

Xi Jinping's UK Visit Raises Questions about How to Deal with a Rising China

Written by Zhiquan Zhu

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When Sir George Macartney, the first British envoy to imperial China, visited Peking in 1793, he reportedly refused to kowtow in the presence of Emperor Qianlong, maintaining the dignity of a British nobleman. How British leaders treat China's rulers today may make Sir Macartney's head spin.

Much ink has been spilled on President Xi Jinping's October 2015 state visit to the United Kingdom. Xi's visit undoubtedly raised the Sino-British relationship to a historic height as Prime Minister David Cameron called Britain "China's best partner in the West". The visit focused on trade and investment, but the long-term geopolitical impact should not be underestimated.

Xi's visit to the UK raises a critical question for the global community: how to deal with China's rise? Unlike the United States, the UK does not feel threatened by China and, unlike Japan—another key US ally, the UK has a more independent foreign policy and does not have bilateral disputes with China.

Xi traveled to the UK on the heels of his US visit a month earlier. While the UK enthusiastically embraces opportunities associated with China's growth, the United States is more cautious. President Barack Obama's statements such as "we can't let countries like China write the rules of the global economy" reflect deep American anxiety about the growing Chinese power and influence. President Xi's active global diplomacy is not so much about what China wants and does, but how the international community responds to the new China.

The UK occupies a unique position in China's worldview and foreign policy. The first Sino-British Opium War in 1839 marked the beginning of China's so-called Century of Humiliation that ended in 1949 with the establishment of the People's Republic. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), Mao romantically and recklessly attempted to surpass Britain in industrial output in 15 years. In the 1980s 'Iron Lady' Margaret Thatcher worked with Deng Xiaoping and creatively found a mutually acceptable way to end Hong Kong's colonization. Hong Kong's smooth handover in 1997 is a remarkable event in international history. Despite suspicions and concerns about Beijing's commitment to the 'one country, two systems' policy, it is obviously in both China's and Britain's interest to maintain Hong Kong's prosperity and freedom.

The British are obviously taking a different approach from that of the United States in coping with China's rise. This approach is based on cooperation, mutual benefits, and inclusive development, which resonates with the 'new type of international relations' President Xi is touting. In a rare interview with *Reuters* on the eve of his visit, President Xi commended Britain's strategic choice to become "the Western country that is most open to China." While Xi was not given the opportunity to address US Congress, he was offered the chance to address the British parliament.

Britain's China policy has a demonstrative effect. In 2013, the UK became the first G7 country to create a currency swap line with China. In 2015, it was the first Western country to join the China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). All major economies are AIIB members now except the United States and Japan. The UK is also the first developed country where China is helping build a nuclear power plant.

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Due to their China-friendly policy, both Prime Minister Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne have faced sharp domestic criticism for trading principles for economic gains. Even the Dalai Lama chimed in and claimed that the current British government has lost morality in focusing on money.

The Australian scholar and former defense official Hugh White has suggested that the United States has three options when dealing with China: resist China's challenge and preserve the US dominance in Asia, step back from Asia and let China establish hegemony, or remain in Asia on a new basis, allowing China a larger role but also maintaining a strong presence of its own. Essentially, he argues that the third option, sharing power with a rising China, is the only viable choice. White's idea remains controversial as the world struggles to adjust to the changing global power structure.

Should one counter China's rise, which is virtually impossible and may create a more nationalistic and revengeful China, or should one actively engage China to shape its development into a peaceful and responsible global power? Britain, like many others, seems to have made the decision. One hopes that this proves the right choice for Britain, for China, and for the international community.

About the author:

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