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The sixth in our series of expert comment and analysis, by Professor the Lord Alton of Liverpool, member of the House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, Vice Chair of the APPG on Hong Kong, co-chair and founder of the APPG on North Korea; and a Patron of Hong Kong Watch. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.

The China Reckoning Must Put Human Rights At Its Heart

Dominic Raab, the Foreign Secretary, has told us that once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, it cannot be *'business as usual'* with China.

He is right.

It is clear from this pandemic that the *'one party, one system'* Communist Party dictatorship - which has tragically abandoned the reform programme of Deng Xiaoping - is both a danger to the people of China, through its brutal repression of human rights and basic freedoms, but also a threat to the wider world due to that same repression and mendacity.

As I argued in a debate in the House of Lords before Easter, this pandemic was unleashed on the world primarily as a consequence of the regime's decision to repress the truth instead of repressing the virus. It silenced doctors, threatened whistle-blowers, arrested citizen journalists who tried to report the virus and failed to immediately report the existence of the virus to the WHO.

This is not the behaviour of a responsible nation and not worthy of its great people.

The subsequent cynical use of the pandemic to engage in self-advancing propaganda, aggression, in threats to others, and to intensify its crackdown on freedoms in Hong Kong, has displayed the hall-marks of a bullying tyranny.

As the mask has slipped, the true face of the Chinese Communist Party has been revealed to the world.

Across the globe, and from Left to Right, this has precipitated the radical reappraisal of our relationship with the CCP for which Dominic Raab has called.

The *'China Reckoning'*, as it has been dubbed, must put human rights and basic liberties at its heart. The reality is that the UK has for too long pursued a naive approach of kowtowing to the Chinese Communist Party regime, being too often silent in public on the grave human rights concerns, turning a blind eye to the regime's increasing aggression well beyond its borders, and compromising national security.

Our policies have been dogged by what I believe to be a myth - the idea that in order to trade you have to stay silent on human rights. A myth that plays into a false narrative about the centrality of China's importance to our national interests. Look at the facts - in 2018, China accounted for just 3.5% of UK imports and 6.6% of UK exports. By contrast, the EU accounted for 45% of exports from the UK and 53% of imports into the UK.

However, be in no doubt, China has been targeting our economy. In the UK its financial power is now worth the equivalent of £100 billion with £43 billion invested by the Chinese since 2000 - significantly more than other European countries. From British Steel, to Premier Football Clubs, from Thames Water, Heathrow Airport, Pizza Express, to the company which makes London's black cabs and the brewers, Greene King, China has been playing a real life version of a game of Monopoly.



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It is not necessarily wrong to develop economic ties with China, but it is wrong to do so in a way that puts too many eggs in one basket and that results in us staying silent on human rights, turning a blind eye to grave violations of international law and compromising our national security in the process.

Our response should be targeted at the CCP regime, not at China, as a country, or the amazing Chinese people. So we should join calls for an international investigation into the causes of the pandemic. We should stop the Huawei deal. We should diversify supply chains so that we are not dependent on China for vital products, strengthen our relationship with Taiwan - which is a democracy that is committed to human rights and good governance and which, in stark contrast with the methods of the Chinese regime, has handled this crisis remarkably effectively. We should impose targeted Magnitsky sanctions on CCP officials responsible for grave violations of human rights - against lawyers, pro-democracy advocates, political dissidents, people of Faith, and in places like Xinjiang, where one million Muslim Uighurs are incarcerated to be forcibly 're-educated.' We should seek fundamental re-form of multilateral institutions such as the WHO, the World Bank, UN bodies and others, to reduce China's disproportionate influence.

Under the cover of COVID-19, China is reported to have been breaking UN sanctions against its ally in North Korea. It has also been imitating the worst characteristics of Colonialism in aspects of its Belt and Road programme and treatment of African countries. But the world has simply looked away.

As Beijing ridicules 'weak' liberal values and democracy we need to strengthen alliances with countries that share our values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law - with our traditional allies in the Commonwealth, North America, and Europe, but also with established and more fragile democracies in Asia, particularly Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and elsewhere. It means standing four square with the beleaguered people of Hong Kong in their existential battle for 'two systems, one country' - and to whom we have a historic, legal, and moral responsibility.

Trade is clearly important - and in the contest of a post pandemic Depression will be vital in creating jobs and sustaining livelihoods. I would not want to advocate a position that suggests that trade does not matter. But trade should not be values-blind and it should be conducted as far as possible in ways that benefit both the people of the UK and the people of the countries with whom we trade, and human

rights concerns should be at the centre of foreign policy.

In the Cold War, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan used the Helsinki Process to weave the defence of human rights into how we engaged at every level with the Soviet Union. They didn't take the place of defence, security, or trade, but were intrinsic to how we patiently dealt with the regime and expressed solidarity with oppressed people. Later Robin Cook argued for an ethical foreign policy which looked at the world through the lens of democratic values. In 2006, William Hague promised to put human rights at the heart of foreign policy. That was good rhetoric, but 14 years on, especially in the way we now deal with the Chinese Communist Party, I would like to see its realisation in concrete policy terms.

As a consequence of the pandemic, we have heard many more voices, from right across the spectrum, calling for a rethink of how we approach China. I welcome that. It's long overdue.

David Alton
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House of Lords Official Portrait

