

House of Lords – China speech – 06.07.23

Lord Howell of Guildford
(Con)

My Lords, it is a privilege to participate in such a highly informative and well-informed debate on such a vital issue. It is a bit hard to focus at the moment when I gather that we are once again in search of another Prime Minister, but that is an issue that we shall put aside for a moment and rightly concentrate on this one.

It is a very interesting report. It is remarkable that we are debating it now, a year after it was published. There seems to be something wrong with the machinery for deciding the timing of these things. It is an excellent volume, under the superb chairmanship of my noble friend Lady Anelay, and we ought of course to have come to it much earlier. Oddly enough, and ironically, because of that delay it has arrived for this debate at a very topical time indeed. China is now more than ever at the centre of our affairs—our home affairs as well as our international affairs—on energy questions and the climate issue, which has already been mentioned, where it is central. We have Xi Jinping at the 20th plenum eyeing up Taiwan again and saying that he is not ruling out force, and apparently we are being told by the strategists that Beijing says that, if China sees that America is getting too intrusive, it will, in those chilling words, “surround Taiwan” in three hours—a rather sinister warning of what is to come.

As for Ukraine, the Chinese role has always seemed to me—and, I think, to many others in this Room—pretty central to that as well. As long as Putin has felt that he has solid support from Beijing, he will not lose much sleep over threats from NATO and so on. Slightly encouragingly, I hear, and I am sure others will hear, that the Chinese are getting increasingly worried about Putin and feeling that they are losing control of him. Of course, what they are terrified of is that he will start with the tactical nuclear weapons. So I hope that, maybe if we have good back-track relations with China on that issue, we can exert some more influence on this evil man in the Kremlin.

Meanwhile, of course, China continues to be, embedded here at home right in the United Kingdom at the heart of our nuclear power replacement programme, which happens to be vital to the whole strategy of carbon reduction in the future. That is more and more important now, as our leaders realise that net zero is splendid but it will not be anything like enough to check the vast growth in emissions, coming not least from China but also from the rest of Asia, which is roaring ahead and for which entirely

new policies will be needed. So here we are, dealing with and addressing an issue which is highly topical, despite this deplorable delay.

I just had one additional theme to add to the story, and indeed to the report and to the Government's response, where it was a missing element. I refer to it in rather over-graphic terms used by one expert, who observed that China as part of its hegemonic strategy is hoovering up the developing world, and in particular the Commonwealth members of the developing world—the coastal states of Africa, but even more the islands of the global south: the South Pacific and the Caribbean as well, and indeed parts of Latin America too. This development does not get much mention from the witnesses in this report, and yet it is really the key issue in our relationship with China and the most serious threat in the medium term to our influence, to the transmission of our soft power and to our place in a transformed world with a rising Asia accounting for an increasing volume of world product activity and indeed a major contribution to security.

The most visible immediate sign of that is what has been going on in the Solomon Islands, which I think took everybody by surprise. Indeed, it seemed to me, listening to our distinguished diplomats, that they were only dimly aware that the Solomons were part of the Commonwealth, that the Queen was the Head of State and that we appointed the governor-general. However, that picture was soon asserted when we saw photographs of the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands with the Defence Minister of China inspecting a rather grim formation of burly-looking Chinese troops on parade. Was that supposed to be what we were trying to achieve in the Solomon Islands? Rapidly, people reassessed and increased our influence on them and realised that that is not the way we want things to go.

Then there is Vanuatu, of course, which has a huge Chinese base on it. Tuvalu has now been incorporated. Incidentally, the Solomons sit over one of the main maritime routes of the entire east Asian trade, which is a huge proportion of world trade, and the arrival of China there, and its proposal to have a nuclear base, is a matter that concerns us very much indeed.

Then we have Africa where, as we know, the Chinese have had their setbacks and are not always popular, particularly when they have used prisoners to do infrastructure work. But they call themselves Africa's "dependable ally", and are increasingly involved in a whole range of countries. Indeed, they have a military base in the top of Africa, in Djibouti, which is a real advance and departure. That is significant, because it brings home that we are talking about not just trade involvement—bags of gold, infrastructure, new conference centres, roads and railways and all that sort of thing—but about security co-operation. We are talking about military

training, weaponry and the Sandhurst of China— the Sandhurst of Beijing, rather than the Sandhurst of Camberley—offering thousands of places for officer training to teach military values that are very different from our views of how armies should fit into democratic societies. All that is going on, almost—and I hope that I will be forgiven for saying this—with an oblivious disregard from our policymakers here about what is really happening.

That is the global south—and then we have the Caribbean, of course. I know that Barbados has not left the Commonwealth, although the media think that it has, because it has ceased to be a realm. They are very confused and do not actually understand what is happening in the Commonwealth at all. But those who went there tell me that, as they left, large jumbo planes were arriving and parking at the airport, covered in Chinese designations and signs. It turns out that the Barbadian Government have become dangerously involved, as have many other countries, in owing China a large amount of money for what they thought were grants, which turned out to be loans. They are going to cause a lot of grief when they have to be repaid.

So here is a picture of our Commonwealth of like-minded countries, which are privileged to be members of it—and it is one of the main sources of our transmission and influence in the world. We would like to think that it would be a chain of liberty and democracy containing China, but almost before our eyes it is being turned on its head into a chain of Chinese projection of its power, instead of a containment of its power. It is a very serious development, not mentioned here and not mentioned by the Foreign Office; it is not understood, and it is coming into our lives in very serious ways and at great speed.

We have, of course, huge involvement in south Asia. We have our involvement in Five Eyes and the Five Power system, which was mentioned very thoroughly in the report. We have our links with Japan, which are again covered in the report, and we have AUKUS and the submarine plans, which are important. We have our ambitions to join the CPTPP. We are not involved in the RCEP. All these are organisations far larger than the European market, and far more important in the long term for our development.

We have that; versus that, we have a China which at a very deliberate, practical and detailed level—with not too much ideology but in detail—is constantly moving from island to island and state to state. China is arranging not only the links that I talked about earlier but also technology links and opportunities that they can use as basis for GPS, which we are told is part of the next war, in space, and for drone development, which you do not need on a small island, for a large airport with a large airstrip, and

for a whole range of other technologies controlling maritime movements through the continental shelf and the UN's law of the sea provisions of immense strategic value.

I was saddened to hear from a leading Foreign Office expert a year or so ago that the Commonwealth was a bit boring; it was much-loved by the late Queen, but these little islands were very remote and of no strategic significance. The Chinese do not think that; they think the opposite. They think they are of high strategic significance, and they are involving themselves in these nations at a great rate and in many very effective, soft-power types of ways. I wanted to add that missing bit to our debate, to the Government's response and to the report, because it is the most important bit of all.

I wish we could have a strategy and framework, which noble Lords with huge expertise are calling for, but I do not think it will be like that. The pace of change of events is enormous, and we have to, at best, try to fit in with the hard cop, soft cop pattern. We need to be hard cop.

We listened to the noble Lord, Lord Alton, with his ceaseless and superb indications of the nasty, illiberal side of China, and what it is doing to people in thuggish ways—there was a little demonstration of that in Manchester last week, which I thought was very interesting. These are Chinese thugs at work; we know that this is a streak in the Chinese character. We have to listen to Xi claiming his endless term of office and talking, frankly, ideological rubbish about how we must go back to Marx and Leninism. He has issued his own absurd “Little Red Book”. The Chinese are not fools; I do not know how they will tolerate that sort of thing, but I do not think that it will last.

We have to be the hard cop there, but we also have to be the soft cop, because China is a world leader in technology, it is a decisive part of the world economy—I understand that China is the second-largest source of imports to this country—and it is embedded in our nuclear power, as I said earlier, and indeed in many other aspects of our infrastructure, partly as a result of being perhaps overencouraged 10 years ago. As noble Lords have rightly said, the world has changed radically. We now have to look at China with the scales dropped from our eyes and realise that we have to deal with it—while holding our noses—but that it is also, potentially, an increasingly dangerous threat to the order of a democratic, free world.

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