

What not to do in Hong Kong: Lessons from Goa, 1961

<https://www.thearticle.com/what-not-to-do-in-hong-kong-lessons-from-go-1961>

by BRUCE GILLEY | 02 SEP 2019

A giant Asian state with a potent anti-Western identity. A European colonial enclave on its periphery. Growing agitation from the Asian giant to bring the enclave into line. After a few months of threat, an invasion. The West does nothing.

Hong Kong in 2019? Maybe. The scenario did occur in India's subjugation of the Portuguese territory of Goa in 1961. It holds lessons for policy makers today. The most important: standing on the sidelines and enjoining both sides to work out their differences is an invitation to conquest. The time for the West to deter nationalist aggression by China against Hong Kong is before the situation escalates.

Goa was a prosperous port city of about 50,000 souls that had been seized by a Muslim prince when the Portuguese ousted him in 1510. Portuguese rule attracted migrants from the interior areas of the sub-continent, raising the population to 350,000 by 1850, shortly before Britain put India under colonial rule. Even after India became independent in 1947, tens of thousands of Indians migrated to the enclave, raising the population to 650,000 by 1960. The Goa cultural identity was cosmopolitan and Goans enjoyed Portuguese citizenship. When the newly independent India demanded it be handed over, Lisbon balked.

In retrospect, Lisbon's mistake was to depend too heavily on international law and on repeated promises from Delhi of a peaceful resolution to the "Goa problem." Britain, whose defence ties to Portugal went back to 1373, warned Delhi against aggression, but was ignored. A growing nationalist chorus in India felt resentful about the relative stability and prosperity of Goa. On independence day in 1955, hundreds of Indian nationalists attempted to break into Goa following five similar incursions earlier in the year. Portuguese sentries fired, killing 28. The obsessively anti-colonial Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru imposed a blockade.

Six years later, after Portuguese sentries returned fire from India, killing an Indian fisherman by mistake, Nehru's government declared a need for "self-defence". Nehru later admitted this

excuse was a sham, but insisted that the United Nations commitment to decolonisation gave India the right to invade. It was India's "sovereign territory", he insisted, and previous promises to colonial powers to respects its autonomy were now outdated. In the small hours of December 18, 1961, the 17th division of the Indian Army, with bombs falling for air support, launched a three-pronged attack on Goa. Within 26 hours, Operation Vijay (Victory) had lived up to its name, at the cost of 17 Portuguese dead and 21 Indian dead.

A UN Security Council resolution demanding withdrawal of Indian forces was vetoed by the Soviet Union. Moscow, along with Beijing, had stirred up the Goa invasion with rousing speeches and rallies throughout the 1950s. The U.S. and other Western countries condemned the action against a NATO ally. But the fait accompli was hard to reverse given other priorities.

The analogy to Hong Kong is far from perfect. China already enjoys formal sovereignty over the territory and its troops are stationed there. But the political dynamics are the same: a colonial remnant with promises of autonomy from the neighbouring Asian giant facing pressures to conform to the giant's interests against its own. In Goa, the end result was complete absorption because the international community would not defend it.

One unexpected lesson of the Goa invasion might give Beijing pause: after the takeover, Nehru had a difficult time restraining fanatical nationalists in India who insisted that Goa should be erased off the map through absorption into neighbouring Indian states. Nehru had unleashed anti-colonial furies that he found hard to control. Only India's (colonial) democratic legacy allowed the system to survive.

China would not be so fortunate. If party chief Xi Jinping sanctioned an invasion of Hong Kong to "complete the liberation of 1997," he might be among the victims. It is in everyone's interest to deter another Goa before it is too late.

ENDS