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### Let's Give the United Nations an Asian Home

Richard Gilbert

In 1945, when the location for the United Nations head office was being decided, the initial choice was between a site in Europe and one in the United States. Europe lost by two votes, and today's UN headquarters in New York City began to be occupied in 1950. The former League of Nations complex in Geneva serves as the alternate main office. Twice as many UN meetings are held there as in New York. It's time to think about a third UN main office. Hong Kong would be an ideal location, particularly if a waterside portion of the Kai Tak site could be made available.

The UN needs a third main office to accommodate the organisation's growing importance and indispensability in an interdependent, globalising world. It needs a third main office to provide relief for the New York building, which is in urgent need of renovation. It needs a third main office on the other side of the globe to accommodate the change in the geopolitical centre of gravity since the 1940s, with the growth in UN membership from 51 to 191 states.

Hong Kong is an ideal locale for the UN. It has excellent transport links and communications, superb human resources, and just about every service an international organisation might require. It is the most international of Asian cities. Hong Kong is a part of the country that will have the greatest influence on human affairs during the 21st century, but not quite part of it.

Kai Tak is a perfect site. Its geography makes it secure but readily accessible. It is a breathtaking location that provides breathtaking views. A UN building could be-

come the brightest jewel in Hong Kong's rich diadem of stunning development around Victoria Harbour.

The present UN headquarters is a disaster waiting to happen. It is New York's only building of any size that does not have a sprinkler system. A 1999 *New York Times* article noted, "Roofs leak. . . . Asbestos insulation needs to be replaced. Plastic sheeting was installed to protect library desks and computers from dripping water. And some motors and water pumps that keep the building running are so antiquated that spare parts are no longer made."

Things are worse today than in 1999, but there is little prospect of funds becoming available for renovation or for the latest plan, which would involve construction of a new building at the edge of the present Manhattan site.

A significant part of the problem is the United States' growing lack of interest in hosting the UN. The then New York mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, was quoted in the same *Times* article as suggesting it would not be so terrible if the UN left town. This was said even though hosting the UN is known to bring economic activity to the city worth HK\$25 billion or more each year.

At Hong Kong's request, China could breathe new life into the world's best hope for peace and progress by inviting the UN to establish itself on the Kai Tak site. Hong Kong could serve as a meeting place for the General Assembly, the Security Council, and a myriad of committees and agencies while facilities were improved in New York. Then, Hong Kong could become the Asia-Pacific's Geneva,

the permanent site of numerous UN functions. The General Assembly and Security Council might even decide to continue meeting in Hong Kong for at least a part of each year.

The UN does not have the money for new offices but the SAR Government does, and so may some of Hong Kong's substantial private interests. Hardly a better investment could be made in Hong Kong's economic prospects than putting up the five to ten billion Hong Kong dollars required to construct a complex that would define the city as a world centre of international activity.

Would the UN want to come to Hong Kong? As one of the world's few truly vibrant cities, Hong Kong could be hard to resist. It's an expensive city, particularly for accommodation, but hardly more than New York. Hong Kong's facilities are already extraordinary and would be more so with construction of a well-designed UN complex. There could well be concerns about how opinions may be expressed in Hong Kong, but such concerns could be readily addressed.

The benefits of bringing the UN to Hong Kong would be great for the world and great for Hong Kong.

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