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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Leoni, Z. (2022). The end of the "Golden Era"? The conundrum of Britain's China policy amidst Sino-American relations. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 51(2), 313-326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026221090315>

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The End of the “Golden Era”? The Conundrum of Britain’s China Policy Amidst Sino-American Relations

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Journal of Current Chinese Affairs
2022, Vol. 51 (2) 313–326
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DOI: 10.1177/18681026221090315
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Abstract

This analysis contributes to a fast-growing body of literature on Sino-Western relations and the tension between economic and security interests. It takes Britain’s China policy as a case study considering the Integrated Review 2021. It argues that London’s stance towards Beijing has shifted – officially – from the so-called “golden era” to a complex phase of diplomatic–military tensions and scrutinised economic relations, principally because of US pressure. However, this shift de facto has not had a structural impact on the economic side of the relationship between London and Beijing. The article reaches this conclusion by framing its narrative through the lens of the economy–security conundrum at the heart of the Liberal International Order and through the lens of the New Cold War between the US and China. These two factors are crucial for understanding the change between Britain’s China policy pre- and post-2016.

Manuscript received 2 June 2021; accepted 8 March 2022

Keywords

UK foreign policy, Liberal International Order, New Cold War, China

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Introduction

Diplomatic–military relations between the United Kingdom (UK) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have reached a negative zenith over the last two years – a tension crystallised in the Integrated Review 2021. Yet, only a few years ago the UK and China were said to be in their (financial) “golden era.”

This analysis seeks to answer two questions: why has Britain’s China policy shifted and to what extent is this a radical shift as opposed to a tactical adjustment? The argument put forward here maintains that the end of the golden era at this particular time is the result of pressures exerted on HM Government by the United States (US), and more generally by international tensions between Washington DC and Beijing. In Britain, these tensions acted as a catalyst to pre-existing domestic concerns. However, it is noted that while the official policy narrative about the PRC has shifted, there have not been tangible, structural consequences in the economic sphere – although, a report of the think tank Civitas and the Ministry of Defence’s *Project Defend* have considered the possibility of “partial decoupling” from China (Harris et al., 2021; Parker and Thomas, 2020). Therefore, the end of the golden era might have turned more into a tactical adjustment at a time of US–China tensions rather than a policy overhaul.

To explain why this limited shift in UK’s China policy happened and to contribute to both debates on UK–China relations and Sino-Western relations – an academic debate on UK–China relations is still developing – this analysis is framed through the lens of the International System (IS) in two ways. On the one hand, it considers the impact of the economy–security conundrum that lies at the heart of the Liberal International Order (LIO); on the other hand, it links the UK’s China policy shift to the New Cold War between Washington DC and Beijing, in the context of which the UK is a “special” ally of the US but also a historically business-driven state. Indeed, both factors explain why British policy-makers have sought to rebalance economic and security interests when it comes to China.

The rise of China has accelerated the production of literature on Sino-Western relations. The tension between economic and security interests, whether openly or tacitly acknowledged, is a theme that links many contributions in this area. The relationship with China is a major dilemma for the US. Washington DC has had to find a balance between three different foreign policies (Leoni, 2021: 74, 226–238; Luttwak, 2012: 213–247). While China is Australia’s most important economic partner, there has been a “reality check” in recent years (Medcalf, 2019). After a long debate, the country issued “robust” legislation against foreign interference (Medcalf, 2019: 109). Italy was the first Western state to join the Belt and Road Initiative – by signing a Memorandum of Understanding – and the first recipient of Chinese health aids in Europe. Yet, it was reminded by its Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic (COPASIR, 2020: 18) that it needed to be more cautious about its interaction with the PRC. Similarly, it was argued that there is a “kaleidoscopic dynamic” in European Union (EU)–US–China relations and that the EU’s China strategy is a “multi-track” (Tooze, 2021). But recent events saw the EU, the US, Canada, and the UK siding with one

another over human rights in China. These are just some of the most debated examples, and similar tensions are to be found in Israel or in the Gulf (Evron, 2017; Kerr, 2020). Britain's example fits into this picture. By asking HM Government to adopt a "strictly case-by-case approach" to Beijing, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK parliament acknowledged that a coherent China policy remains a challenging endeavour (UK Parliament, 2019).

The rest of this article is organised into four sections. The first section unpacks the implications of the LIO and the New Cold War. The second section provides an illustration of how Britain's China policy failed to address the economy-security conundrum between the handover of Hong Kong and the end of David Cameron's mandate. It shows that economic interests were prioritised over strategic interests, especially during the golden era. The third section focuses on the post-2016 period and on how international events – especially developments in US–China relations and pressures exerted on the UK – led to a shift in the UK's China policy. The fourth section critically reflects, however, on the extent to which this shift is a tactical rather than a structural one, to align the UK to the US while maintaining a smooth economic relationship with China.

The Economy-Security Conundrum of the LIO

Unpacking the Economy-Security Conundrum

The LIO is a Janus-faced construct. About 200 sovereign territorialities intersect with, but do not merge into an a-territorial order characterised by transnational flows of people, money, goods – and diseases – together with inter- and supra-national institutions of governance. International relations in this context is the product of balancing between different interests and forces, where one component does not permanently dominate over the other.

This intersection causes tensions both between and within states. Ikenberry (2011) stated that this order is made of both "liberal states and liberal order building" that is characterised by a degree of unevenness as there can be many kinds of LIO (pp. 18–19). Marxist scholars agree with this analysis. Teschke and Lacher (2007) claimed that any theory of international relations in the capitalist era must acknowledge "the socially spatio-temporally differentiated and geopolitically mediated trajectories of territorial state formations and the emergence of capitalism" (p. 569). Harvey (2003) with his "two logics" approach maintained that while "[t]he capitalist operates in continuous space and time, ... the politician operates in a territorialized space" (p. 27). The relation between the two logics is "problematic and often contradictory" (Harvey, 2003: 30). Castells (2010) argued that there is a tension between the "space of flows" and "national elites" to the extent that the former is "a-spatial" and "can supersede and escape the socio-political control of nations" while the latter strives to control and mitigate the implications of such flows (p. 446). Both levels, however, intersect. Flint (2017) noted that states – or sections of them – have been "active agents in promoting [or shaping] transnational networks" (p. 180).

From the Post-Cold War “Hangover” to a new (Type of) Cold War

After the Cold War, the West’s victory over the USSR led many to think that it was time for a “strategic pause” (Freedman, 1998: 5). Indeed, Anthony Lake, Bill Clinton’s National Security Advisor announced that “[t]he successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of [geo-economic] enlargement” (Lake, 1993: 5). Applied to China, this strategy translated into the Clinton Administration’s effort to bring Beijing into the World Trade Organization (WTO), hoping to untap the Chinese market (Leoni, 2021: 78). Geopolitical interests were “significantly marginalized in favor of the economic calculus” by the acceleration of US-led globalisation (Smith, 2006: 187). This policy, however, contained the seeds of a structural “blowback” (Leoni, 2021: 74). Indeed, Harvey (2003) commented that Washington DC’s relationship with China requires balancing between the desire to maintain “the world open enough” for American and global business to thrive and the need for “prevent[ing] the rise of any grand challenge” to American power (p. 84).

This economy-security conundrum was aggravated as the PRC became richer, more integrated within the global economy, and more assertive in foreign policy. Geopolitical tensions between the US and China have reverberated across the International System in recent years, to the point that some have seen this as a New Cold War, although not everyone agrees with this historical comparison. The media has extensively used the concept of New Cold War to describe a confrontation that is happening on several fronts – military, economic, diplomatic, ideological – between two great powers (Kemp, 2020). Some scholars, instead, believe that analogies with the past are misleading (Westad, 2019). A third group has taken a middle ground position, arguing that the New Cold War remains a useful analogy, providing it is not employed in a mechanical way (McFaul, 2020).

In this author’s view, this is not Cold War II but a “new (type of) Cold War.” On the one hand, the US and China are confronting each other over a multitude of issues and geographies, to the point that US allies are increasingly pressured by tensions between Washington DC and Beijing. On the other hand, because of how US grand strategy has operated since the end of World War II, and because of the intersection of this with the PRC’s state-led capitalism, the US and China are currently trapped in an economy-security conundrum where they need one another to prosper, but at the same time, they are each other’s obstacle to international economic, technological, and military primacy. Ultimately, there is a condition of restrained confrontation and necessary cooperation between both powers.

This definition helps make sense of US efforts to turn allies against China but it also explains its limited success with this operation. Furthermore, it reflects the incoherence found in the UK case study. Due to the charm of China’s economic power at a time of US retreat from liberal hegemony, Washington DC’s allies could one day become Beijing’s geopolitical allies. This is a major concern in the US and reflects a qualitatively similar dynamic compared to the Cold War. Indeed, although American power projects globally thanks to its vast military network, US hegemony relies on “forms of

coordinated economic [and security] interdependence” and it needs allies to project its power and win conflicts with peer adversaries (Bromley, 2008: 4; Mansoor and Murray, 2016: 2, 377). Yet, the economy-security conundrum and economic interdependence between the US and China and between US allies and China undermines Washington DC’s efforts to constrain Beijing, allowing allies to make adjustments rather than making hard choices.

Britain’s China Policy: From Ethical Foreign Policy to the Golden era

Prior to 1997, negotiations for the future of Hong Kong defined Britain’s concerns about China (Zhang, 2019: 208). However, the PRC’s economic growth – especially after joining the WTO in 2001 – has been highly consequential to Britain’s China strategy (Brown, 2011: 170). On the one hand, the UK found itself in a position of “reversed [power] asymmetry” (Brown, 2011: 6). On the other hand, China’s global geoeconomic presence widened the number of issues that every country, including Britain, faced when dealing with Beijing. This raised questions about how to approach the PRC – “to engage or contain” it – which have lasted to this day (Breslin, 2004: 414–418). To manage such a dilemma, the New Labour government of Tony Blair sought, in the spirit of an ethical foreign policy, to balance between values and economic interests. It did so through a policy of “engagement,” that is, “flexibility” to raise “human rights and other sensitive issues in China” with British stakeholders while ensuring smooth continuation of business operations (Brown, 2011: 178).

Towards the end of its mandate, New Labour published *The UK and China: A Framework for Engagement* (FCO, 2010) strategy. This document emphasised the need for achieving “the best for the UK from China’s growth”; encouraging China to become a “responsible global player”; and “fostering democratic modernisation in China” (FCO, 2010). However, this was described as an “uneasy mixture” and New Labour ultimately failed to “make tough choices about what the cut-off point is between the West’s interests and China’s” (Brown, 2011: 171, 181, 187; Zhang, 2019: 209).

With “a clear embodiment of the liberal tradition,” the Conservative–Liberal coalition (2010–2015) prioritised “financial collaboration” with China (Zhang, 2019: 209, 211–213). Such a skewed diplomatic attitude led to the so-called “golden era” in Sino-British relations. This slogan “was coined ... to promote Chinese President Xi Jinping’s lavish state visit to the UK in 2015” (Turner, 2018). With it, Cameron’s government celebrated a relative intensification in interactions between the UK and the PRC, while it sought to charm Chinese investors (Harris, 2017: 254). In London, the first Western clearing centre for the renminbi was opened (Lockett and Hughes, 2016). It was argued that “the most important reason to establish the London RMB centre” was because it would have “safeguard[ed] London’s status as world-leading financial centre” (Pacheco Pardo et al., 2019: 539–540). The UK was the first country in the

West to allow a consortium of industries, within which the state-owned China National Nuclear Corporation featured, to build the Hinkley Point C civil nuclear plant. Although the British government had several security warnings, these “worries” were “over-ruled” by Cameron and Osborne (Thomas, 2017: 690). This explains the fact that evidence for securitising Britain’s China policy and rebalancing priorities was already palpable. Indeed, when the UK became the first Western country to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in March 2015, the Obama Administration accused the UK of “constant accommodation” with China (Freeman, 2019: 670). But this did not prevent the Chancellor, in September 2015, from stating that Britain was going to be “China’s best partner in the West,” partly helped by the fact that the Obama Administration continued to maintain a stable diplomatic relationship with China (HM Treasury, 2015). Yet, in May 2016, David Cameron warned the PRC that it would have to “abide” by the ruling of Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on South China Sea disputes (Asthana et al., 2016).

From May’s Transition to the Integrated Review 2021: The end of the Golden era

By the time Theresa May began her mandate, the mood in Washington DC was ripe for escalating the US’ China policy. The latter has evolved more resolutely and assertively since the last years of the Obama Administration. The Democratic president realised that ordinary diplomacy and the announcement of a geostrategic shift to the Pacific did not prevent Xi Jinping from continuing a nationalist agenda while advocating for a post-unipolar way of managing great powers relations (see chapters 5 and 6, Leoni, 2021). It became more difficult for the UK to play the game of “middle power manship” between West and East (Harris, 2017: 262–265). In the days following May’s election, the PCA ruled against China and in favour of the Philippines. It was reported that while the EU had issued a mild statement, the British government advocated for sending a stronger message (Emmott, 2016). Since then, Beijing “cooled on a series of high-profile projects” (Ford and Kyngé, 2017). A Chinese official complained that the “level of enthusiasm” was not the same as the “Cameron Osborne team” (Ford and Kyngé, 2017). May flew to China in February 2018, where she confirmed that Sino-British relations were living a golden era. Yet, it seemed that she did so more for institutional sensitivity than for her political agenda (*The Guardian*, 2018).

In hindsight, the golden era was described as an example of “mutual opportunisms” (Bencivelli and Tonelli, 2020: 84). But it was noted that the contribution of China to the UK economy was limited (Turner, 2019: 216; Zhang, 2019: 209). Indeed, some argued that rather than tangible benefits it was the hope about “the key role the PRC will play globally” that justified the “depoliticisation” of Britain’s China policy (Bencivelli and Tonelli, 2020: 83; Harris, 2017: 265). Meanwhile, there is no agreement as to what extent the PRC is an essential economic partner for the UK, whether Beijing

needs the UK and its knowhow, on the benefits of Chinese Foreign Direct Investments in the UK, and even on the dependence of Britain on supply chains linked to China (Turner, 2019).

Since then, hesitation turned into a “deep freeze” (Ford and Hughes, 2020). Between May’s late mandate and Johnson’s early years, a series of international events made it difficult for the UK not to side with its special ally and to revise the golden era narrative. Firstly, the mood about China within the policy community in Washington DC was bi-partisan and hostile. This allowed Donald Trump to respond to China with a more confrontational version of Obama’s “pivot to Asia,” such as the trade tariffs and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (Leoni, 2021: 222–226). Secondly, growing tensions in Hong Kong culminated in a new and much-contested national security law, while the world learned about the re-education camps in Xinjiang. The United States explicitly condemned these actions and the UK – also due to its relationship to the Fragarant Harbour – was keen to support this. Thirdly, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic undermined the international image of China and aggravated tensions with Washington DC. The Trump Administration used this as an excuse to delegitimise the CCP vis-à-vis the international community.

These events opened a window of opportunity for the US to exert its leverage on allies at a time when the UK needed to either allow or reject Huawei’s 5G from entering the country. Indeed, the United States played a major role in Boris Johnson’s U-turn on Huawei, which would have been China’s flagship investment in the country. Intervening in London in May 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reminded Britain that the US wanted “trusted” intelligence partners (*BBC News*, 2019). His British peer Jeremy Hunt had to reply that “we would never ... compromise” intelligence sharing, “particularly [with] the United States” (*BBC News*, 2019). In late January 2020, a senior member of the Trump Administration confessed that the US was “disappointed by the UK’s decision” to allow Huawei’s 5G into the British network (Dilanian, 2020). Johnson sought to explain this decision to Trump, but the media reported contrasting accounts of the tone of that telephone conversation. Ultimately, it was revealed that the UK government admitted that Huawei was banned due to “geopolitical” concerns and “huge pressure from President Donald Trump” (Helm, 2020). In July 2020, Pompeo, reacting to the Huawei ban, claimed that it “advances Transatlantic security” (Smith, 2020).

Internally, this kind of international environment and the special relationship provided a “momentum” for the British anti-China camp to become more vocal (des Garets Geddes, 2020). Indeed, between 2019 and 2020, the balance in Britain’s China strategy tilted from economic to security interests – at least, on a diplomatic level. In April 2019, the Foreign Affairs Committee of Westminster advanced some unequivocal requests: that there should be a “recalibrat[ion]” of Britain’s China strategy, considering that China’s foreign policy is shaped by the CCP’s assertive interests; that the term “golden era” should be acknowledged as inappropriate; that there is a risk of “prioritising economic considerations over ... national security”; and that Britain’s China policy needed to be “crafted via a [FCO-led] cross-Government process.”

When Ken McCallum was promoted director of MI5 in March 2020, he promised to be tougher on China (Sabbagh, 2020a). In April of the same year, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab stated that UK–China relations “could not go back to ‘business as usual’ once the pandemic was over” (Lunn et al., 2020: 11–12). Meanwhile, a parliamentary paper confirmed that the UK Government backed calls for an inquiry into the response to the pandemic led by the World Health Organization (Lunn et al., 2020: 12). In May, a group of Conservative MPs forced Prime Minister Johnson “to reduce [the presence of] Huawei [in the British 5G network] to a 35% market share” (Sabbagh, 2020b). Meanwhile, the former MI6 chief, intervening on Huawei, argued in July that COVID-19 “revealed more about China under President Xi Jinping than the previous six years” (Sawers, 2020). A few days later, Boris Johnson completely banned Huawei’s 5G from the British network.

The Aftermath of the Integrated Review: Rhetoric versus Reality

This new (diplomatic) normal in the UK’s China policy was made official by the Integrated Review in March 2021, while statements from the FCO continued to condemn China’s human rights record between 2020 and 2021 (FCO, 2021). The Integrated Review made an economic and military argument about China. It stated that the PRC is the “biggest state-based threat to the UK’s economic security,” and that its military modernisation and assertiveness threaten British interests in the Indo-Pacific (HM Government, 2021: 29; 62–63). These statements were consistent with the U-turn on Huawei, but also with the first deployment of the HM Queen Elizabeth II aircraft carrier to the Pacific in early 2021, and later on with the trilateral security pact between Australia, UK, and US (AUKUS). In this way, the UK has aligned to Obama’s, Trump’s, and Biden’s national security strategies since the Integrated Review reflects a world order where great power competition is back in town. Furthermore, differences with Cameron’s National Security Strategy 2015 are profound, since the latter advocated for a deeper relationship with China (HM Government, 2015: 58). Instead, Chinese policies will now be scrutinised more rigorously while London will continue to support Washington DC on international issues that concern China. From this perspective, the UK has moved away from the golden era narrative.

However, even if the golden era has been ditched, to what extent have the events analysed above substantially disrupted UK–China relations? From an economic viewpoint, the UK does not appear to be keen to implement changes in areas of economic engagement with China. To begin with, business interests have undermined the British government’s new position on China. British banks such as HSBC and Standard Chartered “openly supported” the national security law that China imposed on Hong Kong during the summer of 2020 (Riordan, 2020). This event delegitimised the whole-of-government spirit that represents the backbone of the Integrated Review 2021. Furthermore, for the most part, Sino-British business continues, as usual,

coexisting with diplomatic tensions. Indeed, after the Integrated Review was published, Johnson stated that “[t]hose who call for a new Cold War on China or for us to sequester our economy entirely from China ... are, I think, mistaken” (*Xinhua*, 2021). Meanwhile, Dominic Raab stated in a leaked message that the UK “ought to be trading liberally” regardless of the human rights record of commercial partners (Wintour and Allegretti, 2021). Raab’s message sounded hypocritical but revealed a real issue about the economy-security conundrum in a post-Brexit era. Meanwhile, a former cabinet minister asked if “are we going also to isolate ourselves from China, ... [w]here are we going to make a living?” (Ford and Hughes, 2020). This not only highlights a hypocritical stance of Johnson’s Government, but it also confirms that from a financial perspective US hegemony is losing command.

From a diplomatic and military viewpoint, the UK continues to signal its full commitment to the alliance with the US. However, at the G7 in Cornwall, it became clear that the UK – like other countries – is uncomfortable with US pressure. Indeed, at the summit, it was evident that President Joe Biden will struggle to organise a unified, anti-China front behind the Build Back Better World label. The G7 communiqué stated that members “will cooperate to address the challenge posed by China” but only “where it is in our mutual interest” (G7 Cornwall, 2021). Furthermore, it was reported that while the US was keen to make most of the G7 about China, “Britain sought to avoid framing it in those terms.” Likewise, EU diplomats revealed that the UK, Canada, and Italy advocated for a more nuanced China policy compared to Biden’s hard line and that the EU’s approach should be one of “cooperate,” “compete,” and “contest” (Parker and Cameron-Chileshe, 2021). In addition, in his AUKUS speech, Johnson wished to make the online summit – which involved the building of nuclear-powered submarines in Australia – more about British jobs than strategy (Johnson, 2021). Last but not least, if the rise of China is an urgent problem, the delivery of its first submarine in 2034 seems to be disconnected from its original spirit.

Regardless, Britain’s diplomatic and military endeavours have disappointed Beijing and have contributed to escalating the relationship to a new era. To China, in the current International System “strategic competition becomes more acute” and there is a “Cold War mentality of encirclement” (The State Council, 2019). Through this lens, China believes that London, with its Pacific tilt, is supporting an anti-China diplomatic–military coalition in the Indo-Pacific. This perspective crystallised between the Huawei ban, the publication of the Integrated Review, and the announcement of the AUKUS pact. In the summer of 2020, the *China Daily* argued that by banning Huawei’s 5G “London capitulated to Washington’s demand” (*China Daily*, 2020). Months before the Integrated Review, the Chinese ministry of defence “warned against the British navy dispatching warships [such as the new aircraft carrier] to the disputed South China Sea” (Wong, 2021). Meanwhile, a Chinese scholar wrote in the *Global Times* that post-Brexit Britain reveals “a tendency to take sides with Washington against Beijing” (Cui, 2021). Hours after the Integrated Review was published, two *Global Times* (2021) journalists replied that global Britain is aimed at “moderat[ing] China’s global dominance” (Zhang and Zhao, 2021). About AUKUS, the *Global*

Times (2021) sought to undermine the legitimacy of the alliance by arguing that it is a threat not only to China, but also to ASEAN, regional stability, and the world.

Conclusion

This article analysed why the golden era in UK–China relations ended, and it critically reflected on the extent to which this was a structural shift as opposed to a tactical adjustment. It was argued that there has been a shift in Britain’s China policy during the post-Brexit era, principally caused by international events, among which US hegemonic pressures figure prominently. Indeed, the article noted that from a diplomatic and military viewpoint, the UK has demonstrated that when it comes to China it supports Washington DC’s foreign policy. However, it was shown that this shift is not a radical one. Indeed, aside from diplomatic and military tensions, the economic relationship between the UK and China – which is what both countries care about the most – continues uninterrupted, and the British government does not seem to have any intention of taking the bull by the horns.

This analysis has made two contributions. Firstly, it has updated the literature on Britain’s China policy at a critical time in Sino-British relations. UK–China relations have, for the past two decades, attracted limited academic interest, while the Integrated Review 2021 has made a step forward compared to issues discussed in previous publications. Secondly, it has provided a framework for interpreting Western countries’ China policies. Indeed, this analysis was framed through the lens of the International System, and by considering the security-economy conundrum of the LIO and current tensions in US–China relations. This inner, structural tension is the source of both necessary cooperation and constrained competition that defines the new (type of) cold war between Washington DC and Beijing, and that impacts on the strategies of countries integrated within the US-led system of alliances.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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