

# 'Nesting Dragon, Soldier, Spy': Shaping the Narrative on China Through Huawei in UK Parliamentary Debates

Francisca Da Gama & Kim Bui

To cite this article: Francisca Da Gama & Kim Bui (07 Oct 2024): 'Nesting Dragon, Soldier, Spy': Shaping the Narrative on China Through Huawei in UK Parliamentary Debates, Journal of Contemporary China, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2024.2399048](https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2399048)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2399048>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 07 Oct 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# 'Nesting Dragon, Soldier, Spy': Shaping the Narrative on China Through Huawei in UK Parliamentary Debates

Francisca Da Gama and Kim Bui

Greenwich Business School, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the controversy surrounding 5G in the United Kingdom preceding the decision to remove Huawei from the UK network. We analyse UK parliamentary debates from 2012–2020 against the backdrop of tensions between the United States and China in the race for global leadership in 5G technology. We identify four principal themes in the UK parliamentary discourse: Huawei as innovator and collaborator; a threat to national security; as undermining UK relations with its allies; and embodying opposing values. We argue that the narrative shifts in the UK government's position towards Huawei correspond to Conservative Party internal conflicts on how to navigate the UK's relationship with Huawei in response to geopolitical pressures. We situate this changing narrative within a political sinologism that is used to shape a negative view of Huawei and China.

## Introduction

On 7 October 2022 the United States Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security issued a series of regulations restricting the ability of specified Chinese firms to acquire advanced computer chips. As a result of these new restrictions, US companies are no longer able to supply Chinese companies with semiconductor manufacturing equipment and advanced chips without a licence, and US citizens are also banned from facilitating or engaging in activities that support Chinese integrated circuit development.<sup>1</sup> This announcement followed a ban on US companies using Huawei networking and communications equipment citing national security concerns, part of a wider geopolitical move to limit China's technological advancement with respect to US capabilities.<sup>2</sup> These developments reflect the tensions that have grown over China's rise as a technology power, presenting a challenge to US global dominance in terms of the security environment, maintaining its military and economic power, and the international liberal order.<sup>3</sup>

**CONTACT** Francisca Da Gama  [f.dagama@greenwich.ac.uk](mailto:f.dagama@greenwich.ac.uk)  Greenwich Business School, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, UK

<sup>1</sup>Virginia Harrison and Martin Farrer, 'What Do US Curbs on Selling Microchips to China Mean for the Global Economy?' *The Guardian* (19 October 2022) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/19/what-do-us-curbs-on-selling-microchips-to-china-mean-for-the-global-economy>> accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>2</sup>Karsten Friis and Olav Lysne, 'Huawei, 5G and Security: Technological Limitations and Political Responses' (2021) 52(5) *Development and Change* 1174–1195.

<sup>3</sup>Doug Stokes, 'Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order' (2018) 94(1) *International Affairs* 133–150; Min Tang, 'Huawei Versus the United States? The Geopolitics of Exterritorial Internet Infrastructure' (2020) 14 *International Journal of Communication* 22, accessed 9 November 2022, <<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/12624/3204>>; Kevin H. Zhang 'US-China Economic Links and Technological Decoupling' (2023) *The Chinese Economy* 1-13.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Global leadership of information technology has been an aspiration of China's economic development and modernisation, set out in China's 'Made in China 2025' policy launched in 2015, as it has responded to what Kennedy and Lim refer to as 'the innovation imperative', that is, the need to develop new technologies in order to overcome 'structural challenges'.<sup>4</sup> With the aim of driving technological advancement and transforming China into the world's most advanced and competitive manufacturing economy,<sup>5</sup> this vision involves the implementation of new technology that would see China participate in global norm-setting in 5G technology, an arena traditionally dominated by the EU and US.<sup>6</sup> Where previously Chinese economic development was reliant on Western technological transfers to China with the core technology remaining with the West, China is now prioritizing ownership and intellectual property rights over technology critical to the major economic systems worldwide.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, a major strategic goal for China is to elevate its status in the manufacturing global value chain driving innovation and increasing self-sufficiency in science and technology by 2035.<sup>8</sup> Direct guidance and financial support, including reduced taxation for high-tech enterprises and USD\$20 billion allocation by the state supported an increase of Chinese cross-border high-technological investment, primarily in Europe and North America.<sup>9</sup> To facilitate the technological norms in support of this policy, China submitted more than 800 technical documents to the International Telecommunication Union in 2019 - three times as many as the US, Japan, and South Korea combined.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, since 2014 China has authored a quarter of new technical proposals to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), a process historically led by the EU followed by the US.<sup>11</sup> However, China's engagement has increased significantly with influence in the ISO now comparable to the level of Japan and the UK in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, Huawei's 5G technology has served as a flagship for the Made in China 2025 strategy. As the 'innovative public face of the economic rise of China',<sup>13</sup> Huawei has achieved extensive reach internationally in both the Global South and developed economies, building and maintaining core networks and establishing leading research and development centres.<sup>14</sup> Huawei

<sup>4</sup>Andrew B. Kennedy and Darren J. Lim, 'The Innovation Imperative: Technology and US-China Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century' (2018) 94(3) *International Affairs* 553–72.

<sup>5</sup>Jost Wübbeke, et al., 'Made in China 2025' (2016) 2(74) Mercator Institute for China Studies. Papers on China 4.

<sup>6</sup>Ching Kwan Lee, 'Global China at 20: Why, How and So What?' (2022) 250 *The China Quarterly* 313–331; Tang (2020).

<sup>7</sup>The overall goal by 2049 is for China to become a leader in manufacturing high-quality, high-tech products, see Ling Li, 'China's Manufacturing Locus in 2025: With a Comparison of "Made-in-China 2025" and "Industry 4.0"' (2018) 135 *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 66.

<sup>8</sup>Xinhua, 'The central committee of the Communist Party of China issued the outline of national innovation-driven development strategy' *Xinhua News Agency* (19 May 2015) <[http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-05/19/content\\_5074812.html](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-05/19/content_5074812.html)> accessed 8 April 2022, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 'Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China' *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Peoples Republic of China* (25 October 2022) <[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202210/t20221025\\_10791908.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html)> accessed 9 November 2022.

<sup>9</sup>Examples include Midea's acquisition of Germany's Kuka (robotic engineering) for €4.5 billion in 2016 and HNA Group's acquisition of US's Ingram Micro Inc (technology services) for \$6 billion. China's outbound cross-border M&As for 2015 was recorded at \$111.5 billion and \$111.6 billion in (2016). Denny Thomas, 'China outbound M&A beats 2015 record with 6 months to spare' *Reuters* (21 June 2016) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/china-ma-idUSL4N19C2UL>> accessed 21 December 2022.

<sup>10</sup>Hideaki Ryugen and Hiroyuki Akiyama, 'China leads the way on global standards for 5G and beyond' *The Financial Times* (4 August 2020) <<https://www.ft.com/content/858d81bd-c42c-404d-b30d-0be32a097f1c>> accessed 12 November 2022.

<sup>11</sup>The ISO is one of two most important international standardization organization, International Electrotechnical Committee (IEC) being the other. China's growing engagement with standardization and is evident in the National Standardization Development outline released by the State Council: 'Deepen standardization exchanges and cooperation. Fulfil the responsibilities and obligations of member countries of the International Standards Organization and actively participate in international standardization activities'. 'The CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the "National Standardization Development Outline"' *Xinhua News Agency* (10 October 2021) <[http://www.news.cn/politics/zywj/2021-10/10/c\\_1127943309.html](http://www.news.cn/politics/zywj/2021-10/10/c_1127943309.html)> accessed 2 November 2022.

<sup>12</sup>Björn Fägersten and Tim Ruhlig, 'China's Standard Power and its Geopolitical Implications for Europe' (2019) The Swedish Institute of International Affairs ui-brief-no.-2-2019.pdf.

<sup>13</sup>Bruno Mascitelli and Mona Chung, 'Hue and Cry Over Huawei: Cold War Tensions, Security Threats or Anti-competitive Behaviour?' (2019) 1 *Research in Globalization* 4.

<sup>14</sup>Nigel Inkster, 'The Huawei Affair and China's Technology Ambitions' (2019) 61 *Survival* 105. Huawei had 14 R&D centres and 36 joint innovation centres and 45 training centres. By 2019 huawei had connected over 3 billion in 170 counties and was a market leader in Europe, Asia and Africa.

was able to acquire a significant portion of the core 5G patents and files the most standard-essential patents for 5G, which helped to ensure that it is the only telecommunications company able to produce and offer all the elements that are required to implement the 5G network at scale for a competitive price, surpassing US and European players in the 5G and telecommunications market.<sup>15</sup> Because of its technological prowess and rapid expansion, Huawei has been subject to extraordinary scrutiny. The United Kingdom, initially welcoming the company's provision of communications infrastructure, abruptly reversed its position in July 2020 under pressure from the US, banning Huawei from its 5G networks.

Alongside this sequence of events, contesting narratives developed in the UK's political discourse around Huawei. Understanding the political narrative in a host country is important for international businesses operating in that country as they influence policy formation. Important aspects of the political narrative are who the political actors are that are driving that narrative, and how that narrative shapes parliamentary policy.<sup>16</sup> In order to understand this shift in UK policy towards Huawei, this article examines the political narrative in UK parliamentary debates from September 2012 to July 2020, utilising the concept of political sinologism. After charting the rise of Huawei in the UK, we present a theoretical overview of sinologism, followed by a discussion of UK parliamentary debates. We identify four principal themes in the parliamentary debates: Huawei as technological innovator and collaborator, Huawei as national security threat, undermining UK relationships with allies, and embodying opposing values to the West. We find that Huawei was subjected to a political sinologism bound with negative views of China, political motivations corresponding to internal conflicts within the Conservative Party, and external pressures from the US.

## Huawei and 5G

Huawei (华为: China achievement) was founded in 1987 by Ren Zhengfei, an engineer and former low-ranking officer in the People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>17</sup> Foreseeing the arrival of the mobile network and telecommunications equipment, Ren formed Huawei in 1987 and grew the private Chinese enterprise from three employees to 195,000 worldwide. Huawei pursued international expansion in 1996, establishing themselves in developing countries of South-East Asia, Central Asia and Latin America before entering developed economies. By 2008, 75% of Huawei's sales came from overseas, including the US, Europe and Japan, reaching revenues of USD\$123 billion in 2019.<sup>18</sup> Unlike state-owned enterprises, Huawei is 100%-owned by its employees, does not receive capital from the state and is accountable to external stakeholders.<sup>19</sup> Huawei's ownership structure has been criticised for its ties to the Chinese state, despite its privately owned status similar to many Western firms.<sup>20</sup> Since 2019, Huawei has been the world's largest producer of telecommunications equipment, servicing the world's 50 largest carriers.<sup>21</sup> While benefiting from state policies encouraging technological development, much of Huawei's success can be attributed to indigenous growth

<sup>15</sup>By 2019 China held 10% of the '5G-essential' industrial property rights, see Kadri Kaska, Henrik Beckvard and Tomáš Minárik, 'Huawei, 5G and China as a Security Threat' (2019) 28 NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Center for Excellence (CCDCOE)1-26; Ewan Sutherland, '5G Security—The politics of Huawei equipment in the United Kingdom' <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3654596>> accessed 7 October 2020.

<sup>16</sup>Gilberto Capano, Maria Tullia Galanti and Giovanni Barbato, 'When the Political Leader is the Narrator: the Political and Policy Dimensions of Narratives' (2023) 56(2) *Policy Sciences* 233–265.

<sup>17</sup>Much is made of Ren's connections with the People's Liberation Army, however military service was common for people of his generation, see Mascitelli and Chung (2019).

<sup>18</sup>Sunny Li Sun, 'Internationalization Strategy of MNEs From Emerging Economies: The Case of Huawei' (2019) 17 *Multinational Business Review* 129–156.

<sup>19</sup>Xin Liu, 'Chinese Multinational Enterprises Operating in Western Economies: Huawei in the US and the UK' (2021) 30(120) *Journal of Contemporary China* 368–385.

<sup>20</sup>For a detailed discussion of Huawei's ownership structure and surrounding controversy, see Colin Hawes, 'Huawei: Critically Assessing the 5G Ban and Commonly Cited Risks' *UTS Australia-China Relations Institute* (2022) <[https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/20220818%20UTS%20ACRI%20Analysis\\_Huawei%20-%20Critically%20Assessing%20the%205G%20ban%20and%20commonly%20cited%20risks\\_Colin%20Hawes.pdf](https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/20220818%20UTS%20ACRI%20Analysis_Huawei%20-%20Critically%20Assessing%20the%205G%20ban%20and%20commonly%20cited%20risks_Colin%20Hawes.pdf)> accessed 17 July 2022.

<sup>21</sup>Inkster (2019).

of technological capabilities and the significant funding of domestic research institutes.<sup>22</sup> Huawei's rapid rise to dominance in the telecoms industry has raised concerns from the West, with suggestions of unfair advantages from state subsidies.<sup>23</sup> Huawei has had to navigate its strong national identity in the domestic market as the largest telecoms provider in China and its identity as a Chinese multinational enterprise (MNE) in a wary West.<sup>24</sup>

Emblematic of China's rising technological power, Chinese mobile network technology was caught up in US-China ideological and geopolitical tensions with Huawei, alongside other key Chinese technology companies, subject to increasing US scrutiny, which were later exacerbated by the Trump administration's trade restrictions.<sup>25</sup> While ostensibly addressing current account deficits,<sup>26</sup> trade sanctions have also advanced desires to maintain US technological leadership, to curb the Made in China 2025 initiative, contain China's technological influence and enforce a decoupling from Chinese technology firms.<sup>27</sup> Washington unease includes increased Chinese domestic production in high tech industries at the cost of foreign firms' participation in the Chinese market, alongside forced restructuring of business systems and transfer of technology.<sup>28</sup> While China outperforms the US in some technological areas, it is still dependent on the US for parts such as high-end semiconductors; trade sanctions have served as a means to protect US companies from intellectual property theft, halt the sharing of core technologies with Chinese enterprises and obstruct China's technological advancement.<sup>29</sup> In curbing China's technological rise, US actions have been part of maintaining US global political and economic hegemony and a wider campaign to pressure Western governments to exclude Huawei from their telecommunications networks with national security predominant in US arguments, framed around Huawei's links to the Chinese state and Ren's former PLA history. Actions against Huawei were brought to the fore on 1 December 2018 with the arrest of Huawei's chief finance officer and Ren Zhengfei's daughter—Meng Wanzhou—at Vancouver Airport in response to a US extradition request. US and Canadian actions were part of a coordinated response towards Huawei amongst the Five Eyes allies steered by the US. Comprising the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, the Five Eyes alliance was instrumental to the US to promote a unified approach to Huawei, with Australia unilaterally banning the company from its 5G network in August 2018.

Unlike some of its Five Eyes allies, however, the UK did not initially take action to ban Huawei and adopted a more nuanced approach, what Krolkowski and Hall refer to as a 'non-decision decision' in an attempt to preserve its economic relationship with China alongside its special relationship with the US.<sup>30</sup> From the early 2000s, successive UK governments had sought a relationship with Huawei with the company entering the UK in 2001 during the Labour government led by Tony Blair, a direct consequence of China's 'Going Out' policy. Huawei went on to sign a contract with British Telecom (BT) in 2005 to upgrade the UK's broadband service, the first major contract for Huawei in Europe. The following decade saw Huawei further develop its presence in the UK leading to what has been

<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth Braw, 'The 6 G Showdown with China is Coming' *The Financial Times* (30 November 2022) <<https://www.ft.com/content/4a1eaf64-c956-45ab-9473-d1437e36d3a4>> accessed 17 December 2022.

<sup>23</sup>Andrew B. Kennedy and Darren J. Lim. 'The Innovation Imperative: Technology and US—China Rivalry in the Twenty-first Century' (2018) 94 *International Affairs* 553–572.

<sup>24</sup>Liu (2021).

<sup>25</sup>This scrutiny accelerated following a 2005 publication of a RAND report investigating Huawei's military links. Evan S. Medeiros, Cliff Roger, Keith Crane and James C. Mulvenon, *A New Direction for China's Defense Industry* (2005) <[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND\\_MG334.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG334.pdf)> accessed 13 July 2024.

<sup>26</sup>'How Made in China 2025 Frames Trump's Trade Threats', *Bloomberg* (10 April 2018) <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-10/how-made-in-china-2025-frames-trump-s-trade-threats-quicktake>> accessed 23 January 2022.

<sup>27</sup>Robert Lighthizer, '2018 Special 301 Report' Office of the United States Trade Representative 2018 Special 301 <<https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/Press/Reports/2018%20Special%20301.pdf>> accessed 5 November 2022.

<sup>28</sup>Nitin Agarwala and Rana Divyank Chaudhary, 'Made in China 2025': Poised for Success? (2021) 77 *India Quarterly* 424–461.

<sup>29</sup>David Shepardson, 'U.S. Tightening Restrictions on Huawei Access to Technology Chips' *Reuters* (17 August 2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-huawei-tech-idUSKCN25D1CC>> accessed 6 June, 2022. US companies have, however, resisted decoupling from Chinese companies.

<sup>30</sup>Alanna Krolkowski and Todd H. Hall, 'Non-decision Decisions in the Huawei 5 G Dilemma: Policy in Japan, the UK, and Germany' (2023) *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 1–19.

referred to as the 'Golden Era' (2010–2016) of UK-China relations under the Conservative leadership of Prime Minister David Cameron, characterised by a growth in bilateral trade and investment.<sup>31</sup> Huawei's favourable reception continued with the signing of a research collaboration agreement with BT at the end of 2016 to develop institutional ties in the UK through its research and development centres and by September 2019, Huawei had developed partnerships with 35 UK universities, funding projects through its Huawei Innovation Research Programme. Huawei introduced an annual 'Academic Salon' in conjunction with the *Times Higher Education*, with the inaugural European event hosted in London bringing together academics, industry experts and government. Huawei committed to spend £3 billion on research and development from 2018–2022, including a £1 billion R&D facility in Cambridge.<sup>32</sup>

The UK's relationship with Huawei came under closer scrutiny during Prime Minister Theresa May's government (2016–2019) which attempted to navigate a more intermediate position towards China and Huawei than most of the Five Eyes following the Australian ban.<sup>33</sup> Tensions within the May government and Conservative Party reflected divisions within the Conservative Party that had developed from the 2016 referendum to leave the European Union ('Brexit') relating to May's inability to secure support for her terms for the Brexit deal. Opposition to May came to a head on 24 April 2019 with a media leak from the National Security Council, which led to the sacking of Secretary of State for Defence Gavin Williamson.<sup>34</sup> Chaired by the Prime Minister, the National Security Council includes members of cabinet, heads of intelligence and defence agencies and other senior officials involved with defence; the leak revealed that the meeting had agreed to allow Huawei to have a continued, albeit restricted, presence in parts of the UK network. The leak intensified Party divisions, and ultimately led to May's resignation as Prime Minister on 7 June 2019. This followed high profile meetings with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on 8 May 2019 and President Donald Trump on 4 June 2019, which included discussion of Huawei and security concerns, contributing to pressures to remove Huawei from UK networks.<sup>35</sup>

In early 2020, Huawei critics in the UK, increasingly vocal amongst Conservative Party backbenchers, voiced national security concerns regarding Huawei's presence in the UK and government policy towards China and backbench pressure resulted in a government commitment to hold a debate on Huawei in March 2020 (Huawei and 5G).<sup>36</sup> With Boris Johnson replacing May as prime minister, the government (July 2019–September 2022) had moved closer towards the US position on Huawei, despite Johnson's previously expressed pro-China stance.<sup>37</sup> In January 2020, the government announced that Huawei would be restricted to a 35% share of the 5G market in the UK and would not be allowed to supply the central or critical core of the 5G network. Then, following the parliamentary debates on Huawei and 5G in July 2020, the government retracted their initial agreement, banning all British telecommunications companies from buying Huawei 5G equipment and instructing that any equipment already installed into UK mobile networks be removed by the

<sup>31</sup>George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer 2010–2016, is largely credited with strengthening UK-China relations and heralded the 'Golden era' in his speech to the Shanghai Stock exchange 22 September 2015, 'Let's create a golden decade for the UK-China relationship' HM Treasury 2015. See, Kerry Brown, *The Future of UK-China Relations: The Search for a New Model* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2019).

<sup>32</sup>Planning permission for the facility was received in 2020. It is not uncommon for foreign telecommunication networks to invest in major projects in the UK, for example the Shared Rural Network initiative saw Vodafone (Spain) and Three (Hong Kong) along with EE and O2 provide 4 G coverage to 95% of the UK landmass by 2025 - a £1 billion deal. See, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 'Shared Rural Network' Gov.UK (9 March 2020) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/shared-rural-network>> accessed 17 August 2022.

<sup>33</sup>Krolkowski and Hall (2023).

<sup>34</sup>Steven Swinford and Charles Hymas 'Theresa May Defies Security Warnings of Ministers and US to Allow Huawei to Help Build Britain's 5G network' *The Telegraph* (23 April 2020) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/04/23/theresa-may-defies-security-warnings-ministers-us-allow-huawei/>> accessed 24 April 2022.

<sup>35</sup>Sebastian Payne, 'Pompeo invokes Thatcher to urge UK to take hard line on China' *The Financial Times* (8 May 2019) <<https://www.ft.com/content/d09eedda-71ac-11e9-bf5c-6eeb837566c5>> accessed 8 June 2023.

<sup>36</sup>Ruike Xu and Wyn Rees, 'America and the Special Relationship: the Impact of the Trump Administration on Relations with the UK' (2021) 17(1) *British Politics* 1–19.

<sup>37</sup>Helen Warrell and George Parker, 'China lashes out at Boris Johnson over Huawei ban' *The Financial Times* (15 July 2020) <<https://www.ft.com/content/783fd015-68f0-4dcc-9110-c8e5c4f4366c>> accessed 11 December 2022.



end of 2027.<sup>38</sup> This was a result of the prevarication on implementing an outright policy on Huawei in an attempt to maintain a favourable standing with both the US and China, and enabled the reversal in approach to be framed as a forced hand due to US actions.<sup>39</sup>

Huawei is in a unique situation whereby it is the only telecommunications operator in the UK that has had its own bespoke mitigation strategy to manage potential security risks.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the US, the UK had indicated a willingness to work with Huawei by establishing the Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre (HCSEC) Oversight Board in 2010 to evaluate security risks.<sup>41</sup> In 2018 the HCSEC Oversight Board concluded that risks to UK national security from Huawei's involvement in the 5G network could be managed and had been mitigated. A 2019 HCSEC report mentioned some underlying defects but the following year's report concluded: 'engineering competence and cyber security hygiene ... give rise to vulnerabilities that are capable of being exploited by a range of actors. NCSC does not believe that the defects identified are a result of Chinese state interference'.<sup>42</sup> In the drive towards the development of tech policy, the UK position reflected a divide between industry experts and government in how to consider Huawei, with expert opinion increasingly superseded by government disquiet.<sup>43</sup> Questions over security were guided by the inability to guarantee the security of Huawei products following the US-imposed sanctions on Huawei's supply chain and the company was subsequently issued a designation notice formally classifying them as a high-risk vendor of 5G network equipment.<sup>44</sup> Initially welcomed into the UK as part of closer UK-China economic relations, Huawei became rhetorically synonymous with the Chinese state, and by default, a security threat that made the UK's telecoms infrastructure vulnerable. This was a culmination of an increasingly hostile narrative that arose out of the contrasting approaches towards Huawei; on the one hand, seeking to protect relations with China and working with Huawei to manage security risks, and on the other, responding to US fears over Huawei and pressures to enact an outward ban.

The following examines these competing perspectives in the UK parliamentary narratives leading up to Huawei's ban in July 2020. The increasingly negative view of China in this narrative was bolstered by wider lobbying activity to set the agenda and influence policy towards China. Some MPs prominent in the debates over Huawei, such as Tom Tugendhat and Damian Green, went on to form the China Research Group in April 2020, aiming to more systematically influence policy on China and draw attention to Chinese soft power activity, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes.<sup>45</sup> Others would be active in the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) founded in June 2020 with the expressed aim to stem China's global rise: Iain Duncan Smith, Bob Seely, David Davis, Liam Fox and Tim Loughton. MPs also drew on think tanks such as the Henry Jackson Society and the Australia Strategic Policy Institute.<sup>46</sup> Together

<sup>38</sup>National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), 'Huawei to be Removed from UK 5G Networks by 2027' *Gov.UK* (14 July 2020) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/huawei-to-be-removed-from-uk-5g-networks-by-2027>> accessed October 30, 2022.

<sup>39</sup>Krolkowski and Hall (2023).

<sup>40</sup>National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), 'Summary of the NCSC analysis of May 2020 US sanction' *Gov.UK* (1 May 2020) <<https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/report/summary-of-ncsc-analysis-of-us-may-2020-sanction>> accessed October 31, 2022.

<sup>41</sup>Xin Liu (2021). The Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre (HCSEC) Oversight Board is composed of senior UK government members, UK telecoms experts as well as a senior Huawei representative to evaluate security risks.

<sup>42</sup>Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre (HCSEC) Oversight Board, 'Annual Report (2020) A report to the National Security Adviser of the United Kingdom' *Gov.UK* <[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/544444/Huawei\\_Cyber\\_Security\\_Evaluation\\_Centre\\_HCSEC\\_Oversight\\_Board\\_-\\_annual\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/attachment_data/file/544444/Huawei_Cyber_Security_Evaluation_Centre_HCSEC_Oversight_Board_-_annual_report_2020.pdf)> accessed 2 December 2022 (publishing.service.gov.uk) 24.

<sup>43</sup>Antonio Calcaro, 'From quiet to noisy politics: Varieties of European Reactions to 5G and Huawei' (2020) 36(2) *Governance* 439–457.

<sup>44</sup>Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 'Huawei legal notices issued' *Gov.UK* (13 October 2022) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/huawei-legal-notices-issued#:~:text=a%20requirement%20to%20remove%20Huawei%20equipment%20from%20the%20network%20core,by%2028%20January%202023%3B%20and>> accessed 17 December 2022.

<sup>45</sup>Li Zhang, 'The rise of China: Media Perception and Implications for International Politics' (2010) 19(64) *Journal of Contemporary China* 233. Tom Tugendhat MP was a founding member of the China Research Group alongside other Conservative Party MPs Neil O'Brien, Dehenna Davison, Anthony Browne, Laura Trott, Kevin Hollinrake, Alicia Kearns, Andrew Bowie and Damian Green.

<sup>46</sup>The Henry Jackson Society states that its purpose is 'to assist those countries that are not yet liberal and democratic to become so': <<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/statement-of-principles/>> accessed 10 August 2022. See for example Bob Seely MP's report for the Henry Jackson Society: Bob Seely, Peter Varnish, and John Hemmings, 'Defending our data: Huawei, 5G and the Five Eyes' *Henry Jackson Society* (16 May 2019) <<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/defendingourdata>> accessed 24 June 2022. The Australia Strategic Policy Institute criticised the UK position on Huawei and has been used as an information source for parliamentary commentary and debate. See for example Bob Seely MP, *Global Britain* (30 January 2020).

with a broader negative framing of China in influential media outlets, this lobbying contributed to the consolidation of the negative narrative on China that influenced policy debates.<sup>47</sup> Combined, this built momentum around a conception of Huawei conflated with concerns over China, consolidating common themes and criticisms to construct a knowledge of China.

## Sinologism and Huawei

In order to evaluate the political narrative surrounding Huawei and the UK, we draw on sinologism as a critique that highlights the ways in which knowledge production about China in the global era is influenced by Western perceptions and interests.<sup>48</sup> This critique aims to unpick the political and ideological underpinnings of narratives around China, but without succumbing to an idealisation of China. Following from Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>49</sup> in which the West created orientalist narratives on the Middle East that enabled colonial representation and containment of the Other (colonised), sinologism is particular to China's historical and political development alongside the rise of Sinology, or studies about China.<sup>50</sup> While some critics see sinologism as synonymous with Sinology,<sup>51</sup> we consider sinologism as a distinct practice as articulated by Gu in that it corresponds to a concrete geopolitical, economic and cultural context—a context that is centred on Western global efforts and assumptions about the universality (and superiority) of Western values.<sup>52</sup> 'Sinologism is an integral part of West-initiated globalism [and] came into being as a result of Western efforts to bring China into a West-centred world and knowledge system'.<sup>53</sup> With the 1949 establishment of the People's Republic of China, sinologism became more politicised and ideologically-informed. These views are present in what Mayer refers to as 'digital orientalism' to refer to the perception of China's rise as a technological power to be a threat, overlooking any positive contributions or areas of commonality with the West.<sup>54</sup> Huawei's identity as a Chinese MNE has been bound with this narrative of China as a rising power and both an ideological and technological threat.<sup>55</sup> As Liu argues, 'Huawei represents how China as a rising power is perceived: as an ideological entity of "red" China or a red threat to hegemony in the eyes of the U.S'.<sup>56</sup> Underpinning this narrative is the primacy of what are considered Western values in some of the discourses surrounding China and the recurring tropes of civilisation versus barbarism seen in the rhetoric promoted by former US President Donald Trump and repeated references to COVID-19 as the 'China-virus',<sup>57</sup> his trade war with China and references to the 'theft' and 'rape' of America.<sup>58</sup> While these may appear as more extreme sentiments, they are rooted in a political sinologism that reinforces the civilisation/barbarism dichotomy that pits a liberal West against a 'backward' and 'authoritarian' China.

Focusing on the discourses surrounding Trump's trade war with China, Zhang identifies four aspects to the narratives on China as barbarian in its economic practices: as trade cheat, intellectual property thief,

<sup>47</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the role of the media in the negative framing of China and influencing of British policy, see Tim Summers, 'Shaping the Policy Debate: How does the British Media Present China?' Lau China Institute (2023) 08 China in the World Policy Series <kcl.ac.uk/lci/assets/2024/british-media-china.pdf> accessed 13 July 2024,

<sup>48</sup>Meng Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>49</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

<sup>50</sup>Ning Zhou, 'Sinologism: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge' (2018) 49 *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 7.

<sup>51</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>Gu (2013).

<sup>53</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 73.

<sup>54</sup>Maximilian Mayer, 'China's Authoritarian Internet and Digital Orientalism' in *Redesigning Organizations: Concepts for the Connected Society*, ed. Denise Feldner (Luzern: Springer Nature, 2020) 177–192.

<sup>55</sup>Mascitelli and Chung (2019); Xin Liu (2021).

<sup>56</sup>Xin Liu (2021), 382.

<sup>57</sup>Bruna A. Gonçalves, 'Readings of the Coloniality of Power in the COVID-19 Global Dynamics: A brief Reflection on Global South's Socio-political Locations' (2021) 4 *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*.

<sup>58</sup>Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, 'More Pain than Gain: How the US-China Trade War Hurt America' *Brookings* (7 August 2020) <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/07/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america>> accessed 23 February 2022.



hacker (cyberespionage) and ‘villain’.<sup>59</sup> He highlights that framing China as barbarian justifies the ‘barbarian’ tactics used by the West and serves to legitimize attacks on Huawei. He breaks down the discursive practices on Huawei further as a national security threat with links to the Chinese state security and military, tied to the Communist Party of China that has actively sought to develop closer links between state and business enterprises, and beholden to the Chinese government. Some of this framing is evident in the UK and this article examines the narrative shifts on Huawei in UK parliamentary debates to consider the ways in which the discourse on Huawei is shaped by a political sinologism, that is, constructing a body of knowledge to contribute to a view of China in order to advance a political narrative. We situate the debate on Huawei and 5G within the geopolitical context of UK relations with the US. In research on Huawei and its interactions with the West there is a broad general agreement that the geopolitical context is central to understanding Huawei’s current conflict with the US and its allies.<sup>60</sup> Changing perceptions towards China in the UK have also been documented, particularly in 2020, the year in which the decision to remove Huawei was taken.<sup>61</sup> In this study we seek to tie this geopolitical context more concretely to the sinologism narrative that has emerged on Huawei to show how the two are instrumental; sinologism needs the geopolitical just as much as geopolitical conflict is sustained by sinologism.

We adopt a narrative analysis of parliamentary debates on Huawei and contextualise them against the backdrop of Conservative Party politics and the broader geopolitical sphere. We examined parliamentary debates, searching for all transcripts held in the Hansard online parliamentary database containing the word ‘Huawei’ from the first mention in 2011 up to July 2020, when the decision was taken to remove Huawei. The original sample of 102, was narrowed to 26 debates in the House of Commons in order to focus on where government sits and greater legislative power rests (Table 1). Single references to Huawei

**Table 1.** List of parliamentary debates

Date	Parliament Debate	Word Count
12/09/2012	Engagements	5416
19/11/2013	UK Relations with China	11764
4/03/2014	Defence and Cyber-security	19377
24/04/2019	Cyber-security	611
24/04/2019	Engagements	7189
25/04/2019	UK Telecoms: Huawei	6779
02/05/2019	National Security Council Leak	7858
07/05/2019	China: UK policy	11988
25/06/2019	US-UK Special Relationship	276
22/07/2019	Telecoms Supply Chain Review	5845
28/10/2019	Shared Rural Network	8107
13/01/2020	Britain in the World	51467
27/01/2020	5G and Huawei	7414
28/01/2020	UK Telecommunications	10224
29/01/2020	Engagements	5419
30/01/2020	Global Britain	43711
05/02/2020	Engagements	4826
13/02/2020	Topical Questions	1543
04/03/2020	Huawei and 5G	14606
04/03/2020	Defence Relationship: South East Asia	444
10/03/2020	Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill	22249
29/06/2020	Xinjiang Uyghurs	7469
01/07/2020	Hong Kong National Security Legislation	11795
14/07/2020	UK Telecommunications	10546

<sup>59</sup>Yongjin Zhang, ‘“Barbarising” China in American Trade War Discourse: The Assault on Huawei’ (2021) 42 *Third World Quarterly* 1443–44.

<sup>60</sup>Yun Wen, *The Huawei Model: The Rise of China’s Technology Giant* (University of Illinois Press, 2020), online edition <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctv19wx7rm>.

<sup>61</sup>Tim Summers, Hiu Man Chan, Peter Gries and Richard Turcsanyi, ‘Worsening British Views of China in 2020: Evidence from Public Opinion, Parliament, and the Media’ (2022) 20 *Asia-Europe Journal* 173–194.

were excluded if they were not part of a broader discussion on Huawei as they were more indicative of an MP taking advantage of a platform to introduce the topic of Huawei in order to promote their own political interests.<sup>62</sup> The final sample totalled 24 transcripts of 276,923 words and 466 utterances from 107 MPs.

We defined an utterance as a single sustained commentary regarding Huawei on a particular theme. We adopted a qualitative thematic analysis to identify major common themes. Coding was carried out independently by the authors, with any differences negotiated until a resolution was agreed. We converged on four themes, initially adopting a deductive approach drawn from the historical narrative above, starting with the theme of Huawei as a national security threat, including trust and Huawei as a spy for China. Related to national security, ‘allies’ emerged as a separate theme with the call to work with UK allies in the UK response to Huawei. Connected to allies was the theme of shared ‘values’ that include sub-themes of liberal democracy and free trade. A fourth theme that emerged was that of ‘innovation and collaboration’, which surfaced as an early theme from the first mentions of Huawei (Figure 1). Coding was based on the overall emphasis of the theme. For example, ‘trust’ was coded as ‘national security’ if it was related to Huawei as linked to the Chinese state but was coded as ‘values’ if it was linked to the idea of Huawei as a trade cheat undermining free trade. The sentiment of MP utterances was also captured independently by the authors and was coded either ‘positive’, ‘negative’, or ‘neutral’. Of the total utterances coded, Conservative MPs accounted for 69%, Labour MPs 18% and those from other parties 13%. Of the pivotal debates surrounding Huawei from January 2020 until July 2020 when the decision was made to ban Huawei, of the total number of Conservative MPs,

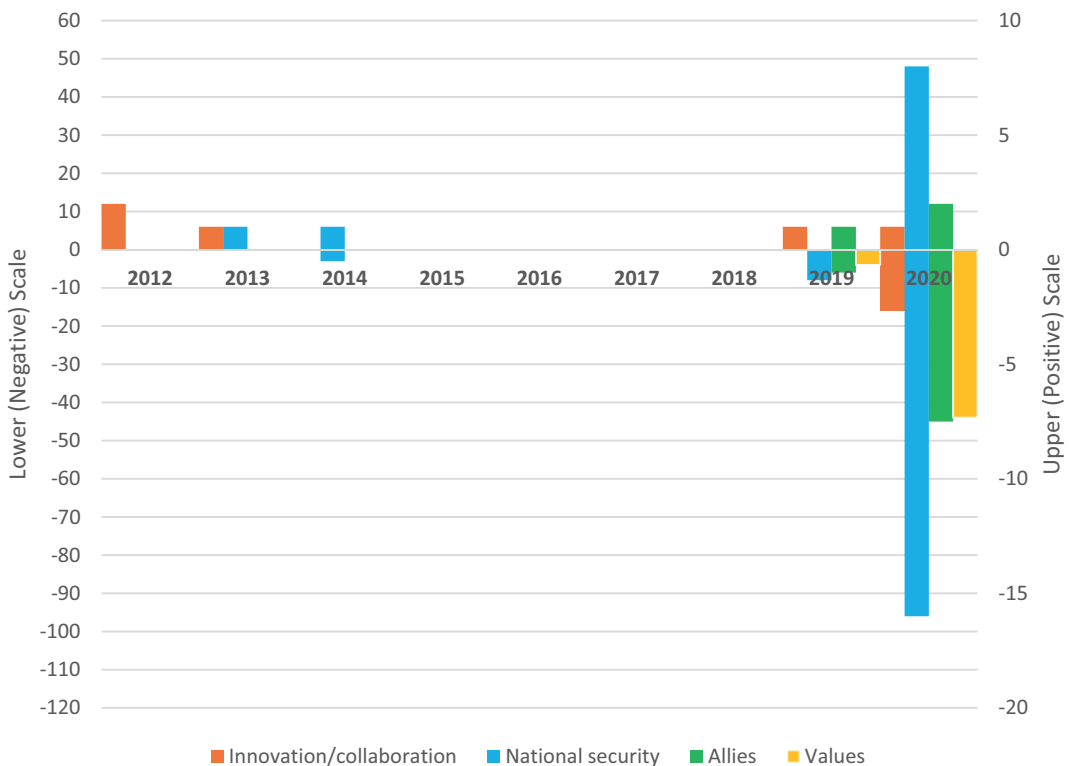


Figure 1. Conservative MP utterances by theme, sentiment and year.

<sup>62</sup>For example, in Business of the House (23 January 2020) there is one mention of Huawei calling for a parliamentary debate on Chinese high-tech and national infrastructure by prominent opponent to Huawei, Bob Seely MP.

ministers accounted for 16% indicating 84% were Conservative backbenchers. Overall across the entire period, 73% of utterances were negative, 7% positive and 20% were neutral. On closer examination neutral utterances were mostly made by government ministers, reflecting their ministerial roles and responsibility to outwardly promote a position that supports government policy. Of the negative utterances, 66% were from Conservative MPs, 20% from Labour MPs and 14% from other parties. While we coded utterances and sentiments of all MPs, our focus in the following discussion is on interventions by Conservative Party MPs who overwhelmingly dominated and drove the debates, as we are interested in the influences on the policy shifts of Conservative governments.

### *Innovation and Collaboration*

An early theme in the debates on Huawei is that of innovation and collaboration in 2012–2013, benefiting the UK, contributing to the country's leading role in technological development. Collaboration was particularly highlighted by then Prime Minister David Cameron in 2012 reflecting the 'Golden Era' of UK-China relations and the welcoming of Chinese investments including Huawei into the UK. Following a question from Conservative MP Steve Baker welcoming Huawei's investment in the UK leading to 700 jobs being created, Cameron responds:

I am delighted to say that I welcome the investment by Huawei and I met its founder and chairman yesterday at No. 10 Downing Street. It is a significant investment of £1.5 billion. I am afraid to tell my hon. Friend that some of the jobs are going to be created—I very much hope—in Banbury, next to my constituency, but with an investment of this scale I am sure that there will be opportunities around the rest of the country. The firm is coming here not for the weather, but because we have highly trained engineers, we have excellent universities, we have a leading role in the telecoms and mobile industries, and it thinks that this is a Government who are open to business.<sup>63</sup>

Huawei's identity as innovator and collaborator here is a key argument for Huawei presence in the UK, regarded as important to the UK's quest for advancing its own technological development and innovation. The theme of innovation and collaboration does not appear again until 2019, where it is directly questioned in order to undermine the view of Huawei as innovator. Here the relationship is articulated negatively as being one of dependency, rather than collaboration, and as critique of Huawei grows, so does questioning of its contribution to the UK and instead, Huawei is aiding UK technological decline. In the China-UK Policy (2019) parliamentary debate, reliance on Huawei works to hold back Western technological development.<sup>64</sup> Here Huawei serves China's Made In China policy, and there is the threat of China domination of cyber-space and contribution towards China's growing technological supremacy.<sup>65</sup> The UK needs to 'wean' itself off China and work with allies to catch up with Huawei,<sup>66</sup> and this narrative around dependency is likened to a drug dependency of which the UK is addicted as if to heroin.<sup>67</sup>

Huawei as a technological leader is still present in the 4 March 2020 debate on Huawei as expressed by former minister Jeremy Wright:

... Subject to our security requirements we should have the best equipment possible. This debate cannot ignore the fact that a great many people in the telecoms industry believe that Huawei equipment is not simply cheaper than its competitors, but better.<sup>68</sup>

However, this view is seen as misplaced and Huawei's technological authority is called into question by Iain Duncan Smith MP:

<sup>63</sup>Prime Minister David Cameron, Engagements (12 September 2012).

<sup>64</sup>Julia Lopez MP, China-UK Policy (7 May 2019).

<sup>65</sup>Bob Seely MP, Global Britain (30 January 2020).

<sup>66</sup>Tobias Ellwood MP, Global Britain (30 January 2020).

<sup>67</sup>Iain Duncan Smith MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>68</sup>Jeremy Wright MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

Far from Huawei having some insurmountable technological lead, it seems, when one starts to investigate, that the quality of its work is no better than anybody else's, and in some cases somewhat worse ... We need to take stock of this nonsense propaganda that Huawei is light years ahead as an organisation.<sup>69</sup>

These interventions reflect what Calcara has observed as the divide between the role of industry experts and government critics in the development of policy surrounding Huawei with the increased politicisation of technology and telecoms.<sup>70</sup> Challenging Huawei as innovator contests arguments that promote collaboration with the firm, arguing that it is not advantageous to the UK; the limited benefits are outweighed by security issues and promote a dependency on Huawei whose technical superiority is overstated. This is evidenced in the debates leading to the National Security Council leak and the growing pressures on the May government to remove Huawei from the UK network ahead of the larger debates before its ban. Both viewpoints, while outwardly in conflict with one another, sustain notions of Western superiority: Huawei as innovator and collaborator is framed as serving the UK in its drive to develop world-class technology and a belief in the UK's standing as a technological leader while arguments about Huawei's lack of real capabilities reinforce rhetoric of inferior Chinese production.

### **National Security**

Related to the contestation of Huawei as technological innovator are security concerns; according to this argument, the poor quality of Huawei's technology leaves it more vulnerable to cyber-attack. In the debates, Huawei's ongoing cooperation with the British intelligence agency GCHQ is little discussed, beyond an early reference in 2013<sup>71</sup> and a 2014 suggestion that claims of Huawei serving as an agent for the Chinese state is exaggerated:

... Huawei is a major employer in the United Kingdom and is a multi-billion pound multinational company. The suggestion that it is, in some way or another, an agent or a foreign force in the way he [Bob Stewart Con MP] describes may of course be true, but it is worth saying that there is no evidence that this is the case.<sup>72</sup>

National security is also invoked within a trope of war that resurfaces in later debates, with computer hacking referred to as more deadly than a gun, and reference to Prussian general Von Clausewitz citing war as an extension of politics.<sup>73</sup> As this narrative develops, Huawei is presented as one with the Chinese state and embedding itself in UK networks to spy for China. Preoccupations with national security increased following China's enactment of the 2017 National Intelligence Law requiring organisations to hand over information to Chinese intelligence officials on request, despite similar legislation existing in Five Eyes countries.<sup>74</sup> Government legislation allows for the existence of hidden backdoors in the software in order to allow intelligence sharing agencies of Five Eyes networks to access network data for security and law enforcement purposes.<sup>75</sup> In response, both Huawei and the Chinese government stated that Huawei is bound by the laws of the countries in which it operates<sup>76</sup> and Ren Zhengfei has insisted that he has never been asked to hand over any customer data or information and would refuse if requested, even at the cost of closure.<sup>77</sup>

The theme of national security gains traction in 2019 and Huawei's ownership structure is questioned, asserting that it is not a truly private company because of its close relationship to the

<sup>69</sup>Iain Duncan Smith MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>70</sup>Calcara (2020).

<sup>71</sup>Mark Simmonds MP, UK Relations with China (19 November 2013).

<sup>72</sup>James Gray MP, Defence and Cyber-security (4 March 2014).

<sup>73</sup>Bob Stewart MP, Defence and Cyber-security (4 March 2014).

<sup>74</sup>MJ Masoodi and Alexander Rand, 'Why Canada Must Defend Encryption' *Policy Brief, Cyber Secure Policy Exchange* (2021) <<https://www.cybersecurepolicy.ca/policy-brief-encryption>> accessed 8 December 2022.

<sup>75</sup>Hawes (2022).

<sup>76</sup>Yuan Yang, 'Is Huawei Compelled by Chinese Law to Help with Espionage?' *The Financial Times* (5 March 2019) <<https://www.ft.com/content/282f8ca0-3be6-11e9-b72b-2c7f526ca5d0>> accessed 15 September 2022.

<sup>77</sup>Dan Sabbagh, 'Huawei "Prepared to Sign No-spy Agreement with UK Government"' *The Guardian* (14 May 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/may/14/huawei-founder-shut-down-china-eavesdrop>> accessed 10 December 2022.

state.<sup>78</sup> Once installed in the network, Huawei's presence will be difficult to remove and any decision could 'nest a dragon' in the UK's critical infrastructure.<sup>79</sup> Allowing Huawei access to UK networks is likened to 'giving the burglar the keys to our house'.<sup>80</sup> Huawei and the Chinese state are presented as the same, and this theme is also framed within a wider context of being at cyber-war with a totalitarian China; permitting Huawei to develop 5G in the UK is compared with allowing a Nazi company to operate British radar systems in 1939.<sup>81</sup> Contrasting concerns over Huawei as a national security risk, the head of the NCSC declared in 2019 that the UK 'regime is arguably the toughest and most rigorous oversight regime in the world for Huawei'.<sup>82</sup> Some Conservative MPs - Richard Graham and Ruth Edwards as well as former minister Jeremy Wright - still questioned claims of national security breaches, citing intelligence and industry experts. In the March 2020 debate on Huawei, Ruth Edwards MP argues:

The National Cyber Security Centre, my former employer BT and many other telcos have all been very clear that they have not previously detected attempts at malicious activity by Huawei. If they had, they would hardly be doing business with them for their 5G networks.<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, as late as September 2020, the HCSEC stated in its annual report that despite vulnerabilities, there was no evidence of Chinese state interference; 5G's weak core was a feature of all 5G providers.<sup>84</sup> It is notable that in the national security theme, there is a reliance on recurring figures, namely the head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Mike Burgess, and the former Head of British Secret Intelligence (MI6), Richard Dearlove; Dearlove appears five times across four debates and Australian intelligence is referred to eight times across six debates. The authority of both is emphasised in the debates although neither could be regarded as independent experts. Burgess was at the July 2018 Five Eyes meeting that agreed a campaign to block Huawei from their networks, with the UK considered the most problematic<sup>85</sup> and the Australian government banned Huawei from its 5G network in August 2018, with Burgess recommending its exclusion as a high-risk vendor.<sup>86</sup> Dearlove, Head of MI6 (1999-May 2004) had been singled out in the Chilcott inquiry into the Iraq War for exaggerating the security threat posed by Iraq and its supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction; he was rebuked for over-reliance on a source that appeared to have lied or had referred to non-existent sources.<sup>87</sup> At the time of the debates, Dearlove was no longer with MI6 and had written the foreword to a report on China authored by Bob Seely MP and had claimed COVID-19 originated from a Wuhan lab.<sup>88</sup> The national security theme surfaces throughout the House of Commons debates (Figure 1) and despite competing narratives surrounding Huawei as a security risk, negative utterances increase greatly in volume and dominate later debates. These at

<sup>78</sup>Bob Seely MP, National Security Council Leak (2 May 2019).

<sup>79</sup>Tom Tugendhat MP, 5G Network and Huawei (27 January 2020).

<sup>80</sup>Bob Seely MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>81</sup>Iain Duncan Smith MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>82</sup>Jack Stubbs and Foo Yun Chee, 'Britain Managing Huawei Risks, Has No Evidence of Spying: Official' *Reuters* (20 February 2019) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/britain-managing-huawei-risks-has-no-evidence-of-spying-official-idUSKCN1Q920L/#:~:text=Britain%20is%20able%20to%20manage%20the%20security%20risks,back%20against%20U.S.%20allegations%20of%20Chinese%20state%20spying>> accessed 23 June 2022.

<sup>83</sup>Ruth Edwards MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>84</sup>See the conclusion of the HCSEC Oversight Board report (2020).

<sup>85</sup>Chris Uhlmann and Angus Grigg, 'How the "Five Eyes" Cooked up the Campaign to Kill Huawei' *Sydney Morning Herald* (13 December 2018) <<https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/how-the-five-eyes-cooked-up-the-campaign-to-kill-huawei-20181213-p50m24.html>> accessed 5 August 2022.

<sup>86</sup>Gareth Hutchens, 'Huawei Poses Security Threat to Australia's Infrastructure, Spy Chief Says' *The Guardian* (30 October 2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/oct/30/huawei-poses-security-threat-to-australias-infrastructure-spy-chief-says>> accessed 18 December 2022.

<sup>87</sup>Committee of Privy Counsellors, (2016).

<sup>88</sup>Bill Gardner, 'Coronavirus Began "as an accident" in Chinese Lab, Says Former MI6 Boss' *The Telegraph* (3 June 2020) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/03/exclusive-coronavirus-began-accident-disease-escaped-chinese/>> accessed 2 September 2022; Bob Seely, Peter Varnish, and John Hemmings, 'Defending our data: Huawei, 5G and the Five Eyes' *Henry Jackson Society* (16 May 2019) <<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/defendingourdata>> accessed 24 June 2022.

times counter opinions of UK intelligence agencies and technology leaders, deploying their own experts to lend authority to the narrative of Huawei as a national security threat.

### Allies

The continued partnership with Huawei and risks to UK national security are viewed by MPs as undermining UK relations with its allies and leading to their loss of trust in the UK. The debate surrounding Huawei was exacerbated by the internal Conservative Party divide particularly during the post-Brexit May and Johnson premierships, which intensified in the period leading towards the formal departure from the EU on 31 January 2020. While outwardly May's government sought to build trade relations with China following Brexit, apprehension towards China as a threat grew, amidst a growing sense of pressure following the Five Eyes' actions towards Huawei, in particular from the US, and then Australia. May's Conservative government had pursued a more independent position from the US on China and Huawei than other Five Eyes allies, echoed in the debate on the National Security Council leak on 2 May 2019:

Of course the Five Eyes are our most important allies, and we have to do everything we can to reassure them, but we are a sovereign country, and we have our own unique circumstances and our own more nuanced position with Beijing.<sup>89</sup>

Uses of 'sovereign' to describe the UK is resonant of language adopted during the campaign to leave the EU, and the post-referendum context is used to justify an independent approach. Moreover, as late as August 2019 Boris Johnson had called for the removal of US tariffs on China.<sup>90</sup> Even after Pompeo's meetings with Johnson in January and July 2020, where he pressed the UK to back the US position,<sup>91</sup> more moderate voices in the debates, such as Crispin Blunt MP, continued to push for a more cautious response to the US:

Will he [Matt Warman Con Minister] also confirm that unless the Americans can make a legitimate security case, we should quietly ignore their current public position that thinly disguises a protectionist trade position built on supposition, and proceed on the evidence? We should also gently let our American friends know that we are not leaving one dependent economic relationship on Friday to immediately enter another.<sup>92</sup>

At the same time, post-Brexit UK is also invoked to reinforce the need to build relationships with traditional allies, which a continued relationship with Huawei threatens to derail:

As the UK leaves the EU, we desperately seek our friends and allies to make a good trade deal. As I understand it, the US is now thinking not to sign up to a trade deal if 5G is linked to any part of it.<sup>93</sup>

Maintaining a relationship with Huawei, Iain Duncan Smith MP argues, risks isolating Britain from its allies:

There is no question that the US Administration are very exercised by the UK's decision to go ahead with 5G and Huawei. In fact, I cannot think of any other time when we have been so separated from most of our allies that we respect.<sup>94</sup>

There is explicit reference to China as a geostrategic power and the 'foreign policy implications' of UK actions.<sup>95</sup> While Huawei as national security threat is still a concern, this is inextricably bound with notions of assisting and working with the UK's allies. These later debates and differences over how to respond to Huawei reflect the Conservative Party's shifting policy towards China following Brexit and

<sup>89</sup>James Cartlidge MP, National Security Council Leak (2 May 2019).

<sup>90</sup>Heather Stewart, 'Boris Johnson Calls for Removal of US-China Trade Tariffs' *The Guardian* (24 August 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/aug/24/boris-johnson-calls-for-removal-of-us-china-trade-tariffs>> accessed 16 July 2022.

<sup>91</sup>Toby Helm, 'Pressure from Trump Led to 5G Ban, Britain Tells Huawei' *The Guardian* (18 July 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jul/18/pressure-from-trump-led-to-5g-ban-britain-tells-huawei>> accessed 7 March 2022.

<sup>92</sup>Crispin Blunt MP, 5G Network and Huawei (27 January, 2020).

<sup>93</sup>Richard Drax MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>94</sup>Iain Duncan Smith MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>95</sup>David Davis MP and Tom Tugendhat MP, Huawei and 5G (March 4, 2020).



also reveal an inner conflict within the Party surrounding the UK's identity in the emergence of a 'Global Britain'. Set out at the Conservative Party conference in 2018, Global Britain has become a vision of post-Brexit foreign policy and forms part of what Turner argues is a narrative of empire born out of the 'domestic trauma' following Brexit and the UK's place in the world.<sup>96</sup> This trauma is played out in the Huawei debates; on the one hand, the UK is in control and advancing its own independent course seeking trade opportunities with China, while on the other, it is tied to a foreign policy narrative to prioritise working alongside Western allies. The tension between advancing economic interests versus diplomatic and military interests is evident in this theme. Ultimately, it was the allies that influenced the decision, with the UK government privately admitting that the ban was due to geopolitical reasons following direct pressure from Donald Trump.<sup>97</sup>

## Values

Related to the development of a common approach to Huawei with the UK's allies is the theme of shared democratic values of the Five Eyes, which gained momentum complementing fears over national security and support for allies. As Iain Duncan Smith MP states:

After all, this totalitarian regime is not an ally of ours, and we get confused about that at times, even if the Foreign Office is reluctant to admit that China poses a threat to us, for fear of upsetting the Chinese Government. That threat is not just in its cyber-attacks on our systems, but also in the way in which it does not obey the international rules-based order in trade.<sup>98</sup>

The narrative of dependency on Huawei is also tied in with values in the repeated references to Huawei not being a private company but instead heavily directed by the Chinese state or as being subject to Chinese state directives. Here, Huawei is presented as engaging in unfair practices against democratic values of free trade. In a series of interventions, Bob Seely MP highlights the ways in which Huawei undermines diversity in order to further dependency on China, which it is able to do through access to cheap loans via the China Development Bank and is effectively 'bankrolled by the Chinese state'.<sup>99</sup>

Another sub-theme in values is human rights, which increasingly come to the fore in the lead-up to the decision on the Huawei ban with debates dedicated to the Uyghurs and Hong Kong Security legislation. There is a shift in focus to allegations of Huawei's role in enabling human rights violations through building surveillance systems that enable state repression in Xinjiang and China and bearing different ethical standards to those held in the UK. Concern for human rights during the Hong Kong protests and the passing of the Hong Kong National Security Law in June 2020 allowing Hong Kong dissidents to be tried in China, bleed into discussions on Huawei, highlighting the shift towards an emphasis on values. Recurring mentions of the plight of the Uyghurs and Hong Kong human rights are effective in building a broader consensus on Huawei among Conservative MPs and in this way, the UK is a protector of democratic values upholding human rights rather than follower of a US directive.

The appeal to shared values also garners greater cross-party backing whereby interventions on themes of values are higher, consistent with Summers et al.'s findings on the differing preoccupations regarding China held by UK parliamentary parties.<sup>100</sup> These values are underpinned by the contrast between notions of democratic societies and authoritarianism. The recourse to a 'rules-based order' is referenced and in an extended speech, Tom Tugendhat MP invokes Brexit arguing the importance of cultural code:

<sup>96</sup>Oliver Turner, 'Global Britain and the Narrative of Empire' (2019) 90 *The Political Quarterly* 727.

<sup>97</sup>Helm (2020).

<sup>98</sup>Iain Duncan Smith MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>99</sup>Bob Seely MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>100</sup>Summers et al. (2022). Labour's interventions and negative associations with China were greater for human rights. Another debate not addressed in the present study: China's policy on its Uyghur population 11 March 2020 had two Labour MPs and one DUP MP contribute towards it, and no Conservative contributions.

Just as we write laws in this place to shape the culture of society we shape the culture of our systems by writing code. The code that is being written today in places like Shenzhen is going to shape the culture of our communication systems and the way in which they act together ...the real decision for us is not just 'What are we looking at today in our 5G network, and how much influence will it have on the systems that we seek to operate now and in the immediate future?' but 'What cultural norms are we embedding into our society that will shape the concepts of liberty and individuality' – concepts that I thought we held dear? ... I fail to understand why government from Beijing is better than government from Brussels, or why cultural norms set in a collectivised state are better than those that arise among democracies with which at least, we share values.<sup>101</sup>

The 'cultural code' referred to is bound with UK values and in this configuration, Huawei is conflated with China and presents a threat to UK cultural norms and order. This view complements preoccupations in a post-Brexit Global Britain that is increasingly about Britain's place in the world.<sup>102</sup> There is no question of where the UK stands in the rules-based order, nor the cultural norms being referred to; the inherent understanding is that these are clearly based on a shared notion of morally superior Western values—values which China does not share. This fits with the evolution of a rules-based narrative in international relations that contributes to the underlying assumption that China does not play by the rules.<sup>103</sup> However as Walt notes, central to conceptualising a rules-based order is 'who gets to write the codes'<sup>104</sup> and elision of China's views.<sup>105</sup> This resonates with Gu's conceptualisation of sinologism as 'characterised by a refusal or reluctance to engage things Chinese on their own terms'.<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

This study of the UK parliamentary debates on Huawei shows the ways in which the UK government's policy towards Huawei is bound with the wider geopolitical context of fears of a rising technological China and the external pressures of the US to maintain political and economic hegemony.<sup>107</sup> A sinologism reading of the debates affords an understanding of the political underpinning of the narrative shifts on Huawei that correspond to a broader framing of China to promote negative views of China.<sup>108</sup> While Gu's conceptualisation of sinologism pre-dates modern-day China, sinologism has intensified alongside unease of China as a rising power, presenting a challenge to US hegemony. Sinologism draws attention to how knowledge about China is constructed through a Western lens to reinforce Western dominance and elide alternative views, evident in our analysis of the parliamentary debates on Huawei. There is a concerted effort to build a negative narrative on Huawei and promote a broader singular narrative on China. Where previously the UK had attempted to adopt a nuanced strategy towards Huawei, a consequence of its initial favourable position towards China, the Huawei ban was part of a wider initiative to contain China's technological advancement and reassert Western political and economic interests. These shifts were made possible through internal pressures from within the Conservative Party, part of an attempt to assert a more negative approach towards China by a select group of MPs, amidst a backdrop of Brexit and changes within the Party towards a more sceptical stance towards China.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>101</sup>Tom Tugendhat MP, Huawei and 5G (4 March 2020).

<sup>102</sup>Summers (2021); Tim Summers, 'Imagining Brexit: The UK's China Policy After the Referendum' in *A New Beginning or More of the Same? The European Union and East Asia After Brexit*, eds. Michael Reilly and Chun Yee Lee (Singapore: Springer, 2021, 101); Turner (2019).

<sup>103</sup>Stephen M. Walt, 'China Wants a Rules-Based International Order, Too' *Foreign Policy* (31 March 2021) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/>> accessed 20 December 2022.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

<sup>105</sup>Melissa Conley-Tyler, 'China's Views on International Order' *Asia Link* (9 October 2019) <<https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/asialink-dialogues-and-applied-research/commentary-and-analysis/chinas-views-on-international-order>> accessed 22 December 2022.

<sup>106</sup>Gu (2013) 108.

<sup>107</sup>Tang (2020); Zhang (2023).

<sup>108</sup>Liu (2021).

<sup>109</sup>Leoni (2022).

The four themes of innovation, national security, allies and values draw on a language of war, human rights and subterfuge to promote a narrative on Huawei that manifests the authority of the UK and disparages China. Huawei as tech innovator is undermined by arguments surrounding Chinese low-quality and the dependency on Huawei inhibits the UK's technological advancement. Huawei as security threat sees Huawei as synonymous with China, in the service of the state against UK interests. Concerns with national security are intertwined with support for allies' actions, and gain momentum alongside US developments in particular, and pressures to pursue a common approach towards Huawei and China.<sup>110</sup> Finally, the notion of superior values comes to the fore and appeals to a higher moral standing of the UK whereby Huawei undermines free trade and is complicit in Chinese human rights abuses. These superior values are presented as embedded in the rules-based order in which China is not a participant.<sup>111</sup> Even where there is support for an independent position, this is shrouded in the wider debates surrounding the UK's decision to leave the EU and promotion of a vision of the UK as a global leader, and advocates for collaboration with Huawei contribute to a sinologistic outlook of UK superiority as a tech leader in its partnership with Huawei. Where Huawei as security threat is regarded as exaggerated, this is premised on a perception of the relationship based on containment, with the UK in control.

A sinologism reading of the UK parliamentary debates on Huawei demonstrates the concerted effort to build a negative narrative on Huawei, establishing authority based on selected testimonies and texts to contribute to a broader construction of knowledge about China. This narrative is sustained by a focus on ideological difference that draws on Huawei's relationship with the state, against a liberal West. The narrative shifts reveal the UK changing relationship towards China that corresponds to its own identity as an ally of the US with shared interests. Taken together, these themes contribute to the emergence of an overarching narrative that reveals the way in which political sinologism is pervasive in crafting the UK government's approach towards Huawei.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

---

<sup>110</sup>Xu and Rees (2021).

<sup>111</sup>Walt (2021).