

By Rejecting Huawei, Britain Risks Being Swept up in the US' Next Ideological Crusade

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'Let China sleep, when she wakes, she will shake the world' Napoleon reportedly said. But China has been far from asleep in recent years – the West has. In the last few decades the East Asian country of around 1.4 billion has become the manufacturing powerhouse of the world. It is not common knowledge, but in most fields it has already surpassed the United States. In a generation, a country which did not even feature on the economic league tables in 1980 is now leading them. By 2024 its estimated GDP will exceed the US' by over \$10 billion.

The US has been aware of this, although arguably has done little up until now to react other than President Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' in 2012. Donald Trump has taken a much more confrontational approach since he came to the presidency, embarking on an uncompromising trade war with China, in which he has openly attempted to manipulate US allies. Britain for some time resisted, signing up last year to a deal with Chinese tech giant Huawei to roll out 5G technology across the UK, against US advice. But last week, the British government performed a U-turn on its decision, declaring it would not be allowing Huawei to be involved in its 5G network after 2027. On Sunday, Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab said that there would be '[no return](#)' to normal relations with China.

So what happened to the 'golden decade' of Sino-British relations announced by the Cameron government back in 2015? Only last year with the shadow of Brexit looming, then PM Theresa May announced \$9bn of business deals with China. But the honeymoon is now over. In a world which is dominated by two economic powers, Britain has been forced to choose sides, and the coronavirus pandemic has provided the perfect opportunity to change policy. Indeed as soon as the epidemic took hold in Britain, the anti-China rhetoric was ramped up. It was as if the Chinese had to be punished somehow for Covid crisis – suddenly the nation was enemy number one and couldn't be trusted at all. Someone just had to be made responsible for the rising death toll in Britain; it couldn't be Boris Johnson, Xi Jinping was a much more suitable option. In terms of making the current anti-China stance more palatable for the British public, the coronavirus crisis was just what was needed. The media campaign began, as rumours of coronavirus having been leaked from a Wuhan laboratory (although unfounded) were [spread](#).

Up until Covid-19, Britain was silent on the plight of the Uighurs, uninterested in the Hong Kong umbrella movement, and unwilling to budge on Huawei, even under considerable pressure from the US. Even during the unrest in Hong Kong which began last year over changes to extradition laws, Britain was cautious. It had to protect its post-Brexit trading interests. But the pressure from the US has clearly proved too much. Donald Trump, for his part, personally takes credit for the UK rejection of Huawei. On the announcement of the UK

decision, he [said](#): 'I talked many countries out of using it...If they want to want to do business with us, they can't use it.' Just like that, the leader of the 'free world' admits western nations are not free at all, but at the bidding of America. In fact, it was [reported](#) that the US effectively forced the UK to reject Huawei by imposing new sanctions that cut off the company from international semiconductor supplies, leaving Britain no choice but to look to other 5G providers.

Make no mistake, the UK was bullied out of the Huawei deal. The US administration has escalated tensions with China in the last few weeks, now imposing visa restrictions on Huawei employees entering the US, and removing Hong Kong's special trade status. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said recently 'if China treats Hong Kong and China as one country in a single system then so must we'. Giving a press conference last week on the subject, Pompeo was flanked by screens bearing the slogan 'If you are doing business with Huawei, you are doing business with human rights abusers.' (Never mind the multi-billion dollar arms contracts signed last year with Saudi Arabia, a nation famed for its lack of human rights, with a crown prince that brutally [annihilates](#) his opponents.) The US picks and chooses who it wants to fight, and when, and its motivations are primarily economic. In addition, the US elections are looming, Trump needs an enemy, and China has fallen in the crossfire.

China for its part clearly doesn't want conflict. It has spoken of trust having been 'seriously damaged' and of impending 'consequences' for the UK of banning Huawei, but it's not likely it would go as far as to impose its own sanctions or blacklist US companies. Multinationals such as Google and Apple are so heavily embedded in the Chinese technological infrastructure that restricting them would pose huge risk. Instead, it's more possible that China will look towards strengthening its links with allies such as [Russia](#), and expanding its market elsewhere. 'In the end, this is a big world, and the UK is only a small part of it' the Chinese foreign ministry said [last week](#). Chinese companies will no doubt be discouraged from investing in the UK however, moving forward.

The reality is Britain has been slow to catch up with a rising China, and for too long has sat on the fence in the US-China trade war. Now it cannot afford to ignore it: in 20 years China has gone from [26th to 6th](#) place in Britain's largest export markets. The Covid crisis, together with increasingly aggressive US rhetoric towards the government of Xi Jinping, have now shone a light on the country, and it has become obvious that the UK is lacking a coherent China strategy. [Very few people](#) in the Foreign Office have real, hands-on experience of China and its language and culture, and this is a real handicap when dealing with any nation. With the US outright rejecting China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, and sending a warship there recently to flex its muscles, it would take very little for this 'cold war' to heat up.

The UK needs to craft its future China policy very carefully, or risk being swept up in the US' next ideological crusade.

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