**Hong Kong`s return**

BY SY E D S I K A N D E R M E H D I 2021-07-02

BETWEEN 1989 and 1997, three spectacular events took place: f all of the Berlin Wall; the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union; and the return of Hong Kong to China. While the first two are remembered and celebrated internationally, the third is rarely remembered and celebrated outside China.

We live in a world where territorial disputes abound. During such times, China has shown how to peacefully resolve a territorial dispute through a visionary approach, in line with the advice of ancient China`s military genius Sun-Tzu who said: `Ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle, but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting.` Twenty-four years ago, at midnight on July 1, 1997, China regained Hong Kong without firing a single bullet, and a historic wrong was undone.

Great Britain had invaded China in 1839. One of its first acts of war was to occupy Hong Kong. This occupation was formalised when China was forced to accept the Convention of Chuenpi and cede the island to the invader. Signed in 1842, the Treaty of Nanking further consolidated the British position. In 1898, China had to agree to lease Hong Kong for an additional 99 years to Britain. This territory, which was stolen, had been an integral part of China for over 2, 000 years.

How to get it back from Britain was the challenge that China faced after the Chinese revolution of 1949 and af ter.

Hong Kong`s status as a British overseas territory was clearly humiliating as it projected the incompleteness of Chinese sovereignty over its territories. The new China declared that all the treaties it had signed under duress were illegal, and the state expressed its resolve to regain Hong Kong. Nevertheless, despite its resolve, revolutionary China never sent in its military or mercenary forces to the territory. It knew quite well that imperialist forces would pounce on it and destroy what the revolution had achieved if it acted in a reckless manner. So the country decided to wait patiently for the expiry of the lease in 1997. At midnight, on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong was formally handed back to China by the British.

The return of Hong Kong to China was no doubt an event of great historical significance. The return wasn`t easy. After all, Hong Kong wasn`t a desert in Sinai nor a glacier in Siachen, where only enmity, brutality and death are witnessed. Hong Kong was and remains a bastion of capitalism and a territory that has significant strategic value for all stakeholders involved. Again, the bitter memories ofover more than one century of Britain`s ruthless domination would be a huge obstacle to any negotiated settlement.

Then, when serious negotiations started between the two countries in the early 1980s, China was not the global power that it is today. Moreover, the 1980s was a period still marked by the ferocious Cold War. Both the superpowers (the US and the Soviet Union) were hostile to China, while the US-led Western bloc was unsympathetic and unsupportive. Worse still, Britain was looking for excuses to wriggle out of the treaty that it had imposed on imperial China in 1898. The latter country moved cautiously. It didn`t provide any excuses to Britain, and turned the treaty against its architect by emphasising that Britain was bound by the treaty to leave Hong Kong in 1997.

This was a realistic approach. It had calculated that a rigid position on the issue would possibly embroil it in a costly and never-ending territorial conflict withBritain, and Hong Kong would then never return to it.

Moreover, China had longer-term goals, which it was not prepared to sacrifice. As such, it didn`t hesitate in making extraordinary compromises and taking huge risks.

For instance, itagreed that Hong Kong would be governed under the principle of `one country, two systems`, where the city would enjoy `a high degree of autonomy, except in foreign and defence affairs` for the next 50 years.

It also agreed that Hong Kong would be a `Special Administrative Region` that would have its own legal system, multiple political parties as well as rights including the freedom of assembly and free speech.

After regaining Hong Kong, China took a series of measures to integrate the island with the mainland. However, it`s clear that the US will continue to resist China`s drive to develop and expand its influence globally, and will try and use Hong Kong as a tool to destabilise China and damage its politico-economic system as is evident in its stance. It is clear that the war for the future of China will be fought in Hong Kong. The writer is the former chairperson of the International Relations, Department at the University of Karachi, and a peace scholar.

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