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Research Article

UK-China Relations: Global Britain in a Competitive Age and China as the Systemic Competitor

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Abstract

The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: *Global Britain in a Competitive Age* has been published in March 2021. It sets out the United Kingdom's foreign and security policy approach for the next decade. In the Integrated Review, the international system is described as more competitive, more fragmented, and multipolar. It introduces a new policy approach based on new trends namely geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts; systemic competition; rapid technological change; and transnational challenges in the world post-Covid-19 and post-Brexit. The Global Britain vision labels China as a challenging "systemic competitor" in this new world order. The United Kingdom-China relations have a long history, with a complex nature and include both cooperation and confrontation. This article focuses on the United Kingdom's China strategy which, according to the Integrated Review, requires a shift in policy making. This article claims that the United Kingdom lacks a clear China strategy although it describes it as the main systemic competitor. It elaborates on the historical developments of bilateral relations and questions the challenges that China pose to security, prosperity, and values from the British perspective.

Keywords: UK's Foreign Policy, Global Britain, UK's China Policy, Integrated Review, UK-China Relations

JEL Codes: F50, F52, N44, N45

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Araştırma Makalesi

Birleşik Krallık-Çin İlişkileri: Rekabet Çağında Küresel Britanya ve Sistemik Rakip Olarak Çin

Ayşe Gülce Uygun¹ & Cemre Pekcan²

Öz

Güvenlik, Savunma, Kalkınma ve Dış Politika Entegre İncelemesi: *Rekabet Çağında Küresel Britanya* Mart 2021'de yayınlanmıştır ve Birleşik Krallık'ın önümüzdeki on yıl için dış politika ve güvenlik politikası yaklaşımını ortaya koymaktadır. Entegre İncelemede, uluslararası sistem daha rekabetçi, daha parçalı ve çok kutuplu olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Jeopolitik ve jeoekonomik değişimler, sistemik rekabet, hızlı teknolojik değişim ile Covid-19 sonrası ve Brexit sonrası dünyadaki ulusötesi zorluklar gibi yeni trendlere dayalı yeni bir politika yaklaşımı sunan Küresel Britanya vizyonu, Çin'i bu yeni dünya düzeninde zorlu bir "sistemik rakip" olarak nitelendirmektedir. Birleşik Krallık-Çin ilişkileri karmaşık bir yapıya ve uzun bir geçmişe sahiptir ve hem işbirliğini hem de sorunları içerir. Bu makale, Entegre İncelemeye göre politika yapımında bir değişim gerektiren Birleşik Krallık'ın Çin stratejisine odaklanmaktadır. Bu makale, Birleşik Krallık'ın Çin'i ana sistemik rakip olarak tanımlamasına rağmen, net bir Çin stratejisinden yoksun olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Ayrıca ikili ilişkilerin tarihsel gelişmeleri üzerinde durmakta ve Çin'in güvenlik, değerler ve refaha getirdiği zorlukları İngiliz perspektifinden sorgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Birleşik Krallık Dış Politikası, Küresel Britanya, Birleşik Krallık Çin Politikası, Entegre İnceleme, Birleşik Krallık-Çin ilişkileri

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1. Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) government has been conducting a five-year strategic review since 2010. Following this, at least formal, pattern, in February 2020, Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, announced the new one which would go “beyond the parameters of a traditional review” (Strachan, 2021, p. 161). The outbreak of coronavirus has postponed the process and the “Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*” has been published in March 2021.

Leaving the European Union (EU) following an uneasy process of Brexit and the outbreak of the coronavirus have been two challenging issues, among others, for UK’s foreign policy during the last decade. To respond to these challenges the Integrated Review (IR) 2021 sets “a high level of ambition” for the UK (Lyll Grant, 2021, p. 20). The Integrated Review focuses on a new foreign policy approach based on new trends in the world post-Covid-19 and post-Brexit. The 2025 vision for Global Britain emphasizes four trends namely geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts; systemic competition; rapid technological change; and transnational challenges.

The *Global Britain* strategy describes the post-Covid international order as more competitive, multipolar, increasingly contested, and fragmented; and it affirms the UK as the “global leader” in many areas. Therefore, the UK’s foreign policy should adopt a “new approach” since preserving the status quo is not sufficient anymore, in this fragmented and multipolar international order (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 11). The Integrated Review claims that the UK needs this shift in thinking because the current international system is more characterized by increasing competition among states over interests, norms, and values than by the “rules-based international system” that the UK has greatly benefited from since the end of the Cold War (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 11).

According to the Global Britain approach, the threats to the UK’s security are in diverse forms in today’s global settings. The largest defence investment program since the Cold War’s end has been launched (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 4) to respond to the different forms of threats and to become more “powerful” in many senses. The 2025 vision of the UK employs many forms of British “power” considering the material and non-material capacities of the UK. It, therefore, includes an ambition of becoming “soft power superpower”, “responsible cyber power”, “global leader in diplomacy”, and “science and technology superpower”.

Besides, the Integrated Review underlines the principal continuities and changes in the UK’s foreign policy approach. The United States of America (USA) as the key partner; commitment to NATO; respect for human rights; and promoting international development remain the elements of continuity in the UK’s approach. On the other hand, the Integrated Review focuses on the challenges and changes which require shifts in policymaking. These changes include the post-Covid international order; European Union following Brexit; climate change and biodiversity; science and technology; cyber power; space policy; Indo-Pacific; China; global health issues; armed forces; state threats; and domestic and international resilience.

This article focuses on the UK’s approach towards China which, according to the *Global Britain* vision, requires a shift in the UK’s policymaking since it’s described as the “systemic competitor” in the Integrated Review. The first part of the article is devoted to the main lines of the UK’s foreign policy vision for 2025, as it appears in the Integrated Review. The second part strives to provide historical context for the two countries’ current bilateral relations. The third part elaborates on China as the “systemic competitor” for the UK. It also analyses the

challenges that China poses to the UK, with a special focus on Hong Kong. It concludes with an assessment of the UK's China strategy.

2. The Integrated Review and the Global Britain Strategy

“The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*” has been published in March 2021 and sets out the UK's new foreign policy approach, in a competitive age. The UK will be stronger, safer, wealthier, and more resilient in 2030, according to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who also sees the country as a problem-solving, burden-sharing society with a global outlook (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 6).

As security concerns and tests of national resilience can take many different forms, security-related concerns are stressed in a variety of ways, and the Integrated Review (IR)'s central theme is a stronger commitment to security and resilience so that the British people are safeguarded against dangers (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 4,11). Boris Johnson has launched the largest defense investment program since the Cold War's end to respond to various types of threats (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 4). To be more “powerful” then becomes a priority in many senses. Alongside the future vision of the UK, the Integrated Review describes the UK's material and non-material capacities from different perspectives and employs many forms of British “power”. These power definitions include: “soft power superpower”, “responsible cyber power”, “global leader in diplomacy”, and “science and technology superpower”.

The IR 2021 states that the UK's advantages in terms of defence and security include having top-tier security and intelligence services supported by annual investments of over £3 billion and ranking as the second-highest NATO and European spender on defence. The UK is said to as a superpower in terms of science and technology since it is home to world-class medical research, like the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine, and it is placed fourth in the Global Innovation Index (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 8). The UK is considered a global leader in terms of diplomacy and development due to its fourth-largest diplomatic network, which has 281 posts in 178 nations and territories; it is one of the main donors and a founding member of COVAX and, funding the WHO at a rate of 30% over the past four years (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 8).

Another strength is the UK's membership to major multilateral organisations (NATO, World Bank and IMF, UN Human Rights Council 2021-22, G7 (President 2021), Commonwealth, Founding member of the UN, P5 member of the UN Security Council, Council of Europe and G20) (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 8,9). The UK has the third-ranked soft power in the world, according to the Integrated Review, the BBC is the most dependable broadcaster globally, reaching 468 million viewers each week in 42 languages, and the British Council has operations in more than 100 nations. Therefore, it's described as a “soft power superpower” (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 9).

The UK's economy is also the fifth largest in the globe. It ranks first in defense, intelligence, norms, and offensive capabilities, and the UK's cyber network spans 122 countries on six continents, making it the third-most powerful cybernation in the world. Furthermore, the IR 2021 stresses that the UK successfully decreased its emissions by over 40% between 1990-2018. These strengths are described to justify being a “responsible cyber power” and a “world leader in climate action” (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 9).

On the other hand, leaving the European Union (EU) following an uneasy process of Brexit and the outbreak of the coronavirus have been two challenging issues, among others, for UK's foreign policy over the last decade. According to the Integrated Review, British foreign

policy during the most recent ten years has been focused on maintaining the "rules-based international system. The battle between states for interests, rules, and values, however, is becoming more intense in the current international system, which is more fractured. Therefore, maintaining the status quo is insufficient for the upcoming decade, which also denotes a change in strategy (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 11).

The UK is bound together by common interests and values, and the government's fundamental goal is to further these values through domestic and international actions. The most important interests are presented as sovereignty, security, and prosperity. Shared values, fundamental to British national identity, on the other hand, consist of a "commitment to universal human rights, the rule of law, free speech and fairness and equality" (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 13).

Although "Global Britain" remains a vague concept hard to define, its context is "much more explicit about strategy" compared to its predecessors in 2010 and 2015 (Strachan, 2021, p. 166). According to Integrated Review 2021, actions rather than words are the greatest way to clarify what something means in practice (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 14-16). Integrated Review underlines that, since the 2019 general election, the UK's defence and security were strengthened by the government's greater commitment to finding multilateral solutions to problems like the global health crisis and climate change, while also increasing burden-sharing with allies and protecting the rights of the weak and vulnerable (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 14-16).

The strategic framework for 2025 (in some parts of the document such as Johnson's foreword, for 2030 though), sets a baseline for a more flexible new foreign policy approach, and sets out further required policies and sub-strategies (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 18). Although it lacks the priority-setting seen in the risk-based approach of previous Reviews (Neville-Jones, 2021), to identify priority actions, the present Review focuses on the continuities and changes to get prepared for the opportunities and challenges of the new World order (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 20).

In terms of continuities, the United States of America (USA) remains the most important key partner. As Dame Karen Pierce (2021), the UK's ambassador to the USA, emphasizes:

During his first overseas visit in June, President Joe Biden affirmed with Prime Minister Boris Johnson a relationship without equal anywhere in the world. The closest of partners and the greatest of allies, the United Kingdom and the United States are unparalleled in their shared commitment to defend the rule of law and sustain cooperation that is critical for global stability and prosperity.

Besides, to ensure collective security through NATO, as "the leading European Ally", the UK abides by its promise to collaborate with partners to thwart nuclear, conventional, and hybrid threats to their security, including those from Russia. Some of the other continuities are described as: acting to uphold universal human rights, fighting against poverty, as "a world-leading international development donor" and promoting girls' education (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 20).

When it comes to the challenges, the Integrated Review focuses on the changes which require shifts in policymaking. These are the post-covid international order; Europe and European Union following Brexit; climate change and biodiversity; science and technology; cyber power, space policy, Indo-Pacific, China, global health issues, armed forces, state threats; and domestic and international resilience. To overcome these challenges the UK "will need friends and partners more than ever" in the post-Brexit era (Sawers, 2021).

The focus of this research is on China because, as China becomes more dominant in the globe, the Global Britain plan must take additional steps to adjust to China's rising influence on many parts of (their) life. (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 22). According to the Strategic Framework:

We will invest in enhanced China-facing capabilities, through which we will develop a better understanding of China and its people, while improving our ability to respond to the systemic challenge that it poses to our security, prosperity, and values – and those of our allies and partners. We will continue to pursue a positive trade and investment relationship with China, while ensuring our national security and values are protected. We will also cooperate with China in tackling transnational challenges such as climate change. (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 22)

China is described as a “systemic competitor” to Global Britain’s vision as well as to UK’s security, prosperity, and values. Before a detailed evaluation of China’s growing threat to the UK, the next part looks at the historical background of bilateral relations.

3. Historical Background of UK-China Relations

China, being a deep-rooted culture, was one of the richest countries in the world until the 18th century. Due to its wealth and size as a market, China, which accounts for nearly one-third of global production, began to draw Western nations’ interest. As Westerners moved into the area, China's influence and wealth gradually declined. China's remoteness from industrialization and growth rate in the West is the main cause of this.

Although there is evidence of commerce in the 1600s, the most notable event that comes to mind when we look at the history of connections between China and the UK is the Opium wars. Western nations, which mostly purchased tea, silk, and porcelain from China, began to sell opium to China in exchange. Although the use of opium for non-medical purposes was outlawed in China in 1729, the illegal smuggling of the drug persisted, and when China launched a significant campaign against opium smuggling in 1839, the British declared war on China. (Holcombe, 2016, pp. 233-236). China was defeated in the First Opium War between England and China in the years 1839 to 1842. The Nanjing Agreement was signed at the end of the war, and five ports were opened to trade. China was forced to pay a high compensation and Hong Kong was transferred to England (Mishra, 2013, p. 42). In 1898, the UK leased additional territory known as the New Territories with the intent to return it to China after 99 years.

As the Western nations requested greater concessions and China resisted, the Second Opium War broke out in 1856, including France and the UK. China was once more beaten, and the Tianjin Agreement, which ended the war, gave foreigners increased privileges in several areas (Mishra, 2013, p. 45). The burning of the Emperor's summer house and the destruction of numerous works of art inside it during this conflict earned a place in history as an occasion that the Chinese still find difficult to forget.

The largest industrial power in the globe by the late 1800s was the UK. China, on the other hand, was battling successive losses and opium, to which the majority of the nation had become addicted. With the 1895 Shimonoseki Agreement, the Chinese, who had been defeated by the Japanese in the 1894–1895 Sino–Japanese War in Korea, was forced to cede Taiwan to Japan (Gelber, 2007, p. 219).

China was freed from being a colony of any nation thanks to the USA's "Open Door" policy, and the Republic was founded on January 1, 1912, under the direction of a pro-revolutionary organization. However, domestic control was not entirely attained. In the First

and Second World Wars, the authorities of the created republic allied with the UK, but confrontations erupted between the Nationalist Party in power and the Communist Party, which was founded in China in 1921.

The People's Republic of China was formally established on October 1, 1949, following the Communist Party's triumph in the civil war that raged in China from 1945 and 1949. On the other hand, supporters of the Nationalist Party fled to the island of Taiwan, where they proclaimed the Republic of China.

On January 6, 1950, the PRC was recognized by the UK as the rightful leader of all of China. It was the first significant Western nation to recognize China. However, the two nations were on opposing sides when the Korean War started, and their relations were strained. When the US embargo against China came up for discussion, the UK prioritized its alliance with the US and postponed the opening of full diplomatic ties. Following the war, diplomatic ties developed gradually while commercial volume grew quickly. The Joint Communiqué on the Agreement on an Exchange of Ambassadors was signed on March 13, 1972, and thus marked the official start of diplomatic relations between the two nations (Xinhua, 2003).

The adoption of UN resolution 2758 in 1971, which designated the People's Republic of China as the UN's representative for all of China instead of the Republic of China, was the single most crucial step in the establishment of diplomatic ties (Restoration of the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations, 1971).

In the 1980s, negotiations began between the two countries regarding Hong Kong's reversal. Hong Kong swiftly became one of the PRC's most significant trading partners with the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1979 (Garver, 2016, p. 583). In 1984, the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed. In the PRC, the parties agreed that Hong Kong would be granted special administrative status and have a great degree of autonomy, with the exception of foreign and security issues, which would be handled by Beijing (Garver, 2016, p. 590). In other words, China consented to rule Hong Kong for the next 50 years by "one nation, two systems", granting the city "a considerable degree of autonomy, save in foreign and defense issues" (BBC News, 2022).

The 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident damaged China's relationships with the UK and all other nations. Of course, for the UK, these events also caused concern for the future of Hong Kong in terms of freedom and human rights of people living in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, the proverb "The Beijing of today is the Hong Kong of tomorrow" has gained popularity (Garver, 2016, p. 597). Therefore, these events also transformed the UK's foreign policy towards China. Human rights had not been a major concern up until that point, but it was now on the agenda. However, Hong Kong, whose 99-year liaison ended as a result of long negotiations, returned to China on July 1, 1997. Although Hong Kong is now a part of China, the Hong Kong issue still continues to be an important issue in the relations between the two countries. After Hong Kong's return, human rights issues became more prominent on the UK agenda.

It may be claimed that the two nations' ties improved in the early 2000s, although it goes without saying that one of the key reasons for this is China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). Total exports and imports have increased five-fold as a result of China's WTO participation. Between 2000 and 2010, the UK's imports from China rose from £5 billion to £30.6 billion (Fry, 2019, p. 81). Despite this, we still can't conclude that China places a lot of economic weight on England. China was the UK's 26th-largest export market in 1999, although commerce between the two countries is undoubtedly growing. In 2020, China became the UK's 6th export partner (BBC News, 2020).

Gordon Brown, who took over as prime minister from Tony Blair in 2007, was actually in favour of improving trade ties with China, but on the other hand, this was a time when the Tibet issue was brought to the attention of the international community and human rights abuses became more blatant. Before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, there were increasing protest demonstrations by Tibetans in China, and these demonstrations were on the agenda of the whole world. As a result of the Chinese invasion of Tibet and his worries regarding the nation's human rights record, Prince Charles decided not to attend the Olympic Games in Beijing (Hough, 2008). China reacted strongly to the Dalai Lama's visit to Gordon Brown that same year. Tibetans objected to Brown's decision to host the Dalai Lama somewhere other than Downing Street (Reuters, 2008; France 24, 2008).

Gordon Brown was replaced by David Cameron in 2010. The period of 2010-2016 is often referred to as the golden age of relationships. This is because in 2015, Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, said "Let's stick together and create a golden decade for both of our countries" in a speech to the Shanghai Stock Exchange in China (Osborne, 2015).

Mutual visits marked the start of the Cameron era in UK-China ties. Even as a goodwill gesture, China gifted two pandas to the Edinburgh Zoo. However, this positive period of relations lasted until 2012. The Dalai Lama and the UK's David Cameron and Nick Clegg had a private meeting in St. Paul's Cathedral on May 14, 2012. The Dalai Lama has already visited the UK; for instance, in 1999, when he met with Tony Blair, China was displeased, but the visit did not harm relations (Fry, 2019, p. 78). China, who had previously been content with denunciation or criticism during meetings of the previous presidents, responded this time in a far harsher manner and cut off high-level relations with England for a whole year (Winnett and Moore, 2013). Of course, it is true to say that China's development into a far more powerful and self-assured nation has had a significant influence on the hardness of its response.

With Xi Jinping, who was elected Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader in 2012 and became President in 2013, Chinese foreign policy has also changed direction. Xi Jinping is referred as the strongest leader after Mao Zedong and China started to make more significant moves once Xi Jinping adopted an active foreign policy, such as the Belt-Road Initiative. Chinese officials had previously referred to China as a developing power, but under Xi Jinping, they now refer to it as a great power that is prepared to carry out its obligations (Thomas, 2020).

According to Garcia Herrero and Jianwei (2016), China undoubtedly saw the UK as a key entry point for expanding its commercial ties with the EU. Therefore, in 2015, following visits by David Cameron and Xi Jinping, the two sides released a joint statement on "Building a Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century." However, the relations were slightly hampered by the Brexit process.

In the UK, a referendum on EU membership was held on June 23, 2016. The question of whether the United Kingdom should leave the European Union was presented in the referendum. Around 33,5 million people voted for the referendum and 51,9 % voted to leave the EU (BBC News, 2016). The Conservative Party leader David Cameron, who was in favour of remaining in the EU, resigned due to the results and Theresa May was chosen to lead the Conservative Party in July 2016, following David Cameron's resignation. The UK left the EU on January 31, 2020, following negotiations with the EU and a transition period.

Theresa May's administration saw a favourable improvement in ties with China. Of course, a key element in the beneficial continuance of relations is the UK's need for Chinese investment after it decided to leave the EU. In this context, the parties signed a nuclear power station agreement in September 2016. A new nuclear power station worth £18 billion (about

\$24 billion) will be constructed at Hinkley Point, a town in the country's southwest, according to a contract signed by the UK government. Two-thirds of the Hinkley Point C nuclear power plant project will be funded by the French state energy company EDF, with the remaining £6 billion coming from the Chinese government. The nuclear power station will subsequently be run by these two, who will also hold an equal part of the stock. However, the agreement was criticized by many people, especially the main opposition Labor Party, for the cost of energy, national security, environmental pollution, and foreign control of critical infrastructure facilities (BBC News, 2016).

Theresa May visited China in January 2018. Her visit, according to the UK prime minister, "will strengthen the golden age in UK-China ties." They signed an education agreement worth more than £550 million during her visit, which is supposed to result in the creation of 800 jobs in the UK (BBC News, 2018). Despite the improvement in ties, May chose not to support the BRI because of certain worries about its lack of openness and conformity to international standards (Huileng, 2018). According to Mitter (2021), although there was increased security-related concern under the May government, such as with a long-term plan to construct a new nuclear power station at Bradwell in Essex, the general outlook of China-UK relations did not change dramatically. However, this positive trend in relations was interrupted by the protests that started in Hong Kong in 2019. With the Hong Kong protests, Osborne's golden decade came to an end.

The post-Brexit foreign policy of the UK, overall, has closer attention on China. British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab emphasizes that for a "new Britain" the UK seeks to establish a unique identity (Wemer, 2020). He also emphasizes the significance of a strengthening democratic coalition, emphasizing the UK's essential role in forging international alliances with the primary goal of containing China's growth (Wemer, 2020). To respond to China's aggression, he also adds that, "the most important thing is to be able to act in concert with our closest friends and also then broaden out, if you like, the coalition or consensus of like-minded countries that share the values." (Wemer, 2020).

4. China as the *systemic competitor* for the UK

The UK Government's assessment of the strategic setting until 2030 is based on four interrelated and overlapping trends namely geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts; systemic competition; rapid technological change; transnational challenges. For all these trends, China's rising power and foreign assertiveness are expected to be the most important geopolitical theme of the 2020s (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 26).

As mentioned earlier, there are significant areas of geopolitical continuity for the UK. The US will continue to be the UK's most crucial strategic ally and a global economic, military, and diplomatic superpower, according to the Integrated Review. Additionally, while the Euro-Atlantic zone will continue to be important for the UK's security and economy, Russia will still pose the greatest direct threat to the country (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 26).

The geopolitical and economic centre of gravity would likely have shifted eastward toward the Indo-Pacific, according to the UK, as the world will have moved toward multipolarity. China's rising power which translates into a "struggle for global economy" (Akdağ & Aktükün, 2021, p.2) is viewed as both a chance for trade and investment and a threat from which the UK will need to defend itself as the distribution of political and economic power in the world will continue to alter (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 26).

The Integrated Review describes China as a "systemic competitor". Systemic competition is central for the new approach of the UK since it "will determine the shape of the

future international order” (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 26). For the UK the rivalry is systemic in several ways: between political systems; able to influence the international order; spanning multiple domains, such as traditional military domains of land, sea, and air; and other domains, including technology, cyberspace, and space, further influencing the broader geopolitical environment, as well as with increasing conflict and instability throughout the World (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 26).

Security concerns and trade relations have been central in the UK- China bilateral relations for decades and so will be the next decade. Integrated Review points out that:

China’s growing international stature is by far the most significant geopolitical factor in the world today, with major implications for British values and interests and for the structure and shape of the international order. The fact that China is an authoritarian state, with different values to ours, presents challenges for the UK and our allies. China will contribute more to global growth than any other country in the next decade with benefits to the global economy. China and the UK both benefit from bilateral trade and investment, but China also presents the biggest state-based threat to the UK’s economic security. (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 62)

Referring China as a “systemic competitor” has diverse implications and not many details are given in the Integrated Review. The Foreign Secretary claims that China is breaking more than simply the occasional law. Quite plainly, it aims to plunder the global system (House of Lords, 2021:53). He also adds that the challenge posed by China is systemic in that it acts continuously and resolutely, citing its activities in the South China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative, and its general attitude toward the current global system (House of Lords, 2021:53).

According to the Minister for Asia, there are a variety of reasons why the UK views China as a systemic rival, including;

its attempts to shape the international order in line with its own values and world view, its attempt to undermine open societies and democracies, its aggressive approach to cyberspace and its approach to economic statecraft” alongside “China’s military modernisation” which poses an increasing challenge. (House of Lords, 2021, p. 53,54)

The amount to which China poses a threat to the UK, however, is disputed, and there are nuances that may make it more of a security threat in some sectors than others, according to a House of Lords assessment. However, the Integrated Review uses the imprecise term "systemic competitor" without clarifying these nuanced points, which increases uncertainty over the Government's approach to China (House of Lords, 2021, p. 53,54).

Hong Kong is one of the controversial issues between the UK and China and it has a long historical background. In 1997, Hong Kong returned to China, and it was decided that it would maintain its status for 50 years, therefore it is governed under a one country two-system model. In other words, it is autonomous in its internal affairs. However, there have long been worries about China interfering with Hong Kong's government.

As previously mentioned, the 1984 agreement between the UK and China declared that Hong Kong would be an area of self-government with a high degree of autonomy, subject to the one nation, two systems principle, except in foreign affairs and defence. In a White Paper on Hong Kong issued in 2014, China explained that the elections in Hong Kong would be held indirectly, rather than directly, through the Electoral Committee, and that the candidates would

need to receive approval from the Chinese government. Following this, protests grew steadily, and because people used umbrellas to block the police from using tear gas, they came to be known as the "Umbrella Movement." (Ergenç, 2015, p. 298).

After the "Umbrella Movement", there were occasional rallies against the Chinese government, but the biggest one was in 2019. Protests broke out in Hong Kong in April as a result of a bill (Extradition Bill) that China approved in 2019 making it simpler to extradite criminals to the country. The number of protestors reached around 2 million in June. The protests continued until their demands—for the government to stop labelling the demonstrations "riots," for a fully independent investigation into the conduct of the police, for the unconditional release of everyone detained during the demonstrations, the full withdrawal of the extradition measure that had been introduced and, the establishment of true universal suffrage—were met, despite the fact that the bill had been completely withdrawn (Martin, 2019). The protesters were concerned about the Chinese government's growing influence over Hong Kong.

In 2020, China passed a new security law for Hong Kong. The National Security Law prohibits acts and activities that endanger national security, however, what will endanger this national security is determined by the Chinese government more than the law. For example, some articles of the law are as follows: The maximum sentence for crimes like secession, subversion, terrorism, and cooperation with foreign forces is life in jail; inflicting damage on public transportation facilities is terrorism; some cases may be sent to the mainland China for trial by this Office; Beijing, not any Hong Kong court or policy body, will have authority over how the law should be construed. Beijing legislation is given precedence over any Hong Kong laws if they conflict with the law and; non-permanent residents and anyone "from outside [Hong Kong]... who are not permanent residents of Hong Kong" will also be subject to the law (Tsoi and Wai, 2022). Since the law went into effect, hundreds of activists and protestors have been detained.

The Integrated Review stresses British determination to defend their interests and principles when they are threatened or when China violates existing agreements (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 63). Considering the situation over Hong Kong and related to the values:

The UK has responded to China's actions in Hong Kong by creating a new immigration route for British Nationals (Overseas) and their eligible family members and dependents, and to China's human rights violations in Xinjiang through measures to ensure that British organisations are neither complicit in nor profiting from them. (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 26)

From the British perspective, "the ongoing destruction of Two Systems in One Country" in Hong Kong, had a destructive effect on UK-China relations, as well as profound negative influence on British public opinion. The Hong Kong, as an "emotional issue" to the UK (Macleod, 2021) seems to continue to impact adversely the bilateral relations in the future (Rifkind, 2021). On the other hand, as Brown (2021) argues, "China has more options than the UK" and it has more ability to control the bilateral relations "on its own terms as never before". Finally, although the Integrated Review tries to offer a pragmatic and, in a sense, balanced approach to the challenges posed by China, the course of action and implementation of the strategy will determine the future of bilateral relations (Brown, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The UK's foreign and security policy for the next decade has been introduced by the "Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: Global Britain in a

Competitive Age”, in March 2021. The Global Britain strategy describes the post-Covid and post-Brexit international order as more competitive, multipolar, increasingly contested, and fragmented. In this new order it affirms the UK as the “global leader” in many areas. According to the Integrated Review, a new approach should be adopted since preserving the status quo does not help to achieve Global Britain vision. The UK’s policy towards China is described as one of the corner stones that need a new approach in the competitive age. In this new order China is labelled as the main “systemic competitor”.

Alongside the global challenges, after the Integrated Review's publication in March 2021, both political and economic instability dominated the UK’s domestic sphere. First, Boris Johnson resigned in July 2022. Then, Rishi Sunak succeeded Liz Truss who was forced to resign just after just 45 days as Prime Minister. Furthermore, Sunak has been the fifth Prime Minister since the Brexit Referendum in 2016. From the economic perspective, some bankers have labelled the UK as “the sick man of Europe”, even though it has long been one of the “most boringly stable countries” in the region (“UK: What Does Rishi Sunak Spell for ‘Global Britain’?” 2022).

As Devanny and Gearson (2021) argue, the UK will not be able to realise its 'Global Britain' ambitions unless it first addresses domestic issues as well as those linked to its current and potential relations with Europe. The UK's domestic, social, and political issues will surely continue to be a target for hostile states looking to undercut the UK's capacity to act, as the Review's reference to a competitive era shows. A fragmented domestic agenda won't produce the strength and cohesion of thought needed to play an active role in the world (Devanny & Gearson, 2021).

However, Sunak’s perspective on domestic and world affairs does not seem to concentrate on advancing any kind of vision of Global Britain; yet his vision is labelled as “empty”. (Gibson, 2022). On UK-China relations, his approach seems uncertain. He defended a “mature and balanced relationship” back in 2021 (Gibson, 2022). Recently, he said that he was very clear that “China poses a systemic challenge” to both UK’s values and interests. For Sunak, China “represents the single biggest state threat” to British economic security and necessary steps should be taken to protect themselves (BBC News, 2022). On the other hand, he also believes that the UK should have dialogue with China over global challenges such as war in Ukraine and issues such as climate change (Reuters, 2022). Sunak and Chinese President Xi Jinping were to meet for the first time in person at the G20 Summit in Indonesia. However, this planned meeting was cancelled (BBC News, 2022).

To sum up, the UK-China relations have been in a complex nature with ups and downs, in between trade cooperation and confrontation over security issues and conflicting values. The Golden era of bilateral relations during Cameron government has been replaced by an uncertain era with increased concerns about security challenges. The Global Britain vision identifies China as the systemic competitor, in the new international system more competitive, multipolar, and fragmented. It also underlines the necessity for a new policy towards China, however, it does not elaborate on how, when, and by which means. The UK lacks a clear and long-term strategy towards China. Consequently, the UK needs a more concrete and steady policy to cope with the challenges, that it claims China poses to its security, prosperity, and values.

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