

DEVELOPING A CHINA STRATEGY

Human rights activist and writer **Benedict Rogers** is a co-founder and chief executive of Hong Kong Watch and co-founder and deputy chair of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission. He argues that the UK government needs a clear, consistent and coherent China strategy.

Ever since the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco on 24 October, 1945 – less than two months after the end of the Second World War – an international rules-based order has given the world peace and stability for almost 80 years.

Of course, it has not prevented wars and conflict, nor has it stopped genocide and persecution or successfully protected human rights. But the rules-based order has at least established a set of international norms against which perpetrators of crimes can be measured and, where possible, held accountable.

That global order has come under ever-increasing threat in recent years, especially with Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the escalation of conflict in the Middle East and, most particularly, from the rise of China as a global power. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in Beijing is asserting its influence on the world stage and, especially under the leadership of Xi Jinping, is not only intensifying its repression of dissent at home but increasing its belligerence and aggression abroad.

It is exerting not only influence but at times dominance within key multilateral organisations such as the UN, including the World Health Organisation (WHO), silencing or sidelining critics and reshaping the agenda. Through its campaigns of espionage, cyber-attacks and transnational repression, it is threatening, harassing and intimidating critics abroad, not only within diaspora communities but among foreign politicians, journalists and activists. Its influence and infiltration operations are sophisticated and widespread.

As the renowned China expert Elizabeth Economy wrote in a [recent article in *Foreign Affairs*](#): 'By now, Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambition to remake the world is undeniable. He wants to dissolve Washington's network of alliances and purge what he dismisses as "Western" values from international bodies.'

All this raises the question: what is the future of the UK-China relationship and how should the next British government, after the general election on 4 July, approach perhaps the biggest foreign policy challenge of our time?

The current government has been through several different incarnations of China policy. Six months into his premiership in 2010, David Cameron travelled to China and

delivered a speech to university students [about the virtues of democracy](#). Two years into his time in office, he and his deputy prime minister in the coalition government, Nick Clegg, infuriated Beijing by [meeting the Dalai Lama](#).

But then, seemingly spooked by Beijing's fury, Cameron swung to the opposite extreme, presiding over the so-called 'Golden Era' of Sino-British relations, which led to him hosting Xi Jinping on a state visit and drinking a pint of beer with him in a pub. During that state visit, China's human rights record was not raised in public once by the government as the red carpet was rolled out, although Fiona Bruce MP, then chair of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission, ensured that human rights received attention by tabling an [urgent question in the House of Commons](#) before Xi left the country.

Yet by 2020 the 'Golden Era' was beginning to fray, with increasing concerns being expressed about allowing Huawei into the UK's 5G telecommunications network. Tensions grew as evidence of atrocities perpetrated against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs in China's western Xinjiang region emerged, the crackdown in Hong Kong intensified and the Covid-19 pandemic hit the whole world.

In more recent years, the UK-China relationship has been further tested by increasing incidents of cyber-attacks on parliament, the Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Defence, allegations of espionage and infiltration in parliament, and increasing concerns of China's transnational repression.

The dismantling of Hong Kong's freedoms, in total violation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, and the resulting – and generous – decision by the British government to establish a visa scheme for Hong Kongers with British National Overseas (BNO) status, has only heightened tensions between London and Beijing further. The so-called 'Golden Era' is long gone, and rightly so.

The current government has shed some of its reticence about speaking out about human rights in China. As foreign secretary, David Cameron has met with Sebastien Lai, son of Jimmy Lai, the jailed 76-year-old Hong Kong entrepreneur and pro-democracy campaigner and a British citizen, and repeatedly called for Mr Lai's release. At the United Nations, the UK has been a prominent voice both on Hong Kong and human rights in Xinjiang.

And yet there is still a lack of clarity in UK-China policy. Rishi Sunak's government has described the relationship with Beijing as an 'epoch-defining challenge' which should be met with 'robust pragmatism'. Yet few people seem to know what those terms mean.

In 2019 the [House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee](#) held an inquiry into China and the rules-based international system, which noted: 'China under President Xi Jinping has become more ambitious, more confident and more assertive.' In response, the UK should 'recalibrate its policy towards China' and yet 'the current framework of UK policy towards China reflects an unwillingness to face this reality'.

Five years on, that largely remains true. Even today, as the Foreign Affairs Committee said five years ago, 'the UK's approach risks prioritising economic considerations over other interests, values and national security'.

While rhetoric on human rights has improved and there is a much greater awareness of, and attention to, the national security threats, especially from the intelligence

agencies but also from government, there remains too much mixed messaging, too many inconsistencies, not enough joined-up cross-government thinking and too little long-term strategy.

Whichever party forms the next government needs to take a more strategic, coherent and consistent approach. The next government should adopt the Foreign Affairs Committee's recommendation of producing a single, detailed, public document defining the UK's China strategy.

This should involve a whole-of-government cross-departmental review, assessing the CCP's human rights record and what we should do about it in foreign policy; trade and investment policies to ensure, for example, that we stop the use of forced labour in our supply chains or the import of products made by prison or slave labour; education policy to reduce the dependency of our universities on Chinese sources of funding which could represent a threat to our own academic freedoms and freedom of expression on campuses here at home; policing to ensure we tackle transnational repression and protect diaspora communities within the UK; cyber-security so that we protect our democracy; the Treasury and the Business and Trade Department, to review how we can reduce our strategic dependency and de-risk our investments; the Ministry of Defence, to ensure we are prepared for all eventualities in an ever-more dangerous world; and a whole host of other policy areas too. And in developing this strategy, human rights non-governmental organisations and human rights defenders, among other experts, should be consulted.

In regard to human rights specifically, there are six steps the next government should take.

First, it should recognise the atrocities against the Uyghurs as a genocide or explain why it does not do so. It should review the decision by both the previous and current US administrations to recognise the Uyghur genocide, assess resolutions by several parliaments including the House of Commons declaring the atrocities in Xinjiang a genocide, and, most importantly, study and engage with the judgment of the [Uyghur Tribunal chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice, KC](#). Additionally, the UK should engage actively in UN human rights mechanisms to hold the Chinese/Hong Kong governments accountable, including calling for an impartial and independent United Nations mechanism to closely monitor, analyse, and report annually on the range of human rights violations being committed.

Second, it should impose sanctions on those responsible for dismantling Hong Kong's freedoms, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. If those responsible are not made to face the consequences for their behaviour, the CCP will be emboldened to continue its repression at home and aggression abroad with impunity.

Third, in particular the next government must speak out loudly, clearly, consistently and repeatedly for the release of British citizen Jimmy Lai and an end to his prosecution.

Fourth, the next government should meet and engage, regularly and at a ministerial level, with representatives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan diaspora, as well as Chinese dissidents and representatives of the Uyghur and Hong Kong communities.

Fifth, the next government should increase engagement with Taiwan and send a clear message to Beijing of the UK's support for Taiwan and determination to deter any military invasion of the island, which is one of Asia's most vibrant democracies and an inspiring voice for human rights.

And sixth: the next government should place human rights clearly and consistently at the centre of all engagement with China and at the heart of all policy-making within the UK-China strategy. It should speak up unambiguously and repeatedly for freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of assembly and association, an end to torture, arbitrary arrest and forced labour, and the release of all prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, across all the territories under the CCP's control. It should also exert pressure on Beijing to stop supporting, equipping or facilitating crimes under international law by other repressive human rights violators, such as the military dictatorship in Myanmar, the North Korean regime and Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.

The UK needs a clear, consistent and coherent China strategy – and one which puts human rights first.

The views expressed in this essay are the author's own and not those of Amnesty International UK