

UK and China clash over Hong Kong

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Tensions between London and Beijing escalated after Chinese embassy officials said at the weekend that a committee of inquiry of UK members of Parliament would not be allowed to enter Hong Kong.

The trip was intended for later this month by the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee. Its ostensible purpose was to evaluate the implementation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration that returned the former British colony to China 30 years ago.

However, the visit comes as Britain, lining up with the United States, has backed the protest movement in Hong Kong against Beijing's decision that candidates in the 2017 election to the post of Hong Kong's chief executive will be vetted by an appointed committee before a popular vote. This led to Chinese accusations that the MPs' visit was motivated by Britain's geopolitical meddling.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the purpose of the MPs' trip was not for "a normal friendly visit, but to carry out a so-called investigation on Chinese territory."

"We do not need any foreign lawmakers to carry out probes," she said. "China's opposition to any foreign government, organisation or individual interfering in Hong Kong's affairs in any form is resolute... Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China. The central government is responsible for foreign affairs regarding Hong Kong."

Warning that the UK's actions risked damaging Chinese-British relations, Hua said, "If certain people in Britain still want to keep on like this, it is not only irrational and useless, but like lifting up a rock to drop it on one's foot."

British imperialism annexed Hong Kong via the Opium War in the early 1840s. In December 1984, China's Zhao Ziyang and Britain's Margaret Thatcher signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration giving China sovereignty over the territory effective July 1997, under

the "one country, two systems" agreement.

Portrayed as a significant concession to Britain, the guarantee to preserve capitalist property relations in Hong Kong, in fact, just as fully served the interests of the Beijing Stalinists, who were intent on utilising the territory as a gateway for foreign capital into the mainland. Since then, southern China has been transformed into a cheap-labour workshop, with a resulting explosion in social inequality, especially in Hong Kong itself.

This was a factor in the emergence of the protest movement, at least in its initial stage. Since then, however, the pro-capitalist "democrats" and Occupy Central organization at the head of the movement have worked to dissipate all social demands. Representing sections of Hong Kong's elite and the upper-middle classes concerned over Beijing's usurpation of their formerly privileged position in the territory, their aim has been to channel the protests into demands for "autonomy."

This dovetails with the concerns of a significant section of the ruling elite in Washington and London, for whom the dispute over Hong Kong's status is a mechanism for encouraging the break-up of China and its dismemberment by Western imperialism. When they complain about Beijing's veto, their real objection is that it prevents them putting forward their own candidates for the strategic post of Hong Kong chief executive.

Until recently, the British government had been circumspect in its public statements on the protest movement. The Conservative chair of the parliamentary committee, Richard Ottaway, said the fact that the inquiry had been set up two months before the umbrella protests began in September was proof that the UK was not "meddling" in Chinese affairs.

But the UK's reluctance to aggressively take sides had led to angry denunciations. Writing in the *Observer*

in October, Anson Chan, former chief secretary in the British colonial government of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government under Beijing rule, complained that the territory had been “betrayed by China. And abandoned by the British.”

Britain had a “moral and legal responsibility” to its former colony under the Sino-British declaration, Chan said.

Chan was one of those giving evidence to the parliamentary inquiry. Her statements echoed Chris Patten, the last British governor before the 1997 handover. He told the inquiry, “When China asserts that what is happening in Hong Kong is nothing to do with us, we should make it absolutely clear publicly and privately that that is not the case.”

China’s assertions “spit in the face” of the 1984 Joint Declaration, he said. “It is amazing that when they say that sort of thing, the [British] Foreign Office doesn’t make a fuss, because the Joint Declaration provides obligations on China to us for 50 years.”

Britain refused to accept universal suffrage throughout its 150-year colonial administration. Moreover, Article 45 of Hong Kong Basic Law states only that “The *ultimate aim* is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures.” [Emphasis added].

This “ultimate aim” extends only to an executive that is wholly dominated by rival big business parties and figures.

Patten’s and Chan’s comments are in line with demands by the US that Britain utilise its position as co-signatory to the Joint Declaration to reassert its colonial claim against China. An op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* on September 23 angrily denounced “Britain’s Betrayal of Hong Kong” and berated London’s failure “to call Beijing on its broken promises of autonomy.”

London “has failed to express even mild criticism of Beijing’s treaty violation,” it complained.

“As a signatory to the Joint Declaration, only the UK has the legal standing to protest Beijing’s broken promises,” the column stated, concluding that Thatcher’s insistence that the UK would hold Beijing to its treaty commitments was “one more Thatcherite legacy her successors have failed to honor.”

Washington is stepping up its military and diplomatic intrigues against China. Speaking on the eve of the G20 summit in Australia last month, President Barack Obama served notice on Beijing of preparations for a new “colour revolution”—modelled on that in Ukraine and elsewhere—when he declared that “people in Hong Kong are speaking out for their universal rights.”

This followed the declaration by the UN Human Rights Committee in October that China must allow free elections in Hong Kong, stipulating that universal suffrage includes “the right to stand for office as well as the right to vote.”

In November, the US Congressional Executive Commission on China held a hearing on “The Future of Democracy in Hong Kong,” which Patten addressed by teleconference. The bipartisan committee has authored a bill calling for an update to the 1992 Hong Kong Policy Act that would make any new agreements with China on trade and economic matters dependent on guarantees of Hong Kong’s autonomy.

Britain is now hardening its own stance. At Tuesday’s emergency parliamentary debate on the decision to bar the parliamentary visit, the government was urged to publicly condemn China. Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ottaway said the ban was “an attack on the free world” and sent “a clear threat that the pledge that Hong Kong would enjoy a high degree of autonomy is now under threat.”



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