

DEFENCE

How China framed Admiral Radakin's visit as a subtle recalibration in UK foreign policy

On 09 April 2025, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, the UK's Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), visited China, marking the first trip to the country by the head of the UK armed forces since General Sir Nick Houghton's visit in 2015.^{1 2 3} During his visit, Admiral Radakin met with General Liu Zhenli, Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission.^{4 5}

The UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) made no formal announcement about the visit, beyond confirming that it took place.⁶ Meanwhile, the Chinese Ministry of National Defence (MND) reportedly issued a brief statement on its website on 9 April, that the two military officials exchanged "in-depth opinions on the military relations between the two countries, the international regional situation, and issues of mutual concern, as well as discussing strengthening military exchanges and cooperation".^{7 8}

After the 'discreet' visit had been reported across the UK media ecosystem, Chinese state-media outlet the Global Times, and state-affiliated nationalist news and blog platform Guancha, published their own fuller coverage on 11 April.

In its coverage, the Global Times quoted several Chinese international relations scholars, as well as existing British coverage including that of the BBC and Admiral Radakin's own post on X which stated: "We agreed that in an unstable world we must play our part as responsible nations with global interests, and we reflected on the importance of military-to-military communications."⁹ The outlet also highlighted that this is not the first 'meeting' between Liu and Admiral Radakin, referencing a video call from May 2024 between the two officials on "strengthening communication and cooperation between the two militaries".¹⁰

One of the academics featured was Zhuo Hua of the School of International Relations of Beijing Foreign Studies University who interpreted Admiral Radakin's visit to China as "not only the result of the improvement of China-UK relations, but also a signal of further positive development".¹¹ This was reinforced by further references to previous China-UK military dialogues, including a defence strategy consultation between the two militaries which reportedly took place in China on 25 September 2024.

Meanwhile, both Guancha and the Global Times emphasised that Admiral Radakin's visit coincided with that of Douglas Alexander, the UK's Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security, who was attending the 5th China International Consumer Products Expo around the same time. Alexander's visit was likewise unaccompanied by official UK government promotion.^{12 13} Although the Chinese state media outlets directly acknowledged sources describing Alexander's visit as pre-planned and consequently unrelated to President Trump's recent tariffs, simultaneously they promoted their interpretation of the UK's dispatch of two senior officials to China as demonstrating "Britain's desire to consolidate bilateral ties under the shadow of US' reckless tariff policies".¹⁴

Both outlets also linked the visit with preparations for the Royal Navy's deployment of the Carrier Strike Group including to the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the UK's intent to maintain its strategic presence in the region.¹⁵ This was also reflected within the coverage by Radio France Internationale and Taiwanese national newspaper Liberty Times, speculating that Admiral Radakin's visit was a measure to prevent misunderstandings over UK activities in regional waters surrounding China.^{16 17}

Adarga Analysis:

While UK media coverage emphasised the visit's discreet nature and the domestic political optics of a British military chief visiting China amid strategic tensions, Admiral Radakin's visit to Beijing received markedly different treatment from the Chinese state media apparatus which emphasised a more long-term strategic view set within an aspirational framing of the China-UK relationship.

In our examination of the Chinese state media's coverage of Admiral Radakin's visit, the insight lies not so much in what was said, but how confidently and deliberately it was framed. Both the Global Times and Guancha moved quickly to not only acknowledge the visit but to position it within a broader Chinese narrative arc. Their coverage leaned into a tone of inevitability and mutual interest, that whether the UK chooses to broadcast its overtures or not, it is nonetheless coming to China, and doing so across both defence and economic fronts. The timing of the visit, coupled with that of Douglas Alexander, was portrayed not as coincidental, but as part of a subtle recalibration of British foreign policy. From Beijing's perspective, the message was clear: the UK, despite its rhetoric and transatlantic loyalties, cannot afford to ignore China, either economically or in terms of global security. With this framing, the coverage is seeking to entrench a long-standing narrative but also indicates an emboldened sense of strategic confidence.

Within this Chinese narrative, the UK is positioned not as a reluctant suitor, but as a pragmatic actor navigating a post-Brexit, post-American-led-order landscape. The Global Times editorial strategy made space for this interpretation by citing British media, selectively quoting Admiral Radakin's X post, and inviting commentary from Chinese scholars, including those who emphasised the importance of the UK's strategic autonomy. Furthermore, Zhuo Hua's assertion that the visit was both a 'result' of warming ties and a 'signal' of further positive development allowed the outlet to frame the encounter not as a one-off courtesy call, but as part of a trajectory that began well before this meeting and that is likely to continue. That idea is reinforced within the narrative through its references to past interactions: the May 2024 video call between Liu and Admiral Radakin, and the September 2024 bilateral defence strategy consultation. By anchoring the visit in a recent history of steady, if quiet, engagement, Chinese outlets are likely attempting to shape a story of reliable, institutionalised military dialogue, aligned with its aim to cultivate the projection of itself as a 'stabilising actor' and 'responsible global power' amid heightened strategic competition and tensions with the US.

Moreover, the visit was discursively bundled with the Royal Navy's upcoming deployment to the Indo-Pacific. Here, the coverage walks a fine line: acknowledging Britain's persistent military interests in the region, including the Carrier Strike Group's arrival, while framing Admiral Radakin's presence in Beijing as a de-escalatory gesture. Importantly, this framing tells us not just how Beijing sees the UK, but how it wants others to see it: as a mature power open to dialogue, capable of decoupling ideological disagreement from practical cooperation. Likewise, the omission of any reference to UK criticisms of Chinese human rights issues or regional military assertiveness is not accidental; again, it is almost certainly part of a broader narrative strategy. China is working to normalise its role as a security interlocutor, not just an economic one, and British willingness to show up, however quietly, is treated as validation.

Taken together, this coverage demonstrates that China is not only welcoming such visits, but actively attempt to shape their meaning to domestic and international audiences. In Beijing's hands, Admiral Radakin's visit becomes more than a bilateral exchange; it becomes a soft assertion of China's centrality within global security dialogue. The narrative casts China not just as a regional power, but as a global stabiliser, and one that Western states, including the UK, must engage with. This underscores the importance of watching not just what China does, but how it narrates events like these. The story Beijing seeks to tell itself, and others, about Admiral Radakin's visit, is one of strategic patience, quiet confidence, and increasing gravitational pull. The significance is therefore, not so much that the visit happened, but how swiftly and deliberately Beijing has folded it into its broader narrative of strategic engagement in order to shape its meaning.

ABOUT

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