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# China's latest acts of oppression must act as a wake-up call

David Owen | Thursday November 26 2020, 12.01am, The Times

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The third breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration by the Chinese Communist Party should serve as a wake-up call not just to Britain but to her allies as well.

The pace at which President Xi has dismantled Hong Kong's democracy through the purging of pro-democracy and the recent arrests of former pro-democracy lawmakers only points to further trouble ahead.

Such a brazen move by Beijing to rule in favour of the mass expulsion of all pro-democracy lawmakers in Hong Kong would previously have been unthinkable, but with the eyes of the West fixed on the fallout from the US election, the Chinese Communist Party has pounced at the opportunity to turn the screws further by annexing one of the remaining remnants of opposition in the city.



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Xi based his calculation on the premise that this would produce far less international outcry than the outright cancelling of pending democratic elections in the territory. With the exception of Canada, the response to this latest encroachment has culminated in little more than a flurry of statements of condemnation paired with a noticeable absence of concrete actions, which appears to have proved Xi's assumption correct.

Even the UK government's welcome offer of UK citizenship for Hongkongers now needs additional action, preferably in concert with the US government.

Aside from its continued encroachment in Hong Kong, Beijing continues to intimidate its neighbours in the South China Sea, wage a trade war against Australia in violation of the countries' free trade agreement, and increase its preparedness for war with Taiwan.

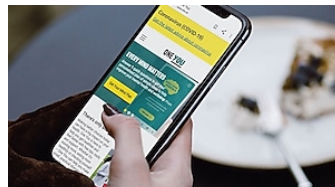
The answer to challenging China's behaviour lies in closer collaboration between like-minded democracies. The UK, as a leading member of the Five Eyes and Nato, has an important role to play in this regard.

Beijing's belligerent response to the Five Eyes condemnation of the purging of pro-democracy voices in Hong Kong, which included the threat "of their eyes being poked and blinded", is illustrative not of its leaders' indifference to the formation of an alliance against China but of its growing insecurity.

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In terms of continued threats against Taiwan, the UK must be ready to work closely with the US and other partners in the Asia Pacific region to guarantee its continued stability and security. In light of the need for closer defence collaboration, it is welcome that the UK government has committed to increasing the UK's defence budget, which will include the Royal Navy acquiring eight Type 26 and five Type 31 frigates, as well as the development of new Type 32 frigates.

Outside of defence partnerships, the UK government should actively be working to deepen cooperation across the Five Eyes to counter Chinese Communist Party interference in the West and work with other democracies to create an Indo-Pacific Strategy which will serve as an alternative to China's debt diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative.

The G7 Summit hosted in the UK next year will present a key opportunity to help formulate the beginning of a more permanent alliance of democracies concerned with China's behaviour. As the first G7 of Biden's presidency it will no doubt be used to re-establish US leadership in the West and repair some of the damage inflicted by the previous administration. Boris Johnson, as chairman, should sound out the other six countries to see if there is a consensus to enlarge to a G10 and invite India, Australia and South Korea to become members.

Beijing's encroachment in Hong Kong should serve as a signal to the UK that it can ill afford to neglect key alliances, particularly as it leaves the European Union. To remain a relevant partner with a substantial contribution to make towards a coordinated democratic alliance against the Chinese Communist Party, the UK government must be willing to increase spending not only on defence but its diplomatic and intelligence capabilities as well.


Otherwise, there is a risk that the promise of a truly global Britain will give way as the UK retreats from its historic, moral, and legal obligations to the people of Hong Kong and its mutual interest in working with key allies to contain China's expansionist behaviour.

**Lord Owen is an independent Social Democrat peer and former foreign secretary**

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