

# With Johnson at helm, will China-UK ties turn?

By Song Xin

Finally, the United Kingdom has a new prime minister – Boris Johnson. Just as it is with his predecessor Theresa May, the most urgent task awaiting Johnson is to complete Brexit, regardless of whether it's a no-deal or renegotiated. Meanwhile, Brexit is not only about pulling the UK out of the European Union (EU) but also about managing the consequences to minimize damage.

The UK is in desperate need of new trade deals with other countries. China, with its economic power and market, is not a partner the UK should and can afford to ignore. However, despite its verbal promises, it has become harder to sense a willingness from the UK government to reinforce UK-China relations now, especially considering the UK government's recent actions over its reluctance to use Chinese 5G technology and its remarks on Hong Kong.

This raises the following question: Has the China-UK golden era, launched in 2015, already ended?

Against the backdrop of globalization, the UK and China have become mutually vital to each other. Economically, the UK is one of China's best partners in Europe. On the one hand, it is China's second-largest European trading partner. And on the other, the UK is the

EU's top recipient for Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI), which includes stakes in infrastructure, major companies, and football clubs.

Over 155,000 Chinese students study in the UK. "They make a massive contribution to Britain and to our society. [There are] more Chinese students in London than any city in the world outside China," said Johnson in an interview with Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV.

Owing to the reconfiguration of the world system, including unpredictable trade conflict between great powers and regional chaos, China is reshaping its strategies with the Western world. In the

post-Brexit era, the UK could possibly lose its earlier attraction to China. Its competitive advantages, compared with other European countries, have decreased. After Britain is outside the EU, countries like Germany, France, and the Netherlands, will compete harder to replace UK's privileged role as "China's best partner in the West," as former chancellor George Osborne put it.

Before embarking on the next phase of the UK-China relationship, Britain's leadership should be aware that the game is no longer played to their advantage. If they cannot tackle the challenges they face, a deeper crisis in the near future is possible.

What should be done to strengthen and further develop bilateral ties between the UK and China?

First, the UK needs to react fast. It fits in with China's agenda to strengthen strategic relations with the UK. But this window of opportunity will not always remain open or until the British government realizes its urgency. The UK faces serious competition from its European neighbors, which are keen on acquiring more trade deals with China.

Second, the UK should be warned against a diplomatic approach with British characteristics – a proclivity to smile at you and stab you in the back. When it comes to Huawei,

China is willing to deal with an open-minded British leadership, but not with one whose promises and behavior are unclear.

Finally, even though Johnson is willing to attach more importance to US-UK relations, the UK may not gain much through Washington's influence. Global powers, like China, would build a resilient relationship with an independent partner who defends its own interests than a "yes-man" nation which takes orders from someone else. There hardly remains a chance the UK could please US President Donald Trump's administration without harming bilateral relations with China. As the saying goes, you can't have your cake and eat it too.

The clock is ticking. Time is short before October 31, the new Brexit deadline. The new UK leadership needs to demonstrate its dedication and commitment to strengthening the UK-China partnership sooner rather than later. It is also expected that the Chinese side will see a more reliable UK, which behaves in the spirit of pragmatism. It is only this way that bilateral relations could become more beneficial and see the golden era once again.

The author is former EU-China policy advisor at the European Parliament. [opinion@globaltimes.com.cn](mailto:opinion@globaltimes.com.cn)



## Though Iran and US don't want to get involved in a war, battle lines remain

By Shu Meng

Since the US announced it will pull out of the Iran nuclear deal in May, a vortex of tensions in the Persian Gulf threatens to suck down peace as Washington's sanctions hobble the Iranian economy. The White House has even threatened to scupper Iran's oil exports as Tehran accuses it of "economic terrorism." Two recent incidents have further aggravated tensions between the two arch foes.

In early July, British overseas territory Gibraltar's authority impounded Iran's oil tanker Grace 1 in early July. Iran retaliated by seizing the British-flagged Stena Impero oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz on July 19. Tehran clearly said that the British operation came at US request, warning what Britain did was "very cheap, wrong and a mistake."

The second reason for heightened tensions is Iran's claims on July 22 that it arrested 17 Iranian nationals allegedly spying for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Tehran accused the CIA of setting up shell companies as a cover to approach Iranians and lure them to work for it by promising US visas, jobs and money. US President Donald

Trump used Twitter to dismiss the Iranian assertion, calling it "just more lies." But given the sensitive timing, the incident has further intensified tensions in the Gulf region.

The US-Iran confrontation is evolving into a clash between the Western world and Iran after the two incidents. In particular, the seizure of the British oil tanker triggered European criticism against Iran, before which Europe, unlike the US, was scrambling to save the Iran nuclear deal. A German foreign ministry spokesman said recently that Tehran's move will "undermine all ongoing efforts to find a way out of the current crisis."

The US has been sparing no effort to portray Iran as a major threat to regional security. On July 19, Washington briefed more than 60 nations on its plan to form a multinational coalition to purportedly ensure freedom of navigation in the Gulf region. It was reported by the Associated Press the same day that "with Iranian military threats in mind, the US is sending American forces, including fighter aircraft, air defense missiles and likely more than 500 troops, to a Saudi air base." However, Washington's policy

of applying maximum pressure to force Iran to bow, further provoked Tehran. The US and Iran have fallen into a cycle of vicious wrangling.

The two countries have been locked in a stalemate: It is hard for them to return to negotiations, but neither wants war. On one hand, the two sides have different opinions on the preconditions for getting back to talks. Unless there is a strong third-party mediator, it is hard to hold talks. But Europe, which is the most likely mediator, is unable to bring the two sides back to the negotiation table after the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, also called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Besides, both Iran and the US can benefit from the current stalemate. For the US, an Iran threat is useful to unite allies in the Middle East and safeguard US influence in the region. For Iran, a tough response against the US and Europe can help the regime divert attention from economic and social problems.

Both Iran and the US don't want tensions to escalate into a direct military confrontation. Iranian spokesman Ali Rabiei said that there are diplomatic solutions to the current crisis with Lon-

don. The US waived sanctions on Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, granting him visa to attend a UN meeting in New York earlier July. This indicates that a military conflict is in no one's interest.

Moreover, Western allies of the US are cautious in confronting Iran so as not to let the situation snowball into a military confrontation. UK under new Prime Minister Boris Johnson is set to undergo a cabinet reshuffle, making military action against Iran more unlikely. France has clearly said it does not intend to increase military presence in the Gulf region.

Noticeably, although neither side wants war while both are trying to strike a balance to maintain a status quo in the region, with escalating tensions, the Persian Gulf has been on the brink.

The author is an assistant research fellow at the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University. [opinion@globaltimes.com.cn](mailto:opinion@globaltimes.com.cn)

