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Britain Lost the Ball in Hong Kong

By Robert Weiner and Jonathan Person

On July 1st 1997, the world witnessed the handover of Hong Kong from British control to China. When terms were made between the two nations, it was determined that Hong Kong and China would act under the pretense of "one country, two systems" and that Hong Kong would retain full autonomy for the next 50 years. The joint agreement also states that the SAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) will enjoy a high degree of autonomy, except in foreign and defense affairs, which are the responsibilities of the Central People's Government. When addressing the handover, then-US President Bill Clinton remarked that the situation in Hong Kong was not set in stone and would "unfold over the months and years ahead". 27 years on, things have not gone smoothly between the two nations, with protests and demonstrations eerily similar to past situations in Tibet as well as Taiwan today.

With the new government taking control of Parliament, China and Hong Kong should be on the top of British foreign policy. The newly elected Labour parliament must realize that they have to help uphold a peaceful transition, as they are the ones who agreed to protect the state of Hong Kong and its citizens' rights and to help insure a peaceful transition during their handoff negotiations. This can best be done through increased and harsher sanctions against China, increased presence from the British, and possibly through legal proceedings.

Before and after the handover, Hong Kong has developed a different culture and economy that clashes with the Chinese government. It is important to note that it was agreed during the handover that under their autonomy Hong Kong would have an independent judiciary, freedom of speech, and the right to have elections with many political parties. This is best seen through a crackdown on journalism. Former Hong Kong Press Club General Manager Didier Saugy, now the General Manager at the club in the US, talked about the unique situation of having to manage both Hong Kong and Chinese citizens during the unrest. He emphasized the importance of "promoting unity at the press club" and to uphold journalist integrity and peace despite what was going on around them. The UK should take a similar approach by promoting a peaceful unity through fighting for the preservation of the citizen rights on both sides.

The UK could also look to emulate the actions of the United States. The situation in Hong Kong is akin to the US situation in Taiwan, with both conflicts involving a key trading partner who have found themselves in difficult situations with their Chinese neighbors. The US has come to understand that they have an obligation to protect the rights of Taiwanese citizens and to help promote peace in the whole of southeast Asia.

The current choice of action for the US is sanctions, and harsher sanctions should be implemented in the future if China continues to encroach. However, an increased land presence by the US and their allies such as the ASEAN nations, could be a potential solution. US Army General Charles Flynn said something similar at the LANPAC conference in June where he sees an increased land presence as being advantageous and that countries "must be in a position to defend our sovereignty, to protect our people and uphold their rights under international law". If increased presence is needed, the UK must unite with allies in the area with the goal of promoting a peaceful existence for all nations in the area. Another choice of action worth considering is for the UK to take China to the UN Court of Justice, being that they are both members, and by association required to uphold the rule of law agreed between two states. This is a legitimate option, and with cooperation by the UK, China, and the Hong Kong government, could lead to a peaceful existence and transition, which was promised almost 30 years ago.

This situation questions the role of the UK in their former territories. While China feels like they understand their role in the area, the UK must act to hold up their own end and defend the autonomy of Hong Kong. The US also sees this as an issue, and has offered remedies to the situation, which the UK can follow. With a new government taking shape, it is imperative that they show the willingness to stand by the agreements and protect the rights of their citizens at home, in the Commonwealth, and in former territories.

Robert Weiner was a spokesman in the Clinton and George W. Bush White Houses. He was communications director of the House Government Operations Committee and senior aide to Congressmen John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper, and Ed Koch; Senator Ted Kennedy; and Four-Star General/ Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey.

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