

We may not be able to save Hong Kong, but its fate can crystallise our response. It illustrates that China cannot be trusted to obey international treaties and that it puts paranoid, xenophobic nationalism ahead of rational economic self-interest. This is the basis for a belated, clear-eyed assessment of how we deal with China in future.

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<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/comment/chinas-treatment-of-hong-kong-shames-us-too-sx6g335tq>

China's treatment of Hong Kong shames us too

We need a strategy for dealing with the bullies of Beijing — let's look to our new line on Russia

Edward Lucas

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The people of Hong Kong are making a desperate stand for freedom. The new national security law railroaded through the communist regime's sham parliament in Beijing not only criminalises dissent but destroys the autonomous government and legal systems entrenched under the 1997 treaty with China. Those protesting today face the fate of their counterparts in other supposedly autonomous regions of China: disappearance and re-education.

Their eyes are [stinging from tear gas](#). Ours should sting from shame. Even before the latest power grab the vice was tightening. Peaceful protestors were arrested, pro-democracy legislators and candidates disqualified, foreign journalists and activists expelled and local residents, including a British diplomatic employee, Simon Cheng, abducted to the mainland and maltreated.

The former governor of [Hong Kong](#) Chris Patten has gathered more than 200 signatories from two dozen countries for an open letter decrying the power grab. Two thirds of them are from abroad, including many from countries such as Lithuania and Slovakia. They have no historical connection to our ex-colony but they understand freedom, perhaps better than we do.

Our government issued a terse, cross, joint statement with Canada and Australia. But we need deeds, not words. At a minimum we — jointly with Commonwealth allies — should offer asylum to all people at risk of

persecution in Hong Kong. In particular, we should upgrade the second-class British passports that give 250,000 people only limited rights to visit this country. Late last year the government was still refusing to look at this issue for fear of offending [China](#). Such worries seem laughable now.

We have a moral obligation here. Whether you regard the British empire with Kipling-esque pride or Rhodes-must-fall shame, the loose ends are ours to deal with. Our good name is at stake in another sense, too. As Lord Patten argues, if we do not stand up for Hong Kong now, why should anybody think we will ever stand up for anyone over anything?

Part of that response should be to raise the cost paid by the bullies of Beijing for their victory. Those responsible for repression in Hong Kong should no longer be able to travel to the West freely. These “Magnitsky sanctions” (named after a murdered Russian whistle-blower) bring home to human-rights abusers the consequences of their actions.

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Some steps have parallels. An important part of blunting the Russian threat was better energy security. The EU’s anti-monopoly powers helped to bust the Kremlin’s corrupt and exploitative gas-export model in eastern Europe. In China’s case, the much larger task is to diversify our supply chains, ranging from pharmaceuticals and medical equipment to electronics manufacturing. Japan is putting nearly £2 billion of its pandemic-related stimulus package into helping companies to shift production away from China. We should do likewise.

We can take tips from elsewhere on other fronts too. Australia’s tough package of national security laws gives us some clues about how to harden our academic, media and political systems, and prevent penetration of our elite institutions by Chinese influence-peddlers. The man who as Australia’s attorney-general drafted those laws, George Brandis, is now his country’s high commissioner in London. His views on Britain’s vulnerabilities are pithy and informative.

The next flare-up is likely to be over Taiwan. This week the Chinese communist regime dropped the word “peaceful” in its official rhetoric over reunification with the island democracy. We need to start thinking now about what we will do if China tries, for example, to blockade Taiwan. We can signal our support by boosting our ties with the democratic authorities there, for example by upgrading the British mission and receiving high-level Taiwanese guests. The hard question is how to raise the political, economic

and military cost of aggression to the point that decision-makers in Beijing back down.

The only answer will be a global coalition. Many flinch at Donald Trump's fitful and splenetic Beijing-bashing, rightly thinking that the president is seeking a distraction from his domestic problems. We can find other allies, boosting what *The New York Times* recently called a "middle-power dynamic". But, as in every geopolitical conflict in the last century, if we want to save ourselves, let alone Hong Kong, it will only be with America on our side.