

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, October 23, 2018.

## To Beijing: don't hold Hong Kong too tight if you want 'one country, two systems' to succeed

- Tom Plate says Hong Kong is so precious to China that it tends to overreact to anyone who adds to societal tension in the city
- However, China needs to remember the importance of 'one country, two systems' to its other hopes of unification

PUBLISHED : Tuesday, 23 October, 2018, 7:19am

UPDATED : Tuesday, 23 October, 2018, 3:19pm



[Tom Plate](#)

Hong Kong is exceptional, of course. It is an object of desire worldwide – a known global gem, a gold-medal metropolis. It attracts not just businesspeople but also holiday-seekers. It is glamorous and still has an amazing film industry. It probably has

more [raging shopaholics](#) per square metre than anywhere outside Dubai. Its history is almost as rich as its property tycoons.

The government of China always wanted it – politically as well as economically – in no small part because [for more than 150 years, it couldn't have it](#). The British wanted to keep it – and would take it back at the drop of an umbrella. Empires, British or otherwise, tend to bow out ungraciously: having been compelled to [return Hong Kong to China in 1997](#), London still can't stop [yapping – about freedom and autonomy and so on](#), which it did precious little to foster while Hong Kong was in its back pocket.

Alas, Hong Kong residents these days feel a significant squeeze on both private space, where they live, and public space, what they discuss and how they interact: the former due to real-estate economics and the latter due to Beijing, which, in its mimetic desire, tends to take excessive note of London's possessive avidity.

Why? It's as if the mainland, irrationally enough, fears Hong Kong will be snatched away and needs to press its thumb on it more than ever, reacting with official ire no matter how trivial the provocation.

"The British?" Tung Chee-hwa said to me shortly before the 1997 handover. "They're anti-Chinese and they have a total mistrust of China." Recently, a high-level British journalist, stationed by his London-headquartered newspaper in Hong Kong, had his [work visa tied up in Zhongnanhai's knots](#) following a panel-hosting gig at the Foreign Correspondents' Club.

The event co-starred the mainly harmless 27-year-old leader of the local independence party. Because Hong Kong is so desired, no time and effort can be spared to scapegoat anyone who even slightly adds to tension, however short it falls of a credible threat to societal breakdown. The FCC, widely beloved for its colourful history and iconic importance, suddenly became ground zero for retaliation.



After journalist Victor Mallet was expelled from Hong Kong for hosting the Andy Chan talk at the FCC, London couldn't stop yapping about freedom and autonomy and so on, which it had done little to foster before 1997. Photo: Reuters

In reality, the pragmatic course for Hong Kong, many agree, is to forswear on a stack of [Das Kapitals](#) any thought of independence while working adroitly to maximise autonomy. This [bifurcation](#) offers full deference to Beijing's sovereignty over the territory, but would permit amiable public space for [umbrellas](#), [wet-behind-the-ears potential historical figures](#) and just about everyone else.

The international camera-ready umbrella movement did little but further harden the hardest hearts in Beijing and annoy many Hong Kong adults. And some adult "democrats" are increasingly seen as naive. "No," a Hong Kong friend of decades corrected me sternly, "they were just plain stupid for rejecting the offer of a chief executive election where everyone got a vote." Even though candidates would be screened first by Beijing's ideological talent scouts? "Absolutely; it would have been a start."

The opposition's [refusal to go ahead with the semi-direct election proposed three years ago](#) was a bonehead move. It fed Beijing's paranoia that the strings must have been pulled by someone outside the territory, or local people must have lost their minds – what's not to like, Beijing reckoned, just because we don't want to risk someone winning the election who hates us?

China played it fairly cool, though, and just shrugged its shoulders in public. It will do more than that, however, if progress is not made towards Article 23 national security legislation whose necessity is spelt out in the Basic Law. George Yeo, a highly regarded

former foreign minister of Singapore, has said: “China is losing patience on Article 23 ... I think Chief Executive Carrie Lam will push it through either this term or next. Worsening Sino-US relations make Article 23 even more urgent. For China.”

The roughhouse rigidity of China-US relations is stupidity itself. Last month, a solitary US warship was [denied permission to make a routine port call in Hong Kong](#). (Has bilateral mistrust got so bad that Beijing feared the ship might never leave once docked?)

Sure, it's hard to blame the Xi Jinping government for going into one of Beijing's patented sulks after Donald Trump's sledgehammer of tariffs. How long the US president's pack of economic primates will continue on this reckless trail is unknown. Bad international economic policy makes for bad superpower politics, with Hongkongers – among others – caught in the squeeze.

Recall that, in 1997, the Clinton administration was blissfully expanding economic engagement with Beijing, not blocking it. Back then, the atmosphere was not noxious, and the handover went well. Tung, the incoming chief executive – to my mind the best of Hong Kong's post-colonial leaders, but underappreciated locally – put it thus: “A successful Hong Kong is very important to China. It will make further unifications an easier job. It is in China's national interest to make Hong Kong work.”

This may be even truer today than two decades ago. But desire can sometimes drive you crazy when you want something so much.

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