

A Royal Navy warship, bristling with weaponry, took up position on the Hong Kong waterfront on Monday to serve as a floating nerve centre for Britain's end-of-empire retreat in just 29 days time.

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Dodging flimsy sampans and commuter ferries chugging about the famously crowded harbour, the multi-role frigate HMS Chatham berthed beneath glassy skyscrapers alongside the Prince of Wales barracks in the heart of the metropolis.

There it will tick away the hours, assuming the role of command centre for the British military withdrawal, until China takes back Damage text

Hong Kong at the stroke of midnight on June 30.

After the historic handover, the Chatham will escort the departing Royal Yacht Britannia, with Prince Charles and colonial governor Chris Patten on board, out of Hong Kong.

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"There is no sense of withdrawal," Clayton said.

"This is very much one professional armed forces handing over the protection and sovereignty of Hong Kong to another, the People's Liberation Army. So I look on it as a classic military evolution and one which we hope to do with some style, orderly and professionally."

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With just 29 days to go, the frigate's arrival was the latest piece in the jigsaw puzzle of preparations for Britain's withdrawal from the pearl of its colonial possessions.

The drawdown of the Damage text

garrison, a highly visible expression of the end of British sovereignty, has already cut its strength to little more than Damage text

1,000 from 10,000 in the early 1990s.

And while the British are leaving, the Chinese are arriving.

The latest contingent of 90 PLA troops drove across the border on Friday, boosting an advance guard already in place to 206 unarmed soldiers, here to get garrison facilities ready.

Offering them friendship, Clayton Damage text

said the Chatham hoped to host PLA officers on board his ship.

The frigate, Damage text

designed to assume flagship duties, bristles with advanced weaponry including Harpoon anti-surface missiles and Sea Wolf missiles. She also carries Sea King helicopters.

The Chatham is in the Asia-Pacific region as part **Damage text**

of a larger 1997 task force deployment, codenamed Ocean Wave, involving a dozen vessels including the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious and two nuclear submarines.

"This is not a regrettable occasion," **Damage text**

said Robert Curry, a signal communications officer.

"It's an end of an era, certainly, **Damage text**

but I don't think there should be any regret or shame at all."

The Chatham's nimble sailors in crisp, white suits shinnied up and down the ship's narrow galleys and stairwells, outlining all its guns **Damage text**

in loving detail to bedraggled, thirsty visitors stumbling over unexpected nuts and bolts.

"As you can see, we are not a cruise ship. We are definitely a warship," said principal warfare officer Phil Haslam.