

Lord Patten of Barnes – Written evidence (TRC0019)

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A systemic competitor

The views in this submission are those of the author alone

Asked by one of his disciples what would be his first act if he became ruler, Confucius replied that he would rectify the names. While there is much discussion about what exactly this means, the best explanation is that it came close to what more recently George Orwell said about politics and language. Things should mean in practice what their names are customarily taken to signify. Orwell memorably referred to some phrases used in politics as like the ink from a cuttlefish, disguising what was really meant. So what does the Integrated Review tell us about the government's assessment of China's relationship to this country and to others, a particularly pertinent question given that the Prime Minister calls himself with his usual enthusiasm a Sinophile?

China is explicitly described in the Review as a "systemic competitor", which means exactly what? We are told a couple of pages later that "systemic competition will further test the line between peace and war, as malign actors use a wider range of tools — such as economic statecraft, cyber attacks, disinformation and proxies — to achieve their objectives without open confrontation or conflict. The UK is likely to remain a priority target for such threats." A little later we read that "China presents the biggest state-based threat to the U.K.'s economic security". On the other hand, "we will continue to pursue a positive economic relationship, including deeper trade links and more Chinese investment in the UK". On the next page: "we will not hesitate to stand up for our values and our interests where they are threatened, or when China acts in breach of existing agreements".

I imagine that an observant reader might conclude from all this that China is from time to time a malign actor which threatens the U.K.'s interests and values, but that we do not want to say this too explicitly in case we hurt China's feelings. This is the same China that has set out to obliterate freedom under the rule of law in Hong Kong (our last major colonial responsibility), to attack parliamentarians including the chairman of the House of Commons foreign affairs select committee for discharging their democratic responsibilities, to drive out a senior BBC journalist from Beijing for telling the truth, and to attack a distinguished group of British lawyers with the minatory objective of discouraging all those seeking to undertake their professional calling. From which we can conclude at the

very least that China is not too bothered about upsetting our own feelings.

Patriotism and the Chinese Communist Party

Like many others, including the author of this note, the Prime Minister says he is a Sinophile which in my case means that I have read large numbers of books about China, admire Chinese sculpture and visual art, and count many Chinese (especially in Hong Kong) among those I most like and admire. But this is where, it seems to me, we need to make a serious distinction — to admire China is not to admire the Chinese Communist Party. This goes right to the heart of the problem faced by many in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The Communist regime in Beijing insists that love of China and the love of the Communist Party are (to use the language of the Creed), consubstantial. For many in Hong Kong that would oblige them to love the authoritarian regime from which they or their families fled because of its brutalities and suppression of freedom.

It is very straightforward to make a distinction between China and the Chinese on the one hand, and the Chinese Communist Party on the other, when considering the outbreak of the coronavirus. While the Chinese Communist Party tried to cover up what was happening in Wuhan, individual Chinese doctors and health workers bravely attempted to warn their neighbours and the world about the new epidemic. Dr Li Wenliang sent a message on “we chat” warning other doctors to wear protective clothing when dealing with the early victims of what was to become a global pandemic. He and others were immediately summoned to the public security bureau and made to sign a letter in which they said that they understood that they had committed illegal activity which “still severely disturbed the social order”. We only know about this letter because when Dr LI became very ill, he posted it on the Weibo website. So it was brave Chinese doctors and nurses who tried to warn the world about the pandemic and the Chinese Communist Party which stopped the truth emerging for several weeks. Dr Li subsequently died of coronavirus.

I will return to this point later in referring to China’s breach of international obligations.

Self-delusion

In trying to develop a coherent, effective and contemporary response to China’s behaviour, it seems to me imperative to recognise how in the past we have consistently deluded ourselves, with the self-delusion often oiled and greased by greed and our assumptions about commercial advantage. There was, for example, an assumption during our last years in Hong Kong, particularly when negotiating the Joint Declaration, that the Chinese leaders were — to quote from the distinguished ambassador to

China and adviser to Prime Ministers, Sir Percy Cradock — “men of their word” who would keep to their undertakings even though they were “thuggish dictators”. When the Joint Declaration was being negotiated many people in Hong Kong asked that there should be an arbitration mechanism as part of it. They were turned down on the grounds that the Chinese Communist Party could be trusted and that the development of democracy in Hong Kong would help to protect it. We know what has happened.

This is not the only example of China breaking its word. President Xi went back on the undertakings he gave to President Obama about not militarising the South China Sea; China has fortified atolls and islands in breach of the Hague tribunal’s findings on its maritime borders. Beijing has, to be polite, resiled from the spirit and in many cases the letter of the undertakings it gave when it joined the WTO. On the pandemic, after the outbreak of SARS (which also started in China and was also initially covered up), an agreement was brokered through the WHO called the International Health Regulations under which signatories including China accepted an obligation in article 6 to provide “timely, accurate and detailed information” about public health emergencies within 24 hours of their discovery. When the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Australian counterpart on 30th January 2020 he assured her that “the epidemic is generally preventable, controllable and curable”. At the same time China was buying huge quantities of medical supplies from Australia (and certainly in February from Britain as well). It was not surprising that the Australians were quick to urge the establishment of an independent enquiry through the WHO into the outbreak of coronavirus. This led to the subsequent coercive assaults on Australia notably through commercial bullying.

A stake-holding future democracy?

So when earlier in this century we suggested that the efforts of liberal democracies should be focused on making China a responsible stakeholder in the existing system of global rules, regulations and agreements, we made two mistakes. First of all, we assumed that Beijing would keep these agreements if it had been party to making them. Second, we rather rashly took the view that China accepted our notion of what the global rulebook should be. But its behaviour makes pretty plain that it only accepts rules which work in what it deems to be its own interest.

We have also assumed that by embracing China, for example, as part of the global economy, we would help to change it in a more open and even democratic direction. I suspect that this assumption was turbocharged by the hubris that went with the fall of the Berlin wall and what Francis

Fukuyama called “the end of history”. In Hong Kong we often thought that after 1997 the rest of China would gradually become more like Hong Kong. After the Tiananmen murders President Bush and others were keen as soon as possible to turn the page and offered China a new start in its relations with the rest of the world. Around the turn-of-the-century we took the view that China’s accession to the WTO would further integrate China’s economy with that of the most developed countries with benign political consequences. China’s trade surpluses with most countries soared — her exports to the US increased by 1600% in a 15 year period — but the politics remained even more embedded in the permafrost. Mr Blair confidently predicted in 2005 that there was in China “unstoppable momentum towards democracy”. If there was any momentum at all, what stopped it? Undoubtedly, any even vestigial political change in China has gone into reverse since President Xi became lifetime boss. Many suspect that this was the result of several factors. First there seemed to be a palpable sense of drift under Xi’s predecessor Hu Jintao. Second the leadership seemed to be spooked by the affair of Bo Xilai who was thought to be trying to force his way into the heart of the party leadership. Third there was evidently concern about the party’s ability to hold onto control given the impact of globalisation, urbanisation and the Internet.

The “intense struggle” against liberal democracy

One manifestation of the party’s tighter grip on government and country was the prosaically called communiqué number nine issued in 2013 as an instruction to party and government officials to “wage intense struggle” against the following —

1. Western constitutional democracy, which was said to be an attempt to undermine the current party leadership.
2. Universal values of human rights — this was thought to be an effort to weaken the theoretical foundations of the party leadership.
3. Civil society — a political tool of Western anti-China forces aimed at dismantling the party’s social foundation.
4. Neoliberalism — an effort led by the US to change China’s basic economic system.
5. Western ideas of journalism — forcing an opening through which to infiltrate Western ideology.
6. Historical nihilism — the attempt to undermine the Communist Party’s history.

It is difficult to suggest that there is no clash of values between China and countries like our own when reading these instructions and others from the party in recent years about, for example, education as the way (in Stalin's words) to "engineer the soul".

Constraintment

There is a rather absurd attempt to argue that any effort to work with others to protect our own liberal democracies is tantamount to the launching of a new Cold War. The Beijing leadership likes this argument though it sits rather oddly with their own Wolf warrior diplomacy. I do not mean to give this proposition any legs by recalling a remark made by George Kennan in the famous long telegram about dealing with the Soviet Union. He remarked in that document — "our respective views of reality are simply incompatible". That does not seem to me to be a bad or inaccurate way of looking at China today.

But what we should seek is no Cold War, no iron or bamboo curtain, but what the late Gerald Segal described very well as constraintment, not — repeat not — containment. Segal described it thus: "tell China that the outside world has interests that will be defended by means of incentives for good behaviour, deterrence of bad behaviour, and punishment when deterrence fails".

An agenda for the UK

How might we define this in London? First, we have to acknowledge with some enthusiasm that we cannot work on our own. Trump has gone. Beginning with an expanded G7 meeting this year we must work creatively with the US and others in our common interest in dealing with the Chinese Communist Party. At home, I agree with those including Tom Tugendhat and Charles Parton that the government should establish a Cabinet committee under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister to coordinate policy on China right across the board and in developing policy to seek assistance, understanding and the experiences of others.

The economic relationship

The government should review, with input from think tanks, universities and business, our trading and investment relations with China. It is interesting that despite all the efforts of government and others, and all the occasional demeaning genuflections to China's view of itself and its narrative, the balance of our economic relations seems to have been almost immovably in China's favour. The statistics provided by the House of Lords library, based on the IMF direction of trade statistics database, for the period from 1980 to 2019, suggests that in real terms UK exports to China increased over that period by 3.774% , while UK imports from

China went up by 9.119%, again in real terms. The proportion of our exports to China as a proportion of all our trade in goods since 1980 appears to have been rather behind the same figure of imports from China. Whatever else they tell us, they don't suggest any very close correlation to political rows, nor do they suggest that China has been doing us any favours: indeed, rather the contrary. Not much sign of a golden era.

We should look at areas where we might want to change supply lines in certain products (most obviously high tech) from China to other countries in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

In addition, we need to examine where we may have become excessively dependent on investment by Chinese state-owned enterprises in strategic sectors of our economy, including energy and general infrastructure. We should be wary of putting ourselves in a position where the weaponization of these investments by Beijing could create security difficulties.

Economic partnerships with like-minded countries

In some high-tech areas — like AI, robotics, 5G technology — we should search for opportunities for joint investment with other liberal democracies. We should also develop a common agenda to tackle WTO abuse calling out China's flouting of the rules. China has continued, despite WTO membership, to discriminate against foreign multinationals. It has failed to curb subsidies to home-grown industries. It still presses foreign companies to transfer technology. It steals intellectual property. The Chinese government has direct involvement in the commercial decisions made by SOEs, which were not privatised as some had assumed but commercially strengthened (invariably with doubtless well-paid assistance from Wall Street and the City of London). In order to have any chance of making progress in these areas we will need to strengthen the institutions required for WTO arbitration.

Reclaiming international organisations

Partly because the Trump administration ignored and even disliked them, too many of the U.N.'s international bodies have in effect been taken into China's charge and even suborned. We need to work sedulously with our partners to reverse this process which has had unfortunate consequences from the WHO to the U.N.'s human rights bodies. Anne Appelbaum has written very well on this subject.

Coercion

Both the US and the EU have spoken out against the sort of coercion applied by Beijing to several countries including Norway, Australia and South Korea. We should not allow the Chinese Communist Party to pick

off countries one at a time without coming together to prevent this sort of focused bullying. Even the EU — the ratification of whose trade and investment deal with China has been called into doubt — is apparently considering at the moment measures against coercion.

Internal security

United Front activity clearly affects several liberal democracies. We should explore with our friends shared experience and the best ways of dealing with these assaults on our systems of governance and our values. We should look, in this context as well, at cyber security and espionage.

Higher education

There are two issues here of particular concern which are made more awkward, first, because of the extent to which some universities have become dependent for a large part of their income on recruiting foreign (and particularly Chinese) students, and second, because of both threats to the levels of research funding and the greater difficulty now of tapping into growing quantities of European research budgets out of which we have in the past done very well. Universities UK have produced advice on safeguarding the integrity of our universities in these areas, perhaps diplomatically avoiding so far as I can tell any mention of China.

Without in any way infringing the autonomy of universities, there seem to me to be three important steps for all universities to take.

1. In the light of the extraterritorial intent of China's National Security Law imposed on Hong Kong, it is clearly vital for all universities to make clear to their Chinese students from the mainland and Hong Kong, and to the embassy and consulates around the country, that any bullying of Hong Kong students or reporting on their activities, or on the teaching of academic staff, will be regarded as a clear breach of the obligations on the student body to respect the values of open academies. It is easier to say this than to make it effective. We know what has happened in other Anglophone countries. It would make sense to exchange experiences with them.

2. Academics who teach Chinese studies already seem to have set up effective arrangements for trying to protect the integrity of the classroom and of their research. But, of course, most of those who come from China and study on our campuses are working in other disciplines.

3. So far as research is concerned, the government seems to be taking steps which will enable it to provide good and clear advice to universities on the sort of collaboration which would be unwise and even damaging to our national security. Universities can help themselves by insisting on

transparency in research funding and in payments from other countries to their own employed academics.

It is quite likely that one of the areas which the Chinese Communist Party will seek to weaponise in future political disputes is that of higher education. But, to limit the ability of young Chinese women and men to study in the West, would clearly be hugely unpopular with the rising Chinese middle class. The same thing is probably true about efforts to weaponise tourist flows.

External security

With a new administration in Washington there is plainly a greater effort to work with others in trying to secure stability in Southeast Asia and beyond. We will want presumably to support the intelligence, naval and military relationship between the US, Australia, India and New Zealand and to work with others like Japan and South Korea who broadly share our own values and security interests. The UK will be required with its enlarged naval presence in the waters around south-east and eastern Asia to ensure the security of the major shipping routes. There is obviously much more concern at the moment about the possibility of a Chinese Communist assault on Taiwan. We should join others in making clear discreetly, and perhaps even less discreetly, that liberal democracies and others would regard this as a red line which China should not contemplate crossing. It was surprising that there was no mention of Taiwan in the integrated review. In our attempts to revalidate the WHO, we should with others urge the seating of Taiwan as a member of the WHO assembly. The present situation is a disgrace.

With, I hope, a restored aid budget, an important element in our soft power as a country, we should certainly join with the USA and others to offer more sustainable and less politicised assistance to those countries which are already getting into difficulty as one time willing partners of the debt diplomacy represented by Beijing's "one belt, one road" initiative. This has of course targeted ports, airports and other transport routes and hubs including several in Europe.

Partnerships with China for the sake of the Globe

We should take the initiative with our liberal democratic friends to work with China across the board in dealing with environmental challenges and with the threats of future global health problems, especially antimicrobial resistance. China would not be doing us any favours by working with us on these huge problems of the century. In addition to the great difficulties it faces with debt and demography it also confronts major environmental challenges particularly water shortage. China also faces a crisis of antimicrobial resistance. This is getting worse and is said to have become

a major public safety problem, endangering human and animal health and the ecological environment. These issues are of existential importance and we should not hold back in offering Beijing comprehensive cooperation in dealing with them. But we have to be able to depend on China keeping its word. It has recently been reported that, despite its promises, China has added more coal-fired energy than the aggregate reduced by the rest of the world. President Trump could not have made this up. It is not very encouraging.

Declinism

Chinese Communist leaders are said to believe that Western liberal democracies are in terminal decline and that the future lies with China's autocratic model and with friendly autocracies elsewhere. I believe myself that the story of American and European decline is vastly overblown. When the United Kingdom was a superpower, we used to think that one way of ensuring our status was by spending on our Armed Forces at least as much as the next two biggest powers put together. The USA spends more than the next 10 big defence spenders in aggregate. This is just one proxy for an economy which is still mighty strong and for a society and culture which have so much appeal to others. Some of this is also true about Europe. But there is no question that the biggest threat to all of us in liberal democracies, and the most likely way in which the Chinese Communist Party can damage us, lies in some of our own recent political failures. I do not believe that we can change China by anything we do in China. The biggest threat to the Chinese Communist Party is the success of what it purports to believe is a clapped-out system of government, a contention which it makes even while fearing — remember communiqué number nine — most of the things we stand for. Of all the existential threats faced by the Chinese totalitarian surveillance state, the most dangerous for it is the success of our own value system and the way it sustains our stability and prosperity, our decency and our civic humanism. Making those things safe, upholding the relationship between political freedom and economic liberty under the rule of law, is the best way of ensuring that we live in peace with China whatever its political system in the years ahead.

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