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How the Chinese Communist Party 'positions' the United Kingdom

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Foreword

As Chair of the Defence Select Committee, I am always looking for new work that helps me understand the objectives and strategies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The United Kingdom's (UK) Integrated Review identified the People's Republic of China as a 'systemic competitor'. As a revisionist autocracy, the Chinese government often actively engages in political operations close to political warfare.

We must, therefore, better understand Beijing's strategic objectives, particularly when the CCP's actions aim to change what and how we think about critical issues – even our own country's international role and responsibilities.

This paper, by Matthew Henderson, a former British diplomat with several years of experience working in China, outlines Beijing's discursive goals and operations to frame and reposition the UK as an international actor.

It identifies the intersection between the CCP's worldview and how it views Britain, how it wants Britons and foreign powers to view the UK, and how it projects its narratives domestically (in Britain) and overseas. The paper also looks at how Chinese positioning operations become internalised and adopted in our own discourses about Britain's international role.

What the Council on Geostrategy defines as 'discursive statecraft' is clearly a challenge for our generation. The thinking in this paper will help us understand how it is practised by the CCP.

The Rt. Hon. Tobias Ellwood MP

*Chair of the Defence Select Committee
House of Commons*



Executive summary

1. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views and ‘positions’ foreign powers positively or negatively according to whether they contest or support its revisionist aim to supplant the United States (US) as the dominant global power. The CCP uses a specific form of ‘discursive statecraft’, including positioning operations, within its ‘unrestricted warfare’ strategy, whose purpose is to divide and degrade rivals without the use of military force.
2. In this context, the CCP perceives the United Kingdom (UK) as a challenge embodying both opportunity and risk. Opportunities have been framed as (nominally mutual) gains from increasing economic engagement, described as the dawn of a so-called ‘golden era’. Risks, posed by active British opposition to CCP authoritarianism at home and abroad, have provoked subversive positioning discourses intended to silence critics, ventriloquise proxies and undermine British autonomy, power and global influence.
3. A fundamental element of this negative positioning stems from the CCP’s claim to legitimacy as China’s sole ruler. The CCP is presented as the liberator of Chinese territory and people from nineteenth-century colonial oppressors, with the UK branded as one of the worst. The UK’s continuing legal commitment to Hong Kong under the Joint Declaration has thus been aggressively positioned and rejected as an obsolete irrelevance. Current UK efforts to realise the ‘Global Britain’ concept are also dismissed as a declining middle-sized power’s continuing delusions of imperial grandeur.
4. Other recent positioning in this vein incorporates threats of a Chinese military response to UK involvement in protecting freedom of navigation in maritime regions China lays claim to. The UK is accused of adventurism beyond its proper sphere of influence, driven by the wish to ingratiate itself with the US. British support for values including human rights and the rule of



law is positioned as an equally hypocritical ‘imperialist’ attempt to sully China’s international standing and autonomy.

5. In parallel, the CCP has contrived to sustain the notion that the UK needs good relations with China to support its declining economy, particularly since Brexit and damage done by the Covid-19 pandemic. Economic ‘carrots’ are proffered and threatening ‘sticks’ wielded concurrently to promote discord in UK domestic and political debate. However, responding to increasingly critical UK government and public discourse on China, the CCP has lately resorted to rather more aggressive, threatening language about the UK in critical official statements and state media commentaries aimed at foreign as well as domestic audiences.
6. Despite shifts against China in British public opinion and signs of developing robustness in China policy, the British Government’s reaction to this barrage of positioning remains somewhat inchoate. Efforts to engage the current CCP leadership in debate on such matters are unlikely to succeed.
7. The UK government should instead focus on adopting consistent China policies, grounded in defending the values and interests the UK shares with its closest allies and partners worldwide. To rebalance domestic public debate and counter CCP-inspired local positioning, the government should also demand transparency concerning the Chinese connections of UK-based CCP apologists, and take urgent steps to free Chinese studies in the UK from the current near-stranglehold of PRC-controlled interests.



1.0 Introduction

When David Cameron, then British Prime Minister, visited China in 2013, the *Global Times* (环球时报 / Huánqiú Shíbào), media outlet owned by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), commented that

China won't fall for Cameron's "sincerity" ...The Cameron administration should acknowledge that the [United Kingdom] UK is not a big power in the eyes of the Chinese. It is just an old European country apt for travel and study. This has gradually become the habitual thought of the Chinese people.¹

This classic example of derogatory shaping was presumably intended to embarrass the Prime Minister of a former colonial oppressor. Coinciding with his eager quest for Chinese investment, it underlined how much Britain's former victim had gained the upper hand.

Interestingly, Cameron had been met with a very similar dismissive Russian comment, attributed to President Vladimir Putin's official spokesman, when he attended the G7 summit a few months earlier. Addressing these attempts to undermine the UK and its government, his responses were robust and dignified.²

At first sight, the CCP's decision to greet the British prime minister with a scornful put-down just as he came to sign deals with the People's Republic of China (PRC), worth some £5.6 billion, may seem perverse. But the apparent contradiction is deliberate, reflecting the dual objectives of CCP 'positioning' discourse; by combining offers of carrots with glimpses of a big stick, it keeps clients fully aware of what their patron expects in return for its favours. At times, carrots predominate and talk of 'golden eras' abound. At others, as in early 2021, abusive denigration and bullying predominate. The challenge is to read CCP messaging accurately as an indicator of shifts in PRC policy rather than simply as a zero-sum war of words. This paper seeks to shed light on how that challenge can be met.

¹ 'China won't fall for Cameron's "sincerity"', *Global Times*, 03/12/2013, <https://bit.ly/3va1Hy1> (found: 19/04/2021).

² Andrew Foxall, How Russia 'positions' the United Kingdom, Council on Geostrategy, 08/04/2021, <https://bit.ly/3scZdNj> (found: 19/04/2021) and Nicholas Watt, 'David Cameron dismisses Chinese depiction of Britain as historical', *The Guardian*, 03/12/2013, <https://bit.ly/3v4Ftx4> (found: 19/04/2021).



The Council on Geostrategy's national positioning series

This paper is part of a series produced by the Council on Geostrategy to shed light on the political operations undertaken by foreign governments which aim to redefine the United Kingdom's position and role in the world. These operations, part of a broader approach which might be defined as 'discursive statecraft', can be undertaken by friend and foe, either to nudge a target country towards a different course of action or to silence and subdue it. The series focuses on five of the most significant countries to the UK: two competitors – Russia and China – and three allies and partners – Germany, Japan and the United States. The conceptual and methodological paper for the series can be found on the Council on Geostrategy's website.³

To that end, this Policy Paper examines how the CCP furthers various agendas through 'discursive statecraft' using official statements and media messaging to position the UK as an increasingly spent force, subservient to the US, alienated from Europe, and yet still vainly seeking to revive past glories under the banner of 'Global Britain'.⁴

Observing that UK public and government opinion of China increasingly frames the PRC as a threat to national security, the CCP has begun using increasingly aggressive language in its messaging in an effort to deter the UK from adopting policies unfavourable to PRC objectives. However, as noted above, this minatory positioning should not be regarded as zero-sum. While obviously intended to combat jingoistic criticisms of China, it is also meant to encourage more 'realistic' and 'pragmatic' British assessments of how the UK would benefit from better relations with a nascent economic superpower, particularly at such an uncertain historical nexus.

To set these efforts in context, this study first explains how the CCP views the world. In doing so, it outlines the impact of PRC domestic and external risk perceptions on CCP positioning discourse, before situating national positioning operations in CCP methodology. It then goes on to identify major themes used in this positioning discourse,

³ James Rogers, 'Discursive statecraft: Towards national positioning operations', Council on Geostrategy, 08/04/2021, <https://bit.ly/3moToN7> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁴ As James Rogers puts it: 'Discursive statecraft results when countries seek to articulate concepts, ideas, and objects into new discourses to degrade existing political and ideological frameworks or generate entirely new ones. It could be likened to offensive soft power. In the final instance, such efforts are designed to (re-)structure how people can think and act, as well as what can be said and thought.' Ibid.



exploring their historical origins, diction and frames of reference, motivations and aims. Having established this wider locus, the paper looks at the various platforms the CCP uses to disseminate positioning narratives about the UK, to explore how different ‘voices’ are harnessed in parallel to multiply desired effects. Finally, the impact and consequences of CCP positioning is assessed, followed by some recommendations on strengthening political and public resilience against this important aspect of China’s ‘systemic competition’ with the UK.

2.0 How the CCP views the world

The CCP's attempts to position the UK should be understood as part of its geostrategy to surpass free and open nations economically, politically and militarily and by degrees, to replace the current open international order by one in which the PRC makes the rules.

This competitive geostrategy entails maintaining single-party authoritarian control within China's sovereign territory; buffering and strengthening China's influence in the near-abroad through economic and political dependencies; exploiting bilateral partnerships, notably with Russia, to encourage a wider authoritarian contest with liberal democracy; and by globalising China's supremacy over increasingly beleaguered rivals, to undermine and supplant the United States (US) as the leading world power, and sooner rather than later, to revise the former 'rules-based' international order into one controlled by the CCP.

The CCP approaches this geostrategy from the Marxist dictum of permanent struggle against threats to the survival of the Party. It follows that positive rhetoric framing the PRC's 'win-win' benevolence as a peaceful 'Confucianist' alternative to ruthless US-led capitalism is chiefly a tactical façade. Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the CCP, pointedly promoted in his keynote speech at Davos in 2017 the so-called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as central to the PRC's mission to empower the developing world in a selfless spirit of equality and mutual benefit.⁵ But the BRI is in reality driven by strongly revisionist intentions. This agenda drives discursive statecraft and positioning operations against states resistant to CCP pressure to submit to the PRC's inevitable rise.

Before focusing specifically on how the CCP seeks to position the UK to its advantage, it may be helpful to consider how the CCP frames the PRC and the discourse legitimising its authoritarian rule.

In a curious paradox, the CCP self-identifies concurrently as a revolutionary Marxist force, and the sole inheritor of traditional Chinese civilisation. From its earliest days, the CCP's core task has been, and still remains, to lead China out of a 'Century of Humiliation'

⁵ Xi Jinping, Speech: 'Full Text: Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the World Economic Forum', State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 06/04/2017, <https://on.china.cn/2RJLgtD> (found: 19/04/2021).

by foreign powers, dated approximately from the start of the Opium Wars until the foundation of the PRC in 1949. To this achievement was added its role as liberator of China from Japanese occupation and a failed Nationalist regime.⁶

Lately, under Xi Jinping, the CCP further frames itself – at home and abroad – as the driving force of China’s imminent renaissance as the preeminent world power. In the words of a recent US Department of Defence report:

China’s strategy can be characterised as a determined pursuit of political and social modernity that includes far-ranging efforts to expand China’s national power, perfect its governance systems, and revise the international order. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) frames this strategy as an effort to realize long-held nationalist aspirations to “return” China to a position of strength, prosperity, and leadership on the world stage.⁷

The famous CCP Document Number 9 of 2013 describes efforts by the liberal democracies to weaken and subvert the PRC’s single-party state system, and outlines defensive measures to counter this internal threat.⁸ Under the increasing authoritarianism of Xi Jinping, China has actively projected its new wealth and influence outwards into a globalised competition with foreign rivals. This struggle is conducted using a strategic approach known called ‘unrestricted warfare’ (超限战 / Chāo xiàn zhàn) in which military capabilities are developed in parallel with non-kinetic competition based on interconnected political, economic, influence and espionage activity.⁹

This single narrative of struggle, deeply rooted in both Communist and China’s indigenous political theory – particularly Sun Tzu’s Art of War – is a foundation of CCP state policy, of which

⁶ Alison A. Kaufman, ‘The “Century of Humiliation” and China’s National Narratives’, Testimony before the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on ‘China’s Narratives Regarding National Security Policy’, 10/03/2011, <https://bit.ly/3duuF5B> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁷ ‘Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020’, Office of The Secretary of Defence, 21/08/2020, <https://bit.ly/3n2yNwJ> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁸ ‘Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation’, *China File*, 08/11/2013, <https://bit.ly/2P94oko> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁹ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999).



positioning, framing and shaping foreign opponents is an integral component. Outwardly, however, this zero-sum campaign is presented in anodyne terms derived from traditional Confucian ethics, in which leaders are legitimised by their ‘benevolence’ (仁 / rén), ‘virtue’ (德 / dé) and respect for mutuality; an artificial construct exemplified by the 2017 Davos speech.¹⁰

2.1 The impact of PRC domestic and external risk perceptions on positioning discourse

The CCP’s record of governing China includes disastrous episodes – not least the ‘Great Leap Forward’ and the ‘Cultural Revolution’ – which have inflicted on the people of China harms arguably eclipsing those imposed by foreigners during the ‘Century of Humiliation’. As a result, CCP history has been heavily revised. These and later self-inflicted tragedies, including the suppression of a China-wide democracy movement in 1989, have largely been purged from public discourse. Nevertheless, such grim episodes scar the personal histories of several generations and have irrevocably weakened public trust in the CCP as an infallible national saviour.

Following the success of Deng Xiaoping’s ‘reform and opening up’ policy, the CCP’s claim to legitimacy as sole ruler of China came to depend on delivering rapid economic growth. The same claim, to have freed countless millions from desperate poverty, is still made today.¹¹ While economic recovery from the low baseline created by extreme Communist misrule clearly propelled the PRC to great power status, indigenous and external economic pressures have in recent years reduced growth to levels which the CCP itself recognises as threatening its continued political legitimacy.

This realisation has introduced urgency into recent CCP decision-making. The failure of his first emergency programme of economic reforms led by default to Xi Jinping’s BRI, a ‘portmanteau’ policy construct designed to manage domestic risk from the ‘middle-income trap’ by projecting and exploiting PRC wealth and influence overseas.

¹⁰ Xi Jinping, Speech: ‘Full Text: Xi Jinping’s keynote speech at the World Economic Forum’, State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 06/04/2017, <https://on.china.cn/2RJLgtD> (found: 19/04/2021).

¹¹ Zhao Hong, ‘Graphics: Ending China’s poverty by 2020’, CGTN, 17/10/2019, <https://bit.ly/3anE4Kn> (found: 19/04/2021).

The BRI has generated a surge of infrastructure construction across the developing world. But this has been accompanied by coercive ‘debt diplomacy’, environmental damage, corrupt collusion with authoritarian regimes, human rights abuses, communications data capture and other tangible harms. This unprecedented wave of investment and exploitation has inevitably propelled the CCP’s underlying competitive agenda into the international spotlight.

At the same time, military expansionism in the South and East China seas, combined with worsening tension with Taiwan, has provoked international re-appraisal of the PRC as a threat to peace and security. Critical assessment, particularly among liberal democracies, has enhanced the CCP’s sense of existential risk to a degree not seen since the Cold War. However, the context is very different; the CCP can now present itself as strong and confident enough to defy the US and its allies, which it avidly positions as increasingly weak, self-destructive and divided.

Currently, in the confused and fragmented world of the Covid-19 pandemic, the drivers of this geostrategic competition appear stronger than forces for peaceful reconciliation. Xi Jinping has a personal stake in celebrating a triumphant CCP centenary this year. Despite his attempts to keep the discourse of ‘win-win’ and PRC benevolence alive at the virtual meeting of Davos in January 2021, confrontational struggle rather than cooperation now informs much of the CCP’s rhetoric, explicitly aimed at challenging the open world order, including the UK and its allies.¹²

2.2 Positioning in CCP methodology

For much of its history, the CCP has consistently employed discursive statecraft techniques to degrade domestic and foreign opponents and extend its authority, notably in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South and East China seas. Given the UK’s global interests, historical connections and values, all of these bear on how the CCP positions Britain.

PRC party and state organs responsible for propaganda and thought control have never been more powerful than now, due to an

¹² Xi Jinping, Speech: ‘President Xi Jinping’s Speech at Davos Agenda is Historic Opportunity for Collaboration’, World Economic Forum, 25/01/2021, <https://bit.ly/2RIMbdL> (found: 19/04/2021).



increasingly authoritarian CCP leadership and its ubiquitous use of digital media and surveillance technologies. Lately, the crude rhetoric of so-called ‘Wolf Warrior’ officials, a new phenomenon in the CCP’s use of discursive statecraft, has attracted international criticism. However, Wolf Warrior discourse is mild compared with the CCP’s routine domestic condemnation of all activities and individuals seen as threatening its authority. This may partly explain some of the contradictory and repetitive positioning formulations adduced below. Transparent, hackneyed fictions unquestioned at home are increasingly presented as categorical realities abroad.¹³

As noted above, the CCP fundamentally opposes democratic liberalism, which it blames for the collapse of world communism at the end of the Cold War and the dangerous challenge the Chinese democracy movement posed in 1989. As noted above, since Xi Jinping’s rise to power, contesting the influence of liberal democracies has become an existential struggle to be conducted by all means expedient.

In the late 1970s aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, when the CCP had barely stepped back from the brink of self-destruction, public official discourse on foreign relations was comparatively simple and binary. To balance against Western and Soviet influence and hedge in a changing world, the PRC framed itself as an exponent of international ‘friendship’. One well-known platform for this benevolent posture was a monthly propaganda magazine for foreign readers first launched in 1952 as *China Reconstructs* and rebranded as *China Today* in 1990. As recently as 2017, a *China Today* summary of the year’s foreign relations activity was characteristically entitled ‘An Expanding Circle of Friends’.¹⁴

Deng Xiaoping continued with this uncontroversial approach, which suited his realist pragmatism. Strengthening the economy was more important than diplomatic posturing. In the early 1990s, even as the PRC confronted Western consternation at his 1989 suppression of the Democracy Movement, Deng famously revived an ancient maxim to guide the CCP’s foreign relations – ‘keep a low profile and bide your time’ (‘韬光养晦’ / ‘tāo guāng yǎng huì’) – though he assuredly did not

¹³ Heather Stewart, ‘China’s UK ambassador denies abuse of Uighurs despite fresh drone footage’, *The Guardian*, 19/07/2021, <https://bit.ly/3n1irEA> (found: 19/04/2021).

¹⁴ Lin Minwang, ‘An Expanding Circle of Friends’, *China Daily*, 13/12/2013, <https://bit.ly/3dx5qiS> (found: 19/04/2021).



mean that this approach should continue indefinitely.¹⁵ Deng's successors spent large sums trying unsuccessfully to improve China's image overseas.¹⁶ At this time official expressions of Chinese outrage were chiefly restricted to issues of sovereignty, most importantly Hong Kong, Tibet and Taiwan.

1995-1996 saw a dangerous escalation of tension between the PRC and Taiwan, culminating in Chinese missile tests and the US deployment of two carrier battle groups nearby. Though the CCP failed to prevent the re-election of Lee Teng-hui as president, it has been argued that by carefully moderating military brinkmanship, the CCP achieved a significant victory by using coercive diplomacy to degrade its enemies' will rather than their capabilities.¹⁷ After the 'Straits Crisis', both the US and Taiwanese governments took the PRC's warnings more seriously and Taiwan's independence movement became more circumspect.¹⁸

Currently, the CCP continues its aggressive brinkmanship and shaping campaigns against Taiwan, creating today's most dangerous flashpoint for great power conflict. The UK Government has signalled plans to send an aircraft carrier to the South China Sea later in 2021, provoking critical CCP positioning reactions that are discussed below. As noted in this paper's conclusions, efforts to understand the red lines behind this discourse may be crucial in formulating national and allied strategies for countering and deterring PRC aggression.

¹⁵ David Wolf, 'Understanding "Tao Guang Yang Hui"', *Peking Review*, 02/09/2014, <https://bit.ly/2Qfupyx> (found: 19/04/2021).

¹⁶ Anne-Marie Brady, 'China's Foreign Propaganda Machine', Wilson Center, 26/10/12, <https://bit.ly/3v8tGOz> (found: 19/04/2021).

¹⁷ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 171-191.

¹⁸ Andrew Scobell, 'Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly*, 115:2 (2000).

3.0 How the CCP positions the UK

For at least the last two decades, successive British governments have largely taken CCP blandishments and complaints about the UK at face value, arguably making limited progress in understanding how the UK and its approach towards the PRC is really understood by the CCP. Since both positive and negative Chinese positioning of the UK are polemics intended to further a unilateral agenda, neither should be regarded as reliable evidence of CCP perceptions.

However, some working hypotheses about CCP tactical objectives can still emerge from careful analysis of this body of data. A set of interconnected tropes, sustained over time, do appear to reflect underlying CCP perceptions of the UK. The following section assembles and analyses these individual themes and attempts to link them in a coherent over-all picture.

As noted above, the ‘Century of Humiliation’ is an important trope in CCP positioning discourse in relation to the West at large. Alison Kaufman, a Principal Research Scientist at CNA, describes it as a key element of the PRC’s founding narrative and a source of historical lessons about how strong Western powers still tend to behave toward China:

Although the PRC government maintains that the Century of Humiliation ended when the CCP won the Chinese civil war and established itself as the ruling regime, there remain several vestiges of that period that, in the minds of many Chinese, must be rectified before China’s recovery will be considered complete.¹⁹

This revenge or restitution-based narrative routinely figures in CCP attempts to position the UK. It does so alongside other more transient ideas, grounding them in a consistent narrative. Overall, the aims of this composite framing can be described as; undermining UK confidence and initiative in dealing with the PRC; encouraging domestic political and social dissent about how far the UK should

¹⁹ Alison A. Kaufman, ‘The “Century of Humiliation” and China’s National Narratives’, Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on ‘China’s Narratives Regarding National Security Policy’, 10/03/2011, <https://bit.ly/3duuF5B> (found: 19/04/2021).



challenge the PRC; increasing UK subservience to the wider CCP agenda; splitting the UK's alliances with other free and open nations; and degrading the UK's status as an international proponent and guarantor of liberal values.

While coercive language has always been part of the CCP's 'toolbox' for discursive statecraft, the general tone in regard to the UK has significantly hardened since the end of the so-called 'golden era' in British-Chinese relations and a peak of bilateral tension around Hong Kong during 2019 and 2020. Though the CCP sees continuing utility in accessing transactional gains still available from the UK, it now appears that even this takes second place to positioning the UK as an enfeebled but still arrogant irritant which must bow to reason and correct its ways. Some key strands of this positioning, with examples, are as follows:

1. The UK has declined from a former global and imperial power to a (less well-defined) 'medium-sized' power, but fails to grasp what this diminution entails for its engagement with the world at large and the PRC in particular²⁰

The dismissal of the UK as a spent force in international relations has been pushed vigorously in Chinese media. For example, in June 2014, a Global Times editorial noted that:

British public opinion remains prejudiced against China and highly expects to embrace an opportunity to prove that it is superior compared with the emerging nation...A rising country should understand the embarrassment of an old declining empire and at times the eccentric acts it takes to hide such embarrassment.²¹

More recently, in February 2021, the paper asserted:

²⁰ 'Chinese paper calls Britain a declining empire as premier visits', *Reuters*, 18/06/2014, <https://reut.rs/3gBkgXV> (found: 19/04/2021).

²¹ 'UK media hype over visit unprofessional', *Global Times*, 18/06/2014, <https://bit.ly/32shWtE> (found: 19/04/2021).

Post-Brexit UK still wants to play the role as a major power, which has been its long-held international position. But its limited strength in reality is obvious.²²

Similarly, in March 2021, the *Global Times* declared:

The UK issued its biggest review of foreign and defense policy since the end of the Cold War on Tuesday, in which it vowed to cement the country's presence in the Indo-Pacific region and challenge China where necessary. Yet the "immature" policy decision, originating from London's fantasy of reviving its past glory as a world superpower, not only downgrades itself as a toady of the US, also exposes the UK's over-optimism of its current international status.²³

In particular, due to the UK's supposedly reduced status, the paper positions any British attempt at locking horns with the PRC as futile:

The so-called challenge taken by the UK, a past world power whose international presence is diminishing and whose national strength is greatly weakening, against China, a rising power who bounced back fastest from Covid-19 and is the only major economy to see positive growth last year, cannot be mentioned in the same breath as the competition Beijing is having with Washington, and at best can only be a "war of words."²⁴

2. The UK has a weak and uncompetitive economy in dire need of Chinese investment; if it persists in trying to exclude Chinese investment on spurious grounds of national security, it will forfeit the benefits of a potential 'golden era'

Though the UK's economic difficulties are seldom mentioned in terms, straitened circumstances are implicit in much PRC positioning of the UK, particularly in response to proposed investments that are not universally welcomed. Just ahead of Xi Jinping's 2015 state visit, Liu

²² Wang Wenwen, 'UK's opportunist and adventurist diplomacy with China a dead end pursuit', *Global Times*, 22/02/2021, <https://bit.ly/3n02SNm> (found: 19/04/2021).

²³ Zhang Hui and Zhao Yusha, 'UK tilting toward Indo-Pacific to counterweight China 'immature' decision', *Global Times*, 16/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3eioz4m> (found: 19/04/2021).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Xiaoming, the then Chinese Ambassador to the UK, stated outright that the UK needed Chinese investment.²⁵ Chinese involvement in the UK's nuclear sector 'was in the best interests of Britain'. Asked if the PRC would allow the UK to build nuclear power plants in his own country, Liu claimed it would, provided the UK 'had the money first.'²⁶

In 2017, the then-ambassador again made the case for the UK needing Chinese investment.²⁷ In a lengthy article in the *Evening Standard*, he said that facing Brexit and setting out on the road to becoming Global Britain, the UK needed to prove its commitment to 'staying open' (i.e. to the PRC) to boost the confidence of other foreign investors.

In early 2020, when public debate over Huawei was intensifying, Liu Xiaoming concentrated on sticks rather than carrots.²⁸ A ban on Huawei would damage Chinese trust in the UK and its belief that the UK was able to run foreign policy independently from the US. He declared that the UK 'cannot have a golden era if you treat China as an enemy.'²⁹

Significantly, when the British Government eventually decided to exclude Huawei from the UK's future 5G network, the *Global Times* proclaimed:

It's necessary for China to retaliate against [sic] UK, otherwise wouldn't we be too easy to bully? Such retaliation should be public and painful for the UK. But it's unnecessary to turn it into a China-UK confrontation. The UK is not the US, nor Australia, nor Canada. It is a relative "weak link" in the Five Eyes. In the long run, the UK has no reason to turn against China, with the Hong Kong issue fading out.³⁰

²⁵ 'UK "needs Chinese investment", ambassador says', *BBC*, 18/10/2015, <https://bbc.in/32w65Lb> (found: 19/04/2021).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Liu Xiaoming, 'The Evening Standard Publishes a Signed Article by Ambassador Liu Xiaoming Entitled "Chinese investment in the UK is an opportunity not a threat"', Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the United Kingdom, 21/08/2017, <https://bit.ly/3ap9Whu> (found: 19/04/2021).

²⁸ Patrick Wintour, 'Chinese ambassador: UK ban on Huawei would damage trust', *The Guardian*, 06/07/2020, <https://bit.ly/3n2LR5t> (found: 19/04/2021).

²⁹ See: James Cook, 'UK risks throwing away relationship with China, says Huawei's UK boss', *Daily Telegraph*, 08/07/2020, <https://bit.ly/3v8vPd5> (found: 19/04/2021).

³⁰ 'China won't passively watch UK's Huawei ban: Global Times editorial', *Global Times*, 15/07/2019, <https://bit.ly/3suPkut> (found: 19/04/2021).



As this positioning shows, the UK can be framed from multiple angles. To begin with, it is positioned as a bully deserving public humiliation. Then the British bully is positioned as impotent by comparison with its 'Five Eyes' partners. Finally, now that China has re-asserted its proper rights over Hong Kong, a weakened and waning UK is positioned as having no realistic locus to pick fights with the PRC.

3. Recent policy shifts involving the projection of UK power overseas are anachronistic and futile, since the days of British 'gunboat diplomacy' are long past

This assertion routinely involves the use of the Opium Wars as a point of reference. In the words of the *Global Times*:

The UK is foisting its colonialism and expansionist mind-set upon China...Is the UK going to send its aircraft carriers near China? Somewhere near Hong Kong? Is it going to launch a new opium war against China?...unreasonably confronting China cannot help the UK to win back its old glory.³¹

An additional angle is the suggestion that the UK is playing the jackal to the US lion by taking part in efforts to uphold freedom of navigation. The PRC has warned the UK against sailing ships through disputed waters in the South China Sea, saying that such a move would be 'hostile' and hinting that Beijing would be forced to respond militarily.³² Reacting to a suggestion that the UK might send its aircraft carrier close to the contested Spratly Islands, with US jets onboard, the then-ambassador said the UK 'should not do this dirty job for somebody else'.³³

A further frame is that the UK, as a regional rather than a global power, has no legitimate reason to interfere in the security of the PRC's supposed zone of maritime influence. Recently a Chinese defence spokesman was quoted in the *South China Morning Post* implying, contrary to international law, that foreign powers planning to uphold

³¹ Li Qingqing, 'Is UK trying to launch another opium war against China?', 07/05/2020, *Global Times*, <https://bit.ly/2QCdSoc> (found: 19/04/2021).

³² Alistair Bunkall, 'China threatens military response if UK warships go near disputed islands', *Sky News*, 10/09/2019, <https://bit.ly/3xjG1RU> (found: 19/04/2021).

³³ Catherine Wong, 'China Blasts Nato with British Aircraft Carrier 'heading to South China Sea'', *South China Morning Post*, 01/01/2021, <https://bit.ly/2Qi2cqH> (found: 19/04/2021).

freedom of navigation in the South China Sea are guilty of militarising areas of maritime space beyond any reasonable relevance to their interests:

The Chinese side believes that the South China Sea should not become a sea of great power rivalry...The real source of militarisation in the South China Sea comes from countries outside this region sending their warships thousands of kilometres from home to flex muscles.³⁴

4. Britain clings to delusions of colonial power by imagining that it retains responsibility for Hong Kong after its return to full PRC sovereignty

Ad hominem and colourful in its diction, the polemic below typifies the CCP's regular abuse of Lord Patten in his role as a former Governor of Hong Kong, framing him as the epitome of unwelcome British interference in the PRC's sovereign territory:

...it is both ridiculous and despicable that that Chris Patten, the pathetic "last governor of Hong Kong", should still cling to colonialist mentality and overreach himself to meddle with Hong Kong affairs 23 years after the city's return to its motherland...He has [sic] and will continue to be condemned by the international community, and will only end up as a historical notoriety.³⁵

More in the same vein suggests that might is right and failing to read this across the entire British-Chinese relationship risks incurring punishment. Commenting on the 'interference' from British politicians, the *Global Times* warns the UK to 'cease meddling in Hong Kong' and to take note that the PRC is 'now the second-largest economy in the world'.³⁶ It goes on: 'Downing Street might have attempted to say something but it has so far refrained', before noting

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ 'Chris Patten will be condemned to everlasting infamy', Spokesperson of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 21/05/2020, <https://bit.ly/3v1adza> (found: 19/04/2021).

³⁶ 'UK must cease meddling in Hong Kong', *Global Times*, 04/09/2014, <https://bit.ly/32yp5sw> (found: 19/04/2021).



that the UK ‘can do nothing but merely make some complaints over Hong Kong's affairs.’³⁷

Considerably less nuanced language from a spokesman from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who extends a bizarre threat to the Five Eyes allies over interference in Hong Kong:

They should be careful or their eyes will be plucked out. No matter [if] they have five eyes or 10 eyes, as long as they dare to harm China's sovereignty, security and development interests, [they should be] careful not to get their eyes jabbed and blinded.³⁸

Other related themes include suggestions that UK influence has been diminished by Brexit, and that it is now obliged to follow the US lead even more slavishly.³⁹

3.1 CCP attacks on British principles and values

The UK as a country is not only positioned as a weak and negative global influence; the CCP also attempts to frame British principles and values in a negative light. An article by Cui Hongjian, Director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies – the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in-house think-tank – criticises the British Government’s March 2021 Integrated Review for imagining that the UK can aspire to improve its economic ties with the PRC while at the same time seeking to shape it according to liberal values and human rights.⁴⁰ He concludes that both the UK and the US hypocritically labour the human rights issue as a means of exerting pressure on the PRC as part of a ‘struggle about strength and global leadership’, and lack any real commitment to the issue.

A recent *Global Times* editorial develops this theme, linking UK and US condemnations of the PRC’s human rights record with the high

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Cui Fandi, ‘“Five Eyes” could be poked blind if China’s sovereignty and security harmed, warns Chinese FM spokesperson’, *Global Times*, 19/11/2021, <https://bit.ly/3ss2pVq> (found: 19/04/2021).

³⁹ Gao Jian, ‘Is Global Britain vision a British strategic deceit?’, *Global Times*, 23/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3dvgwoM> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁴⁰ Cui Hongjian, ‘UK vows to stand by values while hypocritically seeking economic benefit from China’, *Global Times*, 20/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3dz5Y7S> (found: 19/04/2021).



Covid-19 death toll in both countries.⁴¹ This framing can be identified by analysing the editorial in some detail. For example, in complaining about the British Dominic Raab's mentioning of Xinjiang at the United Nations, the *Global Times* asserts that

the Foreign Secretary's office [sic] is making a shameless imperialist act against China about human rights that has stunned Chinese people...⁴²

Two tropes are conflated here; British 'imperialism', thrown in apparently for good measure, and the CCP's standard claim that foreign actions it doesn't like are hurtful to 'the Chinese people' and consequently racially discriminatory. The article continues:

As an old capitalist country, the UK is naturally arrogant and profit-seeking, and showing arrogance has increasingly become a way for it to seek profits...⁴³

It is customary in CCP positioning to suggest that Western capitalism, epitomised by US behaviours, is arrogant and selfish by comparison with the PRC's approach, based on 'win-win' and 'mutual advantage'. The article goes on:

Now, the Five Eyes alliance is trumpeting so-called human rights against China. Who else in the world doesn't understand this is in fact a strategic suppression and harassment of China carried out in lockstep with the US?...⁴⁴

This passage suggests that the Five Eyes allies do not really care about human rights, but are simply following the cynical US lead in using these concerns as an excuse to undermine the PRC. Moreover:

Despite the shouting, the US and the UK cannot intervene in China's human rights development. The Chinese public no longer

⁴¹ 'US, UK overdraw human rights against China', *Global Times*, 22/02/2021, <https://bit.ly/2QBQQhk> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.



believes what Washington says, but increasingly feels contempt for the US and the UK's chaos and hypocrisy.⁴⁵

'Chaos' here refers to US and UK difficulties controlling their respective Covid-19 outbreaks, carrying the added implication that the PRC did a better job and that this proves its authoritarian system is superior to liberal democracy. Finally, it claims:

China now has enough strength to support the country to walk its own way while ensuring its own security. Forces that play politics with lies can only harm their own country in the end.⁴⁶

The *Global Times*' archetypal tirade can thus be reprised as follows: Britain, the former imperialist power, still clings to its old ways to persecute the Chinese people unfairly. Its long-accustomed capitalist arrogance increasingly serves material ends. Though the UK and its allies cynically use human rights as a pretext for attacking the PRC, they are powerless to affect how the PRC deals with human rights issues on its own terms. The US Government has lost all credibility with the Chinese people, who increasingly despise US and UK incompetence and hypocrisy. The PRC is now strong enough to defend its autonomy, and ultimately those who use lies to take political advantage of the PRC will simply damage themselves.

This rapid-fire barrage of positioning rhetoric concurrently deploys several of the themes discussed earlier in this study. Here these combined elements fuse into a coherent 'single narrative' which arguably defines not only how the CCP under Xi Jinping wants to portray free and open nations, but also what it actually believes to be true.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

4.0 The CCP's tools for positioning the UK

The activities of the CCP's highest level propaganda apparatus are secretive, making it difficult to trace individual positioning narratives back to an original source. Published CCP documents contain very little evidence of strategic aims and intentions for country-specific positioning. However, some positioning themes have been in use for decades, modified contextually in detail and tone but with little alteration in terms of substance. This enables the construction of an overview of what seem to be key aims and methods.

By definition, most CCP discursive statecraft – particularly positioning narratives – is conducted in the open, through official statements and media coverage designed to reach the widest possible audience. Furthermore, country-specific CCP positioning is also meant to be read by – and sow discord and dismay among – the target's allies and partners.

The sheer scale of the intended audience has additional significance. Unlike Russia, the PRC has a weighty and deeply-rooted diaspora around the world, a target for discursive statecraft articulated in Chinese-language media. Efforts to influence this community in the UK have taken off since the PRC became rich enough to offer material incentives for cooperation, carefully advanced by the United Front Work Department (UFWD), a CCP organ designed to spread pro-PRC narratives.⁴⁷ It reflects the PRC expatriate community's increasing role in local politics and government, likewise a focus of UFWD effort, in target environments around important research and development centres such as Cambridge, Manchester and Surrey.

For the purposes of this study, however, the main target is foreign audiences. Thus, apart from public statements and articles by leaders or officials, direct CCP positioning discourse mainly appears in state-sponsored foreign-language media publications (The important role of mass CCP-funded social media-based influence operations, very active in 2020 in regard to Taiwan and Covid-19, goes beyond the scope of this paper, not least because most of this material is in Chinese).

⁴⁷ For an explanation of the United Front Work Department's operations, see: June Teufel Dreyer, 'A Weapon Without War: China's United Work Front Strategy', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 06/02/2018, <https://bit.ly/3xbDTeE> (found: 19/04/2021).



Since the end of the 1990s, the PRC has spent increasingly large sums on improving its media footprint abroad, as well as buying space in foreign media to spread PRC-friendly narratives. Around 170 lengthy articles by the former Chinese Ambassador to the UK, published by mainstream UK newspapers between late 2010 and early 2021, are a notable instance of this.⁴⁸

4.1 The role of CCP publications

In recent years, the British Government's enthusiasm for Chinese trade and investment has thrown up many political, academic, local government, industrial and commercial contacts for the PRC to engage with. The CCP has thus sought to amplify indigenous British voices, some highly influential, in support of a number of its aims. Propaganda organs such as the *Global Times* have drawn on a number of commentators whose critical contributions are often picked up to help position the UK.⁴⁹ Foreign commentary can appear to provide independent collateral for familiar CCP assertions.

The English edition of the *Global Times* is one of the most extensively-used platforms for CCP discursive statecraft. Both are wholly owned by the *People's Daily*, a CCP-controlled media organ.⁵⁰ The *Global Times*' editor has said that his publications are intended to reflect the views of 'the Chinese people' to foreigners.⁵¹ In apparent corroboration of this half-truth, PRC officials sometimes complain about excessively belligerent nationalism in *Global Times* editorials.⁵² However both the editor's and these complaints may well be contrived, to give an air of deniability to aggressive language whose purpose the CCP endorses. In their book *Hidden Hand*, Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg comment that the newspaper 'serves as an outlet for the more jingoistic and hawkish positions that the CCP does not want to run in its

⁴⁸ Liu Xiaoming, 'I will never forget my 11 years in the UK', *Daily Telegraph*, 25/01/2021, <https://bit.ly/3aolz8G> (found: 12/04/2021). See also: Jane Clinton, 'Liu Xiaoming: The controversial Chinese ambassador to the UK, dubbed the original "wolf warrior" set to retire', *The Independent*, 28/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/3dvzR9e> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁴⁹ See, for example: Chen Qingqing and Bai Yunyi, 'UK mentality toward China shows serious regression: Martin Jacques', *Global Times*, 22/07/2020, <https://bit.ly/3sEzptC> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁵⁰ See: Lucy Hornby, 'Battling for influence – Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief, Global Times', *Financial Times*, 13/11/2016, <https://on.ft.com/3anHFbl> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*



more official media, a tactic that allows them to sound reasonable by comparison'.⁵³

Several examples of CCP positioning adduced above come from the English edition of the *Global Times*. In addition to its lively editorials, the *Global Times* also sources articles from a variety of CCP research and advisory bodies, which sometimes offer more moderate and considered positioning discourse. These statements from the CCP's intellectual heartland lend gravitas and authority to a propaganda platform whose editorial rhetoric alone might be dismissed as deliberately inflammatory posturing. This is important given that as noted above, the English-language edition of the *Global Times* positions itself as a definitive source, able to explain to the world what the Chinese government and people are thinking. This strategy has to a degree succeeded; this publication can generate much more coverage in overseas media than other more conventional Chinese outlets.⁵⁴ The *Global Times*' disparaging remarks about the UK at the time of Cameron's visit mentioned in the introduction of this paper were indeed very widely repeated in global media.⁵⁵

⁵³ Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World* (London: Oneworld, 2020), p. 168.

⁵⁴ 'Xin Xin Interviewed About China's Global Warnings Of War With The US', CAMRI, 02/02/17, <https://bit.ly/3ssVT0N> (found: 19/04/2021).

⁵⁵ See, for example, Tom Phillips, 'Britain good for nothing but travel and study, Chinese paper claims', *Daily Telegraph*, 03/12/2013, <https://bit.ly/3n9CJMo> (found: 19/04/2021) and Oliver Wright, "'Britain is merely a country of old Europe with a few decent football teams": Chinese newspaper criticises UK during David Cameron visit', *The Independent*, 03/12/2013, <https://bit.ly/3dxGTdO> (found: 19/04/2021).

5.0 Conclusion

Despite the remarkable volume and growing energy of positioning discourse it generates, the PRC does not generally use these messages to signal specific intentions with regard to the UK. In particular, threats of punitive action are not necessarily followed up. This sometimes leads to unsupported UK judgements that because past British behaviours did not trigger Chinese retribution, repeating them will not do so. Though attractively pragmatic, this assumption carries risks. Data is lacking to help judge what the CCP's true 'red lines' are at any time, let alone how they may vary in future.

Moreover, it is apparent that PRC tolerance levels, as well as expectations of compliance, vary considerably among bilateral relationships even when the states concerned are quite similar in terms of size, power and regional location (this is particularly evident in Eastern Europe). It is thus advisable not to extrapolate from how the PRC has interacted with other 'medium sized powers' – a term that the CCP uses to position the UK, to emphasise its recent dislocation from the European Union (EU) and apparently subordinate relationship with the previous US administration. The UK's imperial history, military power and outreach and strong regional and cultural alliances make the British case quite unique in Chinese eyes. It may also be relevant that according to a recent opinion poll in the PRC, the UK was popular with over 80% of respondents, a fact likely reflected in the substantial number of PRC students who come to study in the UK.⁵⁶

In other words, Chinese threats to retaliate against the UK are a function of opaque internal as well as external considerations. While CCP policy is typically highly strategic, it may therefore still be prudent to consider the possibility of sudden hostile retaliation. There is a growing tension between how much benefit the PRC has for decades got used to drawing down from the UK, and what its risk/benefit equation might look like if the British Government managed to implement a proper China policy in defence of national and shared international interests.

Equally, there is debatable benefit in paying overmuch heed to the CCP's increasingly intemperate positioning messages. Many of

⁵⁶ See: Charles Parton, 'What the Chinese Communist Party wants from the United Kingdom', Council on Geostrategy, 30/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3v1dmyU> (found: 19/04/2021).



these are formulaic and simply show up the self-mirroring cynicism with which the CCP often views the UK. Lacking in sufficient appreciation of how deep-rooted British liberal and democratic instincts are, the PRC regime often misses its mark when attempting to chastise and frighten the UK. The former Chinese Ambassador to the UK, despite a decade in post, was particularly prone to miscalculate public sentiment on matters such as Xinjiang. Attempts to manipulate the supply of medical products during the first onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe also played very badly with UK public opinion.⁵⁷ It is possible that the recent apparent CCP reaction against Wolf Warrior diplomacy does take account, in a transactional way, of its failure to advance its cause.

5.1 Recommendations

Rather than entering into an overly sophisticated interaction with CCP positioning operations, some more direct and simpler courses of action might instead be proposed:

- 1. Not to try officiously to change PRC behaviours by debate and persuasion.** This does not work. Instead of rising to mischievous and disruptive challenges, the UK should restate its principles, linked to those of its allies and partners, and do everything in its power to follow them through in its own national and international strategy.
- 2. To encourage all in British public life who actively support the UK's 'systemic competitors', be they senior academics, public intellectuals, serving or former officials and politicians, or members of other professional bodies, to be transparent about their substantive connections with the PRC.** They should also be encouraged to expound and justify frankly, in public debate with expert interlocutors, the ideas behind pro-PRC discourse which they disseminate in CCP publications.
- 3. To take back control of Chinese language, culture and history teaching in the UK from CCP state actors and their surrogates.**

⁵⁷ See, for example: David Patrikarakos, 'Beware China's masked diplomacy', *The Spectator*, 30/03/2020/, <https://bit.ly/3aoL9KE> (found: 19/04/2021).



To cite only one current harm, the CCP has appropriated China's most famous philosopher, Confucius, as cover for shaping and disinformation on a broad front, much of this aimed at young people lacking alternative resources. The CCP claims that its rule continues the millennia-old tradition of benevolent government which Confucius endeavoured to systematise. But nothing could be more different from an unelected totalitarian autocracy which tortures and imprisons millions of its citizens without regard for its own constitution and arbitrary 'laws'. Allowing such negative discursive statecraft on this level to shape the next generation of Britons' perceptions of Chinese civilisation, as well as accepting that the CCP genuinely represents 'the feelings of the Chinese people', is to lay the UK open to exploitation by a determined systemic competitor. Unless this error is corrected, it will be all too easy for the CCP and its UK surrogates to pursue their zero-sum revisionist agenda in open sight.



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