

The Perils of Dependence: Why UK Imports from China Undermine National Security, Economic Stability, and Core Values

Introduction

The United Kingdom's economic relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC), particularly its heavy reliance on Chinese imports, presents a severe and multifaceted threat. This threat extends far beyond conventional economic competition, permeating critical areas of national security, geopolitical stability, environmental integrity, and fundamental human values. Evidence indicates that the substantial economic benefits China derives from its dominant position in global manufacturing and exports are directly contributing to activities that undermine the international order and jeopardise UK interests. The growing global recognition of China as a "systemic challenge" ¹ and a strategic "competitor" ² underscores the urgency of this issue. The PRC leverages its expanding economic power to reshape the international system in ways contrary to the interests and values of democratic nations like the UK.²

This report will dissect the interconnected nature of these dangers, demonstrating how China's economic strength fuels its military ambitions, how this military power enables geopolitical coercion detrimental to UK interests, how reliance on Chinese goods creates profound economic and infrastructural vulnerabilities, how predatory trade practices distort global markets and harm UK industries, and how China's production methods inflict severe environmental damage and rely on egregious human rights abuses. The analysis will focus exclusively on these negative dimensions, drawing upon available evidence to expose the profound risks associated with the current trade dynamic. Ultimately, this report argues for decisive protective measures, specifically the implementation of high import tariffs, as a necessary step to safeguard the UK's national interest against the clear and present dangers posed by economic dependence on China.

Section 1: Economic Power as Military Fuel: China's Defence Expansion

The Opaque Build-up: Masking the True Scale of the Threat

A fundamental challenge in assessing the threat posed by China's military

modernisation is the deliberate lack of transparency surrounding its defence expenditure.⁹ While Beijing publishes an official defence budget annually – RMB 1.78 trillion (approx. \$246.5 billion) announced for 2025¹⁰ – external analyses consistently conclude that actual spending is significantly higher. Respected institutions like the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimated China's 2023 spending at \$309 billion and \$319 billion respectively, considerably exceeding the official figure of roughly \$225 billion for that year.¹⁰ Some estimates, reportedly based on US intelligence, have suggested figures as high as \$700 billion annually, nearly triple Beijing's official numbers.¹¹

Even conservative adjustments using Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) – which account for the lower cost of personnel and domestic procurement in China – reveal a vastly larger military economy than suggested by market exchange rates (MER). For instance, one 2023 estimate placed China's military spending at \$541 billion in PPP terms compared to \$296 billion at MER¹⁵, representing 59% of US spending.¹² A 2024 study calculated the PPP equivalent at \$471 billion against an official MER figure of \$232 billion.¹¹ This consistent and significant underreporting is not merely an accounting discrepancy; it functions as a strategic tool. The deliberate opacity makes it exceedingly difficult for nations like the UK to accurately gauge the scale and pace of China's military build-up, hindering the formulation of effective counter-strategies and complicating deterrence calculations.¹⁰ This cultivated uncertainty forces potential adversaries into cautious, worst-case scenario planning, potentially leading to inefficient resource allocation while China continues its expansion under a veil of ambiguity.

Furthermore, even these adjusted figures likely understate the true growth in China's military capabilities due to its state-directed strategy of Military-Civil Fusion (MCF).¹⁶ MCF explicitly leverages China's civilian technological and industrial base – much of it built on export revenues – to enhance military power.¹⁶ Advancements in dual-use technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, and advanced materials, often developed in the commercial sector, are systematically integrated into military applications.¹⁶ This means significant military modernisation occurs "off-budget," funded indirectly through the broader economy rather than appearing in official defence appropriations. The known exclusion of substantial research and development (R&D) spending from China's official defence budget further obscures the true level of investment.¹⁷ Consequently, assessing the threat requires looking beyond defence budgets to the state's capacity to marshal the resources of its entire economy, fuelled significantly by global trade, towards military

ends.

A Relentless Growth Trajectory and Modernisation Drive

The sheer speed and scale of China's military expansion are alarming. In constant dollar terms, accounting for inflation, China's defence spending has surged nearly five-fold over the past two decades.¹⁰ Since 1992, its military expenditure has increased by almost 900%.¹⁸ This relentless growth, often outpacing official GDP growth targets¹¹, signals a clear national priority placed on military power accumulation. China now spends more on defence than the next 22 Indo-Pacific economies combined, fundamentally altering the regional and global military balance.¹⁰

Crucially, this increased spending is heavily directed towards modernisation and the acquisition of advanced capabilities. There has been a noticeable shift in expenditure towards equipment, accounting for over 41% of total spending in 2017, although slightly moderated recently towards training and maintenance.¹⁰ China is investing heavily in cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles, space-based systems, and cyber warfare capabilities, aiming to achieve battlefield dominance across domains.¹⁶ Its real spending on military equipment has grown at an extraordinary rate, significantly faster than that of the United States in recent years.¹⁴ This focus extends to power projection capabilities, enabling the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy to operate further from Chinese shores.²⁰

Perhaps most concerning is the rapid expansion and diversification of China's nuclear arsenal. The US Department of Defence estimates that the PRC surpassed 600 operational nuclear warheads by mid-2024 and projects it will possess over 1,000 by 2030.²¹ This represents a dramatic increase from previous estimates and marks China as the fastest-growing nuclear power.¹⁷ This expansion involves not just quantity but quality, with increasing technological sophistication.²¹ China has developed a nuclear triad, incorporating ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) conducting deterrent patrols and nuclear-capable bombers, alongside a growing arsenal of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), including hundreds of new missile silos.²¹ It is also developing missiles capable of precision strikes with lower-yield warheads, providing a wider range of escalation options.²¹

Connecting Trade Profits to Military Might

While the opaque nature of the Chinese state makes tracing direct financial flows difficult, the logical connection between China's economic success and its military

build-up is undeniable. As the world's largest exporter of goods ²⁴ and a manufacturing powerhouse, China generates vast revenues from international trade. The immense resources required for the PLA's modernisation – developing fifth-generation fighters, building aircraft carriers, expanding the nuclear arsenal, investing in space and cyber capabilities – must, in significant part, be drawn from these economic gains. The Chinese state's pervasive control over the economy allows it to readily channel resources from commercial success into military development.²⁵ Beijing explicitly leverages its economic power, derived heavily from exports, to pursue military advantage and achieve its strategic goals.²⁷ Therefore, importing goods from China inadvertently contributes to the funding of a military expansion that poses a direct challenge to global security and UK interests.

Section 2: The Shadow of Hegemony: Geopolitical Threats and the Taiwan Crisis

Assertiveness and Ambition: Reshaping the Global Order

China's military expansion is not occurring in a vacuum; it underpins a broader geopolitical strategy aimed at fundamentally reshaping the international order. Under Xi Jinping, Beijing has pursued the goal of "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049 ²⁸, an ambition that entails establishing China as the preeminent power in the Indo-Pacific and ultimately displacing the United States as the dominant global force.² This objective is pursued through the coordinated leveraging of political, diplomatic, economic, military, technological, and ideological power.² This strategic direction manifests as increasingly assertive and often coercive behaviour that actively undermines regional and global security.⁵ China's actions frequently run counter to the interests and values of the UK and its democratic partners.²

Taiwan: The Most Dangerous Flashpoint

The most acute manifestation of China's rising power and assertiveness is its posture towards Taiwan. The Taiwan Strait is widely regarded as the most likely location for US-China competition to escalate into direct conflict.³² Beijing views the "reunification" of Taiwan with the mainland, by force if necessary, as a core component of its national rejuvenation goal and a critical step towards regional dominance.²⁸ Xi Jinping has explicitly ordered the PLA to develop the capability to invade Taiwan by 2027 ¹⁹, and rhetoric from the Chinese leadership suggests that military action is increasingly considered a realistic, perhaps even necessary, option as peaceful means appear less viable.²⁸

This intent is backed by a sustained campaign of escalating military pressure

designed to intimidate Taiwan and deter international support.³² This includes unprecedented large-scale military exercises encircling the island, such as "Joint Sword-2024A" and "Joint Sword-2024B"³³, near-daily incursions by PLA aircraft and naval vessels across the traditional median line of the Taiwan Strait³⁴, and the provocative firing of ballistic missiles over Taiwan itself.²³ These actions are not mere drills; they are described by military analysts and officials as "rehearsals" for invasion or blockade scenarios.¹⁹

This persistent military activity serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it aims to wear down Taiwan's defences and morale while enhancing the PLA's operational capabilities for a potential conflict.³³ Secondly, it represents a deliberate strategy to erode deterrence by normalising the PLA's presence in Taiwan's vicinity and gradually shifting the accepted status quo.³⁴ By repeatedly crossing established red lines, such as the median line or firing missiles over the island, Beijing seeks to desensitise the international community and create ambiguity about what actions would trigger a decisive response.³² This calculated salami-slicing tactic weakens the credibility of deterrence commitments and increases the risk of a miscalculation leading to conflict.³⁰

Military Scenarios and Regional Destabilisation

Military planners assess several plausible scenarios for Chinese aggression against Taiwan, including a prolonged blockade aimed at crippling Taiwan's economy, a rapid, overwhelming assault leveraging missile barrages and amphibious landings, or a chaotic multi-front conflict.³⁵ China possesses a formidable arsenal of over 2,000 ballistic and cruise missiles capable of saturating Taiwan's air defences³⁵, potentially exhausting interceptor stockpiles within hours.³⁵ These could be combined with cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure¹⁶ and landings by amphibious forces.³⁵ Furthermore, China's missile capabilities pose a significant threat to US forward bases in the region, potentially denying access and hindering intervention efforts.³⁷ Wargaming exercises suggest that even if a Chinese invasion were ultimately defeated by a US-led coalition including Taiwan and Japan, the costs would be extraordinarily high, involving devastating losses of personnel, ships, and aircraft, severe economic damage to Taiwan, and a long-term weakening of the US global position.³⁶

The implications of China's actions extend far beyond Taiwan, destabilising the entire Indo-Pacific region.¹⁹ This includes the militarisation of disputed features in the South China Sea¹, coercive actions against neighbouring countries³⁰, the deployment of expanding missile capabilities that threaten US allies like Japan and South Korea²⁹, and deepening military cooperation with revisionist powers like Russia.¹ China's

growing military presence is also felt further afield, with concerns raised about its activities in the Western Hemisphere being pursued for military advantage.²⁷

Dire Implications for the United Kingdom

These geopolitical dynamics pose direct and significant threats to UK interests. Stability in the Indo-Pacific is crucial for global trade routes upon which the UK economy depends; conflict or major instability would cause severe economic disruption.³⁸ A conflict over Taiwan, particularly involving disruption to critical industries like semiconductor manufacturing (TSMC), could trigger a global economic crisis, potentially shaving points off global GDP³⁵ and inflicting substantial harm on the UK.

Moreover, China's challenge to Taiwan is fundamentally a challenge to the rules-based international order that the UK seeks to uphold.² A successful coercive annexation of Taiwan by China would set a deeply damaging precedent, signalling that military power can override international law and the principle of self-determination. This would embolden other authoritarian regimes and undermine the very system that underpins UK security and prosperity. Consequently, the UK faces pressure to support allies in deterring Chinese aggression¹, potentially incurring significant diplomatic, economic, and even military costs. The situation in Taiwan is not merely a distant regional dispute; it is a test case for the future of global order, with profound implications for the UK's place within it.

Section 3: Hollowing Out the Homeland: The UK's Economic Vulnerability

The High Cost of Dependency

The UK's economic relationship with China has fostered a level of dependency that carries significant risks. Analysis reveals that the UK is deeply embedded in global supply chain networks, with China emerging as a dominant player.⁴⁰ China is now the largest single-country supplier of intermediate inputs to over half of UK manufacturing sectors.⁴⁰ This reliance is particularly acute in strategically important areas, including electronics, components for renewable energy technologies (such as solar panels, wind turbines, and batteries for electric vehicles), pharmaceuticals, automotive parts, and potentially elements of critical national infrastructure like telecommunications equipment and port machinery.⁵ This concentration creates strategic dependencies on a nation increasingly viewed as a systemic competitor and potential adversary.⁴⁴

A concerning aspect of this dependency is its often hidden nature. A substantial portion of the UK's exposure to China occurs indirectly, meaning that the UK's direct

suppliers in other countries are themselves reliant on Chinese inputs.⁴⁰ This multi-layered complexity makes it exceptionally difficult for UK businesses and policymakers to fully grasp the extent of their vulnerability and to effectively mitigate risks. Disruptions originating in China, whether due to economic downturns, political decisions, environmental crises, or pandemics, can cascade through these opaque supply chains, impacting the UK in unpredictable ways.⁴⁰ This hidden exposure means that simply diversifying immediate suppliers may not be sufficient to build genuine resilience; the dependencies of those new suppliers must also be addressed.

Supply Chain Vulnerability and Coercion Risks

This deep integration makes the UK acutely vulnerable to supply chain disruptions. Recent global shocks, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have starkly illustrated the fragility of extended supply lines.⁴⁰ Lockdowns, factory closures, or logistical bottlenecks in China can directly interrupt the flow of essential goods and components to the UK, impacting domestic production, employment, and potentially fuelling inflation.⁴⁰

Beyond accidental disruptions, this dependency creates vulnerability to deliberate economic coercion by the Chinese state.⁴ Beijing has demonstrated a willingness to weaponise trade and investment for political ends.⁴ China's dominance in the processing of critical minerals essential for green technologies and advanced manufacturing gives it significant leverage.⁴¹ In the event of shortages or geopolitical disputes, Beijing could potentially restrict exports or manipulate prices to pressure countries like the UK, potentially forcing compromises on foreign policy positions, human rights concerns, or security interests.⁴¹ The integration of Chinese technology into critical infrastructure, such as energy grids (wind farms, potentially nuclear) and transport hubs (port cranes), raises further security alarms regarding espionage, data theft, cyberattacks, and the potential for remote disruption or control.¹ This transforms economic interdependence into a dangerous strategic liability.

Impacts on UK Industry and Employment

The influx of imports from China, often facilitated by the unfair trade practices detailed later, has demonstrably harmed UK domestic industries and workers. Sectors such as steel manufacturing have faced intense pressure from subsidised and dumped Chinese products, leading to production curtailments and job losses.⁵⁰ Broader analyses indicate that import competition, particularly from China following its WTO accession, has contributed to declines in manufacturing employment in the UK and other advanced economies.⁵³ While consumers may benefit from lower prices

on imported goods, these gains are typically widely dispersed across the population. In contrast, the negative consequences – job displacement, wage stagnation, and regional economic decline – are heavily concentrated on specific groups of workers and communities, leading to significant social and economic hardship.⁵³ The persistent threat of renewed surges of unfairly traded imports, should existing trade defences be allowed to lapse, leaves vulnerable UK industries in a precarious state.⁵⁰

Broader Economic Instability and UK Context

The risks extend beyond direct import competition. China's own internal economic fragilities, such as its property sector crisis and high levels of debt ³⁸, pose a threat to global economic stability. As the world's second-largest economy and a central node in global manufacturing and trade ³⁸, a significant slowdown or financial crisis in China could have severe spillover effects, potentially triggering global recessionary pressures, renewed inflation, and damaging the UK's economic prospects.³⁸ The UK government itself has acknowledged the scale of the challenge, describing China as the "greatest state-based threat" to the UK's economic security ⁵ and recognising the imperative to build national resilience against potential disruptions and coercion.¹ While events like Brexit have reshaped some UK trade relationships

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