



China's President Gets Royal Reception in London Amid Criticism Over Human Rights

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Chinese President Xi Jinping kicked off a state visit to the UK with a horse-drawn carriage ride and lunch with Queen Elizabeth in Buckingham Palace, amid a growing chorus of protest over his country's human rights record.

Protesters lined the Mall, the tree-lined avenue leading to the Queen's official London residence where Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan will stay, shoulder-to-shoulder with tourists and supporters of the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

Hundreds of people chanted and held up banners which read: "Down with the Communist Party" and "End the crackdown!" in an apparent reference to an ongoing police operation targeting hundreds of lawyers and rights activists.

While Xi's visit will bring a slew of new business deals, facilitated by U.K. Chancellor George Osborne, critics have hit out at Prime Minister David Cameron and his government for failing to put pressure on Beijing on human rights.

Cameron has toned down talk of human rights after his meeting with the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, angered China in 2012.

Instead, his government has stressed growing economic ties, with Britain becoming the first Western nation to join Beijing's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank against Washington's wishes.

Nuclear power investment

And the U.K. was the top destination for Chinese money with U.S.\$5.1 billion in investment, according to law firm Baker & McKenzie.

Xi is likely to oversee the inking of a deal under which two state-owned Chinese utilities invest in a U.S.\$25 billion nuclear power plant at Hinkley Point in southwest England.

But Xia Yeliang, visiting fellow at the Cato Institute in the United States, said media talk of a "golden era" in Sino-British relations is a signal that Beijing will continue its hard line on human rights and its push to play a bigger role on the world stage.

"China is now entering an era of arrogance and impetuous action," Xia said. "They that there is no longer any need for them to play by the rules; they think they should be the ones making the rules."

"Xi Jinping [comes bearing] a lot of gifts, and it seems as if he is getting a warmer reception in the U.K. than he did in the U.S.," he said.

He said China has become the single largest investor in the U.K. during the past three years.

"Investment is rising by 85 percent every year, reaching U.S.\$7.1 billion last year, and U.S.\$40 billion in total," Xia said.

Xia compared Osborne's welcoming attitude to Chinese investors to British government policies of appeasement of Hitler's Nazi regime in the run-up to World War II.

"Humanity shouldn't forget the lesson of the Second World War ... [Cameron] shouldn't shirk the most important issue because it's sensitive, or because the Chinese government doesn't want to hear it," he said.

"Of course they refuse to discuss human rights ... it's shameful."

Back door to West?

Professor Xia Ming, of New York's City University said the U.K. is strategically important for Xi's administration.

"As tensions grow between the U.S. and China, China will rely more on the U.K. as a back door into the West, especially into international financial markets," Xia Ming said.

"At the same time, the U.K. will be looking to gain as much benefit as possible from this."

The New York-based Human Rights Watch called on Cameron to "rediscover the moral courage" to raise human rights issues during Xi's trip.

"Public comments are sometimes dismissed as megaphone diplomacy, but they are nothing of the kind," the group said in a statement on its website.

"Clear public statements of concern show solidarity with the victims of Chinese government repression, and often provide them with some degree of protection from the very worst abuses," it said. "That is what China's human rights activists consistently tell us."

It said that since Xi took power three years ago, there has been "an alarming deterioration" in Beijing's human rights record.

"Between July and September this year, almost 300 human rights lawyers and activists were briefly detained and interrogated," HRW said. "Of these, about 20 remain in custody, most in secret locations without access to lawyers or family."

It said scores of others have been arrested and detained over recent years, while many have been tortured in detention, and hit out at Osborne's description of China during his recent visit as "exciting."

"This is the reality of today's China," HRW said. "There are many ways to describe this situation, but 'exciting' is not one of them."

Hong Kong student leader Joshua Wong, who is also currently in the U.K., hit out at the British government for being "blinded" to rights abuses by the promise of Chinese investment. Wong and other activists have criticized Britain, Hong Kong's ruler until the port city was handed back to China in 1997, of not doing enough to stop Beijing from eroding promised freedoms in the former British colony that saw mass protests of election rules in 2014.

"For most Hong Kong citizens, we think U.K. government should be more active," Wong told Agence France-Presse at the start of Xi's visit. "Our observation is that the U.K. government is just ignoring Hong Kong for the business deals."

"Capital investment has blinded the eyes of David Cameron," said Wong, who was expected to join protests featuring Amnesty International, Free Tibet plus Chinese, Tibetan and Uyghur activists in London on Tuesday.

But in an editorial published ahead of Xi's arrival, China's Global Times newspaper, which has close ties to the Communist Party, commented: "Apparently the concept of a 'golden era' between the two countries has made some people uncomfortable."

"This has hurt the twisted dignity of those who still consider the West the center of the world," it said.