

UK foreign policy

UK foreign secretary hits back at Tory critics of China policy

James Cleverly says a failure to engage with Beijing and seek investment would be a sign of 'weakness'



UK foreign secretary James Cleverly said: 'To consciously withdraw and not utilise our standing in the world, the authority and voice that we have, that would be seen as a sign of weakness, not a sign of strength' © Hanna Johre/NTB/Getty Images

George Parker in London and **Thomas Hale** in Beijing YESTERDAY

UK foreign secretary James Cleverly has hit back at Conservative party critics ahead of a visit to Beijing this week, warning that failure to engage with China would be a sign of British “weakness”.

Cleverly told the Financial Times he would tell his hosts on Wednesday that Britain welcomed Chinese investment provided it did not create national security concerns, declaring: “The UK is open for business.”

Liz Truss, former UK prime minister, wants Britain to [designate China as a “threat”](#) but Rishi Sunak’s government is adopting a softer approach; Cleverly said he would not conduct foreign policy by “catchphrase”.

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The foreign secretary left open the possibility of Beijing being invited to a UK-hosted artificial intelligence summit in November and signalled Britain had no immediate plans to follow the US in banning outward investments in certain sensitive areas in [China](#).

Cleverly will become the most senior British minister to visit Beijing since before the Covid-19 pandemic, to the anger of Conservative critics including former Tory leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith, [who claims](#) China poses a “dangerous threat to the free world”.

But Cleverly said: “To consciously withdraw and not utilise our standing in the world, the authority and voice that we have, that would be seen as a sign of weakness, not a sign of strength.”

He said he could not raise concerns about China’s record in Xinjiang, Hong Kong or its sanctions against British parliamentarians unless he spoke to Beijing; he meets his counterpart Wang Yi during a one-day visit on Wednesday.

Britain’s relations with China have been strained in recent years, notably over Beijing’s crackdown on civil rights in the UK’s former colony of Hong Kong, and other western countries are far ahead of London in making overtures to China.

Olaf Scholz, German chancellor, visited Beijing last November, and Emmanuel Macron, French president, was granted a state visit in April. Meanwhile, Antony Blinken, US secretary of state, was in Beijing in June, one of a number of senior Biden administration figures to make the journey.

Cleverly wants to reset the relationship with Beijing, working with China on issues such as climate change and habitat protection, while bolstering economic ties within the constraints of national security.

Rejecting calls for Britain to define China as a “threat”, he said: “Give me one example of any other country in the world where we define our relationship with a single word or a catchphrase. We don’t do it.”

He said Britain would continue to press its concerns about wider issues including legal crackdowns in Hong Kong; [UK judges withdrew](#) from the territory’s court of final appeal last year and Cleverly said their return was “not on the cards at the moment”.

On the AI safety summit at Bletchley Park, there has been speculation that China could be represented at an official level. Cleverly said the guest list was being finalised, but noted that he had invited a Chinese and British expert to give evidence on the issue at the UN Security Council recently.

Britain has recently thrown Chinese companies out of sensitive UK 5G telecoms

infrastructure and nuclear projects, but Cleverly said that in other areas London wanted to do business with Beijing.

“Yes. we seek inward investment in a range of areas as long as it’s in keeping with our national security interests,” he said, adding that Chinese involvement in financial services, electric vehicle battery production and green energy would be judged on that definition.

This month President Joe Biden announced an executive order that placed targeted restrictions on US investment into China’s technology sector, but there is no sign Britain is immediately about to follow suit.

“Whether it’s foreign investment into the UK or UK investment going out, the principle is that we seek to be a globally active economic player, as long as it’s not in contradiction with the things we want to protect,” said Cleverly.

The foreign secretary said this would be his fourth meeting in different forums with Wang Yi, sometimes described as embodying a “wolf warrior” Chinese approach to diplomacy.

“I’ve always found him forthright, he speaks very directly, but so do I,” Cleverly said. “I’ve always found him courteous.

“When I’ve pushed him on issues I know are uncomfortable for the Chinese government he has always listened even if he often comes back very robustly with the Chinese position. I can deal with that.”

On the abrupt disappearance of China’s former foreign minister Qin Gang, Cleverly said: “I don’t know what the details are, it’s probably not useful for me to speculate.”

The Chinese foreign ministry said Britain and China would have “in-depth exchanges on issues of concern” during meetings in Beijing on Wednesday.

International businesses, including those from the UK, have flocked back to China this year following the lifting of strict zero-Covid restrictions that cut the country off from the rest of the world for three years.

But heightened US scrutiny of China has led to a push for so-called de-risking, in which some western companies aim to reduce their supply chain dependency on the country.

Li Qiang, premier, described the approach as a [“false proposition”](#) at a World

Economic Forum event in Tianjin in June.

The wary rapprochement between Britain and China comes eight years after George Osborne, the then UK chancellor, travelled to China, with both sides talking of a “golden era” in relations and the UK promising to be Beijing’s “number one partner in the west”.

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