



## Hong Kong Handover: 20 Year Anniversary 1 July 2017

### Summary

The United Kingdom transferred sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 July 1997, after which it became a Special Administrative Region of the PRC.<sup>1</sup> This implemented provisions in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong. The UK Government publishes six-monthly reports on the situation in the territory and the implementation of the Joint Declaration.



(The handover ceremony marked the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong)

### Background



British forces took the island of Hong Kong from China during the Opium War of 1839–42. The UK then obtained the territory of Kowloon, across the bay from Hong Kong Island, after it was ceded by China in 1860 under the Convention of Peking. Later, in 1898, the UK obtained the New Territories, which included Lantau Island, under a 99-year lease—set to expire in 1997.<sup>2</sup>

Preparations for Hong Kong's return to China began in the 1980s. In September 1982, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher met with Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping to discuss the future of Hong Kong. Negotiations over the territory were pursued through diplomatic channels over the next two years until, on 19 December 1984, Mrs Thatcher and Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on behalf of the UK and PRC Governments.<sup>3</sup>

Delivering a speech at the Great Hall of the People following the signing of the Joint Declaration, Mrs Thatcher declared that it represented a “landmark in the life of the Territory, in the course of Anglo-Chinese relations and in the history of international diplomacy” because it established a “firm basis for confidence in Hong Kong up to 1997 and beyond, and for its

continued stability, prosperity and growth”.<sup>4</sup> The agreement paved the way for the peaceful handover of Hong Kong in 1997 and set out, among other things, the basic policies of the PRC regarding Hong Kong. In short, the document stated that under a system of ‘one country, two systems’, Hong Kong would retain its legal, social and economic systems and life-style; that elaboration of these policies would be stipulated in a Basic Law; and that these systems would remain unchanged for at least 50 years.<sup>5</sup>

## UK Government Reporting

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) reports to Parliament on Hong Kong on a six-monthly basis. Its reports focus on developments in the territory and the implementation of commitments contained within the Joint Declaration. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee has stated that the UK has “both a legal right and a moral obligation to monitor the implementation of the principles established” in the Joint Declaration, which is primarily done via these FCO reports.<sup>6</sup> The first such report, covering the period January–June 1997—when Hong Kong was still under UK administration—was published by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook in July of that year. The most recent, the fortieth such report, was published by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson in February of this year, covering the period July–December 2016. This report concluded that although ‘one country, two systems’ was functioning well in the “vast majority of areas”, recent developments relating to issues such as democracy and the exercise of rights and freedoms (including of expression and of the press) had “caused concern”.<sup>7</sup>

## Further Information

- House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [The UK's Relations with Hong Kong: 30 Years After the Joint Declaration](#), 6 March 2015, HC 649 of session 2014–15; and [Government Response](#), March 2015
- House of Commons Library, [UK Relations with Hong Kong: May 2015](#), 15 May 2015; [Hong Kong: Pro-democracy Protests and Proposed FAC Visit](#), 1 December 2014; [Universal Suffrage to Elect the Next Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2017: A Legal Primer](#), 30 September 2014; [Hong Kong: The Final Stages](#), 13 November 1996; and [Hong Kong: The Current Issues](#), 26 April 1995

<sup>1</sup> Portugal transferred sovereignty of the colony of Macau to the PRC two and a half years later, on 20 December 1999, after more than 440 years of possession (BBC News, [Macau Handover: Asia's Last Colony](#), 20 December 1999). Image: University of Southern California US-China Institute, [Still the Consummate Middleman](#), 23 January 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Economist*, [1898 and All That: A Brief History of Hong Kong](#), 26 June 1997. Map: Wikimedia Commons, [Colonial Hong Kong](#), 9 April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Hong Kong, [Sino-British Negotiations and the Sino-British Joint Declaration](#), 2012, pp 11–14.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Thatcher Foundation, [Speech Signing the Joint Declaration](#), 19 December 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Hong Kong, [Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong](#), 1 July 2007.

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [The UK's Relations with Hong Kong: 30 Years After the Joint Declaration](#), 6 March 2015, HC 649 of session 2014–15.

<sup>7</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Six-monthly Report on Hong Kong: 1 July to 31 December 2016](#), 24 February 2017, p 33.

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