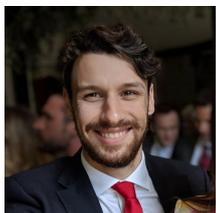


UK-China relations: Labour need to communicate a consistent and clear stance toward China, now



Declan McDowell-Naylor explains why the Labour Party need to take a clearer stance towards China. While the issue is complex and good policy takes time, he writes that Labour must at least make it clear in what direction their policy will head in the weeks to come.

The Labour Party are currently without a recognisable foreign policy on China. Simultaneously, Western relations with China has emerged rapidly as a central issue in recent weeks, amid the coronavirus pandemic, and there are now signs that Sinoscepticism is set to [sweep through British politics](#). It is therefore crucial for Labour that they clearly communicating their stance, as they seek to establish political credibility under the leadership of Sir Keir Starmer.

These signs of change have come thick and fast. The EU's foreign affairs chief Josep Borell has called for '[a more robust strategy for China](#)' and for '[collective discipline](#)' against China's attempts to divide the bloc's members over it. In May, the right-wing think tank, The Henry Jackson Society, published [a report](#) in which it called for an end for the UK's 'strategic dependency' on China. In April, a group of Conservative MPs formed the [China Research Group](#), led by the [vocal](#) chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat. In terms of public mood, recent [polling by YouGov](#) in May suggests that nearly 47% of the British public see a Chinese superpower as a 'threat for Britain'; in an [April poll](#), 51% said that the coronavirus outbreak had negatively impacted their view of China; in August, [just 2% had a positive view of Xi Jinping](#), although 36% either didn't know who he was or had no view.

Of course, It would be unfair to expect Labour to immediately provide a fully formed policy. But clearly, Keir Starmer, Lisa Nandy as Shadow Foreign Secretary, and Stephen Kinnock as Shadow Minister for Asia and the Pacific are under pressure to make it clear in what direction Labour's policy position will head, not least because of the impending issues of [a new UK review](#) into Huawei's role in British 5G networks and the [Hong Kong crisis](#). What Starmer, Nandy, Kinnock, and even Ed Miliband (as Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) say now will have important implications for Labour's credibility and governing ambitions. By communicating effectively now, despite lacking a policy, Labour can boost its diplomatic profile at this pivotal moment.

However, Labour's shadow ministers will need to present their message carefully and clearly. As Labour's ambivalent Brexit position during the previous election showed, there are lessons to be learnt here. A good message is key, because the UK has many relevant interests to balance, which Labour will recognise. There is [extensive Chinese investment in the UK](#), ongoing trade negotiations with the United States (which is hostile to China), and (despite Brexit) Britain's inherent relations with an EU now itself revising its stance. There is also NATO, the climate crisis (to which China's coal plants are key), and of course, Hong Kong. Moreover, Starmer, with a background as a human rights lawyer, will be well aware of the Uighur people being held in Chinese internment camps. In the face of these sensitive issues, and without a policy brief, there may be an urge to stay quiet or just criticise the government. But this would be a mistake. As Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has remarked, when it comes to the US and China, the '[pressure to choose sides is growing](#)'.

Fortunately for Labour, their Foreign Secretary, Lisa Nandy, has so far been a good communicator of complex issues, and has shown her ability to tackle serious and sensitive issues, such [as the death of Harry Dunn](#). But what is her position? [A recent New Statesman article](#) covering Nandy's foreign policy views did not even mention China. In her first newspaper interview as shadow Foreign Secretary, [she told The Guardian](#) that China's actions, 'should give us cause for concern, and they should make us much more vigilant', adding, however, that 'there is no global problem that you can solve without China'. In a further interview with [The Independent](#), [Nandy stated](#) that barriers to the Chinese government were 'very long overdue', and gave the clear statement that 'We've got to have a much more strategic approach to this, not least because there is no global problem that can be solved without the involvement of China [...] So as well as having much more strategic independence, we've got to have a constructive relationship.'

Labour's foreign policy spokesman on China, Stephen Kinnock, has been firm about the issue. [He recently stated](#) that China is presenting itself as an alternative to democracy and that it has taken advantage of the UK economically. He also spoke in opposition terms, calling David Cameron's efforts at economic diplomacy an 'an abject failure'. Similarly, Nandy [has called](#) Cameron's approach 'naïve' and lacking a 'coherent foreign policy'. This clearly signals a shift in Labour's thinking and a willingness to be critical. But what will be key is cutting through and successfully connecting Labour's *own policy* to improving its governing credentials.

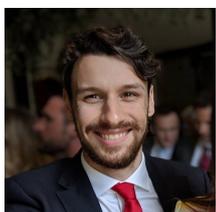
This issue also plays into national identity. Margrethe Vestager, the EU competition commissioner, has said that Europe needs '[to be more assertive and confident about who we are](#)', in relation to China. But how does this sentiment play out in a post-Brexit UK? For Labour, the rhetorical adoption of a Sinosceptic position must be weighed up against the potential prejudice it invites towards Chinese immigrants and their British-born descendants. This is a vital lesson from the Euroscepticism movement. Between April 2019 and January 2020, the [public's positive opinion of Chinese immigrants fell](#), and negative opinion rose. It is worth remembering, too, that Nandy won the support of Chinese for Labour during the leadership election. Whilst rebuilding trust with the Jewish community, the party cannot find itself even remotely in a similar position with the Chinese community.

In cold electoral terms, the strategic opportunity for Labour in having a consistent and clear policy on China is enormous. There are [splits](#) within the Conservative Party on China; a growing Sinosceptic faction being led by influential figures such as [Iain Duncan Smith](#) and Tom Tugendhat, set against the legacy of David Cameron's 'golden era' and its recent supporters, [including Boris Johnson](#). Nandy [has referred to this split](#) as 'quite damaging' to UK interests. Thus, a strong, clear, and consistent China policy would be an emphatic wedge that Labour could deploy over the course of the next Parliament, on an issue that may cause tensions within the Conservative Party. Interestingly, there have been suggestions that [the China Research Group is in talks with Labour](#) to develop a bipartisan policy on China with Labour.

But the question remains stark: what will this crucial policy eventually be? Here, the devil is the detail. Whilst the strategic benefits of having a clear China policy are easy to understand, the fine print of such a policy is anything but. The more pressing question is nevertheless how Labour will lay the groundwork for it in the weeks to come when the issue is pertinent, and people are paying attention. [Kinnock's vocal support](#) of measures like those in Germany, where the government has [approved new laws](#) to prevent foreign takeovers of medical companies is sensible, but also puts Labour on the front foot. Promoting closer ties with East Asian democracies such as South Korea and Japan would offer the same. More controversially, supporting reshoring would offer a way for Labour to promise manufacturing jobs to voters – or risk losing them [if investment is withdrawn](#).

Good policy takes time, nobody can disagree with that. But Labour cannot hide behind that, and Nandy [has promised](#) that 'Labour will take a view' on Huawei as it comes to Parliament. As time goes on, Starmer will be in less of a position to conduct his forensic dispatch box routine and be under increasing pressure to begin explaining his own party's position.

About the Author



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