



Sino-British Negotiations and the Sino-British Joint Declaration

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to China and Sino-British negotiations

In the 1970s, the approaching expiry of the “lease” on the New Territories in 1997 caused uncertainties in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Governor, Crawford Murray Maclehoose, visited China officially on 29 March 1979. To explore the CPG’s position on the question of Hong Kong, he suggested to the CPG that the land grants in the New Territories be approved for a term beyond 30 June 1997, “for so long as the Crown administers the territory”. Deng Xiaoping refused the British request immediately, stating that:

“...Hong Kong’s special position can be guaranteed in 1997, no matter how this question is solved. To speak more clearly, Hong Kong can continue to implement its capitalist system for a rather long period from this century to early next century, while we, the Mainland, practise socialism.”

In September 1982, Deng Xiaoping met British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The meeting signalled the beginning of Sino-British negotiations on the future of Hong Kong.

(Photograph by Wang Jingde, courtesy Xinhua News Agency.)



British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher visited China on 22 September 1982 to discuss the future of Hong Kong with Chinese leaders, after which they jointly declared that “*for the common purpose of maintaining Hong Kong's prosperity and stability, the two sides agreed to continue the negotiations through diplomatic channels*”. This signalled the beginning of negotiations on Hong Kong's future.

The two-year negotiations between the Chinese and British governments can generally be divided into two stages.

The first stage covered the period from September 1982, when Margaret Thatcher visited China, to June 1983, during which the two sides reached agreement on the agenda for the talks and other procedures. In this phase, the main contention between the two sides was the validity of the three unequal treaties (the Treaty of Nanjing, the Convention of Beijing, and the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong). From the beginning of the talks, China asserted that it had always held sovereignty over Hong Kong but had not exercised it due to British occupation. China, therefore, demanded that Britain hand over Hong Kong to China so that China could resume its exercise of sovereignty. Britain insisted that the three treaties were still valid. Between October 1982 and February 1983, the two sides held five rounds of talks, during which both stuck to their positions. As a result they failed to reach an agreement.

In March 1983, the British Government finally recognised that China had sovereignty over Hong Kong all along. In a letter to Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang, Prime Minister Thatcher stated that:

“... provided that an agreement can be reached between the two sides on administrative arrangements for Hong Kong to guarantee the future prosperity and stability of Hong Kong and is acceptable to the British Parliament and to the people of Hong Kong as well as to the Chinese Government, I would be prepared to recommend to the Parliament that sovereignty over the entire Hong Kong would be returned to China.”

The stalemate over the sovereignty issue between China and Britain thus ended, paving the way to the second stage of Sino-British negotiations.

The second stage lasted from July 1983 to September 1984, when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was initialled. During this period, the two sides held 22 rounds of talks.

On 12 July 1983, the CPG proposed 12 Principles to resolve the issue of Hong Kong, which later became part of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. The “One Country, Two Systems” concept facilitated the resolution of the Hong Kong question. The talks held thereafter were focused on the 12 Principles and



on the set of measures to implement them. Relying on the 12 Principles and the relevant British working papers, a series of complex issues regarding nationality, civil aviation, land, and so on were resolved.

The Sino-British Joint Declaration

In early June 1984, China and Britain established a working group at ambassadorial level to draw up the agreement. On 18 September 1984, the two sides made concessions to each other on issues regarding military garrison, social security, the formation of the legislature, the draft of the agreement and so on, reaching consensus on all issues. The Sino-British negotiations, which lasted two years, were concluded successfully.

On 26 September 1984, Zhou Nan, head of the Chinese delegation and Vice Foreign Minister and Sir Richard Evans, head of the British delegation and British Ambassador to China represented their respective governments to initial the Sino-British Joint Declaration and three Annexes. On 14 November, at the Eight Session of the SCNPC, the joint declaration was discussed and adopted.

On 19 December 1984, in the Great Hall of the People, Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, on behalf of their respective governments, signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration which reflected the basic principles and policies of “One Country, Two Systems”. The two sides solemnly declared to the whole world that “*the CPG shall resume the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong on 1 July 1997*”.

The second stage of talks between China and Britain began in July 1982. Picture shows the talks between the Chinese delegation led by the Foreign Minister Yao Guang and the British delegation led by Sir Percy Craddock. (Photograph by Wang Jingde, courtesy Xinhua News Agency.)



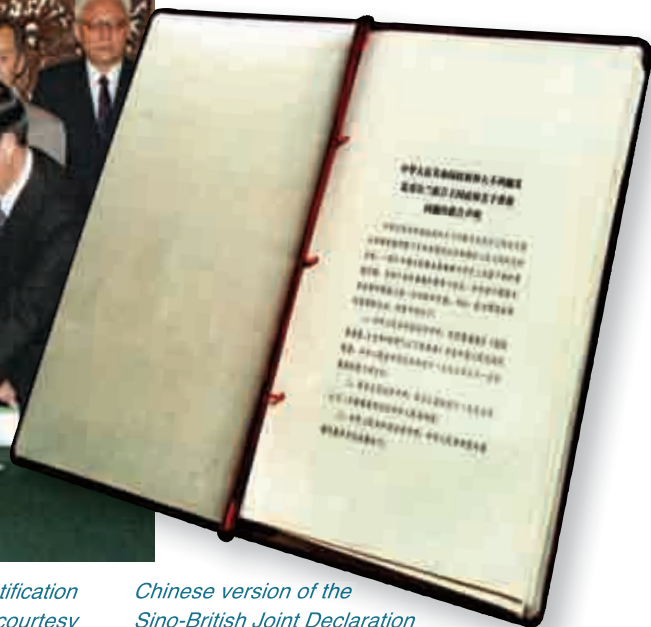
On 26 September 1984, the Sino-British Joint Declaration was initialled at the Great Hall of People in Beijing. (Photograph by Wang Jingde, courtesy Xinhua News Agency.)

The agreement between China and Britain on the future of Hong Kong comprises the main text and three annexes. The main text is the Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong. The three annexes are ANNEX I: Elaboration by the Government of the People's Republic of China of its basic policies regarding Hong Kong, ANNEX II: Sino-British Joint Liaison Group, and ANNEX III: Land Leases. A memorandum on Hong Kong residents' travel documents was also endorsed by the two governments. On 22 July 1985, the Sino-British Joint Liaison Group formally commenced work on the implementation of the Joint Declaration and matters relating to the handover of the administration of Hong Kong.

A landmark in modern Chinese history and in the history of Sino-British relations, the Sino-British Joint Declaration states in its first article that "*the Government of the People's Republic of China...has decided to resume the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong with effect from 1 July 1997*" and, in the second that "*the Government of the United Kingdom declares that it will restore Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China with effect from 1 July 1997*". The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration marks the final resolution of the Hong Kong question, setting a laudable example and marking a significant milestone for the reunification of China.



In April 1985, the Third Session of the Sixth National People's Congress was held in Beijing, ratifying the Sino-British Joint Declaration. (Photograph by Li Ping, courtesy Xinhua News Agency.)



On 27 May 1985, Chinese and British delegates exchanged the instruments of ratification on the Sino-British Joint Declaration in Beijing. (Photograph by Li Shengnan, courtesy Xinhua News Agency.)

Chinese version of the Sino-British Joint Declaration (Photograph by Xie Fengquan, courtesy Xinhua News Agency.)



After talks over two years, China and Britain reached an agreement on the handover of Hong Kong. On 19 December 1984, Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration. (Photograph by Cui Baolin, courtesy Xinhua News Agency.)

