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Xi's State Visit to UK: Turning to British History for China's Future

By Benjamin Ho

Synopsis

Chinese president Xi Jinping's four-day state visit to the United Kingdom was met with great pomp and ceremony by his British hosts, which included a royal banquet and having a 41 - gun salute in his honour. By referencing the illustrious history of the UK, Xi is clearly making a statement about how he wants China's future to be like.

Commentary

WITH THE state flags of the United Kingdom and China lining the Mall towards Buckingham Palace, one could be forgiven for thinking that central London was, for a moment, a street scene outside Tiananmen. By blending the best of traditional pageantry and modern British hospitality, the Cameron administration spared no effort to make President Xi Jinping feel almost at home.

Xi's visit to the UK, less than a month after his visit to Washington to meet with President Obama, comes at a particularly challenging time for China's foreign relations, given the recent Chinese economic slowdown as well as increased tensions with its neighbours, especially countries with which it has territorial disputes.

The Xi factor

The personal presence of Xi in the heart of Europe's financial capital is crucial to assure the outside world that Xi remains firmly in control and that his influence on China's policy-making remains undiminished. This is particularly important in China's engagement with the Western world which has traditionally held values different from China's own.

The image that Xi projects is one that is above bureaucratic politics and he remains his “own man”, who is not subjected to petty factional or even ideological challenges. While British Prime Minister David Cameron was quick to highlight the importance of “trade and investment [ties]” and “people-to-people links” in British-Chinese relations, it would be difficult to imagine other Chinese leaders commanding the level of “pomp and pageantry” (as Time puts it) that Xi received. Indeed, BBC economics editor Robert Peston described Xi as someone who has “put a personal stamp on [China] in terms of economic reform, anti-corruption, political reform and foreign policy”.

Given Xi’s successful (albeit ongoing) consolidation of power at home, his reception would also seem to reflect the British belief that China, under Xi, would continue to thrive economically and that it would be politically stable in years to come. While critics of the Chinese government continue to point out Beijing’s human rights infractions, particularly towards the Dalai Lama (whom Britain historically holds in high esteem), President Xi’s star burns bright. This is not least as a result of a highly choreographed diplomatic itinerary the past month, which included a military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of World War II, a state visit to the US and a landmark speech at the UN general assembly.

Why Britain Needs China

Further proof of the high profile implications of Xi’s visit was witnessed by the writer who was given an English version of a 16-page full colour copy of the China Daily at Waterloo Station, with the phrase “Golden Era” stamped in the pages of the paper. The spreadsheet highlighted the contributions of key Chinese individuals such as business tycoon Jack Ma (named as an adviser to a Cameron business aides’ group) and companies like the China Building Technique Group, which was selected as the primary contractor of a new regeneration development in the south London borough of Croydon.

The British car manufacturing industry, which was in the dumps a decade ago, is also witnessing a resurgence of sorts, with some 1.2 million cars exported last year. Not surprisingly, China was the largest single market for British-built cars, with a seven-fold increase since 2009. On the same note, the London Taxi Company which went nearly bankrupt two years ago was being bought over by Zhejiang Geely Holding, with some 250 million pounds invested in the company. Indeed, over the past ten years, China has invested US\$24 billion in Britain, more than in any other western European country. A further 30 billion pounds has been committed to Britain over the next three years to further Sino-British ties.

All these numbers suggest that UK – like many other countries - cannot possibly ignore Chinese financial muscle and the extent to which Chinese investments are crucial to their own national development. China’s low cost manufacturing industry represents a challenge to developed countries given higher labour costs (some 1,200 jobs were cut at British Tata Steel due to the collapse in steel prices). It would, however, seem that barring a Chinese economic meltdown, Beijing’s capacity to put its money where its mouth is would continue to attract many takers – particularly among EU members, which are still plagued with the problems of the Eurozone crisis.

Already, but not yet a superpower

What is most striking about President Xi's visit, however, is not simply the multi-billion deals signed between China and the UK, nor the lavish treatment he received from the hosts, but rather in the manner Xi articulated China's blueprint towards global leadership. In his speech to the UK parliament, Xi enumerated similarities between the British parliamentary system and ancient Chinese legal tradition, noting that the Chinese people have learnt from the "best practices of other countries."

Terming the Sino-British ties as a "global partnership", Xi also expressed the hope that both countries work together to address "pressing international challenges". Given the UK's traditionally close ties with the US, it would seem that China, in fostering closer ties with the former, has further strengthened Beijing's claim to superpower status, and by doing so, undercut US' dominance and influence in the European theatre. Furthermore, it is a sign that China is able to project its influence beyond its regional periphery and further into regions where there is little historical Chinese presence.

For Xi, however, the mission is far from over. For China to be reckoned as a truly "good" superpower, it would have to rectify a deeper problem, that is, an image deficit. As Professor William Callahan at the London School of Economics explains, China is still viewed as a "vengeful revisionist state" rather than a "generous emerging power", particularly among its Asia-Pacific neighbours. As the Speaker John Bercow wryly put it in his opening remarks in Parliament, "the world will be watching [China]."

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