the "One China"

that had governed relations over the preceding decades. Britain's allies and partners were, it was said, under threat as China's regional footprint became ever larger.

In April 2020, these sentiments took a more crystallized form when the China Research Group (CRG) was established by two influential Conservative backbench MPs, Tom Tugendhat and Neil O'Brien. The name was taken from the European Research Group that had functioned as the most influential and very abrasive Brexiteer faction during the long withdrawal process (China Research Group 2021). Its members deployed hard parliamentary power insofar as they were ready to use their votes in the House of Commons. In March 2020, 38 Conservative MPs led by the Conservatives' former leader, Sir Iain Duncan Smith, rebelled and backed an amendment to the Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill so as to end Huawei's involvement in the development of 5G by the start of 2023 (Smith 2020). They repeatedly raised concerns about minority share held by the China General Nuclear UK (CGN UK) in the Hinkley Point C power station and Sizewell C. China, it was argued, should not have access to the west's critical infrastructure.⁶

Members of the CRG and other China hawks drew conclusions from Australia's shifting relationship with Beijing and developments in Canberra (Strategic Comments 2020: vii). While Australia is closely aligned with the US, it had concluded a free trade agreement with China in 2015 after a decade of negotiations (Camroux 2021). Even before then, trading relations had broadened and deepened. China became Australia's largest two-way trading partner in goods and services. Furthermore, Chinese investment in Australia accounted by 2020 for about four percent of its total FDI and Australia became an important destination for Chinese tourists and students (Australian Government – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2021). Against this background, the state of Victoria signed a MoU in October 2018 which was followed by a BRI Framework Agreement a year later. As well as infrastructural development, it envisaged cooperation spanning trade and finance and looking ahead manufacturing, biotechnology, and agriculture (Callanan 2021).

Nonetheless, it became increasingly evident that these ties and the patterns of dependency that they created could be used to secure political leverage. The breaking point for China appears to have been Australia's backing for a UN inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. Ministerial ties were cut off and tariffs were imposed on Australian wine, barley, beef, coal, timber, cotton, and seafood in breach of the 2015 free trade agreement. Furthermore, there were reduction in the number of Chinese students enrolling at Australian universities and there were, reportedly, waves of cyber-attacks.

Against this background, the federal government in Canberra took action against Victoria's participation in the BRI and Scott Morrison, the Prime Minister, put forward "foreign interference" legislation giving the Foreign Minister the power to review arrangements between state governments (including agencies, local governments, and universities) and foreign governments (Chung and Mascitelli 2019: 18). On the basis of a review, in April 2021, the Foreign Minister ordered the termination

⁶ It should however be noted that 5G development and investment in the UK's civil nuclear infrastructure were not, insofar as it has settled boundaries, part of BRI.

of Victoria's BRI agreement, concluding that it was "inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy or adverse to our foreign relations" (Varano 2021). The key lesson, at least for the Australian government as well as for observers in Europe and the Americas, was that trade with China or investment might always be weaponized by Beijing at some point. Australia was in this sense a "canary in the coalmine" (Strategic Comments 2020: v).

Shifts

Even at the peak of the "golden era", as President Xi Jinping was feted in Britain and the UK was seeking investment funds for the "northern powerhouse", Conservative leaders still acknowledged and at times conveyed the criticisms of China stressed by the party's traditionalist wing. Traditionalism was an element within the overall policy regime. When the Johnson government sought to re-establish the UK-China joint economic and trade committee (JETCO) it provoked fierce criticism from traditionalist figures such as Iain Duncan Smith: "I will not let it rest if we start now, amid all the evidence of genocide, brutality, crackdowns on peaceful protesters, and go traipsing along there as though nothing happened" (Courea 2022). In sum, policy remained structured around the three principal elements but the relationship between those elements shifted. Whereas the prospect of Britain as a trading nation astride East Asia had been predominant, it had been relegated to a subordinate place 5 years later.

This requires explanation particularly because the 2016 referendum vote for Brexit seemed to offer the opportunity to realize the hopes that the UK could take its place in the forefront of trading nations. In large part, the relative weakness of the UK-China trade policy regime opened the way for the twists and turns that took place. It not only rested upon three different elements but each had only limited backing, commanded few resources, and had few allied constituencies. In other words, there had limited feedback effects.

The weakness of the overall policy and policy regime was compounded by four developments. First, the BRI itself appeared to be changing in character. It increasingly appeared to have been a vehicle for China's geostrategic ambitions, rather than a cluster of infrastructure projects, particularly once it came to embrace the setting of standards, a "digital BRI", as well as China's space programme (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 14). In contrast with the AIIB, its overall governance seemed opaque (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 15). Furthermore, at the same time, UK and other western companies appeared to face growing barriers and obstacles in Chinese markets as well as unfair competition from state-owned enterprises (Reuters 2020).

Second, there was a backlash against the perceived excesses of the "golden era". As the relationship between the west and China worsened, it increasingly seemed evident that the exuberance of the earlier period, and the statements made at the time, had been misguided in terms of China's intentions.

Third, the chances that the BRI could credibly play a role in British infrastructural development began to fade. There was an increasingly large question mark against the part that the BRI and Chinese investment could play in addressing the UK's infrastructure gap. The UK had been a very significant recipient of Chinese FDI. If the cumulative value of completed Chinese FDI between 2000 and 2020 (when there were major falls as the pandemic took hold) is considered, the UK secured €51.9 billion whereas the second-biggest recipient country (Germany) gained just €24.8 billion (Kratz et al. 2021: 11). However, as in other countries, most Chinese FDI was based upon mergers and acquisitions and about two-thirds of UK asset purchases were in finance, property, and logistics rather than infrastructure (Kratz et al. 2021: 15; Ford and Hughes 2020). Even when George Osborne visited China in September 2015 together with business leaders, the trade deals that were agreed were not, for the most part, in infrastructure. Instead, for example, a Sheffield-based property developer signed a £60 m contract with a Xinjiang-based conglomerate to launch a large housing scheme in Greater Manchester (Bounds 2015). In the few cases where Chinese firms expressed an interest in infrastructure, most notably HS2 (the high-speed line linking London and the north), it was not regarded as credible or serious and triggered security concerns (The Guardian 2020).

Furthermore, Brexit and the UK's preference for bilateral arrangements played a part insofar as China and the BRI were reportedly drawn to multilateral projects and was not seeking projects only with the UK that would exclude EU member states (OBOR Europe 2019). Furthermore, in many instances, infrastructural projects did not appear commercially viable even in the long term. Infrastructure in the UK is particularly expensive. For example, civil engineering works cost about sixty percent more in Britain than in Germany (Stewart 2010: 31). Furthermore, the principal benefit of infrastructure projects is often in terms of externalities that do not provide a direct return for investors unless, as was the case with Eurasian BRI projects, they played a role in establishing supply chains. Port facilities aside, and their potential was placed in jeopardy by the trade barriers that Brexit imposed, the UK could as an island nation only play a limited part to play in such connectivity initiatives (Pettis 2019). There is truth in the claim that "... all roads from Britain lead to nowhere" (Rowley 2019). In sum, "... the UK government's optimism about Chinese investment has proved unfounded. Unlike in developing countries, it simply never made much sense for Chinese investors and businesses to invest massively in the UK" (Bounds and Mitchell 2018).

Fourth, the character of the UK's relationship with the US should be considered. Despite some initial equivocation by the Obama administration, the Trump White House opposed the BRI and other Chinese initiatives in increasingly pronounced terms as it committed itself to "strategic competition" with Beijing. As a corollary, there were public and direct criticisms of the BRI as a form of imperial aggrandizement and an exercise in "debt diplomacy". It quickly became clear in 2021 that President Biden would maintain much of his predecessor's policy stance towards China.

"Global Britain" had little option but to follow. Alongside images of the UK as a worldwide power, it also rested upon the promise of a free trade agreement with the US. Notwithstanding the backing of President Trump, that prospect quickly became

more distant. Furthermore, US trade agreements were increasingly tied to provisions through which Washington DC sought to promote goals that went beyond tariffs and non-tariff barriers. The wording of the trade agreement that the US had concluded with Canada and Mexico (USMCA) in 2018–2019 that took the place of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is illustrative. It incorporated a section (Article 32.10) that sought to prevent Canada and Mexico from concluding trade deals with Beijing. It specified that if any of the signatories signed a free trade agreement with a “non-market” country (and China was self-evidently in mind), the other USMCA countries could terminate the agreement by giving 6-month notice. Although Ottawa was to question this interpretation, USMCA appeared to prevent Canada and Mexico from seeking a free trade deal with China (Weidenfeld 2018).

Provisions of this type looked set to become a feature of all trade agreements to which the US was a party. Within this context, policy took a more “hawkish” form and the possibility that “Global Britain” might conclude a free trade agreement with China after Brexit had been enacted had to be abandoned (Cooper 2020). Furthermore, in affirming its importance within the western security architecture and demonstrating that it was not, in the aftermath of Brexit, retreating into narrow isolation, the UK committed itself to establishing a more visible presence in the Indo-Pacific which was widely understood, not least in Beijing, as an enrolment in an emerging anti-China coalition.

These policies were spelled out by the UK through both documents and actions. In March 2021, the Government published *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* that set out the case for a “tilt to the Indo-Pacific”. The review also acknowledged new global risks and, in particular, asserted that the UK could play a role in developing and advancing new technologies including 5G, quantum computing, algorithms, and smart autonomous weapons (Peters 2023: 874). The deployment of the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier strike group to the Indo-Pacific was intended as a signal that “Global Britain” was not rhetoric alone (Brooke-Holland 2021).

AUKUS was also seen as a further fulfilment of the vision. It announced in September 2021, bringing together Australia, the UK, and the US in a pact enhancing military capabilities across the Indo-Pacific and, to the chagrin of France which was originally to supply twelve conventionally powered submarines, assisting Australia in securing eight nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines. While Boris Johnson stressed that the contracts could bring jobs to depressed regions, the move also symbolized what was understood as the return of the UK to serve as an important security actor in the East Asian region almost half a century after the withdrawal of almost all forces “east of Suez” (Camroux 2021).

These military moves were complemented by assertions particularly once President Biden, who had sought to use the differences between democracy and autocracy as a rallying point, had taken office that the UK should pursue a values-based approach and a forceful commitment to “democratic values” (Heron and Siles-Brügge 2021: 734). The UK, it was promised, would “defend universal human rights”, “hold to account those involved in serious human rights violations and abuses”, promote gender equality, counter corruption, back “effective and transparent governance, robust democratic institutions and the rule of law”, promote

religious freedom, and defend press and media freedom (H M Government 2021: 48–49). As the 2021 *Integrated Review* noted, these pledges provided a basis for soft power projects although it was acknowledged that traditional soft power mechanisms were under challenge by Russia and China’s engagement in cultural power projections and the rise of the social media: “Such dynamics illustrate that the strength of the UK’s soft power cannot be taken for granted. As a vital part of our foreign policy, it requires thoughtful investment that enables our domestic assets and international activity to thrive in the long term” (H M Government 2021: 49–50).

It would be difficult not to interpret these words as being written with China in mind. Indeed, the 2021 *Integrated Review* declared elsewhere that China was “a systemic competitor” and that its growing power and assertiveness was “... likely to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s” (H M Government 2021: 26). Furthermore, although there was scope for cooperation around, for example, pandemic preparedness, climate change, and biodiversity loss, China was a strategic challenger and “... presents the biggest state-based threat to the UK’s economic security” (H M Government 2021: 62).

Trade was expected to follow the flag. As has been noted, Global Britain was in some way a necessity once the UK had committed itself to a “hard Brexit” that imposed barriers on trade with the European Union and thus based upon hopes of winning trade partners from across the East Asian region and bolstering trade with countries with which there was already a “rollover” FTAs inherited from the UK’s membership of the EU. In this spirit, the Johnson government announced its intention to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the free trade pact of 11 nations that Japan resurrected after the TPP was abandoned by the Trump administration.⁷ The British government stressed the importance of the UK becoming part of the bloc: “Joining CPTPP puts Britain at the heart of a dynamic group of countries ... And as these economies grow, it is even more important that the UK is in a free trade agreement with them, so that we benefit from this growth” (Department for International Trade 2021: 4). In July 2023, the UK signed the agreement to join the CPTPP although projections suggested that it would only give the UK a boost of 0.08%, over 15 years (Bartlett-Imadegawa 2023).

Policy zigzags

There was not so much a slow retreat from the BRI but instead a series of policy lurches and processes of uncertain decision-making. When Prime Minister Theresa May visited Beijing at the beginning of 2018, she stated that she “welcomed the opportunities” offered by the BRI but at the same time, along with the other EU member states,

⁷ Many Conservatives and Republicans as well as Democrats had regarded President Trump’s withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) bringing together countries across Asia, Australasia, and the Americas together as an unforced error. Indeed, he later said he might be open to it on a restructured basis (Long 2018).

she had refused to sign a proposed memorandum of understanding (MoU) which was regarded as an initial step in establishing collaboration with the BRI (Parker et al. 2018; Weidenfeld 2018). The MoU, it was argued, failed to address questions raised by western countries about the levels of debt that BRI projects incurred as well environmental sustainability, transparency, and the rule of law (Phillips 2017).

Theresa May's government did however pledge up to 50 million dollars to the AIIB Project Preparation Special Fund so as to help low-income countries put together credible infrastructure project proposals (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank 2017; Crabtree 2020). Although, as noted above, Boris Johnson made a fulsome statement in support of the BRI, the British government continued to hold back even though, by October 2020, eighteen EU nations had concluded an MoU (Devonshire-Ellis 2021). Furthermore, while the House of Commons' International Trade select committee briefly considered the BRI in mid-2019, it only called three witnesses and consideration did not progress further (International Trade Committee 2019). In September 2021, the British Government published *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, which laid out its plan to engage in particular with the Indo-Pacific region. It only however made one reference to the BRI and represented it in critical terms as evidence of China's "increasing ambition to project its influence on the global stage ..." (H M Government 2021: 26). Although, following the initial attempts at a compromise, Huawei was to be barred from 5G networks, the date set for this was 2027 and firms could retain the equipment that had already been installed. By doing this, the government, it was suggested, "... deliberately left itself room for maneuver". And the government resisted calls to accept that Chinese actions in Xinjiang amounted to genocide. There were some attempts to balance cooperation and confrontation (des Garets Geddes 2021).

Rishi Sunak, who became British prime minister in October 2022, continued the efforts to move in different directions at once. At the end of November, Sunak's government announced that it would invest 679 million pounds and become a 50% partner with EDF (Électricité de France) in the Sizewell C project. This it was said would facilitate the exit of China General Nuclear (CGN) from the project (World Nuclear News 2022).

In May 2023, he reiterated earlier calls for "de-risking" and told the G7 summit in Hiroshima that "China poses the biggest challenge of our age to global security and prosperity ... They are increasingly authoritarian at home and assertive abroad" (Sorgi 2023). However, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sunak had called for a "mature and balanced relationship" with China so that UK firms could open up "the potential of a fast-growing financial services market with total assets worth £40 trillion" (asiafinancial 2021).

Navigation

There were some attempts to navigate between the policy tensions and establish a more stable basis for UK-China relations. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, a Conservative-dominated but cross-party group of backbench MPs,

called for caution but also for a sense of balance. The Committee certainly saw the Initiative in terms of Chinese power projection: “Regardless of the intent behind BRI, it appears to be having geopolitical effects, and will continue to do so. In hard power terms, BRI provides a physical platform for expanded Chinese state presence worldwide” (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 17). The Committee’s report acknowledged western concerns about BRI projects and backed the government’s decision not to sign a memorandum of understanding or provide blanket backing but suggested that the UK could play a role in raising project standards (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 18–19). On this basis, the Committee’s report urged the government to adopt “... a strictly case-by-case approach to assessing Belt and Road Initiative projects, and to refrain from expressing an overarching view on the merits of the initiative as a whole” (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 19).

This approach continued although the COVID-19 pandemic and economic uncertainties within China diminished the importance of the BRI as a foreign policy instrument. In this context, policy towards the BRI was firmly subsumed within overall relations with Beijing. After the sharp deterioration in relations between China and those countries aligned with the US, there were some efforts by the US, the UK, and other western nations to establish “guardrails” to prevent a further deterioration and avert the danger of open conflict. In March 2023, the Integrated Review Refresh balanced out its criticisms of China with a commitment to engagement: “The UK will engage directly with China, bilaterally and in international for a to preserve and create space for open, constructive, predictable and stable relations that reflect China’s importance in world affairs” (HM Government 2023: 31). Then, in August 2023, James Cleverly, the British Foreign Secretary, became the first senior government official to visit Beijing in 5 years. The policy tensions were however on full display as the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee issued a report referring to Taiwan as “an independent country” (Lau 2023).

Conclusion

This article has argued that many policies, including British policy towards the BRI and China more broadly, were based around amalgams that brought together different clusters of cognitive and normative ideas. Whereas many accounts emphasize the processes of compromise inherent within policymaking, such compromises are often short-lived and contingent. Processes of contestation may well continue, and this can seriously weaken a particular policy and its associated regime. Weak policies that have few institutional and ideational moorings may thus be unstable insofar as they follow an uneven and erratic trajectory. British policy towards the BRI and China is a case in point.

What more general conclusions should be drawn? The turn away from the BRI raises important questions about Britain’s capacity to establish itself in new markets and implement its commitment to “levelling up” across the UK. It should also be noted that, despite the implications for trade and commerce, business interests were for the most part on the sidelines as policy towards China

developed. There are thus questions about the settings in which business can or cannot exercise political leverage (Culpepper 2010). And, although the process is heavily mediated by ideational and institutional barriers, there were significant processes of policy learning from Australia and, albeit in different ways, the US. Furthermore, the development of UK China policy suggests that the search for the sources of gradual policy change can usefully be broadened out so as to pay greater attention to the ways in which the composition of a policy and the relationship between its constituent elements can shape the character of that policy's later development.

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