

The UK-China Relations and End of “Golden Era”

written by Ezba Walayat | December 8, 2022



On 28th November, 2022, while delivering his first foreign policy speech British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that “the ‘golden era’ of UK-China relations is over, along with the naive idea that trade would automatically lead to social and political reform.” The relationship between the two countries is currently at a critical point as it is said by the British Prime Minister that China presents a threat to the United Kingdom’s aspirations. He stated, “We recognize China poses a systemic risk to our values and interests, a challenge that grows more acute as it moves towards even greater authoritarianism.” He also added that the Government of UK will make efforts to deepen trade and security ties with Indo-Pacific allies as “economies and security are indivisible” in the particular region. He has also asserted to head an international alliance against Chinese cyber-threats and support British universities and companies in the fight against Chinese espionage. China’s policies for Xinjiang region and the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Hong Kong were condemned by Rishi Sunak and it was acknowledged by him that Western nations could not ignore China’s impact on world affairs and its capacity to assist with shared concerns like economic stability and climate change. In response, representative for the Chinese Embassy in the UK said, the UK should not meddle in China’s internal matters and comments by UK on Hong Kong and Xinjiang are unacceptable.

Prior to Sunak’s speech, the UK prohibited Chinese made security cameras in sensitive government buildings. Sunak has previously pledged to shut down all Confucius Institutes, which support Chinese culture and language while receiving partial funding from the Chinese government, this will adversely affect the two countries and will take ties to a critical juncture. On contrary to this, in 2015, the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, eyed China as the “best partner” for UK’s development with a

promising “golden era” in relations. However, in his recent speech, Sunak referred to the last decade’s closer economic connections between UK and China as “naive.” Currently, China is Britain’s third biggest trading partner and trade ties have doubled in a decade but the current situation can negatively affect the economies. According to data from the UK Office for National Statistics, China is currently one of the countries from which the UK imports the most goods, accounting for 13.3 percent of total imports worth of 63.6 billion pounds (\$76.6 million).



The aftermath of the British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s speech is that UK is pushing Beijing out of a nuclear project. According to an official announcement, the UK will control 50% of the stakes in the country’s new nuclear project and seek additional outside investment to finance its construction and operation as this will help to keep China out of the development of the project. In accordance with the declaration, the UK will provide £700 million (\$842 million) to the Sizewell C nuclear power station in southeast England. China General Nuclear (CGN), which sold its 20% development investment in the project, will be excluded from it as a result of the arrangement with the British integrated energy business. British Finance Minister Jeremy Hunt stated in a statement that once finished, the “mega project” will supply clean and affordable domestic energy to millions of homes for many years to come.



British Prime Minister Sunak and Chinese President Xi Jinping were supposed to meet for the first time at the G20 summit earlier this month in Indonesia, however, the meeting was canceled. A major international gathering like the G20 conference would have been the ideal time to enhance communication between the two countries. The opportunity for a constructive conversation between the two countries seemed to have been lost. If the two countries want to have any chance of improving bilateral ties, they must ultimately stop engaging in provocative behavior when it comes to issues that directly impact another country. This ongoing state of affairs has placed UK-China ties at a crossroads and the future of relationship among two countries is uncertain. Therefore, serious efforts should be made by China and particularly UK considering the geopolitical situation, else, there is no hope of improvement in ties.