

UK ramps up tensions with China, in alliance with the US

Robert Stevens
27 March 2024

The British government has levelled new sanctions against China, accusing it of organising a “malicious” cyber campaign against MPs and the Electoral Commission election watchdog.

Coordinated with the United States, Rishi Sunak’s Conservative government is signalling an intensification of its anti-China campaign, which has reversed previous efforts to tamp down the conflict. This had been the policy of the 2010-15 Conservative administration, led by David Cameron, who is now foreign secretary in Sunak’s crisis-ridden government.

On Monday, Washington and London announced sanctions on two individuals and one company linked to APT31, a China state-affiliated group. Stating that cyber-attacks had “endangered national security”, London said that the Electoral Commission system had been accessible to Chinese assets. The commission holds the details of 40 million voters, including names and address of anyone in the UK registered to vote between 2014 and 2022, as well as the names of those registered as overseas voters.

A press release from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, National Cyber Security Centre, Cabinet Office and Home Office alleged a “pattern of malicious cyber activity by Chinese state-affiliated organisations and individuals targeting democratic institutions and parliamentarians.”

It stated that the “UK can reveal today that the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC)—a part of GCHQ [the UK’s spy centre]—assesses that the UK Electoral Commission systems were highly likely compromised by a Chinese state-affiliated entity between 2021 and 2022.”

It added that the NCSC “assesses it is almost certain that the China state-affiliated Advanced Persistent Threat Group 31 (APT31) conducted reconnaissance activity against UK parliamentarians during a separate campaign in 2021. The majority of those targeted were prominent in calling out the malign activity of China.”

Targeted for sanctions were the Wuhan Xiaorui Science and Technology Company Limited, “which is associated with APT31, operating on behalf of the Chinese Ministry of State Security (MSS) as part of China’s state-sponsored apparatus”; and Zhao Guangzong and Ni Gaobin, both accused of

“operating on behalf of the Chinese Ministry of State Security (MSS).”

Before announcing the sanctions in Parliament Monday afternoon, Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden told the media that China represents the “greatest state-based threat” to Britain. He told MPs, “We will not hesitate to take swift and robust actions wherever the Chinese government threatens the United Kingdom’s interests... The UK judges that these actions demonstrate a clear and persistent pattern of behaviour that signals hostile intent from China.”

The same day, four members of the anti-Chinese “Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China”—former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith, former Minister Tim Loughton, Scottish National Party former defence spokesman Stewart McDonald, and crossbench peer David Alton—were told by parliament’s director of security, Alison Giles, about alleged Chinese moves to hack their electronic devices. This was despite the government’s own press release stating that “No parliamentary accounts were successfully compromised.”

After this the MPs held a press conference. Duncan Smith has long demanded a harsher policy against China, including that it be officially declared a “threat” to the UK’s national interests, rather than its current designation as a “challenge.”

This was accompanied by hysterical press coverage. The *Telegraph* front-page Monday was headlined “China and Russia ‘spreading slurs against Princess of Wales’”. It claimed that Princess Catherine, who has been diagnosed with treatable cancer, was the subject of a disinformation campaign designed to “destabilise the nation”. A government source stated, “Part of the modus operandi of hostile states is to destabilise things—whether that is undermining the legitimacy of our elections or other institutions.”

Five national newspapers led their front pages Tuesday with the anti-China message and three of them—the *Telegraph*, the *Times* and *Mail*—demanded the government go much further against China.

The *Mail* complained, “Sanctions against two key players and a Chinese company over the cyber espionage are derisory,” insisting that Prime Minister “Rishi Sunak must now be willing to label China a threat to our security and prosperity. He can no longer appease the bullies of Beijing.”

On Wednesday, the *Independent* produced a piece by journalist Jonathan Margolis, headlined, “How China stole the West (and we happily gave it away).”

The article claimed, “The Chinese Communist Party considers dominating the world as a work in progress but many believe it’s largely a done deal.”

China, Margolis wrote, had exploited a Britain that was “still (amazingly) the ninth-largest industrial producer,” but whose population was “increasingly drunk, drugged, work-shy, indecisive, falling apart and distracted by silly trivia—culture wars over gender, Brexit, royals, pronouns, woke-ism and the rest of our arguably self-inflicted wounds.”

The reorientation of Britain’s policy to directly confront China economically and militarily is being demanded by Washington as its own world position worsens against its main competitor.

It is a reorientation that extracts a massive price from British imperialism, China accounting for £93.0 billion (7.3 percent) of the UK’s total trade in 2021. The new sanctions and frothing demands that China be rebranded as a “threat” take place amid plans by Chinese manufacturer EVE Energy to invest an initial £1.2 billion to create the UK’s largest gigafactory battery plant on the outskirts of Coventry, England. At least 6,000 jobs, and thousands more in the supply chain, are on the line if China pulls out.

The *Financial Times* citing “government insiders” noted, “Kemi Badenoch, the business secretary, was pushing to ensure that any new regime was designed with ‘business and trade implications’ in mind to avoid unduly damaging trading relations with China and investment in the UK by Chinese companies...”

Last week, Britain and the Australian Labor government ramped up their military alliance against China as part of the trilateral AUKUS pact with the US. On March 21, Australian Minister for Defence Richard Marles and UK counterpart Grant Shapps signed the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) committing them to respond jointly if threatened militarily.

As noted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, “the ministers directly linked the escalating conflict with China with the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. In the opening words of their joint declaration, they proclaimed that the ‘security and prosperity’ of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific were ‘inseparable’.”

The UK-Australia declaration was accompanied by an “AUKUS trilateral statement” that “reaffirmed” a plan for the joint production of nuclear-powered long-range attack submarines designed for use against China.

The fact that Cameron is now part of a government on the verge of declaring China a threat exemplifies growing tensions between the major powers. Despite Britain’s diminished role on the world stage since the loss of empire, it remains a nuclear armed power, which is backing every move of US imperialism in NATO’s war against Russia and Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

“~~It was less~~ a decade ago that Cameron as prime minister rolled out the red carpet for President Xi during his 2015 state visit to Britain, where he was hosted by the queen. This was after Britain became a founding member of Beijing’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, hoping to position itself as a key player in China’s access to European markets.

The growing conflict between the US and China over control of global markets and trade has destroyed this strategy, with Britain’s departure from the European Union in 2016, led by the most right-wing sections of the Tory Party, necessitating even more slavish support for US imperialism.

In 2021, the UK’s Ministry of Defence published its Integrated Review of foreign and defence policy and a further strategy document, “Defence in a Competitive Age”, directly targeting Russia and China. This was followed by a major provocation against Beijing in the South China Sea in September 2021 when HMS Richmond, a Type 23 frigate warship deployed with an aircraft carrier strike group, sailed through the Taiwan Strait—the first time a UK frigate had done so in more than a decade.

The allegations that China is involved in spying on the UK and its elected representatives—particularly those known as being hostile for Beijing—is the height of hypocrisy. Every major power is involved in spying on its rivals. Britain operates one of the most extensive intelligence agencies on the globe, with tens of millions of people nationwide routinely monitored electronically by GCHQ, as proven by Edward Snowden’s revelations.

The spying allegations are simply the latest manifestation of London’s anti-Beijing offensive. It was only a few months ago that the main thrust of the attack centred on the use of the Muslim Uyghur minority in China’s Xinjiang province as slave labour in auto manufacture.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact