

British government ramps up campaign against China

Jean Shaoul
3 July 2020

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has upped the ante against China in the wake of the Trump administration's increasingly bellicose confrontation with Beijing.

Posturing as a defender of human rights, Johnson, speaking in parliament, pledged to honour his provocative and essentially empty pledge—made last month—to offer residency to up to 2.9 million of Hong Kong's 7.5 million citizens.

Johnson's shift marks a definitive end to former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's vision of extending economic relations between Britain and China and Johnson's own once mooted plans for a trade deal with China after Britain leaves the European Union (EU).

On Wednesday, Johnson denounced China's sweeping new security law for Hong Kong as a "clear and serious breach" of the 1985 UK-China agreement over the handover of Hong Kong to Beijing in 1997 at the expiry of Britain's 99-year lease on the island and mainland territories. "It violates Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and is in direct conflict with Hong Kong's basic law. The law also threatens the freedoms and rights protected by the joint declaration."

The new legislation, passed Tuesday, will allow Beijing to crack down on political dissent in Hong Kong and further curtail democratic rights. The Hong Kong government is to set up an "Office for Safeguarding National Security" that will grant Beijing judicial rights over criminal cases with alleged "foreign interference," that includes subversion, secession, terrorism and colluding with foreign forces deemed to pose a threat to national security. Subversion could encompass damage to government property, while attempts to shut down public transportation in a citywide strike, as has happened during recent protests, could constitute terrorism charges.

On Wednesday, protesters took to the streets to oppose the new law, blocking roads, prompting the city's police to detain nearly 400 people for various offences, including nine for violating the new law. One demonstrator was arrested for carrying a Hong Kong independence flag. The police said

one officer had been stabbed in the arm while making an arrest.

The 350,000 Hong Kong citizens who hold British National Overseas (BNO) passports issued before the 1997 handover would be offered citizenship, while those eligible for BNO status and currently living in the city, around 2.55 million, would be able to apply for a BNO passport.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said that BNO passport holders would be allowed to live and work in the UK without having to satisfy any income test. After five years they would be eligible to apply for settled status and later citizenship. He stressed, "There will be no quotas on numbers."

This comes from Brexiteers who fought a vicious campaign to leave the EU based on limiting immigration, whipping up xenophobia and "taking back control of our borders." The government is to introduce a "points-based" system for migrants to Britain and end free movement for EU citizens after Brexit as part of its efforts to all but end immigration.

The Tories appear to have forgotten that their Conservative predecessors in power in 1995, under John Major's premiership, refused Lord Chris Patten's demand for similar measures. According to Lord Michael Heseltine, a minister under both Margaret Thatcher and Major, Britain had not granted residency rights because it would have been seen as "a major insult to China" and undermined the peaceful handover of the colony, which was the gateway to China and the source of much of the City of London's wealth.

But when pressed, Raab admitted that few Hong Kongers were likely to take up Britain's offer and that in practice London was powerless to "coercively force" Beijing if it blocked them from leaving the city to come to the UK.

His sights are in fact set on the city's financiers, hoping to entice them to bring their ill-gotten gains to London and buy property in the City, Canary Wharf and the more affluent parts of the capital. According to Beauchamp Estates, buyers from Hong Kong and China account for 15 percent of international acquisitions worth more than £1 million and 20

percent of deals worth more than £10 million.

Zhang Xiaoming, deputy director of the Chinese government's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office told the media that China would not be intimidated if foreign powers intervened. "Gone are the days when Chinese people had to be at somebody's disposal or rely on others for the air one breathes."

China's ambassador in London Liu Xiaoming said that Britain had no right to grant residency to Hong Kongers, which violated the agreements between the two countries, and vowed to take "corresponding measures" to stop such a move. He pointed out that the city's citizens were Chinese nationals and Britain's offer of residency and citizenship breached international law, insisting, "The UK has no sovereignty, jurisdiction or right of 'supervision' over Hong Kong."

The government has also offered asylum to Cheng Man Kit—also known as Simon Cheng—a former employee of the British consulate in Hong Kong and a British overseas national, who reported on the pro-democracy protests for the British government. He claimed he was tortured by Chinese police and was accused of inciting political unrest in the city in 2019 after returning from a day trip to Shenzhen. Cheng told the *Guardian* that he had been forced under torture to falsely confess that he and the British government were involved in the city's pro-democracy protests.

The Labour Party backed Johnson to the hilt, welcoming the government's stance. Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy urged the government to push for a UN inquiry into police brutality in Hong Kong and to re-examine its commercial ties with Beijing.

London followed up its aggressive stance towards China by summoning Chinese ambassador Liu Xiaoming to a meeting with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's permanent under-secretary, Simon McDonald, to express Britain's "deep concern" about China's imposition of national security legislation on Hong Kong.

Speaking about Britain's commercial links with China, particularly its high-tech companies, which it is threatening to cut, a Downing Street spokesperson said, "We have a strong and constructive relationship with China in many areas. But this relationship does not come at any price. It has always been the case that where we have concerns, we raise them, and where we need to intervene then we will."

The Johnson government, which is moving rapidly to curtail democratic rights in Britain under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic, has absolutely no interest in the erosion of democratic rights in Hong Kong or anywhere else. Its purpose is to open another front in US imperialism's economic, diplomatic, and military-strategic offensive against China that threatens military war against

the world's second largest economy.

Washington has blamed Beijing for the US's shocking death toll from COVID-19, due to its own negligence and incompetence, to deflect public anger and justify aggression against Beijing. It has accused China of pushing disinformation and malicious cyber campaigns and saddling the so-called developing nations with debt and dependency.

It has backed up this war of words by dispatching three aircraft carrier strike groups to operate just off China's water. It is pressuring American companies to move operations from China and other countries to bar Huawei—China's flagship telecoms and electronics company—from their 5G networks, promoting India as an alternate global manufacturing production-chain hub, threatening to repudiate support for the "one China policy" and encouraging others to do likewise.

On Wednesday, US Congress approved with bipartisan support a bill to rebuke China over its crackdown in Hong Kong by imposing sanctions on groups, including the police and banks, that undermine the city's autonomy or restrict its freedoms. Last week, the Trump administration said it would restrict US visas for unspecified Chinese officials for infringing the autonomy of Hong Kong. This follows an earlier announcement that Washington intends to end Hong Kong's special status as a gateway to mainland China due to its looser export controls and agreements on technology transfers, academic exchanges, taxation, currency exchange and sanctions that continued after 1997.

Johnson's moves against Beijing are echoed by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison who said he was "prepared to step up and provide support" for Hong Kong residents, including the possibility of permanent residency.



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