

China protests British and US interference in Hong Kong

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A British government minister ignited a diplomatic firestorm on September 14 after he published an article in the *South China Morning Post* declaring that “Britain stands ready to support in any way we can” to hold the first direct election of Hong Kong’s chief executive in 2017. At present, a 1,200-men election committee, composed of the most powerful businesspeople and elite professionals handed-picked by Beijing, elects Hong Kong’s chief executive.

The comment by Hugo Swire, British Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, represents London’s attempt to exploit the issue of democratic rights in Hong Kong to put pressure on China. Beijing has been wary of the demand for direct elections of the head of the Hong Kong government and the Legislative Council fearing that it could become the focus for broader political and social discontent both in the former British colony and mainland China itself.

The Chinese foreign ministry immediately issued a protest, stating: “Hong Kong’s internal affairs will not brook any interference by outside forces.” Beijing’s representative in Hong Kong, Zhang Xiaoming, ruled out any public nomination of chief executive candidates for 2017, insisting that a “broadly representative nominating committee” must select them.

Leading opposition Democratic Party figures in Hong Kong, such as Martin Lee, welcomed the British statement. Lee insisted that Britain, as a signatory to the 1984 “Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong,” under which Britain handed rule in China in 1997, had the right to raise concerns about Hong Kong.

Swire’s article has been seized on by the Chinese government, which recently accused the opposition parties of being tools of the US and UK governments.

The Chinese state-run media pointed to British intelligence networks in Hong Kong, claiming that they penetrated deep into the political establishment and implying that opposition leaders could be agents.

Hong Kong’s official opposition suffered a blow recently when former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden fled to the territory after exposing the massive illegal Internet and phone surveillance on the American and world population. Snowden’s revelations expose the illusion cultivated by the Democrats that the US is the model of democracy. Leading oppositional figures were silent over Snowden’s stay in Hong Kong during June.

Beijing, which used the exposure of the NSA to counter US accusations of Chinese cyber warfare, gave the green light for Hong Kong authorities to release Snowden, ignoring US demands to arrest him. Just weeks later, in what appears to be a tit for tat, the Obama administration sent Clifford Hart as the new US general consul to Hong Kong. His first intervention was to make a provocative statement that he was looking forward to “genuine democratic suffrage” in the city.

Amid the current Sino-British row over Hong Kong, Hart declared on Tuesday at a lunch hosted by the American Chamber of Commerce that Washington supported Hong Kong’s progress toward universal suffrage. “The United States will always stand for our core democratic values,” he said. His speech came a month after Chinese Foreign Ministry Commissioner Song Zhe warned him to stay out of Hong Kong’s affairs.

Hart has spent years dealing with Taiwan, including as Director of Taiwan Coordination at the State Department under the administration of President George W. Bush.

The hawkish Chinese newspaper *Global Times*

claims that Hart had long advocated a “Quiet Revolution” in Taiwan, promoting “democracy” as the basis to oppose any reunification with mainland China. The *Global Times* accused him of now making a similar push in Hong Kong, seeking to establish “a pro-US regime” without engaging in a “large-scale war.”

Hart’s appointment as the top US official in Hong Kong is part of Obama’s “rebalance to Asia” to undermine China’s position. As well as building up military alliances and partnerships in the region to encircle China, the US has encouraged disputes between China and its neighbours. However, Hart’s activities in Hong Kong are an obvious attempt to stir up dissent within Chinese territory.

Washington passed a United States-Hong Kong Policy Act in 1992 specifying that Hong Kong would continue to be treated as a separate entity from China after 1997. Concerns have emerged in China over “pro-independence” sentiment in Hong Kong, based on a supposedly unique history of British colonial rule and Cantonese language, against the predominantly Mandarin-speaking “mainlanders.”

Britain annexed Hong Kong via the Opium War in the early 1840s and the territory became one of its principal colonial outposts in Asia. Many Chinese capitalists and landlords fled to the territory after the 1949 Chinese Revolution. Behind the negotiations for its return to Chinese rule in the 1980s, Britain and the US calculated that it would encourage the restoration of capitalism in China. Under Deng Xiaoping’s “one country, two systems” formula, the enclave functioned as a gateway for foreign capital, transforming southern China into a cheap labour workshop for world capitalism.

The Basic Law, the city’s mini-constitution negotiated between London and Beijing, calls for eventual universal suffrage, but it has been repeatedly postponed. The Hong Kong tycoons have also grown ever wealthier by integrating themselves into the new Chinese bourgeoisie, giving the city the third highest number of billionaires in the world after New York and Moscow. Of the seven million residents, however, more than a million live under the poverty line, producing intense social tensions.

The opposition Democratic Party and its allies, which represent business layers marginalised by the wealthy pro-Beijing elite, have organised protests each July 1,

the anniversary of the return to Chinese rule, in some cases involving hundreds of thousands of people. Next July, the opposition is planning an “Occupy Central” campaign in Hong Kong’s business centre as a means of pressuring Beijing to grant “one-man, one vote” in 2017.

Chan Kin-man of the Chinese University of Hong Kong told the *New York Times* in August that the “Occupy Central” campaign did not seek to “overthrow the government.” He insisted: “We just want a democratic system in Hong Kong. We are not interested in ending Communist rule in China.” Chan warned that Hong Kong could become “ungovernable” amid rising social tensions, as the unelected administration was widely viewed as illegitimate. Chan urged Beijing to allow elections quickly, saying “we are in deep trouble if we wait.”

Chan’s comments underscore the dilemma facing Beijing. If it makes concessions on universal suffrage in Hong Kong, the same demand will arise across China. The provocative intrusion of the US and Britain into the debate only compounds the intensifying political difficulties confronting Beijing in Hong Kong.



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