

China's increasing influence in the Commonwealth of Nations

A triad of trade, diplomacy, and military relations

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Summary

- The People's Republic of China (PRC) have been engaging with developing Commonwealth economies, and their political systems, for several decades. This has risen dramatically in the last 10 years and has been especially evident across the Commonwealth nations in the Caribbean, Africa, and the South Pacific, and often at an increased pace to their non-Commonwealth regional partners.
- The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) model for achieving long-term influence within Commonwealth nations has been largely political and economic. Only recently in the last 10 years have these bilateral relationships spurned greater diplomatic and military advantages for Beijing.
- A majority of the Commonwealth nations across these three regions are increasingly becoming export-reliant on China, at the same time as accepting large high-interest loans by Chinese creditors for infrastructure programs under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), creating many instances of higher debt owed to Beijing than to any other bilateral creditors.
- This dual export and debt dependency has created systems of economic, and thus political and diplomatic, reliance on Beijing for many Commonwealth nations.
- In particular, China have exported more than 1.5 times the amount (measured in US\$) to African Commonwealth nations, than to non-Commonwealth African nations, between 2010-20.
- As a continent, Africa has increased Chinese imports by 176 per cent in that time; whilst the African Commonwealth nations increased Chinese imports by 269 per cent.
- During the same period, British exports to African Commonwealth nations have decreased on average by twenty one per cent. Whilst China witnessed over 200 per cent growth in exports in many Commonwealth African states between 2012-20, UK exports have largely declined, or at the very most risen only marginally.
- This disparity in trade has resulted in a UK trade deficit with African Commonwealth nations between 2012-21 of US\$65 billion, or an average per nation deficit of US\$3.25 billion. This is reduced to US\$250 million if the significant deficits with Nigeria and South Africa are discounted.
- Significant trade imbalances remain elsewhere. In the Caribbean, Chinese exports rose by an average of 72 per cent since 2012, whilst British exports rose by 21 per cent. In the South Pacific Chinese exports rose again by 235 per cent, whilst the UK experienced a 20 per cent reduction in exported goods.

- More recently, these systems of trade reliance and or dependency by African nations have resulted in an emergence of diplomatic leverage by China, witnessed at the multilateral level within international organisations like the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, where a majority of developing Commonwealth economies are consistently voting in line with the CCP's revisionist and norms-breaking international and domestic behaviours.
- Additionally, many emerging bilateral security relationships are emerging, as China attempts to exert greater influence within Commonwealth nations' communications systems and law enforcement practices. This has included a dramatic rise in Beijing training local police forces across many Commonwealth states, particularly in the South Pacific, and in Africa. Often this training includes ideological indoctrination and a heightened risk that these forces will return and demonstrate an erosion of democratic values.
- Similarly, many bilateral military partnerships have developed between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and local Commonwealth forces. Over the years, these have developed from high-level visits, to increasing Chinese arms sales and military aid, to joint military training and even joint operations.
- China are using many of these deployments to develop 'military operations other than war', in particular disaster relief and anti-piracy, which are used to develop the PLA's combat effectiveness and deployability. The ability to sustain these 'far seas' operations is also crucial for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to develop its blue water (globally deployable) capability.
- It is almost certain that the PLA will now establish a permanent military base in the Gulf of Guinea, on the Atlantic coast. There is a high likelihood that the host country will be a Commonwealth nation which, whilst maintaining strong defence links with the UK, has been increasingly export and debt reliant on China, whilst participating with the PLA in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Guinea. This eventuality will have significant security repercussions for both the UK and the US.

Recommendations

In order for the UK to realign its historic place within the Commonwealth of Nations, an all-of-government approach must be utilised, bringing together experts from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Department for International Trade (DIT), and the Ministry of Defence (MoD), to better unify a UK approach to re-establishing often neglected relations with our Commonwealth partners and allies. In particular, this is required if the UK is to offer an alternative approach than the one currently being exploited by China; one rooted in a lack of respect for the Commonwealth's values and goals, guided by the Singapore Declaration.

Specifically, the UK should seek to re-establish trading, diplomatic, and military relations with Commonwealth partners. These will not just help UK trade and national security interests, but help achieve the UK government's international development strategy, and better reinforce the Commonwealth's liberal values and goals – urgently required for the geopolitical battlegrounds of the coming decades as the international order shifts once more to an era of great power competition.

Trade relations

- Under the new Integrated Review (IR) 'refresh', likely published this spring, the UK government should set out the terms to bring to fruition the previous UK government's 'New Commonwealth Deal'. This should include measures such as expedited bilateral trade agreements with Commonwealth partners, with nations given access to a fast-track process to establish tailored, bilateral agreements. A provisional £9 billion annual fund was earmarked by the previous (Truss) UK government in order to help facilitate this; these funds should be made possible.
- Establish two new FCDO Trade Offices to help drive new export markets; one in Fiji to better coordinate UK trade flows across the South Pacific, and one in Guyana, the UK's largest trading partner in the Caribbean, to help better coordinate UK trade and export growth across the region.
- Create bilateral investment treaties (BIT) with Commonwealth partners with no advanced trading treaties, such as Free Trade Agreements (FTA) or even double tax treaties (DTT). BITs remain important, especially for investors from fragile economies with relatively immature tax laws and regulatory environments. Such treaties help to underpin the bilateral investment conditions needed to develop into more established trading agreements, by developing the reciprocal encouragement of investment, promotion, and investment protection mechanisms. The UK currently only has 20 such BITs in force with Commonwealth partners; Gambia and Zambia are two such nations which the UK should create BITs with. This would go some way to halt the increasing neo-mercantilist economic policies China have with both, which Beijing use as high export markets.

- The UK should double-down on trade agreements, whether they be FTAs for non-FTA nations, or BITs, with the following Commonwealth countries who are currently signed up to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in addition to DTTs with Beijing – these are some of the most economically vulnerable Commonwealth countries susceptible to malign Chinese economic policies: Barbados, Jamaica, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Seychelles, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, and Zambia, in addition to Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Diplomatic relations

- Re-establish the High Commission in Kiribati. The UK have gone without diplomatic relations in-country since the office in Tarawa was closed in 1994, with diplomatic relations coordinated out of the High Commission in Suva, Fiji. The requirement for improved and more effective UK consular services in Kiribati is particularly prudent considering increased Chinese military relations, and the potential for a Chinese military base to be established in the near future.
- Re-establish the British Embassy in Gabon. With the office in Libreville closed since 1991/92, UK trade and diplomatic relations have suffered since. This has helped allow increased Chinese economic and military influence in Gabon – located in the strategic Gulf of Guinea, an increasingly geostrategic location which the Chinese military are attempting to create a permanent presence in.

Military relations

- The UK Armed Forces are active across west and east Africa, and to some extent the South Pacific. The UK government's IR refresh should reconsider how best the armed forces can engage Commonwealth partners and allies in meaningful collaborations by:
 - Developing a platform for short-term training teams to the Caribbean nations, whilst sustaining the widespread humanitarian aid and disaster relief deployments across the region;
 - Reconfigure how best to redeploy British forces in west Africa once OP NEWCOMBE comes to an end in 2023. This will free up a Task Force's worth of personnel, who can redeploy to other areas of west Africa to help assist Commonwealth partners against terrorism, extremism, and improve human security;
 - Sustain military deployments to east Africa, especially Kenya, as China seeks an increasing role in this region. In particular, creating counter-piracy coalitions with both west and east African allies with Royal Navy and Royal Marines deployments would help reduce their security dependencies on China, whilst helping to improve their economies.

- The IR refresh needs to consider how to sustain the government's desired 'persistent presence' to the Indo-Pacific. A separate South Pacific strategy within this should detail how the UK can engage remote Commonwealth island nations in this region, to include disaster relief and military training to counter their dependency on China.
- Specifically, the UK needs to work with the governments of the Solomon Islands in particular, and increasingly Kiribati, to best ensure that their security frameworks with China do not supersede bilateral relations with the UK.
- As one of the world's emerging centres for geostrategy, the UK should use what influence it has remaining in the South Pacific to establish new security treaties with all Commonwealth partners to include docking rights for the Royal Navy, in line with the Five Powers Defence Arrangement that the UK maintains with Commonwealth nations across south east Asia. These usually relaxed and afforded courtesies are increasingly coming under uncertainty from Chinese influence, and have the potential to significantly, and adversely, affect the British military deployments which the IR established a long-term desire for.

Glossary

ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations

AU African Union

BIT Bilateral Investment Treaty

BRI Belt and Road Initiative

CANZUK Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom

CCP Chinese Communist Party

CPC Communist Party of China

DIT Department for International Trade

DTT Double Tax Treaty

EU European Union

FCDO Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office

FDI Foreign Direct Investment

FOCAC Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

FTA Free Trade Agreement

GBP Great British Pound

IR Integrated Review

MoD Ministry of Defence

MoU Memorandum of Understanding

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

ODA Overseas Development Assistance

PLA People's Liberation Army

PLAAF People's Liberation Army Air Force

PLAN People's Liberation Army Navy

PRC People's Republic of China

UN United Nations

1. Introduction

A 'New Commonwealth Deal' for Global Britain

In the run up to the September 2022 Conservative Party leadership contest, Liz Truss (then Foreign Secretary) proposed prioritising trade with Commonwealth nations and establishing a 'New Commonwealth Deal'. With an economic growth rate far outstripping the European Union (EU) (7.1 per cent¹ versus 1.6 per cent²), renewed British trade emphasis with the Commonwealth would not just serve as a means to boost post-Brexit export opportunities, but crucially, in order to counter China's 'grave threat to our values and way of life'.

UK trade with Commonwealth nations is one of the most important trading relationships the UK has, representing 120 billion GBP annually in bilateral trade – with 2021 recording a 4.5 billion GBP surplus for the UK economy.³ However, these figures miss crucial gaps in trading relations with some export markets, with 16 trade deficits reported in 2021 costing the UK billions, including a 3.7 billion GBP deficit with South Africa alone – whilst Chinese imports flood South African markets with a 41 per cent increase since 2012.

In its entirety the Commonwealth represented 10 per cent of UK exports in 2021, but draws 30 per cent of the global population, with a combined GDP of more than 16 trillion GBP. The UK trades as much with Germany, with a GDP of approximately 3.5 trillion GBP,⁴ as it does the entire Commonwealth.

Truss vowed to sign 'fast-track' trade deals with Commonwealth states if she succeeded Boris Johnson as prime minister, declaring that this would help Britain and other democracies to 'win the global struggle against authoritarians'.⁵

The 'New Commonwealth Deal' proposed by Truss aimed at maximising post-Brexit trade opportunities with Commonwealth allies, whilst simultaneously attempting to bring these nations politically and diplomatically back into the western liberal fold. Malign and authoritarian practices by Beijing have sought to increase Chinese influence across the Commonwealth in recent years, leveraging not just lucrative trade and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) opportunities for China, but increasingly crucial diplomatic support at the multilateral level. This has further led to sowing division within the global community, aimed at destabilising and ultimately surpassing the liberal democratic model of global governance in favour of a new authoritarian model suited for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

A continuation of the promotion of the inter-related ideals of trade, human rights, democracy and the Commonwealth of nations, soon followed from Liz Truss to her successor, Rishi Sunak. In the latter's first major foreign policy speech as Prime Minister on 28 November 2022, the British-Indian leader reflected upon his heritage and committed to

¹ Devonshire-Ellis, 2021.

² European Commission, 2022.

³ Ward, 2023. p.4.

⁴ [GDP \(current US\\$\) - Germany | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/ny/gdp/cd?locations=GB)

⁵ Zeffman, 2022.

promoting British values of ‘freedom and openness’ around the world. Values very much rooted in the Commonwealth charter, yet which are a threat to the closed, illiberal, and neomercantilist CCP.

Mr Sunak reiterated the UK's commitment to a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India as part of the country's wider focus on enhancing ties with the Indo-Pacific region, whilst stating that: ‘We will set out more detail in the updated Integrated Review in the new year... including how we'll work with friends in the Commonwealth’.⁶ He also pledged to ‘do things differently’ when it came to China, which he said poses a ‘systemic challenge’ to British values and interests.⁷

Though not as hawkish on China as his predecessor, there is a distinct commonality in the current prime minister wishing to reignite a prosperous economic, political, and diplomatic relationship between a Global Britain and her Commonwealth allies and partners, whilst attempting to counter Beijing's malign economic and political influences across free and democratic nations.

There is an argument to be made that whilst transitioning from a manufacturing-based economy to a services-based one, the UK has deprioritised trading and diplomatic relations with her Commonwealth allies over recent decades – particularly in favour of establishing closer ties with more developed economies across the Indo-Pacific, and even pursuing a disastrously strategically incoherent ‘Golden-Era’ of relations with China in the second decade of this century.⁸

This hypothesis of ‘Commonwealth neglect’ will be explored further with an analysis of official Department for International Trade figures examining British imports, exports and trade balances, over the last 10 years. The ‘Trade Relations’ section of this paper will consider how the UK's trading relations with Commonwealth nations has fared comparatively against China, comparing export growth markets for both in relation to one another, with trade balances determining favourable markets.

Xi Jinping's ‘community of common destiny’

This research is underpinned by an understanding of President Xi Jinping's ‘community of common destiny’ strategy. First discussed in public in Xi's 2017 speech at the 19th CCP National Congress,⁹ his vision for a community of common destiny departs significantly from previous Chinese premiere Deng Xiaoping's reform era dictum to ‘hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership’.¹⁰ Fast forward 20 years, and Xi's increased calls for Chinese global leadership would pave the way for new institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and new development programmes like the Belt and Road

⁶ [PM speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet: 28 November 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ [Joint press conference: David Cameron and President Xi Jinping - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹ [Opening ceremony of the 19th CPC National Congress – China.org.cn Live – Live updates on top news stories and major events](#)

¹⁰ [Deng Xiaoping's ‘24-Character Strategy’ \(globalsecurity.org\)](#)

Initiative (BRI), to build Xi's 'community of common destiny' into a reality for Xi's 'new era' of global leadership.

Set within Xi's 'community of common destiny', the CCP's development model for harnessing greater influence with the emerging economic and diplomatic spaces of the global south is Beijing's 'shared community with a common vision' strategy. China are attempting to unify developing nations under a PRC leadership of a shared collective grievance with the 'west' for past transgressions; in China's case, the so-called 'century of humiliation' between 1839 and 1949, and for the rest of the developing world its colonial past and the age of 'western imperialism'.

Despite the UK enforcing and upholding the abolition of slavery by use of force some two centuries ago, and with almost 4 million Chinese citizens currently living in conditions described as 'modern day slavery',¹¹ the CCP attempt to shape both their own struggle (for 'western' recognition, but more appropriately as global hegemony) with the post-colonial periods for many Commonwealth nations. President Xi Jinping has previously stated that 'China and Africa have forged unbreakable fraternity in our struggle against Imperialism and Colonialism'.¹²

The 'shared community' (of oppressed developing nations with China as its leader) 'with a common vision' (of a post-liberal world order rooted in Chinese-led authoritarian governance) can be readily evidenced in many CCP texts. Again, Xi himself makes no secret of this long-term geopolitical agenda, describing Sino-African relations as 'a new type of international relations'.¹³ In a 2022 essay Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Deng Li reiterated this point by describing a 'China-Africa community with a shared future in the new era'.¹⁴

The Singapore Declaration

The Commonwealth of Nations is a voluntary political association comprising 56 sovereign states. Many of these were British colonies or dependencies, but some, including Cameroon and Mozambique, had no such prior relations with Britain.

No one government in the Commonwealth exercises overall power, and as an international organisation with members from a broad range of social, political and economic backgrounds, all are regarded as equal in status. Cooperation is frame-worked within the Singapore Declaration (1971), which lays down common principles and values including the promotion of democracy, human rights, good governance, the rule of law, civil liberties, equality before the law, free trade, multilateralism, and world peace.¹⁵ Many of these values are promoted through multilateral projects and meetings, including the Commonwealth Games.

¹¹ [China | Global Slavery Index](#)

¹² Deng Li, 2022.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ [Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, 1971 | Commonwealth \(thecommonwealth.org\)](#)

Of the 56 member nations, 15 are Commonwealth realms, with the Head of the Commonwealth as their heads of state (King Charles III), whilst five others are monarchies with their own individual monarchs (Brunei, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malaysia and Tonga), with the rest republics. The latest republic, Barbados, broke from one of the Commonwealth realms in 2021 when the government, after reneging on a previous pledge to hold a referendum on the matter, became a republic amongst widespread socio-political movements, including support for the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign, and increasing influence from China.¹⁶

Indeed, whilst the Commonwealth continues to grow with new member nations Gabon and Togo admitted in 2022, and with more potential future applications (including Nepal, which shares close historical relations with Britain, and has particularly close military links with the Gurkhas serving in the British Army),¹⁷ there have been increasing threats to the Singapore Declaration's guiding principles, and liberal values.

These threats emanate from increasing Chinese influence in the economic, diplomacy, and military-security environments within Commonwealth nations. Almost half of China's Free Trade Agreements (FTA) are with Commonwealth nations, whilst 42 Commonwealth members (77 per cent) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with China for inclusion on Beijing's grand Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure project.¹⁸ Nearly two thirds of all bilateral debt owed by African countries is to Chinese creditors.

At the diplomatic level, China maintains significant trade surplus flows with the four Commonwealth nations which have consistently voted in Beijing's favour regarding human rights issues at the UN. As the largest group of nations in an international organisation that do not contain Russia or China, the Commonwealth has a unique role to play defending the very same liberal values which underpin its collective membership, and which China seeks to suppress. With over 30 per cent of votes at the UN general assembly, the Commonwealth has enormous diplomatic advantage, which China are harnessing to their benefit. This must be reversed going forwards.

Elsewhere the PLA are developing military relations with some of the most heavily indebted and trade-dependent Commonwealth nations, including on Africa's Atlantic coast, and in the increasingly strategic South Pacific. Here, potential new Chinese military bases, or at least basing and docking rights with vulnerable Commonwealth partners, threaten an escalation in geostrategic and military tensions with both the US and UK.

The recent social movements of the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign re-sparked political conversations regarding the role of the British-led Commonwealth. When combined with a shared grievance model and shared colonial victim narrative peddled by Beijing alongside high interest loans for infrastructure and increasingly security agreements, veiled under a cloak of a new model for global development which in reality incorporates authoritarian

¹⁶ Hardy, 2021.

¹⁷ [Nepal urged to join Commonwealth - The Himalayan Times - Nepal's No.1 English Daily Newspaper | Nepal News, Latest Politics, Business, World, Sports, Entertainment, Travel, Life Style News](#)

¹⁸ [Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\) – Green Finance & Development Center \(greenfdc.org\)](#)

governance practices, the CCP are well placed to continually influence the Commonwealth from within. It has been doing so across other international organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), in a bid to ultimately replace the existing rules-based global order for one which allows Beijing to become a global hegemonic and tyrannical power. Beijing sees the Commonwealth of Nations as merely another pawn to use in its long-term agenda for systemic manipulation and, ultimately, realignment.

This research highlights how this is made possible. Largely through a collective complacency by leading liberal powers, including the UK but also by the US, China have vastly deepened economic and trading ties with Commonwealth nations over the last decade. This has occurred whilst the liberal west were preoccupied fighting multiple counter-insurgencies, dealing with a global financial crash and an increasingly destabilising and unpredictable Russia on NATO and the EU's doorstep, a global health pandemic, several deep economic recessions, and a looming energy crisis. Given the UK monarch's position at the head of the Commonwealth, this paper makes the argument that the UK has a moral obligation to put right this complacency – particularly when the geopolitical stakes are so high.

Methodology

This paper examines three primary regions of the Commonwealth in its methodological enquires: Africa; the Caribbean; and the South Pacific. Largely, these are the three regions in which the majority of the Commonwealth's developing economies are located; liberal democracies, including Canada and Australia, oversee advanced economies and modern militaries, and are fully integrated into the US and UK-led security apparatus (CANZUK, Five Eyes) that is very mindful of Beijing's threats and challenges to the global order. As such, they are largely discounted from this research for their higher invulnerability to Chinese influence (though not completely, and are discussed periodically in this paper for broader context).

Whilst these countries, and others not largely discussed here, are still somewhat susceptible to China's influence in trade relations and diplomacy, ultimately the three distinct Commonwealth regions discussed in length in this paper are more vulnerable to malign Chinese influence, through less mature economies more agreeable to high-interest Chinese loans for sorely needed infrastructure projects, ultimately leading to debt-diplomacy, export reliance, and in some cases, political and even military capitulation by Beijing.

This paper first considers the role of trade by both China and the UK in respect of the three distinct Commonwealth regions. Here, UN COMTRADE figures are used to analyse export markets for both London and Beijing, how they compare, any growth or stagnation in recent years, and what can be learnt by these figures. These export figures only capture goods, not services. A further follow-up study to this research will analyse exports in services. As a once proud manufacturing nation, the UK must seek to develop these relations with Commonwealth partners for exporting manufactured goods – particularly post-Brexit.

Next, a focus on China's diplomatic relations with members from these regions, analysed specifically against several recent and important voting sessions at the multilateral level.

Here, we begin to see China's malign political influence transcending trading relations into bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relations, to great effect and advantage for the CCP.

Finally, an analysis of how recent security agreements and deepening military relations between China and Commonwealth nations are helping shape Beijing's aggressive foreign policy for this coming era of great power competition between liberal democracies and authoritarian aggressors who seek to supplant the rules-based order with their own revisionist global governance structures.

Throughout all these analytical aspects – trade, diplomacy, and the military-security environment – a Global Britain has a significant moral component to play by anchoring the Commonwealth nations, fundamentally rooted in liberal values, including democracy, respect for human rights, and free and fair assembly, in countering China's malign influence across these historic trading, political and diplomatic networks. This framework shapes the policy recommendations for the UK government which follows.

2. Trade relations

In the last two decades China has been leveraging far more significantly higher trade surpluses with Commonwealth nations than with either non-Commonwealth nations or the UK. Beijing has enjoyed increasingly higher export market growth across African Commonwealth nations than non-Commonwealth African nations, and at a far higher trade surplus than the UK maintains with the same countries. This is especially true between Commonwealth nations which share an FTA with China. In conjunction with this, African nations are paying back significantly more interest owed to Chinese creditors than to all other government creditors combined. The average interest rates owed to these Chinese creditors are over double the average interest rates owed on average to non-Chinese government creditors, with Commonwealth African nations particularly affected with heavy debt burdens to Beijing.

The nuanced relationships between bilateral trade, government owed debt and inter-government relationships at the multilateral level are complex and varied. A reductionist hypothesis grounded in a belief that the greater the export market and bilateral trade flows, combined with the heavier burdens of government owed debt to Beijing, leads to a favourable outcome for Beijing at the diplomatic level is, of course, difficult to wholly substantiate. However, there are compelling causal variables, further analysed in this and the following chapter, which help understand how long-term and targeted Chinese trading policies have led to consistent support at the multilateral level from many Commonwealth nations with developing economies, especially in Africa. These have been detrimental to the UK's interests and have restricted the liberal order from holding Beijing to account over multiple human rights abuses.

Figures for both the UK's trade statistics and those statistics for Chinese trade are primarily drawn from the UN COMTRADE database, unless separately referenced in footnotes. The figures include up to financial year 2020/21 and do not account for China's zero-Covid strategy which has affected Chinese manufacturing and exports throughout 2022 and in to 2023.

China's Free Trade Agreements

China maintains 17 Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with various global trading partners. These are: ASEAN, Australia, Cambodia, Chile, Costa Rica, Georgia, Hong Kong, Iceland, Macao, Maldives, Mauritius, New Zealand, Pakistan, Peru, Singapore, South Korea and Switzerland.¹⁹

Of these 14 states (ASEAN is a political and economic union; Hong Kong is a city and special administrative region of China; and Macao is an autonomous region of China), six are in the Commonwealth (Singapore, Pakistan, New Zealand, Maldives, Mauritius, Australia); 43 per cent of China's FTA with states are with Commonwealth members.

¹⁹ International Trade Administration, US Department of Commerce. [China - Trade Agreements](#)

Of these six, only three share an FTA with the UK: the developed economies of Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore.²⁰

It can be evidenced that, in comparison to Chinese FTAs with the above six Commonwealth nations, Beijing maintains a favourable trading relationship with the Maldives, Mauritius and Pakistan, having witnessed higher export growth than the UK. Conversely Beijing has experienced lower export growth in the more liberal economies of Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore, whilst the UK has experienced similar export growth in these markets as Maldives, Mauritius, and Pakistan.

China therefore is utilising greater trading power amongst Commonwealth nations which are developing economies which it shares an FTA with.

Table 2.1. Chinese FTA, UK trade balance.

Country	Chinese exports 2012-21 (pc increase)	UK exports 2012-21 (pc increase/decrease)
Maldives	436pc	+73pc
Mauritius	42pc	-33pc
Pakistan	161pc	+5pc
Australia	76pc	-17pc
New Zealand	122pc	+27pc
Singapore	35pc	+4pc

Source: UN COMTRADE.

Chinese exports to Africa

China have exported more than 1.5 times the amount (measured in US\$) to African Commonwealth nations than to non-Commonwealth African nations between 2010-20.²¹ As a continent, Africa has increased Chinese imports by 176 per cent in that time; the African Commonwealth nations have increased Chinese imports by 269 per cent during the same period.²²

The African Commonwealth nations which have witnessed the highest increase in Chinese imports between 2010-20 are: Cameroon (274 per cent); Ghana (250 per cent); Kenya (203 per cent); Mozambique (303 per cent); Rwanda (464 per cent); Seychelles (280 per cent); Sierra Leone (279 per cent); Uganda (307 per cent); and Tanzania (233 per cent). Gambia and Gabon, who have recently overwhelmingly voted at the UN in support of Chinese actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, experienced import growth levels of 101 per cent²³ and 186 per cent, respectively.

Appendix A has a full list of data for Chinese exports to Africa since 2010.

²⁰ [UK-Singapore Trade Agreement - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) [UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) [UK-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

²¹ [Data: China-Africa Trade — China Africa Research Initiative \(sais-cari.org\)](#) See Appendix A for full details.

²² See Reference A for all data regarding Africa's imports from China, all data from UN COMTRADE.

²³ Rounded up. See [Trade and Investment Factsheet \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

It can be evidenced that China use African Commonwealth nations as an export market, significantly more so than non-Commonwealth African nations, thus increasing African Commonwealth dependence on Chinese trade.

UK-Africa trade

Whilst China have reported significant export growth to African Commonwealth nations, at an average rise of 269 per cent since 2010 British exports to African Commonwealth nations since 2012 have decreased by, on average, 21 per cent. This is in contrast to British exports decreasing to non-Commonwealth African nations by an average of 32 per cent.²⁴

Between 2012 and 2021, the UK witnessed a trade balance (net exports in US\$ less net imports) of US\$9.4 billion deficit with non-Commonwealth African nations, compared with a US\$65 billion deficit with Commonwealth countries. Less Nigeria and South Africa, this deficit was US\$7 billion.

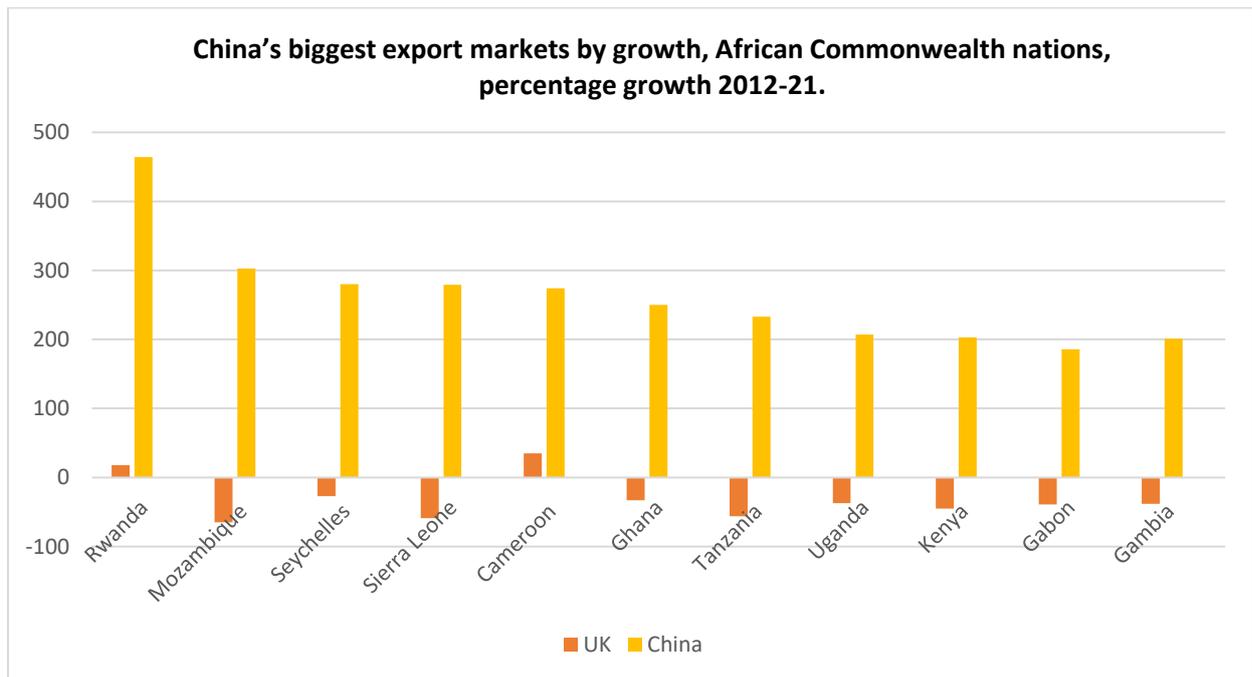
The UK is exporting significantly more to non-Commonwealth African nations than to Commonwealth African nations. China are exporting more than 1.5 times the amount to African Commonwealth states than to the rest of Africa, whilst the UK maintains a significant trade balance deficit with Commonwealth partners than with non-Commonwealth African states – largely due to its enormous deficits with both Nigeria and South Africa.

UK Exports to Africa

There has been a dramatic recent trend of overall declining numbers of UK exports, particularly amongst African Commonwealth nations. This is particularly evident compared against China's largest growing export markets. Figure 2.1 below highlights the significant gaps between China's fastest growing export markets in the African Commonwealth nations, and those that the UK has. In many of these export markets, whilst China is witnessing over 200 per cent growth in exports between 2012-20, UK exports have largely declined or, at the very least, risen only very marginally.

²⁴ See Appendix C and Appendix D for complete data sets. Some countries were discounted due to a lack of or incomplete official figures, including Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and South Sudan.

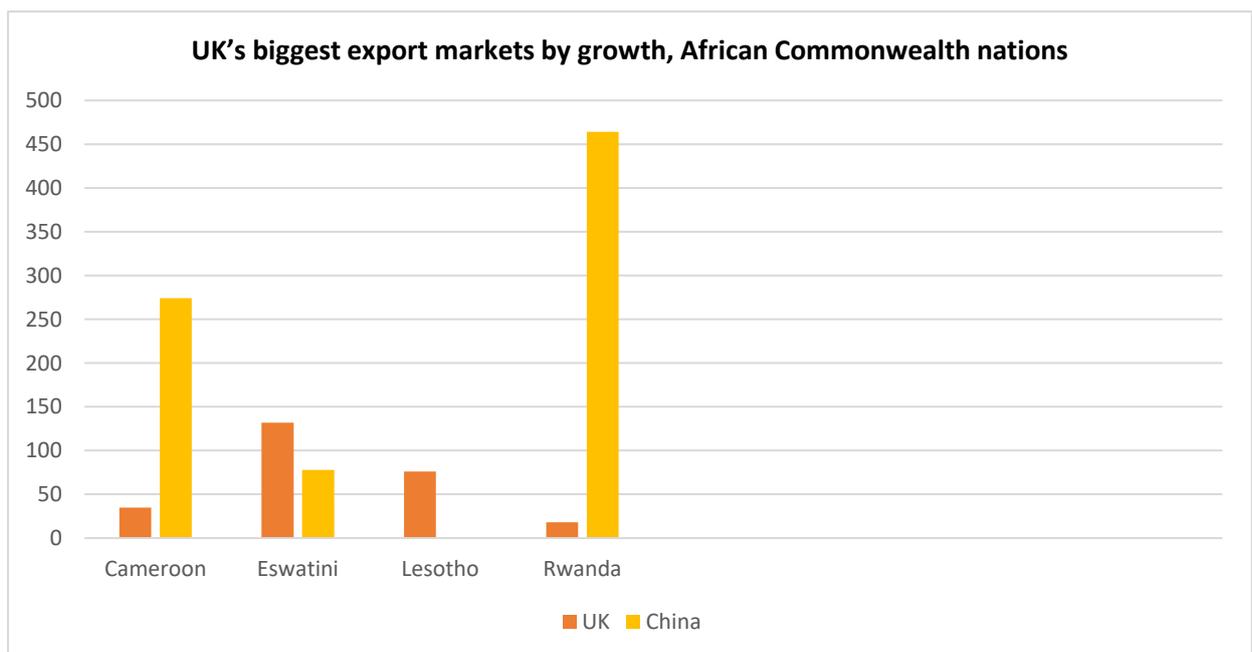
Figure 2.1. China's biggest export markets by growth, African Commonwealth nations.



Source: UN COMTRADE.

Figure 2.2 below highlights the differences between the UK's biggest export markets by growth recorded with African Commonwealth nations (indeed the only four which recorded growth), and the same export markets from Chinese growth. Only in Eswatini and Lesotho has the UK recorded higher growth than China; two markets which between them only accounted for less than US\$12 million in UK exports in 2021.

Figure 2.2. UK's biggest export markets by growth, African Commonwealth nations.



Source: UN COMTRADE.

China's strategic export partners

There is an important observation to be made between the differences in China's highest growing export market markets within Africa, and those of the UK. Out of 11 of Beijing's fastest growing markets, nine can be accurately described as 'strategic' in position. With the exceptions of Rwanda and Uganda, who are both landlocked, the remaining nine markets are in littoral countries with four strategic ports on the Indian Ocean, and five on the Atlantic. Comparatively, of the UK's eight largest growing export markets, five are landlocked, whilst Somalia still suffers from conflict and instability, thus rendering it an unreliable strategic partner. It is no coincidence that Beijing has crafted large export markets and subsequent relative trade dependency in counties with strategic utility on the Indian and, increasingly the Atlantic Ocean, as the PLAN attempt to become a true blue water (global) navy, requiring strategic partners to help facilitate sustainability and future maritime operations.

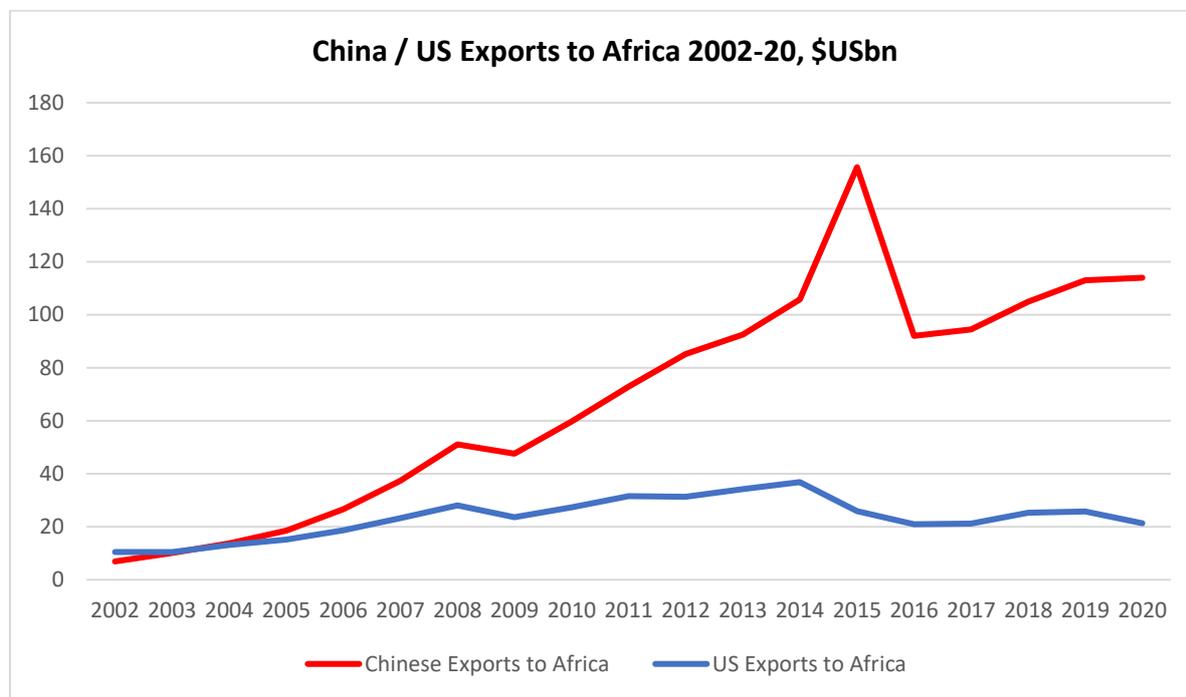
US-Africa trade

It's not just the UK creating an expanding trade deficit and negative export growth with African Commonwealth trading partners. Whilst Beijing has been engaged in an aggressively expanding trade surplus with African nations, the US has similarly neglected the emerging African markets post-global market crash in 2008. By 2009, African bilateral trade with China outstripped that with the US, whilst by 2015, African-US bilateral trade was worth four times that of African-US trade (US\$203 billion compared to US\$52 billion).²⁵ Whilst ebbing and flowing slightly between 2017-19, this bilateral trade imbalance of approximately 400 per cent was again reflective of the two nations' trade with Africa by 2020.

²⁵ UN COMTRADE

Exports

Figure 2.3. China / US Exports to Africa 2002-20.



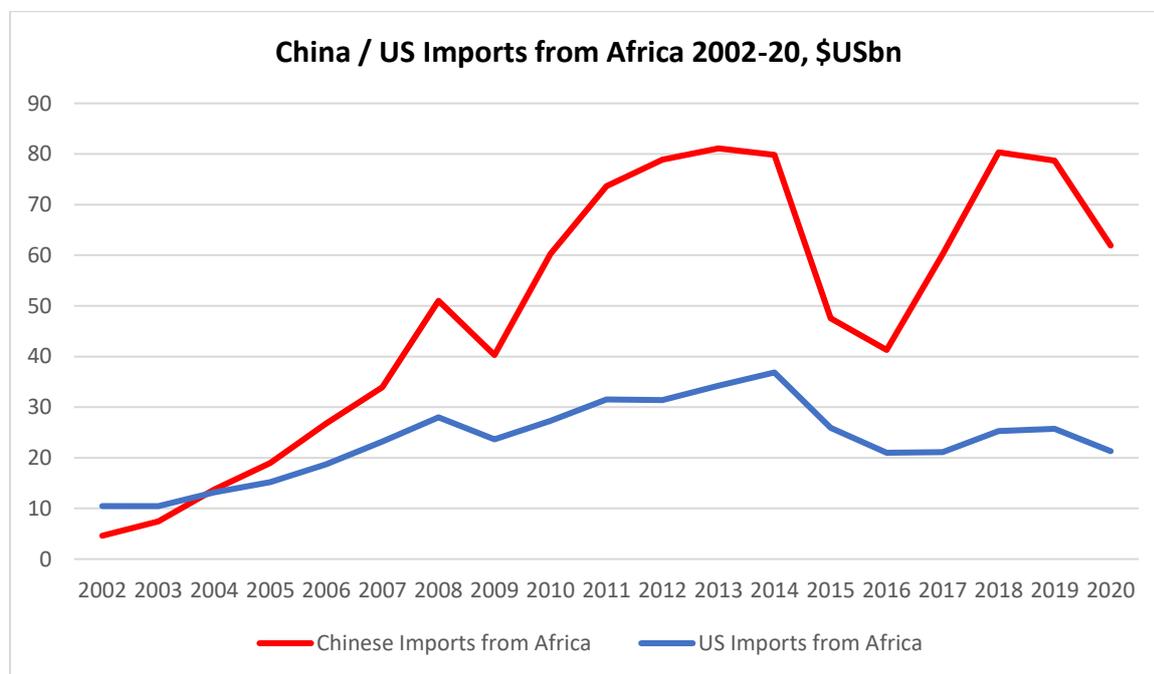
Source: UN COMTRADE.²⁶

Figure 2.3 highlights how there has been over a one thousand per cent increase in Chinese exports to Africa between 2002-20, with an almost doubling in volume since 2010, whilst simultaneously only a 75 per cent rise in US exports since 2002 – which include a 22 per cent decrease since 2010 in US exports.

²⁶ United Nations COMTRADE. [Welcome to the new and enhanced UN Comtrade](#)

Imports

Figure 2.4. China / US Imports from Africa 2002-20.



Source: UN COMTRADE.²⁷

By 2020, African imports to the US outstripped US exports to the continent, resulting in a 12.5 per cent trade deficit (2020) worth approximately US\$3 billion to the US.

Comparatively, China enjoyed a 183 per cent trade surplus with Africa (2020) worth US\$52 billion to China, as Beijing continue to demonstrably use Africa primarily as an export market – whilst both the UK and the US use the continent as overwhelmingly (in the case of the UK in particular) an import market, leading to severe trade deficits for both the UK and the US.

African debt levels to China

By 2021, the total amount of external debt owed by African countries amounted to US\$696 billion. Of this figure, Chinese creditors accounted for US\$83 billion, or 12 per cent.

However, as a proportion of bilateral debt, Chinese creditors represented 19 per cent of all African (bilateral) debt.

Of all government-owed debt, Chinese creditors represented 47 per cent of all African debt.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The average interest rate of all other government debt owed was 1.4 per cent, representing US\$1.3 billion. The average interest rate of all Chinese debt was over double, at 2.7 per cent, representing US\$2.2 billion.²⁸

The planned and agreed upon debt repayments by African countries (49 with data) from 2022 until 2028, as a percentage of payments, are: 19 per cent owed to Chinese creditors (US\$83 billion from 12 per cent of all external African debt); and 11 per cent to other governments (US\$49 billion from 13 per cent of all external African debt).

Planned Chinese debt repayments between 2022-28 represent over 1.5 times the amount owed by all other governments' debt combined, or 63 per cent of all government owed debt by African nations.

Twelve of the 24 African countries which have a 15 per cent or greater expenditure of government revenue servicing external debt payments are in the Commonwealth, as Table 2.2 below highlights.

Table 2.2. African debt levels to China.

Country	%age gvt revenue on debt towards China	%age gvt revenue on debt towards other governments
Cameroon	34	13
Gabon	16	7
Gambia	0	25
Ghana	11	8
Kenya	27	11
Malawi	5	4
Mozambique	28	33
Namibia	4	5
Rwanda	9	20
Sierra Leone	5	14
Uganda	32	14
Zambia	27	8
Highest 24 African average	11	14
Commonwealth average	16.5	13.5

Source: Debt Justice.

Whilst Chinese creditors account for 11 per cent of the top 24 African nations' external debt, other governments account for 14 per cent (minus three per cent). Of those 24, the Commonwealth nations owe 16.5 per cent of all external debt to Chinese creditors, and 13.5 per cent to other governments (plus three per cent).

Six countries – Angola, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Zambia – sent over a third of their external debt payments to Chinese lenders in 2021. A third are from the Commonwealth (Cameroon and Zambia).

²⁸ [Who-African-governments-debt-is-owed-to Media-Briefing_07.22.pdf \(debtjustice.org.uk\)](#) p.2.

Half of Africa's most heavily indebted (measured by government expenditure spent servicing debt repayments as per centage of GDP) countries are Commonwealth nations. These nations on average are more heavily indebted to Chinese creditors than they are to all other forms of bilateral debt repayments, combined. A third of the African countries most heavily in debt (measured by government expenditure servicing debt repayments annually higher than 33 per cent GDP) are Commonwealth nations, including Cameroon.

Chinese exports to the Caribbean

Between 2012 and 2021, China recorded an average per nation export growth rate of 116 per cent with non-Commonwealth Caribbean countries, whilst recording a 72 per cent increase per average Commonwealth country.²⁹

Barbados recorded a 149 per cent increase in exports from China between 2012 and 2021. However, Barbados recorded a 219 per cent increase from 2020 to 2021, when the Barbadian government decided to form a republic.

Xi Jinping declared an increase in relations with Barbados during a regional visit in June 2013, just months before announcing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in October that same year.³⁰ Barbados officially signed up to the BRI in 2018, and Beijing now operates a special trade office for investing in the island. Since then, Barbados has witnessed a Confucius Institute, several US\$ million-worth of Chinese military aid,³¹ and approximately US\$500 million in infrastructure projects.³²

Set as a regional benchmark for export growth amongst Commonwealth nations in the Caribbean, Belize (220 per cent), St Lucia (998 per cent), and St Kitts and Nevis (278 per cent) all experienced higher Chinese export growth than Barbados did in the run up to forming a republic.

Conversely, the UK experienced a 25 per cent average export reduction between 2012 and 2021 with non-Commonwealth nations, whilst experiencing a 21 per cent increase to Commonwealth countries in the same period.³³

China recorded higher export growth with non-Commonwealth Caribbean countries, whilst the UK experienced a marginal growth rate favourable to Commonwealth nations. However, in most of China's largest export growth markets within Caribbean Commonwealth nations, the UK is experiencing export decline and subsequent large trade deficits.

Barbados, which experienced double the average Chinese export growth rate, whilst stagnating British imports, is a prime case between UK and Chinese market driven

²⁹ See 'Appendix D. UK Exports to Caribbean' for full data set.

³⁰ [Chinese president pledges closer cooperation with Suriname, Barbados - CARICOM](#)

³¹ [Barbados Receives Largest Military Donation from Chinese – Atlanta Black Star](#)

³² [Barbados' future marred by fears over China influence after nation ditches Queen | Royal | News | Express.co.uk](#)

³³ See 'Appendix E. UK Exports to Caribbean' for full data set.

approaches resulting (amongst many other variables) in trade imbalances and, ultimately, political influence.

Chinese versus British exports to the South Pacific

China recorded an average Commonwealth export growth rate of 235 per cent amongst the South Pacific nations, against a 295 per cent increase amongst the non-Commonwealth nations, whilst the UK recorded a 20 per cent decrease in exports to Commonwealth members, but a 150 per cent increase to non-Commonwealth countries.

The majority of the non-Commonwealth nations are either dependencies or overseas territories of other states – such as self-governing New Caledonia remaining a French territory, and Niue, a self-governing state part of the Realm of New Zealand. This makes it slightly more problematic when discerning actions and responsibilities of state. For instance, the diplomatic relations and foreign policy of Niue is conducted by the government in Wellington, New Zealand.

Collectively, Chinese export markets within the South Pacific, ranked by value (US\$), have far outstripped British export markets, creating far greater trade dependency by many of these nations with Beijing. Whilst maintaining closer sea-borne proximity to China than to London, many of these nations retain intrinsic socio-cultural links to the UK, such as: English as a widely spoken and often second official language; many former British colonies and dependencies drawing political, executive and legislative parallels to British governance structures; and trading relations going back often hundreds of years. These are all strong levers for assisting in trading relations, yet China are dominating the UK in trade in the South Pacific.

China have been considerably upscaling their export growth to certain Commonwealth markets in recent years – often at a time of reduced British exports to those same markets.

China is far outstripping the UK in exports to the South Pacific. The pace at which China has been increasing these export markets, especially since 2019, is creating high risk high trade dependency on Beijing by many of these Commonwealth countries. With fragile economies often dependent on seasonal and vulnerable industries, including fishing and timber, these nations are attempting to diversify and create sustainable economies, which the UK should be highly supportive of and seek greater market engagement with.

Currently, UK trade flows are stagnating, if not in decline, in many of these nations, with higher imports often leading to trade deficits, at a time when China is using these markets as high growth export opportunities.

3. Diplomatic relations

China support at the United Nations

Since 2019 there have been four significant votes or draft debates at the United Nations Human Rights Council and at the general assembly, which have all related to Chinese domestic policies. These have included one on political crackdowns in Hong Kong which threaten the 'one country, two systems' approach to Hong Kong political representation, and three motions regarding the human rights abuses, widely condemned in liberal democracies as genocide, occurring in China's semi-autonomous Xinjiang province.

In the below four UN votes, motions and draft debates, 36 Commonwealth nations represented one fifth of the countries who supported China (including four abstentions). Of those 36 countries, Cameroon, Gabon and Pakistan voted in China's favour each time, whilst Togo supported the three which it was party to. These votes ran counter to the shared Commonwealth values of democracy, human rights and civil liberties, in motions which attempted to safeguard these very values and rights for Chinese citizens.

41st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019

During the 41st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2019, 22 signatories expressed concern about 'credible reports of arbitrary detention' in Xinjiang and 'widespread surveillance and restrictions', particularly targeting Uyghurs and other minorities. The signatories included the Commonwealth nations of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. Supporting members called on China to uphold its national laws and international commitments, including as a member of the Human Rights Council, and 'refrain from the arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uighurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang.'³⁴

There was a subsequent second letter from 37 opposing members, supporting China. These signatories expressed their opposition to 'politicizing human rights' and reiterated China's defense of what Beijing calls 'vocation education and training centers' (in reality, mass detention centres or 're-education camps').³⁵ Reuters quoted the letter more deeply, including a passage in which the signatories justify China's efforts:

'Faced with the grave challenge of terrorism and extremism, China has undertaken a series of counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang, including setting up vocational education and training centers.'³⁶

The 37 signatories to the second letter, in defence of Beijing's policies in Xinjiang, were: Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Belarus, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Gabon, Kuwait, Laos, Myanmar, Nigeria, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Saudi

³⁴ Human Rights Watch, 2019. [Scan_10072019\[1\].pdf \(hrw.org\)](#)

³⁵ AP News, 2019. [37 countries rally around China at top UN human rights body | AP News](#)

³⁶ [Miles, 2019.](#)

Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Togo, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Five of the 37 are Commonwealth nations.

General Assembly's Third Committee (on Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Issues), 2020

During the UN general assembly's third committee in October 2020, German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen presented a statement to the member nations on behalf of 39 countries, calling on China to 'respect human rights, particularly the rights of persons belonging to religious and ethnic minorities, especially in Xinjiang and Tibet.'³⁷

In return, the Cuban representative Ana Silvia Rodríguez Abascal read a statement on behalf of 45 countries in defence of Chinese policies. These countries were: Angola, Bahrain, Belarus, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, China, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Dominica, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Grenada, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Iran, Iraq, Kiribati, Laos, Madagascar, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Palestine, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, the UAE, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

Eleven of the 45 are Commonwealth nations.

44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, 2020

Shortly after the widely-acknowledged draconian Hong Kong National Security Law was passed by Beijing in 2020, the 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council attempted to debate the issue.

The 66 Article law seeks to safeguard national security and 'prevent, suppress, and impose punishment' for acts deemed to be secessionist, subversive, terrorist in nature or for collusion with foreign country or 'external elements.'³⁸ The heavy-handed law significantly expands Beijing's ability to investigate and pursue suspected criminals within the city of Hong Kong in ways that 'one country, two systems' previously prevented.

Fifty-three nations supported China's new law: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahrain, Belarus, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo-Brazzaville, Cuba, Djibouti, Dominica, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Laos, Lebanon, Lesotho, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Syria, Tajikistan, Togo, UAE, Venezuela, Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Twelve of the 53 are Commonwealth nations.

³⁷ [Statement by Ambassador Christoph Heusgen on behalf of 39 Countries in the Third Committee General Debate, October 6, 2020 - Federal Foreign Office \(diplo.de\)](#)

³⁸ [English translation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region - Xinhua | English.news.cn \(xinhuanet.com\)](#)

United Nations Human Rights Council, Xinjiang, 2022

In October 2022 the UN Human Rights Council rejected a draft decision (A/HRC/51/L.6), by two votes, on a debate on the situation of human rights in Xinjiang, China, by a vote of 17 in favour, 19 against, and 11 abstentions.³⁹

The results of the vote were as follows:

In favour (17): Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Honduras, Japan, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Marshall Islands, Montenegro, Netherlands, Paraguay, Poland, Republic of Korea, Somalia, United Kingdom and United States.

Against (19): Bolivia, Cameroon, China, Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, Eritrea, Gabon, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Mauritania, Namibia, Nepal, Pakistan, Qatar, Senegal, Sudan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan and Venezuela.

Abstentions (11): Argentina, Armenia, Benin, Brazil, Gambia, India, Libya, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico and Ukraine.

This vote came only weeks after the outgoing UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, published her long-awaited report condemning China's repressive policies in Xinjiang province. Countries including the UK and the US were quick to react, expressing 'concerns' as the US State Department labelled the repression against the Uyghur minority 'a genocide'.⁴⁰

The report, published minutes before Bachelet left office on 30 August, found China's 'arbitrary and discriminatory detention' of Uyghurs and other Muslims in the western Chinese region may constitute crimes against humanity. Nearly a month after the report was published, 70 countries (led by Pakistan) made a joint statement at the Human Rights Council, calling on countries to stop interfering in China's internal affairs. The Beijing representative issued a statement after the vote, claiming that 'China is targeted this time, and any other developing countries could be targeted anytime in the future'.⁴¹

Four of the 19 against the motion were Commonwealth nations, whilst a further four Commonwealth members abstained.

Cameroon, Gabon, Togo, and Pakistan

Of these four Commonwealth countries, the UK maintains a minor trade deficit with two (Cameroon and Pakistan).

³⁹ United Nations Meeting Summary 6 October 2022. [AFTERNOON - Human Rights Council Adopts 21 Texts and Rejects One Draft Decision, Extends Mandates on Older Persons, Right to Development, Arbitrary Detention, Mercenaries, Slavery, Indigenous Peoples, Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation | UN GENEVA](#)

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State. 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China—Xinjiang. 2 June 2022. [Xinjiang - United States Department of State](#)

⁴¹ [Why Arab and African countries stand with China at the UN - SWI swissinfo.ch](#)

Despite a healthy trade surplus between the UK and Togo, the trade imbalance between the UK and Gabon, and that of between China and Togo, is significantly in China’s favour, as Beijing increased exports to Togo by 85 per cent, during the same time that the UK decreased exports by 87 per cent.

UK exports to Gabon decreased by 39 per cent (between 2010-22), helping to create a minor trade deficit. Meanwhile Chinese imports to Gabon increased by 186 per cent in the same period, leading to a significant bilateral trade imbalance with China.

Whilst China maintains a 694-kilometre border with Pakistan, it runs through the heavily fortified and often unnavigable Karakorum mountain passes, which are often subjected to volatility and low level conflict between Chinese and Indian border forces (New Delhi maintains that a significant amount of the Chinese-Pakistani border as sovereign Indian land)⁴² which will inevitably disrupt trade flows compared to an accessible and peaceful border.

Table 3.1. Repeat China supporters at UN, trading balances between China, and UK.

Country	Chinese exports 2010-20	UK exports 2010-20	UK exports 2021 US\$	UK imports 2021 US\$	UK trade deficit/surplus %age
Cameroon	274pc increase	35pc increase	58mn	61mn	5pc deficit
Gabon	186pc increase	39pc decrease	51mn	52mn	2pc deficit
Togo	85pc increase	87pc decrease	59mn	2mn	97pc surplus
Pakistan	163pc increase ⁴³	6pc increase	8920mn	2083mn	77pc surplus

China maintains significant trade surplus flows with the four Commonwealth nations which have consistently voted in Beijing’s favour regarding human rights issues at the UN. The UK meanwhile has not enjoyed similar export market growth and trade surpluses with these nations as China has.

⁴² Jacob, H. 2020.

⁴³ UN COMTRADE last published 14 February 2023

4. Military relations

This section will analyse the military relationships between China and the Commonwealth. Whilst maintaining a focus on the three Commonwealth regions studied throughout this paper (Africa, the Caribbean and the South Pacific), this section will broaden slightly in scope to include other Commonwealth nations not previously studied, in addition to covering Chinese military relations with international organisations throughout Commonwealth nations, specifically the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the African Union (AU), and efforts to create a military-security partnership with the South Pacific nations.

By attempting to create parallel security systems and military architecture with Commonwealth nations, Beijing seeks to rival the established security and military organisations across the liberal order, including NATO, Five Eyes, CANZUK, AUKUS, and even UN peacekeeping missions (which Beijing is attempting to influence political favour from within).

Previous research conducted by Civitas has examined how Beijing combines military training with ideological education to promote authoritarian governance within Commonwealth nations. In particular, the CCP's 'Party-Army model', with the army subordinate to the ruling party, is effectively liable to be 'antithetical [to] multiparty democratic systems'.⁴⁴ China's military relations with Commonwealth nations can be broken down into the following categories: high-level visits; military aid; military training; and joint military drills.

There is an important clarification to be understood at this stage. The British Armed Forces, and indeed likewise with the US and other liberal democracies, are increasingly active across many parts of the Commonwealth regions within the analytical scope of this paper – particularly western Africa. Here, whilst conducting joint military training with partnered nations, the British military often cover many non-traditional human security modules to their regional partners, including topics on dealing with sexual violence in war and gender security.⁴⁵

Not even liberal values, but basic respects for human rights, are often incorporated by British military units when training alongside other nations. The PLA conduct no such training when working alongside other nations, adhering to the CCP's mantra of 'respecting' a nation's sovereignty and their own rule of law (in reality, a practice which protects Beijing from accusations of human rights abuses from other human rights violating governments).

Instead of attempting to incorporate respect for universal human rights within their military training modules, the PLA and Chinese security apparatus often export their own authoritarian governance practices into their partnered nations' military and security

⁴⁴ [Tylecote and Rossano, 2021.](#)

⁴⁵ [British Military steps up Women, Peace and Security efforts - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

architecture. This should be considered a most grievous threat to the Singapore Declaration and the inherent values shared inherent within the Commonwealth.

This chapter closes with a look at China's attempted security agreement with 10 South Pacific nations, and a case study detailing the bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands – and the implications for both these Commonwealth nations and for UK foreign policy.

High level visits

Conducting high level bilateral visits – whether in person or remotely (particularly recently during the Covid-19 pandemic) – is often a bedrock for establishing deeper and more meaningful military ties (such as arms transfers, military aid, and joint training). For instance, since the early 2000's, senior PLA officials have conducted over 200 visits to the Caribbean and Latin America.⁴⁶ Worryingly, in post-visit government communiqués, countries often affirm their political and military support to China. Below are some examples of this.

Tanzania

Chinese Defense Minister General Wei held talks via video link with Tanzanian Minister for Defense and National Service Stergomena Lawrence Tax in May 2022:

'China is ready to work together with the international community including Tanzania, upholding the vision of building a *community with a shared future for mankind*, to implement the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI) with concrete actions, and contribute to building a world of lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity', said Wei.⁴⁷

China's defense chief told his Tanzanian counterpart that the Chinese military will continue to strengthen strategic communication with the Tanzanian military, build and make good use of the cooperation mechanism, enhance the quality and effectiveness of joint exercises and training, carry forward the traditional friendship and push forward the relations between the two militaries.

Minister Tax noted that the relationship between Tanzania and China is 'unique', and that Tanzania cherishes the profound friendship between the two peoples and the two militaries. The two militaries have maintained close cooperation and exchanges in such areas as joint training, equipment technology, mutual visits of delegations, and military medicine. Tanzania will continue to deepen military cooperation with China, Tax stated.⁴⁸

Mozambique

Chinese Defense Minister General Wei held video talks with Mozambican Defence Minister Cristóvão Artur Chume on 19 April 2022. Chume stated that Mozambique firmly supports

⁴⁶ Lazarus and Berg 2022

⁴⁷ Author's italics.

⁴⁸ [Chinese defense minister holds video call with Tanzanian counterpart - China Military](#)

China in safeguarding its core interests and China's principled stance on international issues, and is willing to strengthen strategic mutual trust, deepen economic and trade exchanges with the Chinese side, expand exchanges and cooperation in the military field, and constantly upgrade bilateral relations of the two countries and the two militaries.⁴⁹

Sierra Leone

Though not a recent visit, the six-member delegation, led by Major General Jia Xiaoning, Deputy Director General of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense of China, in March 2011 to Sierra Leone demonstrates the long-term impacts such high-level visits can have.

General Jia declared that the Chinese military were willing to further strengthen exchanges and cooperation with Sierra Leone armed forces, at all levels and in all areas. The Sierra Leonean side expressed its appreciation to China for its assistance in capacity building and many other areas, and 'looked forward to a further in-depth development of the military relations between the two countries'.⁵⁰

China completed a US\$7 million military aid package to Sierra Leone in 2019, and a further shipment of military aid in 2022.⁵¹

Pakistan

Though not a member of the three regional Commonwealth blocs studied in this paper (Africa, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific), the Sino-Pakistan relationship nonetheless offers valuable insights into Beijing's broader influence across the wider Commonwealth, and deserves special mention in this section.

The Chinese Defense Minister General Wei visited Pakistan in December 2020, and met with the country's President Arif Alvi, Prime Minister Imran Khan, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee Nadeem Raza, and Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Prior to this Wei also visited Nepal, a potential future Commonwealth nation and a close British military ally.

Troublingly, President Alvi pledged Pakistan's support to China across issues including the South China Sea, Taiwan, and Tibet – all issues at odds with British strategic thinking and planning.

General Wei was noted as stating that 'the China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership is unique in the world'. Interestingly, Wei was also claimed to state that China is 'keen to jointly cope with risks and challenges with Pakistan, firmly safeguard the sovereignty and security interests of both countries and maintain regional peace and stability,' language interpreted in India as directed toward their own national security.⁵²

⁴⁹ [Chinese defence minister holds video talks with Mozambican counterpart | Club of Mozambique](#)

⁵⁰ [Chinese Military Delegation Visits Sierra Leone \(china-embassy.gov.cn\)](#)

⁵¹ [China to supply \\$7million military hardware to Sierra Leone – Welcome to the Sierra Leone Telegraph](#) see also [Chinese Military Hands Over Aid to Sierra Leone | AYV NEWS](#)

⁵² [Rej, 2020.](#)

This last point proved correct when Wei's visit culminated in both countries signing a memorandum of agreement surrounding greater defence cooperation, which is widely understood to contain PLA commitments to intelligence-sharing that will help Pakistan track the movements of Indian forces.⁵³

Sri Lanka

In a similar vein to the Sino-Pakistan relationship, the one with Sri Lanka deserves closer analysis within the military-security context.

Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe visited Sri Lanka in April 2021, with a delegation of 37 high-ranking officials. General Wei's visit was expressed by a Chinese spokesperson as an extension of already growing defence and military ties between the two countries.⁵⁴

General Wei's visit in April 2021 came on the back of an October 2020 visit to Colombo by foreign policy chief Yang Jiechi. While the visit was reported to be a routine ministerial visit, it aimed to boost political, economic and military cooperation and emphasised the growing military dimension of Sino-Sri Lankan ties.⁵⁵

Fiji

General Li Zuocheng, a member of China's Central Military Commission (CMC) and Chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department, met with Fijian Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama in Suva in November 2019. General Li also met with the Fijian Minister for Defence and National Security, Hon. Inia Seruiratu, and held talks with the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces Rear Admiral Viliame Naupoto.

During the meeting, Prime Minister Bainimarama expressed Fiji's firm support for the one-China Policy, whilst General Li promoted the Sino-Fijian relationship to the 'comprehensive strategic partnership' with mutual respect and common development, 'opening a new chapter of China-Fiji cooperation'.⁵⁶ General Li also spoke positively of current military relations, and remarked that China would like to promote the continuous development of the military relationship between the two.

Gabon

Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba met with Chinese State Councillor and Defense Minister General Chang Wanquan in 2018 in Gabon. President Bongo stated that Gabon and China hold similar positions on major international and regional issues, and highly appreciated China's valuable long-term support. The President further added that he hoped that the two countries would further strengthen defence cooperation, jointly cope with

⁵³ [China and Pakistan ink military MOU to counter US-India pact - Nikkei Asia](#)

⁵⁴ [Chinese Defence Minister's Visit to Sri Lanka: A New Dynamic to Bilateral Ties – NUS Institute of South Asian Studies \(ISAS\)](#)

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ [Chinese General meets with Fijian Prime Minister - China Military](#)

regional security challenges, and push the relations between the two armed forces to ‘new heights’.⁵⁷

General Chang declared that the Chinese military was willing to work with the Gabonese military to further strengthen cooperation in the areas of military training and jointly protect regional peace and stability.

Military aid

China does not publish data on its military aid, which falls under what the CCP and the PLA call ‘military cooperation’, encompassing equipment assistance, personnel training and joint exercises. All data on Chinese military aid discussed in this section is therefore based on individual analysis and estimates consolidated from a range of sources, including statements and documents from recipient countries, in addition to announcements by Chinese media reports.

Nigeria

Two Chinese military aid packages worth over US\$12mn between 2017 and 2019. The Chinese Defence Attaché to Nigeria, Senior Colonel Liu Yongxuan stated in 2019 that ‘China and Nigeria will build a stronger and closer community with a shared future and become a model of new type of international relations.’⁵⁸

Nigeria and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding in January 2019, which pledged greater Chinese support for Nigerian defence and security, including a 6 million GBP military aid package. Nigeria also purchased Chinese F7Ni fighter jets. Nigeria’s defence minister used the opportunity to reaffirm Nigeria’s commitment to a ‘strong and lasting relationship with China’, in the hope that the military-to-military cooperation and relationship will be pursued ‘with more vigour’.⁵⁹

Nigeria took ownership of VT4 main battle tanks, manufactured by Chinese state-owned defence conglomerate Norinco, in 2020,⁶⁰ and over 60 Type 89 ZPD armoured personnel carriers from in 2021.⁶¹

China gifted the Nigerian Army with a second patrol boat in October 2022, the first one having been donated in 2015.⁶²

⁵⁷ [Gabonese president meets with Chinese defense minister - China Military](#)

⁵⁸ [China has given N5.5bn military aid to Nigeria in two years - Defence attaché - Businessday NG](#)

⁵⁹ [Counter Insurgency: Nigeria, China sign MOU on military cooperation - Vanguard News \(vanguardngr.com\)](#)

⁶⁰ [NIGERIA : How China's Norinco has been kitting out Nigerian Army - 24/06/2020 - Africa Intelligence](#)

⁶¹ [Nigerian Army unveils Chinese APCs \(janes.com\)](#)

⁶² [China gifts 46-meters patrol boats to Nigerian Navy – Military Africa](#)

Nigeria's Strategic Partnership with Beijing

Having formed a 'strategic partnership' with China, Nigeria traded over three times the amount it did with China than the US in 2020; it traded in weapons sales over two and half times as much with China, and US\$7.5 billion in Chinese FDI between 2013-21.¹

Nigeria is a case in point how the liberal west have ignored a growing and influential regional power, and in effect handed over influence to Beijing. With the largest economy and most populous nation in Africa, Nigeria is also expected to increase markedly in economic weight and population over the coming half-century, with perhaps as many as 410 million citizens by 2050, and with an economy producing more in terms of nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than Italy.¹

The UK can ill afford to continue lacking relations with countries like Nigeria, especially compared to China's advancements in creating 'strategic partnerships' with some of the UK's closest and oldest allies.

Namibia

In 2019 Namibia opened the Chinese-funded Namibia Command and Staff College in Okahandja, 70 km from the capital city of Windhoek. The Chinese Ambassador to Namibia, Zhang Yiming, said that:

'China will work with Namibia to further deepen our cooperation and exchanges in the national defense area to cope with the global safety and security challenges shoulder to shoulder.'⁶³

Tonga

Between 2018 and 2020, China provided US\$626,000 in military aid to Tonga.⁶⁴

Barbados

In 2018 the PLA gifted Barbados a US\$3 million military aid donation, including vehicles. Chinese Ambassador Yan Xiusheng said that the equipment was a demonstration of the strong friendship between China and Barbados and represented the fourth largest amount of aid from the People's Liberation Army to Barbados since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries some 41 years ago. Ambassador Yan stressed that over the past 41 years, China-Barbados relations have enjoyed healthy and stable development with enhanced political mutual trust, fruitful pragmatic cooperation, enhanced people-to-people exchanges and deepened military cooperation.⁶⁵

⁶³ [Namibia's President Geingob opens Chinese-funded military college \(iol.co.za\)](https://www.iol.co.za)

⁶⁴ Liang 2022.

⁶⁵ [Handover Ceremony for China's Military Aid to Barbados - The Barbados Defence Force \(bdfbarbados.com\)](https://www.bdfbarbados.com)

Cameroon

Between 2012-14 there were 10 military aid and arms shipments recorded to Cameroon from China.⁶⁶ This included a 2013 shipment, which contained surface-to-air missiles, infantry fighting vehicles, and combat helicopters.⁶⁷ These weapon systems were subsequently used in internal disputes between the Cameroonian government and separatists, in what many label a civil war.⁶⁸

At an informal discussion at the UN Security Council in May 2019 (which took two years to organise), the United Kingdom criticised Cameroon for violating human rights and for not doing enough to solve the conflict, whilst the British government is ‘deeply concerned’ at the situation.⁶⁹ Meanwhile in October 2019, President Donald Trump cancelled a trade deal with Cameroon, citing human rights abuses,⁷⁰ and by June 2021 the US imposed visa restrictions on anyone deemed to be undermining the peace effort.⁷¹ China voted against proposals to discuss the Anglophone Crisis at the UN Security Council.⁷²

A military assistance agreement signed in 2018 saw a further US\$8 million in Chinese military aid for Cameroon.⁷³

Guyana

In 2017, China gifted 31 items of military equipment to Guyana, including patrol boats. Chinese Ambassador to Guyana, Cui Jianchun, said that China highly values the relationship between the two countries, and that China stands ready to further broaden and deepen the exchange and cooperation between the military forces of the two country:

‘For many years, the PLA has been providing military aid and training to the GDF, which is beneficial to the development of the GDF and the friendship between the two sides. I will spare no effort to push forward the relationship between our two armies and bring China-Guyana relations to new heights.’⁷⁴

Kenya

In March 2022 the Kenya Defence Minister accepted a Chinese military aid package including vehicles and equipment.⁷⁵

⁶⁶ [SIPRI Arms Transfers Database | SIPRI](#)

⁶⁷ [Trade Registers \(sipri.org\)](#)

⁶⁸ [Cameroon’s civil war will continue - The Mail & Guardian \(mg.co.za\)](#)

⁶⁹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/768/html/>

⁷⁰ [US to End Cameroon's Preferential Trade Status \(voanews.com\)](#)

⁷¹ [United States imposes visa restrictions over Cameroon separatist crisis | Reuters](#)

⁷² [Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks? | Crisis Group](#)

⁷³ [China, Cameroon sign military assistance agreement - defenceWeb](#)

⁷⁴ [Chinese Army donates military equipment to Guyana Defence Force -Will enhance GDF’s infrastructural development role – Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation | Co-operative Republic of Guyana \(minfor.gov.gy\)](#)

⁷⁵ [CS DEFENCE RECEIVES MILITARY VEHICLES AND EQUIPMENT FROM CHINA – Ministry of Defence – Kenya \(mod.go.ke\)](#)

Fiji

In 2017, China gifted Fiji a US\$6.5 million military aid package, followed in 2018 with a further US\$9.5 million package. The money was used towards Fiji's armed forces' equipment and training, and for their international peacekeeping missions.⁷⁶

In 2019, China gifted over 47 military vehicles to Fiji's armed forces. Chinese Ambassador Qian Bo stated that:

'China-Fiji defence cooperation will contribute to regional peace and stability, which is an integral part of *China's grand commitment and great endeavour to build a community with a shared future for mankind*'.⁷⁷

Vanuatu

In 2017, Vanuatu received 14 military vehicles for the country's police and security forces.⁷⁸

Papua New Guinea

PNG received more than US\$18 million between 2000 and 2020 in military aid. This aid ranged from military infrastructure and logistical support to personnel training and over 100 vehicles for the Papua New Guinea Defence Force, including 62 vehicles worth US\$5 million in 2017, and included armoured vehicles and troop carriers.⁷⁹

Ghana

China donated four patrol boats to the Ghanaian Navy in 2017.⁸⁰

Sierra Leone

In November 2019, Sierra Leone and China signed agreements to provide Sierra Leone with US\$7 million worth of military aid.⁸¹

Military training

Previous research conducted at Civitas has warned that China's military training programmes have potentially serious consequences for the governance of Commonwealth countries.⁸² Framed under Beijing's desire to train more future political and military leaders in developing nations,⁸³ a significant concern of PLA-delivered military training is the inclusion of CCP ideological education.

Intrinsic to this is the 'Party-Army' model of governance central to the CCP-PLA relationship, in which the military are subservient to the CCP; the PLA fundamentally are a tool for

⁷⁶ [China Gives \\$9.5M For Peacekeeping, Disaster Relief \(fijisun.com.fj\)](https://www.fijisun.com.fj)

⁷⁷ [Fijian Government - CHINA DONATES VEHICLES TO THE RFMF FOR IMPROVED HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF](#) Authors italics in passage.

⁷⁸ [China donates military vehicles to Vanuatu | RNZ News](#)

⁷⁹ [China gives Military Vehicles to Papua New Guinea Army - Papua New Guinea Today \(pngfacts.com\)](#)

⁸⁰ [Ghana engages China in joint military exercise - China Military](#)

⁸¹ [China to supply \\$7million military hardware to Sierra Leone – Welcome to the Sierra Leone Telegraph](#)

⁸² Tylecote and Rossano, 2021.

⁸³ [The Economist, 2020.](#)

ensuring regime survival. This model demonstrably poses threats to a multiparty democratic system, reinforcing elite networks and hierarchies which in China often supersede both institutional and constitutional governance procedures.⁸⁴

The previous research conducted by Civitas examining military training relationships between the PLA and Commonwealth nations should be reviewed for further study; there is much detail of the systems within which these practices occur. Notably, this research uncovered at least 12 established bilateral military training relationships between China and Commonwealth nations, including in: Barbados; Cameroon; Rwanda; Guyana; Nigeria; Seychelles; Sri Lanka; Namibia; Tanzania; Kenya; Uganda; and Fiji.

In a particularly concerning example of what policy implications can be expected from these relations, Nigerian officers conducting training in China made public comments in Chinese media criticising western foreign and military policies, including the UK campaign against the Islamist terrorist organisation Boko Haram.⁸⁵ The British Army have deployed training teams to Nigeria since 2015 to train the Nigerian armed forces fighting against Boko Haram.⁸⁶ Nigeria remains a long-term security partner of the UK, with regular training teams still deploying.⁸⁷

Fundamentally the UK should reconsider in its forthcoming Integrated Review ‘refresh’ how best to rejuvenate military training to Commonwealth partners, alongside education programmes and military aid, in order to reinforce the Commonwealth’s liberal and democratic structures of government. The UK cannot afford to lose vital influence and strategic ground in Commonwealth partners with strong existing defence relations and shared security interests – particularly to an authoritarian regime in Beijing which would see the regression of British influence in these nations as a strategic success.

Joint military drills

The PLA have been persistently training alongside, and increasingly operating jointly with, Commonwealth nations’ militaries in recent years. Predominantly this occurs under two specific frameworks for joint military drills: disaster relief (this occurs across the South Pacific and the Caribbean), and anti-piracy operations (predominantly across littoral east and west Africa). The Chinese government are actively increasing these non-traditional military operations in order to enhance the PLA’s combat effectiveness and ability to deploy at force.

The utility of the PLA and PLAN in this regard can be traced back to Hu Jintao’s ‘New Historic Missions’ speech in 2004. Hu articulated four cornerstones to guide all PLA activity: consolidating the ruling status of the CCP; ensuring China’s territorial integrity; supporting China’s expanding national interests; and helping maintain world peace.⁸⁸ In order to

⁸⁴ Tylecote and Rossano, 2021.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.5.

⁸⁶ [UK team deploys to train Nigerian forces fighting Boko Haram - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-team-deploys-to-train-nigerian-forces-fighting-boko-haram)

⁸⁷ [1 YORKS deliver essential training in Nigeria | The British Army \(mod.uk\)](https://www.mod.uk/press-releases/1-yorks-deliver-essential-training-in-nigeria)

⁸⁸ R. Kamphausen and T. Tanner, ‘Introduction’, in R Kamphausen, D Lai, and T Tanner (eds), *Learning by Doing: The PLA Traits at Home and Abroad*, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2015, p.3.

achieve this, PLAN offensive capabilities would expand to include ‘Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), which primarily include disaster relief and anti-piracy. These operations help serve the CCP narrative of a China as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ – and became central to Beijing statecraft in further influencing Commonwealth nations.

Disaster relief

China is seeking to normalise its military presence, particularly across the Caribbean and the South Pacific, through growing ‘soft-power’ military activities by the PLA, specifically disaster response and delivering humanitarian aid. China provided US\$1.5 billion in Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to the South Pacific between 2013 and 2018 (the latest period for which official data is available for China),⁸⁹ making it the second largest donor after Australia (US\$4.8 billion).⁹⁰

One of the earliest mentions in official CCP political discourse of disaster relief having a role in China’s increasing military relations in both the Caribbean and the South Pacific was in July 2019 by Defense Minister Wei Fenghe at the Fourth Forum for Senior Defense Officials from Caribbean and South Pacific Countries, held in China. Wei stated that China wishes to deepen military exchanges and cooperation with the Caribbean countries and Pacific island countries under the BRI framework, especially with Chinese disaster relief and humanitarian aid deliveries.⁹¹

Troublingly, however, Wei’s comments were preceded by Chinese military strategy; the 2013 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy*, an authoritative book published by the PLA’s Academy of Military Science, states that the PLA should use disaster relief and humanitarian assistance operations as an opportunity to test its organisational and command capabilities, whilst enhancing its combat readiness.⁹² This is seen as crucial for a military which has not engaged in major combat operations since 1979.

China’s Latin America and the Caribbean defence white paper in 2016 called for greater PLA engagement in the region for non-traditional security operations, specifically disaster relief and humanitarian relief deployments.⁹³

Since 2011 the PLA has established major bilateral disaster relief operations with India and Malaysia across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, and concerningly with Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific.⁹⁴ These actions, particularly with modernised, western militaries, gives legitimacy to the PLA operating in these regions.

⁸⁹ [Full text: China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era \(www.gov.cn\)](http://www.gov.cn)

⁹⁰ [Creditor Reporting System \(CRS\) \(oecd.org\)](http://www.oecd.org)

⁹¹ [China to deepen military cooperation with Caribbean countries, Pacific island countries \(www.gov.cn\)](http://www.gov.cn)

⁹² Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, Military Science Press, 2013, 161

⁹³ [China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](http://fmprc.gov.cn)

⁹⁴ Navaltoday.com, ‘ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise concludes in Zhanjiang, China,’ October 29, 2018. <https://navaltoday.com/2018/10/29/asean-china-maritime-exercise-concludes-in-zhanjiang-china>; Rian Maezler, ‘Trilateral Military Exercises Honing Skills, Strengthening Bonds,’ CGTN, October 25, 2018. https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414d3245544d30457a6333566d54/share_p.html; Xinhua, ‘Chinese Military Aircraft Arrives in New Zealand for Joint Exercise,’ June 11, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/11/c_137246914.htm; Xinhua, 6. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-10/26/content_7326611.htm;

Crucially, Beijing has sought to cement its perceived image as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the international system to developing nations. The ‘U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission’, a research department of the US Congress, found in 2019 that Beijing routinely allows political considerations to guide its participation in disaster relief operations, often violating the humanitarian spirit of these operations, and suggesting that Chinese leaders may view such non-traditional military operations as an instrument of influence. Moreover, their research found that the PLA has at times wilfully disregarded best practices for military participation in these deployments.⁹⁵

The PLA Air Force and PLA Navy were involved in delivering relief supplies to Tonga in early 2022 after a volcanic eruption and tsunami.⁹⁶ However, these relief operations were widely speculated to be first enacted by local Chinese fishermen based in Fiji, who were rushed to Tonga in an apparent public-relations stunt to further credit China as a responsible stakeholder, before sending two PLAN vessels and two PLAAF (People’s Liberation Army Air Force) planes to deliver further aid.⁹⁷

In 2021, China launched a dedicated disaster relief centre in Guangzhou, the China-Pacific Island Countries Reserve of Emergency Supplies. Envoys from Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu all attended. Crucially, Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng declared that the centre, and along with it, China’s military operations in the South Pacific, would help ‘build a closer China-Pacific Island Countries *community with a shared future*’.⁹⁸

Anti-piracy

In December 2008 the PLAN deployed a task force comprising two destroyers and a supply ship to participate in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (GoA), after seven of its 1,265 vessels transiting Somali waters were attacked.⁹⁹ This deployment marked the first time in China’s modern history that the PLAN deployed operationally outside of its claimed territorial waters. By 2015, the PLAN were on their 20th continual deployment to the GoA.¹⁰⁰

As a direct result of the PLAN’s continuous deployments across the GoA, conducting anti-piracy operations under a veneer of responsible stakeholder status but, in reality, further developing its military operations other than war, China began building its first ever overseas military facility in 2016, the naval base which it now occupies in Djibouti. In under

China Military Online, ‘Indian Media: India-China Hold Joint Army Exercise on Disaster Relief in Kashmir,’ October 21, 2016. http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-10/21/content_7316055.htm; Atul Aneja, ‘Nepal Quake Widens Scope of Sino-Indian Military Ties,’ Hindu, October 22, 2015.

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/nepal-quake-widens-scope-of-sinoindian-military-ties/article7792992.ece>;

China Military Online, ‘Exercise ‘Peace and Friendship 2015’ in Progress,’ September 21, 2015. http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/photoreports/2015-09/21/content_6691667.htm

⁹⁵ Southerland, 2019.

⁹⁶ [PLA aircraft, vessels to deliver much-needed supplies to tsunami-hit Tonga - Global Times](#)

⁹⁷ [How China is using humanitarian aid to gain a military foothold in the South Pacific \(smh.com.au\)](#)

⁹⁸ [Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng Attends the Launching Ceremony of China-Pacific Island Countries Reserve of Emergency Supplies \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](#) Author’s own italics for emphasis.

⁹⁹ S. A. Erickson, ‘Chinese Sea Power in Action’, op. cit. p.298.

¹⁰⁰ [Henry, 2016](#). p.13.

a decade, Beijing had identified a military operation which fulfilled limited national strategic interests but developed core military ones, deployed a continuous operational military campaign, and built and occupied an overseas military base in one of the world's most strategic locations.

Whilst the PLAN are conducting their 43rd continuous anti-piracy deployment in the GoA, now based permanently out of the Chinese naval support base in Djibouti, it is to the west of the continent, and to the Gulf of Guinea (GoG), which the PLA have been increasingly active in. The GoG comprises 15 littoral basin countries, including: Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, the Gambia, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Angola – eight of whom are Commonwealth nations. Maritime security concerns have been escalating significantly in recent years, with piracy, illegal fishing, and smuggling all destabilising the region's security further.

Through an increased perceived 'responsible stakeholder' status across Africa, and seen as a legitimate security actor in the east of the continent from 2008 onwards having established a framework for so-called 'Far Seas' operations, Beijing solidified this reputation and sought to export the same successful model to the GoG.

The 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan stated that:

'the African side applauds China's escort missions in the Gulf of Aden . . . and encourages that China will do more to support Africa's anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Guinea, and step up cooperation to safeguard the security of sea lanes, regional peace and stability.'¹⁰¹

Despite several regional multilateral anti-piracy initiatives throughout the GoG since 2013, China have avoided these, and only financially contributed marginal amounts to, international efforts to counter the growing threats from piracy.¹⁰² Instead, Beijing have preferred bilateral military engagement with GoG countries, in attempts to further develop 'Far Seas' operations and enhance the PLAN's effectiveness. Between 2014 and 2019, China was involved in 39 military exchanges with GoG partners, including the deployment of PLAN vessels which conducted anti-piracy operations.¹⁰³

In 2022 the Chinese Ambassador to the UN, Geng Shuang, stated that:

'China will continue to carry out counterpart exchanges with coastal countries in maritime security, policing, military and other fields and promote practical cooperation in the fields of detection, early warning, joint cruising, training and exercise, and equipment assistance, so as to play an active role and make greater contributions to the maintenance of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea.'¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ [Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan \(2019-2021\) \(focac.org\)](https://www.focac.org/Forum-on-China-Africa-Cooperation-Beijing-Action-Plan-2019-2021/)

¹⁰² [Zhou and Seibel, 2015.](#)

¹⁰³ [Chinese Naval Base in Guinea & Its Implications - Arete Africa](#)

¹⁰⁴ [Remarks by Ambassador Geng Shuang at the UN Security Council Briefing On Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea \(china-mission.gov.cn\)](#)

Of practical concern to UK foreign policy with the increased Chinese military footprint across west Africa is the highly likely and not too distant eventuality of China developing a permanent naval base in the GoG, just like it did after a decade of anti-piracy operations in the GoA, with its naval support base in Djibouti the end result.

Chinese military facility in the Gulf of Guinea

In December 2021, leaked classified US intelligence from the Pentagon declared that the US were expecting China to soon establish a permanent base in Equatorial Guinea. Though denied by both China and Equatorial Guinea, there remains enough probability to suggest that this will likely occur; and if not in Equatorial Guinea, then certainly in another hospitable GoG nation. This assessment was publicly acknowledged in 2022 by the then Commander of US Africa Command.¹⁰⁵

Eight of the 15 GoG countries are Commonwealth nations, and of those, Table 4.1 below ranks and analyses each in turn for trade dependency and military links with China, for a likelihood of them hosting a permanent Chinese military presence in their country.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ [General Says China Is Seeking a Naval Base in West Africa > U.S. Department of Defense > Defense Department News](#)

¹⁰⁶ All figures have been referenced elsewhere in this research unless separately referenced here.

Table 4.1. GoG Commonwealth nations and China

Country	Chinese imports US\$bn	Chinese import growth	Chinese debt US\$bn & pc total	Chinese military aid	Chinese military equipment	Joint Chinese training
Ghana	6.8	250pc	3.5 ¹⁰⁷ 12pc ¹⁰⁸	Yes	Yes ¹⁰⁹	Yes ¹¹⁰
Togo	2.5	85pc	0.7 ¹¹¹ 24pc	No	No	No
Gambia	0.5	188pc	0	No	No	No
Nigeria	16.7	150pc	4.8 ¹¹² 66pc ¹¹³	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cameroon	2.02	274pc	5.2 ¹¹⁴ 34pc ¹¹⁵	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gabon	0.4	102pc	16pc	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sierra Leone	0.3	279pc	0.2	Yes	Yes	Yes

Based on the high levels of export dependency and debt levels to China, in addition to already high levels of military relations with the PLA (including military aid, military equipment, and joint military training and operations), Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, and potentially Gabon, are likely candidates for a future Chinese military base on the GoA, should Equatorial Guinea debunk the leaked US intelligence assessment and prove unwilling to do so. A Chinese military outpost in the Atlantic would have significant implications for UK national security interests in Africa, as the following case study on Cameroon demonstrates.

Regardless of a permanent Chinese base with a Commonwealth nation – which remains an increasingly likely option – the PLA’s frequent and persistent presence in the GoG help project a regular Chinese military presence in this part of the Commonwealth. The PLA are able to collect intelligence, deepen military relationships, create further military dependency on Beijing through loans, debt and subsequent right-offs, military aid, joint training and disaster relief, and the ultimate security arrangements with these nations

¹⁰⁷ [Suspension of Payments on Selected External Debts of the Government of Ghana | Ministry of Finance | Ghana \(mofep.gov.gh\)](https://www.mofep.gov.gh/)

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/72-chinese-loans.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ [Ghana: China to Donate Military Equipment to Ghana - allAfrica.com](https://www.allAfrica.com/)

¹¹⁰ [Ghana engages China in joint military exercise - China Military](https://www.chinamil.com/)

¹¹¹ <https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/72-chinese-loans.pdf>

¹¹² <https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/72-chinese-loans.pdf>

¹¹³ [China accounts for 66% debt-service payments by Nigeria, other IDA countries in 2022 – World Bank \(premiumtimesng.com\)](https://www.premiumtimesng.com/)

¹¹⁴ [Bone, 2021.](https://www.bone.com/)

¹¹⁵ [African governments owe three times more debt to private lenders than China - International Debt Charity | Debt Justice \(formerly Jubilee Debt Campaign\)](https://www.internationaldebtcharity.org/)

which in effect extend China's 'String of Pearls' from the Indo-Pacific and Indian Oceans, across the African continent and in to the North Atlantic. This eventuality directly risks both UK and US homeland security, and puts current and future military deployments for both at risk.

China's 'Common Development Vision' for security in the South Pacific

In May 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi led a 20-strong delegation on a visit of the South Pacific to lobby for a new multilateral security agreement between Beijing and 10 South Pacific nations, the majority of whom are in the Commonwealth. This was preceded by a far-reaching security agreement in April 2022 with the Solomon Islands, which have grave consequences for the UK and indeed the Solomon Islands itself.

China's attempted 'Common Development Vision' for the South Pacific will be examined first, followed by details and implications of the Solomon Islands security agreement as an example of what would befall the rest of the South Pacific should another deal with Beijing be reached in the future.

Wang Yi's Pacific tour included the Commonwealth nations of Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Virtual meetings were also held with the island nations of the Cook Islands, Niue, and the Federated States of Micronesia.¹¹⁶ At the end of this tour Wang held the second China-Pacific islands foreign ministers' virtual meeting, where he attempted to create consensus to establish a multilateral security agreement with all 10 nations, framed under a development program, termed the 'Common Development Vision'. But when the details were announced, the wide-sweeping security reforms with China were poised to drastically alter the security environment of the South Pacific.

Potential arrangements of the agreement were centred on expanding law enforcement practices and cooperation, Chinese firms running the region's internet networks, and setting up Confucius Institutes.¹¹⁷ Whilst the official Chinese government document emphasised health security and prosperity,¹¹⁸ in reality the agreement sought to train local police, ensure Chinese involvement in cybersecurity, expand political ties, conduct sensitive marine mapping, and gain greater Chinese access to natural resources on land and in the water – including the nation's lucrative and vast tuna waters.¹¹⁹

In particular, the sections on police training and law enforcement cooperation gave grounds for grave concern as China attempted to export its draconian and authoritarian security models to these Commonwealth nations. There was a significant focus on China training Pacific police forces, something that the CCP are already involved in across the region,¹²⁰ with China proposing to hold 'intermediate and high-level police training' for Pacific island

¹¹⁶ Perry, 2022.

¹¹⁷ [China seeks Pacific islands policing, security cooperation -document | Reuters](#)

¹¹⁸ [China's Position Paper on Mutual Respect and Common Development with Pacific Island Countries \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](#)

¹¹⁹ [China, Pacific islands fail to reach consensus on security pact | News | Al Jazeera](#)

¹²⁰ [20 Fijian police officers complete training in China - Xinhua | English.news.cn \(xinhuanet.com\)](#)

nations, and to hold the first ‘China-Pacific Islands Countries ministerial dialogue on law enforcement capacity and police cooperation’, all in addition to constructing special forensic laboratories for fingerprint testing, autopsies, drugs, and electronic and digital forensics.¹²¹

China’s efforts to unify the South Pacific nations into a Chinese-centric security agreement ultimately failed, as the President of the Federated States of Micronesia declared that the deal risked pulling the tiny island nations into great power competition between China, Australia and the US, and that relations with China were not security-focused.¹²² With five of China’s suggested framework criteria being approved, including governing fishing and deep-sea mapping, Beijing may well choose to adjust the agreement to only include the seven Commonwealth nations, and lobby harder for it in another year or two’s time – building on the success China has enjoyed with its bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands agreed only one month prior. In the meantime, the UK government must take this opportunity to re-engage with its Commonwealth partners and regional allies in order to check Beijing’s revisionist agenda, which will almost certainly resurface in a redrafted agreement.

Only six months later in November 2022, six of the original members of the drafted security agreement took part in the first Ministerial Dialogue on Police Capacity Building and Cooperation between China and Pacific Island Countries. The chiefs of police from Fiji, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tonga and Papua New Guinea all attended the virtual meeting held by China’s Minister for Public Security, Wang Xiaohong.¹²³ Wang, as head of China’s police and the CCP’s internal security apparatus, has been widely criticised as playing a leading role in the continued brutal crackdowns against Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang.¹²⁴ Despite rejecting 2022’s security agreement with Beijing, the six Commonwealth nations which took part in the Policy Capacity Building and Cooperation with China are certainly deepening their security ties with Beijing regardless.

China and the Solomon Islands

In April 2022, China and the Solomon Islands established a security agreement which has already paved the way for significant security repercussions for both the UK and the US – whilst in effect signing over great swathes of power and sovereignty to Beijing. An earlier leaked draft version of the closely-guarded arrangements included a provision that China ‘may, according to its own needs and with the consent of the Solomon Islands, make ship visits to, carry out logistics replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in the Solomon Islands.’¹²⁵

Located east of Papua New Guinea, north east of Australia, and south west of the US base at Guam, the hundreds of islands stretching almost 1,000 miles from west to east that make up the Solomon Islands offer countless potential locations for Chinese military facilities, and an

¹²¹ [Lyons, 2022.](#)

¹²² [Micronesia president frets over China's regional security goals - Nikkei Asia](#)

¹²³ [China holds talks on policing with Pacific island officials | Pacific islands | The Guardian](#)

¹²⁴ [Xinjiang officials use China’s anti-crime campaign to target ‘disloyal’ Uyghurs — Radio Free Asia \(rfa.org\)](#)

¹²⁵ [Graham, 2022.](#)

ideal location to interdict vessels enroute to assist Taiwan in any time of crisis. Breaking firmly out of the second island chain, it also gives the PLAN enormous operational bandwidth for sustained and prolonged maritime operations. Ultimately, China's geopolitical interests in the Solomon Islands lie very much in Beijing's desire to displace the US as the Indo-Pacific hegemon.

The minimum five-year agreement, which came only two years after the Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC, has already seen police officers from the Commonwealth nation head to China for law enforcement training and Chinese 'culture' (likely political ideology training) workshops in October 2022.¹²⁶ Almost certainly these police officers will have returned to the Solomon Islands having been trained in Beijing's authoritarian law enforcement measures which have been witnessed across multiple brutal crackdowns in Chinese civil liberties, democracy and human rights, from Hong Kong, to Tibet, to Xinjiang. The Chinese influence now within the Solomon Islands' law enforcement and communications will undoubtedly undermine democratic freedoms.

The draft document which was leaked had afforded broad freedoms to visiting Chinese security personnel and military units when operating in the country, and provided Chinese personnel with 'judicial immunity' from domestic laws. For context on how liberal democracies who genuinely respect their allies' sovereignty, a bilateral defence agreement signed in January 2023 between the UK and Japan operating in one another's territory stipulates each nation will be held to account by the other's domestic laws should any (highly unlikely) infraction occur.

Furthermore, the leaked draft agreement included provisions that would allow China's security agencies to 'assist in maintaining social order' on the islands. A leading national newspaper, the *Solomon Star*, reported that the agreement allows China to spy on electronic devices; an allegation denied by the Solomon Islands Police Force.¹²⁷

However, this has led some Solomon Islanders to be fearful of a deteriorating domestic security situation. A prominent church and community leader stated, 'I'm 100 percent sure the freedom we used to enjoy is slowly disappearing', and that 'My concern is that the Solomons will be the Hong Kong of the South Pacific', as fears spread that the ruling party will use these new laws and security relationship with Beijing to enforce brutal crackdowns.

In August 2022, UK and US fears of Chinese influence dictating Beijing's interests in the Solomon Islands came true, when a US Coast Guard vessel, and HMS Spey (which is one of two Royal Navy vessels permanently based in the Indo-Pacific) were refused access to a port facility to refuel, allegedly for late paperwork.¹²⁸ The ships were both part of an international effort to prevent illegal fishing – a large source of stolen tax revenue for South Pacific nations.

¹²⁶ [Solomon Island police officers head to China for training | Reuters](#)

¹²⁷ [Police clarify article with the title 'Security Pact allows China to Monitor Electronic Devices' – My SIG Services Portal \(solomons.gov.sb\)](#)

¹²⁸ [Solomon Islands halts naval visits after US, UK ships denied entry - BBC News](#)

Kiribati's swing to China

Kiribati lies only 3,000 kilometres due south of Hawaii and the headquarters for the US Pacific Command. In 2021, China drafted plans to upgrade a US-built World War II-era runway on Canton Island. Beijing claimed that the project was not military in nature. But a potential Chinese military presence so close to Hawaii would present unique challenges for the US military.

As research demonstrates previously in this paper, Kiribati is heavily dependent on Chinese exports, was a signed member defending China's human rights atrocities in Xinjiang and Tibet at the United Nations in 2020, and attended the inaugural Ministerial Dialogue on Police Capacity Building and Cooperation between China and Pacific Island Countries.

After switching diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 2019, like the Solomon Islands, Kiribati has been leaning more heavily towards China for infrastructure development, trade, and security relationships. Kiribati has shown a willingness to break with regional partners, withdrawing from the Pacific Island Forum in July 2022, as China denied that it had influenced the decision after agreeing extensive economic and infrastructure deals when China's Foreign Minister Wang Li visited in May.

Given all this, Kiribati's former president signalled in September 2022 that the nation is moving toward authoritarianism, after the government suspended all judges from its appeal and high courts.¹ Former president Anote Tong stated that the situation was 'unprecedented' for the country, which he said had been one of the most stable governments in the region. 'Kiribati is going through quite a serious constitutional crisis. Not to accept the decision of the court would suggest that we may be moving towards a certain state of authoritarianism'. Tong believes that President Maamau may be discussing a security deal with China, similar to the Solomon Islands pact. Kiribati is struggling with the impacts of climate change, Covid-19, and a poor economy — giving China multiple leverage points.

China and multilateral defence organisations

China have been increasingly engaged with regional multilateral defence organisations, primarily in the Caribbean and in Africa. The CCP and PLA's long-term bilateral relations with many Commonwealth nations have now transcended to the multilateral level, giving Beijing far more bandwidth for military deployments, and further solidifying those defence relations with Commonwealth states.

China – Latin American and the Caribbean States Defence Forum

In December 2022, the defence ministers from China and 24 Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) states met virtually under the theme of 'Peace and Cooperation' at the 'Fifth Defense Forum China-Latin American and the Caribbean States'. Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe delivered a keynote speech, highlighting how China-LAC relations have '*entered*

a new era featuring equality, mutual benefit, innovation, openness and tangible benefits for the people'.¹²⁹

General Wang added:

'In the face of complex and challenging international and regional situations, China and LAC countries should work together to cope with risks and challenges, strengthen solidarity and cooperation, build a stronger security barrier, and strive to form a new pattern of omni-dimensional, wide-ranging, and multi-channel defense cooperation. We will make new and greater contributions to regional and world peace and stability and to *the building of a community with a shared future for mankind*'.¹³⁰

Representatives of the LAC countries at the meeting declared that the LAC-China Defense Forum has provided an 'important platform for both sides to deepen defence cooperation'.¹³¹

Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summits occur every three years, with each one directing an action plan for each side to work on until the next summit. Beijing uses this platform as a means to further legitimate, and thus integrate, itself into a pan-African security architecture, with China at its core.

China has developed its role within pan-African security since the 2015 UN General Assembly speech by President Xi Jinping. Here, Xi pledged US\$100 million in military assistance to fund the AU¹³² and to establish an 'African Standby Force' and an 'African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises'.¹³³

Shortly after at the December 2015 FOCAC summit, China announced it would invest US\$60 billion in Africa – this represented a tripling of the amount pledged at FOCAC 2012. At the same meeting, China committed to direct military engagement with African partners, whilst additionally delivering US\$60 million in military aid, pledges that were incorporated into FOCAC's following action plan (2016-2018).¹³⁴

China's role and influence within the FOCAC increased significantly at the 2018 FOCAC summit, which called for the establishment of 50 separate programmes to enhance Sino-African security coordination across the continent, including the 'China-Africa Peace and Security Forum' and the 'China-Africa Law Enforcement and Security Forum'.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ [Chinese defense minister delivers keynote speech at fifth defense forum between China, LAC countries - China Military](#) Author's own bold and italics for emphasis.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* Author's own bold and italics for emphasis.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² [Xi Jinping Attends and Addresses UN Leaders' Summit on Peacekeeping \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](#)

¹³³ [Declaration: African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises \(ACIRC\), Second Extraordinary Summit, 09 Nov 2016 -African Union - Peace and Security Department \(peaceau.org\)](#)

¹³⁴ [The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Johannesburg Action Plan\(2016-2018\) \(focac.org\)](#)

¹³⁵ [file.html \(tralac.org\)](#)

Beijing moved away from the traditional emphasis on infrastructure development at the 2021 FOCAC summit, by emphasising the theme of building ‘a China-Africa *Community with a Shared Future in the New Era*’.¹³⁶ Within the framework of fostering this ‘China-Africa Community’, FOCAC’s 2022-24 action plan called for the strengthening of ‘the implementation of the China-Africa peace and security plan’, aimed at supporting ‘the building of the African Peace and Security Architecture’.¹³⁷

When viewed within the broader context of successive FOCAC action plans, it becomes apparent that Beijing is consolidating its leadership role within a continent-wide system of security relations between Africa and China – and with a similar version now in the Caribbean. In both of these regions, now entire systems of security governance, data collection and dissemination, law enforcement training and practice, elite networks, and military practices, are all highly likely to see an erosion in democratic practices to these increasing levels of Chinese funding, diplomatic and political capital, and increased military-security ties.

South Africa, Russia, and China military relations

In February 2023 extensive week-long naval drills are due to be conducted between the maritime forces of South Africa, Russia, and China, as South Africa host the two authoritarian regimes for military drills for the second time since 2019. A South African National Defence Force spokesperson stated that the joint exercise aims ‘to strengthen the already flourishing relations between South Africa, Russia and China’.¹³⁸

The Russian frigate *Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union Gorshkov*, which carries Zircon hypersonic missiles, with a range of more than 1,000km and travel nine times the speed of sound, was confirmed by Russian media TASS as participating in the South African drills.¹³⁹

The South African Foreign Ministry defended the joint drills with Russia and China, stating that ‘hosting such exercises with friends was the natural course of relations’.¹⁴⁰ Militarily the joint drills, to include search and rescue, gunnery, force protection and air defence, are relatively unremarkable. What is remarkable however is the timing of these drills, taking place over the one year anniversary of Russia’s illegal and barbarous reinvasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022). Politically, it is difficult not to see how for South Africa this legitimises Russia’s unprovoked war.

A further repercussion of these joint drills is the further political and diplomatic legitimacy which South Africa has bestowed upon Moscow and Beijing. Often seen as a leading example of African economic success, the rest of the continent often take note of South Africa’s policies and actions. This could have significantly detrimental impact across Africa,

¹³⁶ [Dakar Declaration of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](https://fmprc.gov.cn)

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ [Russian warship to join drills with China, South Africa navies | Military News | Al Jazeera](#)

¹³⁹ [Russia confirms frigate Admiral Gorshkov to join February drills with China, South Africa - Military & Defense - TASS](#)

¹⁴⁰ [South Africa defends planned military drills with Russia and China | Reuters](#)

legitimising and normalising increasing defence and security relations with authoritarian regimes.

Placed with the UK/China framework throughout this paper, Beijing have witnessed a 41 per cent increase in exports to South Africa since 2010, whilst London have seen exports decrease by 28 per cent in the same period. The trade deficit which the UK maintains with South Africa stood at 3.7bn GBP in 2021 alone.

5. Case study: Cameroon

China's Atlantic coast infrastructure investments, regional military partner, and now a key diplomatic enabler at the UN.

Cameroon established political relations with China in 1971, after Cameroon severed ties with Taiwan and began a largely economic-focused relationship with Beijing, whilst gradually increasing its diplomatic and military relations. Whilst several senior level visits occurred throughout the Cold War, including by Cameroon's then President Ahmadu Ahidjo to China in 1973 to meet with Mao Zedong, with a following trip four years later, this period was largely characterised by Chinese FDI infrastructure projects, increasing political dialogue, and increased defence relations (largely arms contracts, Chinese training missions for those procurements, and senior level military relationships).¹⁴¹

This relationship built on infrastructure projects, political exchanges and arms contracts bore fruition for Beijing by the 1990s. In 1995, in the lead up to a vote at the UNHRC that would have condemned China for its domestic human rights abuses, the then Vice Premier of China, Li Lanqing, visited Cameroon, which was a member of the commission. Cameroon subsequently voted against the resolution, which failed to pass by one vote.¹⁴²

High level PLA visits to Cameroon began occurring; first in in 2001, and again the following year, including tours of the Douala naval base on the Atlantic coast.¹⁴³ These visits laid the foundations for further military cooperation, and resulted in the capitulation of Cameroon to Beijing's sphere of influence in a visit in 2002 by Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, when a subsequent statement from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Yaoundé and Beijing 'have the same or similar viewpoints on major international issues.'¹⁴⁴ In 2003, President Biya visited China, as the Chinese government thanked Cameroon for 'its support for the reunification of China and mutual support with China on human rights and other international issues.'¹⁴⁵

Since 2010, military cooperation has intensified. Numerous contracts for advanced Chinese arms procurements, including surface to air missiles and armoured vehicles, have solidified Sino-Cameroonian defence ties. Between 2012-14 alone there were 10 recorded arms shipments to Cameroon.¹⁴⁶ The bilateral defence ties cemented in arms contracts, senior military visits, military training, and defence manufacturing, culminated in 2014 with an agreement to conduct joint anti-piracy training between the PLAN and the Cameroon Navy, in the GoG.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ [Cabestan, 2015.](#)

¹⁴² [U.N. Rights Panel Declines to Censure China - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

¹⁴³ [Cameroon -- china.org.cn](#)

¹⁴⁴ [China and Cameroon's Evolving Political and Military Cooperation – The Diplomat](#)

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ [SIPRI Arms Transfers Database | SIPRI](#)

¹⁴⁷ [Chinese, Cameroonian navies conduct anti-piracy joint drill \(6\) - People's Daily Online](#)

Located in the Atlantic Ocean, the GoG comprises eight littoral countries, four of whom are in the Commonwealth: Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo. The Gulf is a strategically important location for UK national interests; in addition to half its littoral members being Atlantic Ocean Commonwealth nations, the region is subjected to maritime security challenges from piracy and terrorism, which the both the UK and US frequently attempt to assist with.¹⁴⁸ By 2018, China was also indirectly funding defence investment in Cameroon, with US\$25 million from the US\$100 million Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) into an AU military logistics base in Cameroon.¹⁴⁹

In addition to a key regional military partner, Cameroon has now grown to become one of China's most important West African infrastructure investment hubs. In 2011, Beijing agreed to invest, build and develop the new port at Kribi. When completed in 2035, Kribi will be the biggest deep-water port in the region, and crucially will handle exports of Cameroon's bauxite, iron ore and other minerals, whilst also facilitating the Chad-Cameroon Petroleum Development and Pipeline Project, which pumps roughly US\$365 million per annum (2020) of oil from landlocked Chad to China.¹⁵⁰ The main beneficiaries of this Chinese investment into the new port were China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC), awarded with a US\$1.2 billion contract for the port, in addition to building a US\$436 million highway to connect the new port with the existing port at Douala, whilst also agreeing to construct a railway to an iron ore deposit.¹⁵¹

In addition to operating many gold mines in the east of the country, Chinese companies also have a monopoly on building roads in Cameroon (approximately 90 per cent of new roads by 2014),¹⁵² all in an effort to extend China's Maritime Silk Road out to the Atlantic coast; spreading President Xi's corrupt system of development, governance, and ultimately the coveted diplomatic influence Beijing desires, framed under the now global One Belt One Road program.

Economically, Cameroon is now heavily dependent on China, with over 20 per cent of GDP made up by FDI – up from less than five per cent in 1995, as Cameroon increasingly seeks market access for its exports (mainly timber, agricultural products, and oil).¹⁵³ Reportedly Cameroon's largest trading partner, Chinese FDI now accounts for 67 per cent of all foreign investment,¹⁵⁴ or around 13.4 per cent of Cameroon's GDP.

Whilst previous French and other western economies attempted to engage trade and development relations with Cameroon based on good human rights practices, Beijing makes no such qualms. The US began to cut funding for Cameroon's military in 2019, amid concerns of human rights abuses.¹⁵⁵ Whilst in 2021, Cameroon ranked 144 out of 180

¹⁴⁸ [HMS Trent deploys on security mission to West Africa \(mod.uk\)](#)

¹⁴⁹ [China's expanding military footprint in Africa - The Mail & Guardian \(mg.co.za\)](#)

¹⁵⁰ [China \(CHN\) and Chad \(TCD\) Trade | OEC - The Observatory of Economic Complexity](#)

¹⁵¹ [Chinese-French consortium to run biggest deepwater port in Cameroon - China.org.cn](#)

¹⁵² [China just wrote off a chunk of Cameroon's debt. So why the secrecy? | CNN](#)

¹⁵³ [Cameroon \(CMR\) and China \(CHN\) Trade | OEC - The Observatory of Economic Complexity](#)

¹⁵⁴ [The Dragon in the River of Shrimp: The Reality and Perception of Chinese Investment in Cameroon – The Yale Review of International Studies \(yira.org\)](#)

¹⁵⁵ [US to cut aid to Cameroon due to alleged human rights violations | CNN Politics](#)

countries listed on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.¹⁵⁶ Both countries have publicly defended one another's domestic security situations, often labelled as human rights abuses by the international community.

The solidified political, defence and economic union between the two countries began to manifest significant diplomatic currency for China, just as many international actors were becoming alarmed by the realisation of China's domestic policies rooted in human rights abuses. In June 2018, President Biya stated that:

'Cameroon firmly supports the "One China" policy...They share large common interests and a common position in international affairs and will cooperate with China in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations'.¹⁵⁷

The effect of a now-decades long economic, political, and military Chinese influence of Cameroon's foreign policy was suddenly laid bare one year later, at the UN.

Just months after China wrote off US\$78.4 million worth of debt owed by Cameroon, in an incident which was initially not reported by both countries,¹⁵⁸ in 2019 Cameroon supported China at the 41st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, in which member nations debated the human rights atrocities China were committing in Xinjiang.¹⁵⁹ This was shortly followed by Cameroon jointly hosting an event at the UN with China, defending Beijing's actions.¹⁶⁰ This co-option by Cameroon was to see further diplomatic success by China, at the 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in which the recently enacted Hong Kong security law in effect caused a mass clampdown on civil liberties and political freedoms in the Chinese territory.

Furthermore, in 2020 and 2022, Cameroon voted in favour of Chinese actions in Xinjiang; the latter effectively helping to block a vote on the matter at the Human Rights Council. (The UN Human Rights Council rejected a draft decision (A/HRC/51/L.6) on a debate on the situation of human rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China, by a vote of 17 in favour, 19 against and 11 abstentions. Four of both the against and abstentions were Commonwealth members. Cameroon voted against.)¹⁶¹

What started out as Chinese political dialogue and FDI in infrastructure programs, swiftly led to a defence relationship centred on the courtship of senior Cameroonian military officials by mid-senior level PLA officials, leading to significant arms contracts over a period of years. This multifaceted political, economic and defence relationship continued, with political and military ties resulting in a Chinese military presence in Cameroon and the Atlantic Ocean.

¹⁵⁶ [Cameroon - Transparency.org](#)

¹⁵⁷ [The Dragon in the River of Shrimp: The Reality and Perception of Chinese Investment in Cameroon – The Yale Review of International Studies \(yira.org\)](#)

¹⁵⁸ [Fake news fails in damaging Sino-African ties - CGTN](#)

¹⁵⁹ [37 countries rally around China at top UN human rights body | AP News](#)

¹⁶⁰ [Envoy calls on world to jointly fight terrorism - World - Chinadaily.com.cn](#)

¹⁶¹ [AFTERNOON - Human Rights Council Adopts 21 Texts and Rejects One Draft Decision, Extends Mandates on Older Persons, Right to Development, Arbitrary Detention, Mercenaries, Slavery, Indigenous Peoples, Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation | UN GENEVA](#)

The next logical step to this activity for Beijing is to station Chinese troops at Cameroon bases, likely veiled in the disguise of further military training teams (this time in Cameroon not China). The threat to UK forces who operate extensively across west Africa, but also by Chinese troops facing the US mainland across the Atlantic, would both be unprecedented escalations in Chinese military strategy, and has already been signposted as a likely occurrence by the US General commanding US Africa Command,¹⁶² at a testimony given at the House Armed Services Committee in 2022.

Ultimately, through increased trade and investment flows and debt write-offs, Cameroon became a pivotal diplomatic partner at the multilateral level, supporting China at the UN by blocking four crucial votes surrounding human rights atrocities and political freedoms between 2019-22.

Through a long-term political relationship crafted on increasing Chinese infrastructure investments and exports, Beijing have in effect bought a Commonwealth military partner on the Atlantic coast, whilst simultaneously securing outward Chinese export and investment flows into critical national infrastructure in a now dependent and fragile economy, ensuring political and diplomatic allegiance to Beijing at the multinational level.

¹⁶² [General Says China Is Seeking a Naval Base in West Africa > U.S. Department of Defense > Defense Department News](#)

6. Conclusion

The Commonwealth nations have represented a unique opportunity for the revisionist CCP to deconstruct inherent values of liberty, democracy and human rights held sacrament within the Singapore Declaration, binding all members in common liberal and open values.

Beijing view these values as severely at odds with their own vision for the future global order, one in which they surpass the US and its democratic allies in the Indo-Pacific, including the UK, and seek to replace the rules-based international order with a return to a unilateral, Chinese-led authoritarian system. A 'new era' for a 'community of shared vision' is Beijing's narrative of its revisionist and draconian era which seeks to rip up the established liberal order and values rooted within the Commonwealth system, and this language is prevalent throughout Sino-Commonwealth discourse – in plain sight.

Ideologically, the deconstruction of the Commonwealth as an international body stepped in liberal values, by long-term and targeted malign Chinese influence from within, is of central importance to the CCP's long-term strategic agenda of circumnavigating and ultimately replacing the liberal rules-based international order.

Post-Brexit the UK has a unique opportunity to re-engage with its Commonwealth partners, forge new and exciting trading relationships – and where it has already done so, to build and capitalise on these with new security agreements which ensure not just the UK's security but those of its partners, in a long-term, transparent and non-authoritarian manner in which China are already doing.

The Commonwealth must be shown an alternative vision to China's debt diplomacy, export dumping, revisionist security agenda, in order to re-strengthen the bonds, values and goals, which have underpinned the largest liberal international organisation in the world for more than half a century. The UK must politically re-engage, invest its trading and diplomatic weight, and strengthen security bonds, to ensure that the Commonwealth will not only last at least another half a century but prosper well in to the next one. On its current Sino-focused trajectory, it severely risks doing so under the most extreme decline of the values held within its founding charter, and potentially not even surviving at all.

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Appendix A

China exports to Africa

Per cent change between 2010-2020¹⁶³

Country	Per cent change 2012-2020
Algeria	+40%
Angola	+13%
Benin	+56.5%
Botswana	+36%
Burkina Faso	+570%
Burundi	+130%
Côte d'Ivoire	+325%
Cape Verde	+129%
Cameroon	+274%
Central African Republic	+21%
Chad	-3%
Comoros	+285%
Republic of the Congo	+70%
Democratic Republic of the Congo	+327%
Djibouti	+420%
Egypt	+125%
Equatorial Guinea	+273%
Eritrea	+82%
Eswatini	+78%
Ethiopia	+85%
Gabon	+101%
Gambia	+186%
Ghana	+250%
Guinea	+354%
Guinea-Bissau	+445%
Kenya	+203%
Lesotho	0%
Liberia	-22%
Libya	-9%
Madagascar	+151%
Malawi	+173%
Mali	+103%
Mauritania	+160%
Mauritius	+78%
Morocco	+68%
Mozambique	+303%
Namibia	+3%

¹⁶³ All data from Appendix A is from UN COMTRADE last updated 14 February 2023

Niger	+11%
Nigeria	+150%
Rwanda	+464%
Senegal	+413%
Seychelles	+280%
Sierra Leone	+279%
Somalia	+1138%
South Africa	+41%
South Sudan	+359%
Sudan	+15%
Togo	+85%
Tunisia	+44%
Uganda	+307%
Tanzania	+233%
Zambia	+125%
Zimbabwe	+66%

Appendix B¹⁶⁴

UK-Africa trade – non-Commonwealth

1. Algeria (Bn US\$)

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	0.8	0.8	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.3
Imports	5.3	5.4	2.8	1.0	1.8	3.0	2.5	0.5	1.4
Trade balance	-4.5	-4.6	-2.3	-0.5	-1.4	-2.6	-2.1	-0.3	-1.1

Exports: 63pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$19.4Bn

2. Angola (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	636	857	1000	698	500	493	264	292	336	295
Imports	1200	994	650	1000	369	71.7	83	17.8	1.9	7.9
Trade balance	-564	-137	+350	-302	+131	+421	+181	+274	+334	+287

Exports: 54pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$975Mn

3. Benin (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
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¹⁶⁴ All data in Appendix B and Appendix C is from UN COMTRADE last updated 14 February 2023

Exports	102	110	104	90	28	23	25	36	22	31
Imports	0.09	0.05	0.16	1.1	1.6	0.8	1.7	1.5	1.7	0.75
Trade balance	+101.91	+109.95	+103.84	+88.9	+26.4	+22.2	+23.3	+34.5	+20.3	+30.25

Exports: 70pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$561.6Mn

4. Burkina Faso (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	20.1	20.5	13.5	10.4	12.2	13	22.7	51.4	16.7	22.2
Imports	0.05	0.5	1.6	1.7	2.2	4	7	3.1	4	5
Trade balance	+20.05	+20	+11.9	+8.7	+10	+9	+15.7	+48.3	+12.7	+17.2

Exports: 10pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$173.6Mn

5. Burundi (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	5.9	4.1	5.2	3.1	2.8	3.7	5.6	7	4.3	4.7
Imports	0.2	0.7	0.6	1.4	1	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.8
Trade balance	+5.7	+3.4	+4.6	+1.7	+1.8	+2.9	+4.8	+6.3	+3.7	+3.9

Exports: 20pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$38.8Mn

6. Central African Republic (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	0.5	1	2.3	4.5	2.8	1.7	6.3	3	4	3
Imports	0.2	0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0	0	0.1	0.2	0
Trade balance	+0.3	+1	+2.2	+4.4	+2.7	+1.7	+6.3	+2.9	+3.8	+3

Exports: 750pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$28.3Mn

7. Chad (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	12	17.4	13.6	4	3.5	9.4	27.8	36.8	11.2	11.4
Imports	2.2	1.7	0.3	1.1	0.1	0.9	0.3	1	1.2	0.6
Trade balance	+9.8	+15.7	+13.3	+2.9	+3.4	+8.5	+27.5	+35.8	+10	+10.8

Exports: 5pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$137.7Mn

8. Comoros (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.8	1.3	1.5	1.7	2.2	1.5	1.8
Imports	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.1	0.4	0.7

Trade balance	+0.6	+0.1	+0.2	+0.7	+1.2	+1.4	+1.3	+2.1	+1.1	+1.1
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Exports: 100pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US49.8Mn

9. Democratic Republic of the Congo (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	39.4	52	53.6	40	26.7	29.3	37.6	33	31.4	46.4
Imports	36.7	44.3	3.9	7	15.1	8	6.6	6.4	5.7	9
Trade balance	2.7	7.7	49.7	33	11.6	21.3	31	26.6	25.7	37.4

Exports: 18pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$247Mn

10. Djibouti (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	44.7	10.6	21.7	18.1	12.2	13.6	14.4	23.7	26.5	18.1
Imports	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.3	4.8	5.9	6.4	6	6.3	4.5
Trade balance	+44.5	+9.9	+21.5	+17.8	+7.4	+7.7	+8	17.6	20.2	13.6

Exports: 60pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$168Mn

11. Egypt (bn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	1.5	1.5	1.7	1.5	1.6	1.6	1.5	1.6	1.3	1.9
Imports	1	1.1	1.4	0.9	0.8	0.8	1	1	0.9	1.2
Trade balance	+0.5	+0.4	+0.3	+0.6	+0.8	+0.8	+0.5	+0.6	+0.4	+0.7

Exports: 27pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$5.6Bn

12. Equatorial Guinea (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	93.9	75.8	96.3	48.9	28.2	32.5	35.7	54	40.9	40.8
Imports	496	1850	1940	396	182.4	70.8	26.7	39.4	16.2	0.6
Trade balance	-402	-1774	-1844	-347	-154	-38.3	+9	+14.6	+24.7	+40.2

Exports: 57pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$4471Mn

13. Eritrea (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	8.3	11.2	5.2	2.5	2.5	1.4	5.9	2.4	2.6	2.9
Imports	0.3	0.3	0.05	0.001	0.1	0.01	0.04	0.08	0.05	0.1
Trade balance	+8	+10.9	+5.2	+2.5	+2.4	+1.4	+5.9	+2.4	+2.6	+2.8

Exports: 65pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$44.1Mn

14. Ethiopia (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	164	154.4	178	279.2	245.5	310.3	364.3	620.1	368.3	570
Imports	70	56.7	42.5	67.7	54.5	111	78.8	74	46.7	55.7
Trade balance	+94	+97.7	+135.5	+211.5	+191	+199.3	+285.5	+546.1	+321.6	+514.3

Exports: 248pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$2597Mn

15. Guinea (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	153.6	251.3	60.4	32	29	28.3	28.9	31.3	36	28.9
Imports	3.7	2.5	3.1	1.3	0.4	0.2	1.7	0.8	0.3	1.8
Trade balance	+149.0	+248.8	+57.3	+30.7	+28.6	+28.1	+27.2	+30.5	+35.7	+27.1

Exports: 81pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$663Mn

16. Guinea-Bissau (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	0.6	1	65.9	0.6	1.3	0.9	1	0.6	0.7	1
Imports	0.07	NA	NA	0.001	0.02	0.3	0.2	0.5	NA	0.001
Trade balance	+0.6	+1	+65.9	+0.6	+1.3	+0.6	+0.8	+0.1	+0.7	+1

Exports: 67pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$72.6Mn

17. Ivory Coast (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	133.3	158.2	132.6	188.4	114.4	143.4	120	89	126	189
Imports	274	202.3	218	292	423.8	362.1	298	306	406	509.7
Trade balance	-140.7	-44.1	-85.4	-103.6	-309.4	-218.7	-178	-217	-280	-320.7

Exports: 42pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$1898Mn

18. Liberia (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	30.3	26.7	25.6	17.9	18.2	19	18.2	10.5	7.5	11.9
Imports	5.1	5.2	1.3	1.6	5.3	1.1	97.5	0.5	3.8	25.4
Trade balance	+25.2	+21.5	+24.3	+16.3	+12.9	+17.9	-79.3	+10	+3.7	-13.5

Exports: 61pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$39Mn

19. Libya (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	298.1	421	272.7	161.5	208.7	240.6	169.3	201.5	147.7	141.1
Imports	2708	1929	526.7	103.9	323.3	1086	833.5	253.5	88.9	1500
Trade balance	-2410	-1508	-254	+57.6	-115	-845	-664	-52	+58.8	-1359

Exports: 53pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$2271Mn

20. Madagascar (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	19.5	19	13.9	16.4	20	33.9	13.8	13.7	7.6	11.5
Imports	37	49.5	69.2	61.4	45.7	45.4	52	50.3	36.3	35.9
Trade balance	-17.5	-26.5	-55.3	-45	-25.7	-11.5	-38.2	-36.3	-28.7	-24.4

Exports: 41pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$309Mn

21. Mali (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	15.5	15.8	24.4	36.9	28	51.8	70.2	46.6	75.5	38.5
Imports	0.4	0.4	1.1	1	0.6	0.4	1.3	1.7	5.2	6.5
Trade balance	+15.1	+15.4	+23.3	+35.9	+27.4	+51.4	+68.9	+44.9	+70.3	+32

Exports: 148pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$385Mn

22. Mauritania (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	69.3	87.4	22.4	26.6	12.7	18.8	9.6	30.6	12.2	15.3
Imports	0.3	3.2	45	0.3	1.5	1.5	0.3	1.2	3.9	36.5
Trade balance	+69	+84.2	-22.6	+26.3	+11.2	+17.3	+9.3	+29.4	+8.3	-21.2

Exports: 78pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$211Mn

23. Morocco (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	1000	700.8	944.4	733	1135	994.1	914.4	812.1	555.5	782
Imports	714.5	790	955.8	883.6	870.2	849.8	886	793.7	741.5	1328
Trade balance	+285.5	-89.2	-11.4	-150.6	+265	+144.3	+28.4	+18.4	-186	-546

Exports: 22pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$242Mn

24. Niger (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	2.8	10.3	11.1	10.7	5.1	8.5	3.3	5.3	4.1	14.1
Imports	0.1	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.1	1.9	0.4	0.3	1.2

Trade balance	+2.7	+9.9	+10.6	+10.5	+4.9	+8.4	+1.4	+4.9	+3.8	+12.9
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Exports: 404pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$70Mn

25. São Tomé and Príncipe (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.1	0.2	3.7	0.8	0.2	1.2	0.9
Imports	0.001	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.1	0.4
Trade balance	+0.5	+0.6	+0.7	+0.1	+0.2	+3.7	+0.8	+0.2	+1.1	+0.5

Exports: 80pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$9.3Mn

26. Senegal (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	1486	500.5	493.8	143.5	121.2	255.9	224.9	223.2	110.5	192.3
Imports	33.4	41.9	46.7	36.3	44.7	47.5	60.4	57.4	62.3	69.4
Trade balance	+1453	+458.6	+447.1	+107.2	+76.5	+208.4	+164.5	+165.8	+48.2	+122.9

Exports: 87pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$3252Mn

27. Somalia (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	12.5	16.8	13.8	11.7	11	15.2	18.5	16.1	16.9	20.4
Imports	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.3	1	1	1.3	0.9
Trade balance	+12.3	+16.6	+13.7	+11.6	+10.7	+14.9	+17.5	+15.1	+15.6	+19.5

Exports: 63pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$148Mn

28. South Sudan (mn)

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	3.1	3.9	4.6	2.2	3.1	2.7	7.8	6.6	7.8
Imports	0.01	NA	0.001	0.1	0.01	0.01	0.1	0.01	0.1
Trade balance	+3.1	+3.9	+4.6	+2.1	+3.1	+2.7	+7.7	+6.6	+7.7

Exports: 152pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$42Mn

29. Sudan (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	219.6	155.9	117.3	138.6	92.4	101.4	94	103.9	95.4	56.5
Imports	9.2	14.3	9.2	12	10.4	13.4	11.6	9.5	9.9	11.6
Trade balance	+210.4	+141.6	+108.1	+126.6	+82	+88	+82.4	+94.4	+85.5	+44.9

Exports: 74pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$1064Mn

30. Togo (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	448.2	142.3	299	53.8	166.6	48.2	73.1	27.7	52.1	59.1
Imports	0.8	2.8	2.3	3.2	0.6	0.7	4.5	1.7	2	1.5
Trade balance	+447.4	+139.5	+296.7	+50.6	+166	+47.5	+68.6	+26	+50.1	+57.6

Exports: 87pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$1350Mn

31. Tunisia (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	252.1	250.8	264.3	213	245.3	193.4	213.9	220.5	203.1	244.2
Imports	536	623.1	491	221.1	187	186	198.5	234.9	195.4	251.6
Trade balance	-283.9	-372.3	-226.7	-8.1	+58.3	+7.4	+15.4	-14.4	+7.7	-7.4

Exports: 3pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$824Mn

32. Zimbabwe

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	95.5	81.5	67.4	59.5	36.6	38.1	60.5	50	52.6	55.5
Imports	29.7	55.1	47.8	46.5	59.6	102.9	111.9	90.1	16.2	14.1
Trade balance	+65.8	+26.4	+19.6	+13	-23	-64.8	-51.4	-40.1	+36.4	+41.4

Exports: 42pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$ 23Mn

Total nations: 32

Total trade balance (nominal) 2012-21: -US\$9395Mn

Average trade balance (nominal) 2012-21: -US\$2946Mn

Appendix C

UK-Africa trade balances - Commonwealth

33. Botswana (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	39.4	1045	42.3	32.2	67.4	37.9	45	40.2	13.4	14.3
Imports	3588	3772	43.2	31.2	147.7	57.5	54.8	20.9	5.4	7.4
Trade balance	-3549	-2727	-0.9	+1	-80.3	-19.6	-9.8	+19.3	+8	+6.9

Exports: 64pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$6351Mn

34. Cameroon (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	90.2	102.8	76.6	60.8	57	55.8	60	56	56.9	58.2
Imports	203.7	147.2	242.2	148.1	82.7	61.2	52.5	60.7	50.9	60.5
Trade balance	-113.5	-44.4	-165.6	-87.3	-25.7	+5.4	+7.5	-4.7	+6	-2.3

Exports: 35pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$430Mn

35. Lesotho (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	1.7	1.8	0.8	0.7	2.8	1.2	2	1.4	0.8	3
Imports	2.3	0.8	0.6	0.8	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.1	0.8	0.7
Trade balance	-0.6	+1	+0.2	-0.1	+1.9	0	+0.8	+0.3	0	+2.3

Exports: 76pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$5.8Mn

36. Gabon (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	83.6	93.2	83.9	53.2	31.5	53.5	37.8	51.8	50.4	50.8
Imports	3.3	124.7	175.2	63.1	103.3	33	1.1	0.9	14.5	52.2
Trade balance	+80.3	-31.5	-91.3	-9.9	-71.8	+20.5	+36.7	+50.9	+35.9	-1.4

Exports: 39pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$18.4Mn

37. The Gambia (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	59.7	46.1	33.9	29.1	28.2	34.7	37.2	41.9	29.7	36.9
Imports	5.9	3.4	8.9	5.7	4.5	3.7	3.7	5	3.8	4
Trade balance	+53.8	+42.7	+25	+23.4	+23.7	+31	+33.5	+36.9	+25.9	+32.9

Exports: 38pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$329Mn

38. Ghana (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	818.6	612.2	559.6	476.3	749.7	489	472.3	481	395.6	551.8
Imports	329.7	394.7	410.5	308.2	256.4	238.6	538.2	353	208.3	182.3
Trade balance	+488.9	+217.5	+149.1	+168.1	+492.6	+250.4	-65.9	+128	+187.3	+369.5

Exports: 33pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$2386Mn

39. Kenya (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	611.7	704	672.4	552.5	418.8	443.2	513.8	441.6	330	395.7
Imports	470.9	430.1	407.8	404.5	398.9	405.6	453.6	380.9	420.4	538.4
Trade balance	+140.8	+273.9	+264.6	+148	+19.9	+37.6	+60.2	-60.7	-90.4	-142.7

Exports: 35pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$651Mn

40. Eswatini (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	3.8	3.8	4	4	4	3.7	3.7	4.4	3.3	8.8
Imports	20.5	15.2	49.7	15.7	37.4	10.9	20.4	10	53.1	46.5
Trade balance	-16.7	-11.4	-45.7	-11.7	-33.4	-7.2	-16.7	-5.6	-49.8	-37.7

Exports: 132pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$235.9Mn

41. Malawi (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	30.5	24	23.3	17.4	18.6	17.8	19.9	19.8	13.9	20.3
Imports	35.9	39.2	43.1	35.3	25.4	36.5	32.1	27.9	35.2	21.5
Trade balance	-5.4	-15.2	-19.8	-18.1	-6.8	-18.7	-12.2	-8.1	-21.3	-1.2

Exports: 33pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$127Mn

42. Mauritius (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	100.9	98.7	97.8	87	91.9	105.1	104.2	100.2	62.3	67.5
Imports	408.2	410.7	361.6	317.8	227.1	215	186.9	159.5	117.5	114.3
Trade balance	-307.3	-312	-263.8	-230.8	-135.2	-109.9	-82.7	-59.3	-55.2	-46.8

Exports: 33pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$1603Mn

43. Mozambique (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	113.1	70.8	68.5	48.5	19	28.6	33.4	138.3	64	54.5
Imports	89	150.6	124.9	103.2	96	103.3	132.9	32.3	7.1	15.1
Trade balance	+24.1	-79.8	-56.4	-54.7	-77	-74.7	-99.5	+106	+71.1	+39.4

Exports: 65pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$202Mn

44. Namibia (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	121.4	86.3	78.5	58.5	41.2	55.1	58.2	52.3	60.3	94.5

Imports	569.4	125.6	72	57	51.4	48.7	44.8	52.1	38.7	48.9
Trade balance	-448	-39.3	+6.5	+1.5	-10.2	+6.4	+13.4	+0.2	+21.6	+45.6

Exports: 22pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$402Mn

45. Nigeria (bn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	2.5	2.4	2.3	1.6	1.3	1.4	1.8	1.7	1.3	1.6
Imports	6	5	4	2.2	1.2	1.7	3.1	1.8	1.3	1.3
Trade balance	-3.5	-2.6	-1.7	-0.6	+0.1	-0.3	-1.3	-0.1	0	+0.3

Exports: 36pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$9.4Bn

46. Rwanda (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	20.7	15.3	11.1	11.7	9.9	11.8	17.5	17.6	17.1	24.4
Imports	5.5	3.9	5.7	12.2	12.7	13.3	12.1	17.4	25.9	21.6
Trade balance	+15.2	+11.4	+5.4	+0.5	-2.8	-1.5	+5.4	+0.2	-8.8	+2.8

Exports: 18pc increase

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$28Mn

47. Seychelles (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	32.6	30.7	39.5	26.2	28.8	30.7	82.6	34	26.7	23.9
Imports	81.8	114.7	106.3	92.4	84.8	78.2	87.9	78	70.7	72
Trade balance	-49.2	-84	-66.8	-66.2	-56	-47.5	-5.3	-44	-44	-48.1

Exports: 27pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$511Mn

48. Sierra Leone (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	107.3	113.3	91.4	53.8	39.8	40.2	41.1	43.9	35.5	44.3
Imports	12.2	13.4	12.5	1.5	0.7	8.8	1.8	1.3	1	2.9
Trade balance	+95.1	+99.9	+77.9	+52.3	+39.1	+31.4	+39.3	+42.6	+34.5	+41.4

Exports: 59pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$554Mn

49. South Africa (bn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	5.5	4.1	3.9	3.4	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.3	1.7	1.9
Imports	9.9	4.7	6	5.9	9.8	8.4	8.1	8.5	7.7	10.5
Trade balance	-4.4	-0.6	-2.1	-2.5	-7.1	-5.7	-5.3	-6.2	-6	-8.6

Exports: 65pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: -US\$49Bn

50. Tanzania (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	282.2	267.4	275.7	186.6	143	114.3	148.2	143.8	120.6	123.6
Imports	53.4	35.2	48.4	38	21	20.1	19.9	20.5	16.2	20.6
Trade balance	+228.8	+232.2	+227.3	+148.6	+122	+94.2	+128.3	+123.3	+104.4	+103

Exports: 56pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$1512Mn

51. Uganda (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	100.6	76.8	74.7	74	63.5	56.8	53.1	50	55.5	63.8
Imports	23.6	24.2	25	23.9	19.6	18.9	16.6	17.2	14.8	20.7
Trade balance	+77	+52.6	+49.7	+50.1	+43.9	+37.9	+36.5	+32.8	+40.7	+43.1

Exports: 37pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$464Mn

52. Zambia (mn)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Exports	141.4	137.9	106.6	98.7	62	77.2	102.3	84.3	71.2	82.2
Imports	63.2	64	74	23.2	29.6	17.6	8.5	10.6	19.2	12.6
Trade balance	+78.2	+73.9	+32.6	+75.5	+32.4	+59.6	+93.8	+73.7	+52	+69.6

Exports: 42pc decrease

Trade balance sum 2012-21: +US\$642Mn

Total nations: 20

Total trade surplus 2012-21: **-US\$65Bn**

Total trade surplus 2012-21 less Nigeria and South Africa: **-US\$7Bn**

Average trade surplus 2012-21: **-US\$3.25Bn**

Average trade surplus 2012-21 less Nigeria and South Africa: **-US\$350Mn**

Appendix D¹⁶⁵

China exports to Caribbean (bold indicates Commonwealth member)

Country	China Exports 2012 US\$ (Mn)	China Exports 2021 US\$ (Mn)	China Exports 2012- 2021 % +/-
Antigua and Barbuda	747	110	-85
Bahamas	592	474	-20
Barbados	96	239	+149
Belize	53	176	+232
Cuba	1,174	576	-51
Dominica	25	35	+40
Dominican Republic	1030	4002	+289
Grenada	20	20	0
Guyana	200	390	+95
Haiti	284	795	+180
Jamaica	786	810	+3
Saint Kitts and Nevis	3	13	+333
Saint Lucia	29	26	-10
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	29	33	+14
Suriname	189	277	+47
Trinidad and Tobago	312	425	+36

Average Commonwealth Chinese export growth per nation: 66 per cent increase

Average non-Commonwealth Chinese export growth per nation: 116 per cent increase

Appendix E

UK exports to Caribbean (bold indicates Commonwealth member)

Country	2012 UK exports US\$ (Mn)	2021 UK exports US\$ (Mn)	2012-2021 UK exports % +/-	2021 Trade Balance US\$ (Mn)
Antigua and Barbuda	13.8	23.9	+73	+3.7
Bahamas	60.9	92.5	+52	+80.9
Barbados	60.3	60.6	0	+56
Belize	18.1	10.4	-43	-58
Cuba	41.8	7.1	-83	-0.7
Dominica	8.5	13	+53	+12
Dominican Republic	117.5	170	+47	+46
Grenada	8.4	11.9	+42	+11.5
Guyana	44.4	98.8	+122	+72.1
Haiti	18.3	12.8	-30	+4.6

¹⁶⁵ All data in Appendix E is from [UN Comtrade](#) last updated 14 February 2023

Jamaica	75.2	56.8	-24	-7.9
Saint Kitts and Nevis	11.9	8.3	-30	+7.8
Saint Lucia	22.9	22.4	-2	+19.2
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	13.9	17.5	+26	+16.8
Suriname	21	13.6	-35	+11.3
Trinidad and Tobago	182.4	144.8	-21	+4

Average Commonwealth UK export growth per nation: 21 per cent increase

Average non-Commonwealth UK export growth per nation: 25 per cent decrease

Appendix F¹⁶⁶

China exports to South Pacific (bold indicates Commonwealth member)

Country	2013 China exports US\$ (Mn)	2021 China exports US\$ (Mn)	2013-2021 China exports % +/-
Cook Islands	19.5	4	-70
Fiji	244.5	397.4	63
Kiribati	18.7	39.1	109
Marshall Islands	1423	3187.6	124
Micronesia	4.9	20.1	310
Nauru	1.1	11.3	927
New Caledonia	90.3	151.8	68
Palau	3.2	36.6	1044
Papua New Guinea	553	1050.2	90
Samoa	54.5	102.3	88
Solomon Islands	36.8	167.1	354
Tonga	38.5	53.7	39
Tuvalu	7.5	46.4	519
Vanuatu	380.5	87.6	-77

Niue is a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand, and New Zealand conducts most diplomatic relations on its behalf. As part of the Realm of New Zealand, Niueans are also citizens of New Zealand.

French Polynesia is an overseas territory of France.

New Caledonia is a French overseas territory with significant autonomy under the terms of the 1998 Noumea Accord.

Tokelau is a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand.

¹⁶⁶ All data in Appendix G is from [UN Comtrade](#) last updated 14 February 2023

Commonwealth average per nation: 235 pc increase

Non-Commonwealth average per nation: 295 pc increase

Appendix G¹⁶⁷

UK Exports to South Pacific – (bold indicates Commonwealth member)

Country	2012 UK exports US\$(000)	2021 UK exports US\$(000)	2012-2021 UK exports % +/-	2021 Trade Balance US\$ (000)
Cook Islands	14.2	55.6	+292	+40.9
Fiji	7250	8460	+17	+5100
Kiribati	113.1	42.7	-62	+33
Marshall Islands	563	452	-20	+164
Micronesia	142	278	+96	+220
Nauru	129	241	+87	-1160
New Caledonia	2950	1120	-62	+1090
Palau	101	550	+445	+529
Papua New Guinea	7156	2150	-70	-1040
Samoa	2024	273	-87	+256
Solomon Islands	762	1633	+114	+9.2
Tonga	1231	770	-37	+675
Tuvalu	(2015) 116	30	-74	0
Vanuatu	1083	385	-64	-127

Commonwealth average per nation: 20pc decrease

Non-Commonwealth average per nation: 150pc increase

¹⁶⁷ All data in Appendix H is from UN COMTRADE last updated 14 February 2023

The UK has a unique post-Brexit opportunity to re-engage with its Commonwealth partners, forge new and exciting trading relationships – and where it has already done so, to build and capitalise on these with new security agreements which ensure not just the UK’s security but those of its partners, in a long-term, transparent and non-authoritarian manner.

Ideologically, the deconstruction of the Commonwealth as an international body steeped in liberal values, by long-term and targeted malign Chinese influence from within, is of central importance to the Chinese Communist Party’s long-term strategic agenda of circumnavigating and ultimately replacing the liberal rules-based international order.

The Commonwealth must be shown an alternative vision to China’s debt diplomacy, export dumping, and revisionist security agenda, in order to re-strengthen the bonds, values and goals, which have underpinned the largest liberal international organisation in the world for more than half a century.

The UK must politically re-engage, invest its trading and diplomatic weight, and strengthen security bonds, to ensure that the Commonwealth will not only last at least another half a century but prosper well in to the next one. On its current Sino-focused trajectory, it severely risks undermining the values held within its founding charter, and potentially no longer surviving at all.

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