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Hong Kong enters a new era

THE curtain falls on 156 years of British colonialism in Hong Kong at the stroke of midnight tonight. A historic event, it has in its run-up attracted unprecedented worldwide publicity.

The crux of the controversy over reverting to Chinese rule is a difference in perception as to how the former colony should be run after Beijing assumes sovereignty. Many of the political leaders of Britain and the United States as well as their media have concluded that Hong Kong's transition as a Special Administrative Region of China will go badly. It will be all doom and gloom. They would not give the benefit of the doubt to China's promise that Hong Kong will largely be able to govern itself under Beijing's policy of "one country, two systems", retaining its freedoms, capitalist economy and legal system. They appear to be irked by China's policy of asserting its own independent concept of administration and development.

London's bid to organise an international boycott of the "unelected" Provisional Legislature's swearing-in fizzled out when other countries declined to follow suit. The US is sending its Consul-General in Hong Kong although the Secretary of State will not be there. Following the US move, Britain also decided to send its top Hong Kong envoy, a change of mind which the official adamantly denied is a climbdown from its earlier tough stand. The softening of the Anglo-American stand is no doubt dictated by economic interests. Malaysia's line on Hong Kong is unwavering. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently reiterated his criticism of the British push for more democracy. He said last month: "I think it is the height of hypocrisy. For more than 100 years, the British never thought of ruling Hong Kong as a democracy. Now, just before it has to hand Hong Kong back to China, it suddenly decides there must be democracy" Dr Mahathir is not alone in holding this view.

Malaysia welcomes Chinese rule and is optimistic about Hong Kong's future. In fact, Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim told a conference in Hong Kong in March that he saw the handover as providing the territory with a new opportunity to integrate itself more closely with the booming economies of the region, including Southeast Asia. Despite the pronouncements by prophets of doom in the West, the confidence in East Asian prospects would not be undermined, he said.

China is expected to tread carefully in Hong Kong's sensitive transition, knowing that it is being watched and judged every step of the way. The task ahead will not be easy. Problems notwithstanding, with the co-operation of Hong Kong's 6.3 million who, opinion polls indicate, largely welcome Chinese rule and look forward to better days, particularly housing facilities, the transition will be smooth. China has said it is no threat to world peace and wants to have friendly relations with all but will not compromise on its sovereignty. It goes without saying that any attempt to destabilise Hong Kong by politicising it will not be tolerated.

Despite the sound and fury in the run-up, the way ahead does not seem so dark after all. The US extension of the Most Favoured Nation trading status to China during this crucial year and President Bill Clinton's recent remark on the need to maintain ties with China show reassuring realism. Antagonism begets antagonism, benefiting none.

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