

The Exchange



Are the British or Chinese more cunning?

Kishore Mahbubani [Author alerts](#)  Oct 29 01:00 17 comments



President Xi Jinping travels in style with Queen Elizabeth © Getty Images

Many Asians are puzzled. How can the British and Chinese governments announce a new “golden era” in their relations? The Chinese have long historical memories. How could they have forgotten that Britain was the first western power to humiliate China in the Opium War of 1842? Or that the British, in an act of vandalism comparable to the destruction of Palmyra by the Islamist group Isis, burnt down the magnificent Summer Palace in Beijing in 1860?

The simple answer to this puzzlement is that the British and Chinese governments are two of the shrewdest geopolitical players in the world today. Both have carefully calculated that each will gain from this “golden era”. In theory, the British will gain more. Contrary to the ancient Chinese custom of receiving tribute from supplicant foreign envoys, it is the Chinese who have arrived in the UK with a lot of goodies. The British government has claimed that President Xi Jinping’s state visit last week saw “up to £30bn” worth of trade and investment deals completed, creating more than 3,900 jobs across the UK. London’s stature as a global financial centre is also being boosted as it becomes a bigger renminbi trader.

Of course, the British could pay a price with their chief ally, the US. Many American voices have complained about the British “kowtowing” to China. Having been a diplomat for over 30 years, I have no doubt that London would have prepared the ground with soothing, reassuring messages to Washington. No one will know the exact words they used. But I would not be surprised if the British did say, in private: “Trust us. We will be your Trojan horse. Everything we learn about China will be a gift to you.”

Yet, the Chinese may have gained as much as the British. The number one geopolitical priority of China is to avoid a direct contest with the US. Already, many influential American intellectuals have called on Washington to check China’s rise. But the American public has not bought this line yet. This is why the happy and smiling photographs of President Xi and Queen Elizabeth will matter a lot. These powerful public images of British-Chinese bonhomie will help to undercut the efforts of the US media to demonise China. With the

Germans and French rushing to compete with the British courtship of Beijing, America cannot be sure that a solid western phalanx will confront China if the Americans were to try a new Soviet-style containment policy against Beijing. In short, just as the British once created a great empire with a simple principle of divide and rule, China is doing the same.

In theory, the world should frown at such Machiavellian machinations. In practice, it should welcome them. The single biggest geopolitical challenge that the world faces is engineering the peaceful emergence of a new great power on the world stage. As Graham Allison has recently warned: “Based on the current trajectory, war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not.” However, if the British and Chinese succeed with their respective Machiavellian moves and end up creating a more stable and predictable world order that is devoid of conflict, the whole world should welcome this new “golden era” between the UK and China. It could also pave the way for a new “golden era” of a great convergence between the east and west.



President Xi enjoys a pint with Prime Minister David Cameron © Getty Images

Kishore Mahbubani is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. His latest book is ‘The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World’

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