

**Written evidence submitted jointly by Beijing to Britain and the Oxford China Policy Lab  
(IRR0006)**

## Summary

- 1) China is emerging as the biggest systemic challenge facing the United Kingdom. How we understand and address this challenge will have implications for the UK's security, economy, and values for decades to come. A mature approach to the UK's relationship, which directly addresses security concerns but avoids unnecessarily inflammatory rhetoric and maintains the UK's core commitment to openness, democracy, and academic freedom is the sensible path forward. However, this approach requires deep expertise and precision. The British Government's China capabilities are lacking; they need cultivation, investment, and a coherent driving force to tie them together.
- 2) Thus, we call for a multi-pronged approach to be incorporated into the Integrated Review:
  - a) First, to improve Mandarin language capabilities and in-country expertise from the bottom up;
  - b) Second, to improve coordination and capacity to devise and handle complex, nuanced policy strategies toward the UK-China relationship;
  - c) Third, to more thoroughly implement existing policies in areas such as export controls, research integrity, and investment security by better incorporating existing expertise or cultivating it where gaps exist.
  - d) Fourth, to centralise and coordinate these efforts through the establishment of a cross-departmental 'China House' (CH).

## About the authors:

- 3) Sam Hogg is founder and editor of Beijing to Britain, the only intelligence briefing covering the UK's changing relationship with China.<sup>1</sup> Beijing to Britain content is read widely throughout Parliament, Government and Whitehall, and featured across international media. Before this he worked for an MP, covering the China-facing side of their portfolio. This involved researching a Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Select Committee report on forced labour and supply chains, drafting and researching content on Xinjiang genocide allegations, and navigating the fallout of his employer being sanctioned by the Chinese Communist Party in 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.beijingtobritain.com](http://www.beijingtobritain.com)

- 4) Kayla Blomquist is co-founder and co-director of the Oxford China Policy Lab (OCPL), a research group at the University of Oxford dedicated to bridging the academia-policy gap as countries navigate their roles amidst the U.S.-China relationship.<sup>2</sup> She lived in China for over four years, including time working as a Diplomat at U.S. Embassy Beijing. She recently completed her Master's at the Oxford Internet Institute. Her individual research focuses on the PRC's AI governance model.
- 5) Scott Singer is co-founder and co-director of OCPL. He is concurrently reading for a DPhil in International Relations as a Clarendon Scholar at Balliol College, Oxford. His doctoral research explores how third countries navigate US-China relations, with a particular focus on technological competition. He is currently based in Taipei as a National Bureau of Asian Research Chinese Language Fellow.
- 6) Through our work at Beijing to Britain and OCPL, we have been fortunate to get a look under the hood at much of how the UK formulates China policy.

## The need to enhance UK-China capabilities

- 7) China is a great power, meaning that it yields disproportionate influence on the international system. The UK must therefore develop capabilities to effectively formulate a response.
  - a) There has been much discussion around the level of threat or challenge the Chinese Government represents to the United Kingdom. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has stated that China “*unequivocally poses a... systemic challenge to our values and our interests, and is undoubtedly the biggest state-based threat to our economic security.*”<sup>3</sup> Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said: “*Our knowledge of China... needs to improve, whether that is basic language speakers or long-experienced people who have spent time in that country, et cetera. We are not good enough and we need to invest in that...*”<sup>4</sup> MI5 Director General Ken McCallum recently stated that “*tackling the whole problem needs a system-wide response.*”<sup>5</sup>
  - b) While policymakers and politicians disagree on whether China should be classified as a threat or challenge, there is consensus that the UK needs to build its China capabilities.
- 8) Partially as a result of insufficient expertise and leadership on the topic, the Government has so far refused to publish a China Strategy, which limits the Parliamentary ability to hold its China approach accountable, and the ability of the Civil Service to unify behind one driving force.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oxfordchinapolicylab.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/rishi-sunak-ditches-plan-to-class-china-as-a-threat-to-uk-security/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/11505/pdf/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-ken-mccallum-gives-annual-threat-update#sthash.zvCQJfSG.OqVfKDDJ.dpuf>

- a) By refusing to publish even a general overview, the Government creates a situation in which different Departments interpret high-level Integrated Review objectives to their own ends, as multiple experts - including senior political and Whitehall figures - have noted.<sup>67</sup> The proposed refresh to the Integrated Review will not eliminate the potential for multiple interpretations and thus multiple, competing, intra-Departmental China objectives.
  - b) Similarly, MPs and Peers are not coherently and consistently briefed on the Government's overall China approach. Evidence of this can be seen in the Foreign Affairs Committee's numerous appeals for a China Strategy, or outline of an approach, to be published, and the numerous Written Questions and mentions for clarity around a China Strategy in Hansard.<sup>89</sup>
  - c) Within the Civil Service, the Cabinet Office's National Security Secretariat China Team coordinates across Departments but takes on more of a mediation role than it does one of driving the strategic direction and unifying activity. It is limited by its capacity and often cannot do much more than react to immediate issues. Meanwhile, the Foreign Office China Department lacks expertise on a number of technical issues, such as climate change or emerging technology, and its generally risk-averse approach will often put it at odds with key 'economic' departments, including HMT, BEIS, DIT and DCMS.
- 9) Security is an issue which rightly looms large in any discussion of the UK's approach to China. However, the Government's current approach to personnel and information security actively inhibits the UK's ability to take a more coherent, expert and open approach.
- a) The UK has not published its China Strategy due to concerns around security, preventing external oversight, challenge, and scrutiny. But, even internally, this is a problem. Many China-focused roles in the Civil Service requires STRAP clearance plus Developed Vetting. This makes it difficult for most civil servants, including relevant technical policy leads who routinely have lower levels of clearance, to engage with relevant issues. This widespread 'securitisation' of the UK's China approach also makes it difficult for experts from outside government, such as in academia, to meaningfully engage in current policy developments.
  - b) Likewise, the Civil Service currently lacks a coherent process for identifying, engaging, and utilising expertise from people who recently returned from China – including those

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<sup>6</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/7214/documents/75842/default/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://bfpq.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Resetting-UK-China-Engagement-2021.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/31613/documents/177551/default/>

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[https://www.theyworkforyou.com/search/?q=china+strategy&phrase=China+Strategy&exclude=&from=&o=&person=&section=&column=\]](https://www.theyworkforyou.com/search/?q=china+strategy&phrase=China+Strategy&exclude=&from=&o=&person=&section=&column=)

already working within the Civil Service. The DV/STRAP clearance process takes 6-9 months and its requirements make it difficult for those who have spent time in China outside of the Civil Service, or those with Chinese friends, family, or partners/spouses, to achieve the required levels of clearance.

- c) Even those civil servants who have achieved the required levels of clearance and wish to work in the China Network must seek further ‘approval’ from FCDO Personnel Security before the posting can go ahead. They are also warned in job descriptions that a “security overhead” may impact their ability to apply for future roles if they accept a post in China. Taken together, these systemic factors create numerous disincentives and high ‘barriers to entry’ for those looking to develop China expertise or pursue China-focused careers.
- 10) Security, however, is often most greatly and negatively impacted by a lack of nuance and precision in policy formulation and implementation. This can be seen at many levels of the UK-China relationship in recent years, from the noticeable lack of a coherent strategy to the haphazard or delayed implementation of policies that, while perhaps seemingly niche, can gravely impact the UK’s national security.
- a) For example, the Government has rejected multiple export control licenses in recent years, forcing multiple UK universities to shut down partnerships with research institutions that have documented links to the Chinese military. However, these partnerships were stopped at a delayed pace and sometimes after potentially sensitive information had been shared, causing UK universities significant disruption.<sup>10</sup>
  - b) Learning from but improving on the US’s example,<sup>11</sup> however, tighter controls for ‘national security’ should not overtake the UK’s strongly held values of academic freedom and inclusiveness, nor should it hinder its world-leading university system which exists because of its ability to attract top talent from around the world, including from China. Navigating such complex decisions in a clear-eyed, facts-first manner requires in-depth research by those with expertise on both the technologies at hand and on the Chinese system. The UK and its allies must aim for precision, not paranoia.
  - c) A next step for the Government is to undertake a critical assessment of what parts of the Government’s China approach are essential to be classified, and at what level. Doing so will allow people external to the government without a security clearance (e.g. academics), but whose expertise would help inform and develop the UK’s approach to China.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/11/imperial-college-to-shut-joint-research-ventures-with-chinese-defence-firms>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/us/politics/china-trump-justice-department.html>

- 11) The UK government currently lacks sufficient language capabilities to engage with the most important questions surrounding the UK-China relationship. Language capabilities issues can be divided into two distinctive problems: 1) whether there are sufficient personnel in government to address capabilities, and 2) whether there are sufficient personnel with the skills required to effectively take up a position that exists.
- a) Only 70 members of staff reached fluency or near fluency in Mandarin,<sup>12</sup> while only 14 Foreign Office officials were trained last year.<sup>13</sup>
  - b) Moreover, the FCDO is not training Mandarin speakers fast enough, and their target level for training - CEFR's C1, or professional working proficiency - is often not good enough to read through technical documents or engage in discussions with Chinese counterparts.
  - c) The UK government has on multiple occasions expressed its desire to eliminate Confucius Institutes (CIs), which has heretofore played a critical role in Mandarin language training.<sup>14</sup> What will replace CIs remains to be seen. While FAC Chair Alicia Kearns MP has proposed using instructors from Taiwan to teach Mandarin in the UK,<sup>15</sup> these efforts have so far failed to materialise.
  - d) Language training and in-country training opportunities have been limited due to the strict entry policies of both the PRC and Taiwan, which was severely limited from 2020 to 2022. While access to Taiwan has increased in 2022, allowing British students to travel to Taiwan for language training, access to the PRC has been limited.
  - e) As mentioned earlier, those who are often most qualified to take these China-facing positions are those who have recently spent meaningful amounts of time in China but who often struggle to get these posts and the necessary associated clearances the most.
- 12) Having officials with strong Mandarin language skills are critical for those in China-facing roles.
- a) While fluency in Mandarin does not perfectly correlate with cultural or political knowledge of China, having a significant number of civil servants with advanced Mandarin skills is critical for understanding primary sources and technical documents, ensuring accurate interpretation and contextualization of Beijing's statements, and monitoring intra-country developments from a range of sources.
  - b) Strong language skills and cultural understanding are also necessary at the policy implementation level to ensure policies are carried out accurately and with the intended effect. For example, when adjudicating ATAS accreditation<sup>16</sup> for incoming students and

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<sup>12</sup> Defined as C1 or C2.

<sup>13</sup><https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/fears-for-china-diplomacy-as-foreign-office-reveals-shortage-of-mandarin-speakers-bkvt0bcfm>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.cityam.com/tugendhat-confirms-uk-will-ban-chinese-confucius-institutes-at-universities/>

<sup>15</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/18/beijing-backed-chinese-language-schools-in-uk-to-be-replaced-with-teachers-from-taiwan>

researchers in sensitive research subjects applying for visas, case workers without language skills and knowledge of China's university system and military-civil fusion efforts are at high risk of mis-adjudicating cases, potentially resulting in both unnecessary rejections and approved cases that may pose a threat to research integrity and national security.

- c) Language skills can demonstrate a willingness for cultural engagement, strength in British education, and create space for authentic and hard conversations with counterparts. Together, they constitute essential linguistic and diplomatic soft power.
- 13) Developing these language capabilities will require significant resources. However, given the gravity of this bilateral relationship and the potential costs of proceeding without the necessary expertise, the UK cannot afford not to make this investment.
- a) The US State Department's Foreign Service Institute estimates that it takes, on average, 2,200 hours to gain "Professional Working Proficiency" in Mandarin due to its significant linguistic differences from English. Spanish and Italian are estimated to take about one-quarter of this time, at 600 hours.<sup>17</sup>

## Recommendations for scaling capabilities

1. For the UK to engage with China effectively, it must first articulate a sensible and coherent strategy, avoiding unnecessarily inflammatory rhetoric and instead focusing on expert-led and executed advice. This requires deeper and more involved expertise on China than currently exists in UK policy. This gap can be addressed by:
  - a. First, supporting (financially and logistically) younger generations to study China and Mandarin Chinese, ensuring long-lasting understanding of China for generations to come.
  - b. Second, increasing investment in Mandarin capabilities for current China-facing policymakers and building pipelines to incorporate existing and upcoming talent into the policy ecosystem.
  - c. Increasing inter-departmental coordination within the Civil Service to drive and unify the UK's China approach.
2. To systematically boost its UK Chinese language capabilities, the UK should consider the following policy interventions:
  - a. **Offer Chinese language fellowships** to help language learners rapidly improve their language ability.<sup>18</sup> The UK currently has few widespread programmes that seek to

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<sup>16</sup> The Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) applies to all international students and researchers (apart from exempt nationalities) who are subject to UK immigration control and are intending to study or research at postgraduate level in certain sensitive subjects.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.state.gov/foreign-language-training/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2022/06/16/dont-let-concerns-over-xis-china-trump-vital-language-learning%E2%80%A2%E2%80%9C/>

enhance critical languages, and particularly Chinese language capabilities. The nature of the fellowships should depend on governmental funding constraints, as well as considerations of what age the policy intervention should take place. Some potential models include:

- i. The United States' National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) scholarships, which enhance the critical language ability of secondary school students,<sup>19</sup> which allows students to learn when they are younger and thus better at learning languages.
  - ii. The US' Boren Awards, which provide up to a year of critical language training for American undergraduate and postgraduate students.<sup>20</sup> After the scholarship, students are required to work for the US government in a national security position, thereby building a national security pipeline.
  - iii. NGO-based scholarships targeted at graduate students, such as the Blakemore Foundation language grants<sup>21</sup> or the National Bureau of Asian Research Chinese Language Fellowship,<sup>22</sup> allow students who are most likely to play a role in China-facing academia or policy to rapidly scale their Chinese language skills.
- b. **Increase funding for Chinese language opportunities at the university level** for those not doing a degree specifically focused on China or Chinese languages. At the University of Oxford, for example, these opportunities are limited to classes that are only a couple hours of week.
  - c. **Utilise the influx of BNO Hong Kongers** as a natural talent tool of native Mandarin speakers. In addition to Cantonese, many also have strong Mandarin skills.<sup>23</sup>
  - d. **The Civil Service could create additional entry- and mid-level positions within government**, for example surrounding export control implementation and vetting, that put to use and expand career options for existing and upcoming talent.
  - e. **Nurture the careers of Mandarin speakers and those with China experience/expertise within the Civil Service.** If China is set to be the UK's most pressing strategic challenge over the coming decades, the Civil Service must create an the incentive structure that rewards expertise, provides learning and development opportunities, and offers entry and promotion paths that do not require civil servants to move to different roles for better salaries and career progression.
3. The UK should increase interdepartmental coordination, synergising efforts to increase China capabilities rapidly - which are currently fragmented and lacking one clear driving force and leader. The British Government should create a '**China House**' (hereafter CH) within the Civil Service, which would:

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.nsliforyouth.org/languages-and-program-experience/mandarin/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.borenawards.org/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.blakemorefoundation.org/language>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nbr.org/chinese-language-fellowship-program/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://agorahk.org/bnos-in-the-uk/chinese-proficiency-deficit>.

- a. **Provide high-level strategic advice and assessments** to the National Security Council and Government Ministers ad hoc. This includes developing and driving policy solutions to difficult short and medium-term issues and taking on a ‘project basis’ approach to both by finding and rotating relevant expert CH secondees, academics, and analysts to the issue. It also includes making sure Departments are coherently aligned on the Government’s overarching approach to China.
- b. **Cross-departmental policy coordination:** To formulate and develop strategies and solutions for medium and short-term issues. It would assemble internal and external expertise, navigating the security clearance issues.
- c. **Increasing MP and Peer literacy on China-facing issues:** Government should proactively engage MPs and Peers on China-facing upcoming legislation, or throughout crisis periods. A more senior team would hold regular briefings with HM Opposition leader and shadow Foreign Secretary. The Foreign Office currently briefs MPs on an ad hoc basis.
- d. **Engaging with the business community and strengthening the economy:** This unit would prioritise streamlining existing China-facing operations under one banner, such as Investment Security Unit (ISU) that sits within BEIS. Meanwhile, an external team could provide advice to concerned businesses that fall outside the remit of the National Security and Investment Act, or the National Security Bill’s proposed remit.
- e. **Increasing transparency with the journalist community:** Government should proactively provide on- and off-record briefings to media, and reactive communications, with the aim of stopping journalists from having to approach individual departmental spokespeople.
- f. This concept is not without precedent. In America, the Biden Administration has created its own China House, described by Secretary of State Antony Blinken as “*a department-wide integrated team that will coordinate and implement our policy across issues and regions.*” While the US China House is internal to the State Department, a UK version could take an all-of-government approach.
- g. CH would cut out duplication of work, unify the Civil Service’s understanding of the Government’s China approach, fast-track and nurture Mandarin-speaking civil servants and experts, take a more proactive and driving approach than the Cabinet Office’s National Security Secretariat Team (NSS China), or FCDO China Department, and provide meaningful career paths for those with existing Chinese expertise and create opportunities for those who wish to develop it.



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