



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK heads for potentially unpopular choice on China's super-embassy



The UK's China hawks are sharpening their talons this week as the latest deadline approaches for the government to make a thrice-postponed decision on Beijing's plans to open a massive **super-embassy** in London.

The signals are that ministers will finally give the nod to a project that has been controversial since China acquired a historic site near the Tower of London in 2018 for what would be the largest foreign mission anywhere in Europe.

A further delay, let alone a rejection, would almost certainly mean Prime Minister Keir Starmer having to abandon a planned visit to Beijing later this month after declaring before the turn of the year that it would be a "dereliction of duty" not to engage with China.

Opponents of the embassy plan believe that, in its enthusiasm to exploit the potential economic benefits of closer ties with Beijing, the government is minimising the potential security threats the project poses.

The opposition this time is not confined to the familiar China hardliners concentrated on the depleted Conservative benches of the House of Commons.

In a last-minute intervention, a group of nine **Labour MPs** wrote to the minister in charge of delivering the final judgement on the embassy plan to call for it to be rejected on security grounds and in light of Beijing's human rights record.

The embassy that became a test of UK-China relations

Since China bought the 5.5-acre former Royal Mint site on the edge of the City of London financial district, the embassy project has turned into an unintended symbol of the shifting status of UK-China relations.

In a major foreign policy speech delivered at London's Guildhall at the start of December, **Starmer** accused previous Conservative-led

governments of blowing hot and cold on relations with China while the UK's allies had developed a more sophisticated approach, leaving the UK an outlier.

He nevertheless called out China on a range of issues, from support of Russia's actions in Ukraine to its human rights record at home, as well as its sanctioning of British MPs and threats to UK academic freedom.

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Ahead of the last lapsed deadline for a decision on the embassy in December - the deferral came the day after Starmer's speech - the UK's security agencies had assured the government they were confident they could tackle any espionage threats posed by the proposed new mega-mission.

They apparently believe that the city's underground data cables are safe from Chinese tampering and that it might even be an advantage to have Beijing's diplomats in one place rather than spread around a variety of locations across London.

Nevertheless, much to the irritation of Beijing, the government imposed yet another delay until January 20 to allow ministers more time to digest the latest intelligence findings.

Between caution and indecision

What had looked like caution on the part of the government began to look like indecision once the December deadline passed. Its dilemma is that, in its first 18 months in office, there has been much more than the embassy conundrum to consider when it came to dealing with China.

Evidence is frequently put forward of increasing **Chinese disruption** and spying on UK targets at a time when both sides claim

they want to put the relationship on a more even keel.

Within days of Starmer's December speech, his government's sanctioning of two **China-based companies** for launching more than 80 global cyberattacks against the UK and its allies prompted tit-for-tat allegations from Beijing.

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Highlighting the weight that China accords to the embassy issue, the state-controlled China Daily complained that the sanctions came at a time when the UK was delaying approval of the new London mission on the basis of what the paper called "unfounded security concerns".

"This delay, coupled with the sanctions, points to a broader reluctance to foster a relationship built on mutual respect and understanding."

If approval is finally granted by next week's deadline, Starmer will inevitably face the ire of Sinosceptics who will portray the favour to Beijing as a weak-kneed sellout.

Public scepticism and parliamentary pressure mount

It seems even they are getting impatient about the delays. **Luke de Pulford**, head of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China and an opponent of the embassy plan, told Reuters last month: "Rather than this endless deferral, which will only makes Beijing more angry, the government should say no, and get it over with."

This week's letter from Labour MPs is the latest sign that scepticism about China is spreading from the right to the left of parliament and that a more hawkish stance may reflect an instinctive suspicion of Beijing's motives within much of the electorate.

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A survey taken in late autumn by More in Common indicated the public tended to oppose the embassy project, while few believed the economic benefits of a closer relationship with China outweighed the security risks.

But neither public caution nor resistance from the Sinosceptics explain the slow course of Starmer's promised China 'reset' in which the still unresolved embassy issue has served as a ready symbol.

The latest postponement was the third time the planning decision had been deferred since Starmer's Labour took office in July 2024. In that month Beijing resubmitted a planning application that had been previously turned down by the local Tower Hamlets municipal council.

The council decision reflected complaints about the scheme from local residents, Hong Kong exiles, other Chinese dissidents, and initially the police that the mission's location created a security threat and potential harm to surrounding historical sites.

An inevitable yes?

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Signalling that re-engaging with China was an economic and foreign policy priority for the new government, Starmer said that in the same exchange he and Xi discussed areas of shared collaboration and potential co-operation.

With that in mind, it might have made sense to put more urgency into tackling the embassy hurdle.

Successive governments and their intelligence services have, after all, known for more than five years that Beijing planned to move its diplomats to the Royal Mint site.

The 2022 rejection of the plan by the local council was never likely to be the final word on an issue so closely linked to the national interest.

A government that believes that dealing with China on vital global issues is a necessity rather than a choice may regrettably have left itself no option but to now say 'yes' despite the domestic resistance.