

*THE BUSINESS OF WEALTH*

# FAMILY OFFICE MAGAZINE

AUTUMN ISSUE 2019

ART & MUSEUM MAGAZINE INCLUDED



**J.P. MORGAN PRIVATE BANK**  
ROBERT BARBETTI

WORLD LEADING PUBLICATION DEDICATED TO FAMILY OFFICES - WEALTH - UHNWI - BILLIONAIRES - ENTREPRENEURS

Subscription £99 per year

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# ATMOSPHERIC INTELLIGENCE BEYOND THE HEADLINES

by Michael O'Rourke



Hong Kong has been in the throes of civil unrest and political violence for months as demonstrators demand concessions from the city and Chinese governments. Beijing has threatened to settle the matter by force, potentially dealing this Asian financial hub a catastrophic economic blow.

Hotels are reeling from cancellations, tourism is in a double-digit dip, and the Hang Seng Index is bleeding capital. At least one Fortune 500 company has recalled their employees visiting the city. As this issue of Family Office Magazine goes to press, the final chapter in the conflict remains unwritten. If all you know of this is the clouds of tear gas and petrol bombs seen on the 24-hour news cycle, you would think the city is coming apart at the seams and entirely unsafe.

I am writing this from Hong Kong, and I have had a team here for several months. We were here before the unrest began, and we have been here throughout the worst of the violence. Why is this important? Not for a moment have I contemplated sending my people

home, nor have they feared for their own safety. The reason is simple. We know what is happening on the streets and, importantly, often in advance. Our madness has a method.

Atmospheric intelligence is the ground truth that goes beyond the headlines. It is obtained in-country, on the ground, and face-to-face. Attempting to assess a rapidly evolving dynamic situation from Europe or America based on media reports can easily lead one to conclude that a city or country on another continent is in chaos, when reality is more nuanced.

Next level intelligence requires trained and dedicated people responding to your specific requirements. Who requires rapid, bespoke intelligence during a crisis? Any business with employees and significant assets potentially in harm's way.

While reporters cover the most sensational aspects and move from one hotspot to the next, it is not their job to tell you if your specific business interests and

investments are in peril. The U.S. State Department and British Foreign Office provide the public with broad-brush assessments lacking the specificity you need to make decisions at crisis speed.

Now is a good time to briefly discuss what atmospheric intelligence is not. Atmospheric intelligence is not a covert or clandestine effort to recruit spies or steal secrets. That is the purview of governments.

Atmospheric intelligence does involve cross cultural communications, key leader engagements, and overt information collection by skilled professionals trained to execute those tasks. As Special Forces veterans, we have done exactly that around the globe.

Some CEOs may wish to develop an atmospheric intelligence capability in-house. If significant time and resources are dedicated to recruiting and training the right people, this may be possible. This option is impractical during a crisis, as the capability cannot be created overnight.

Understanding that atmospheric intelligence is a specialty, the most practical approach is retaining a firm accomplished in the field on an as needed basis. On your behalf, specialists are deployed to the area of concern to develop a detailed threat picture focused on protecting your interests.

The right firm will have trained personnel comfortable operating globally, often in austere and potentially dangerous environments. A team cultivating local contacts, developing information, and assessing risk on scene places you and your key decision makers ahead of events.

Operations in parts of the world where unrest is an ever-present concern justifies the need for a persistent atmospheric intelligence capability. Creating an early warning trip wire for conflict, civil unrest, and terrorism that could harm your interests is the focus. Vital is identifying key players at governmental, local, and often tribal levels. Just as important is understanding the sentiments of the people comprising your local workforce, their needs

and concerns, and what may persuade them should conflict arise. Building the level of trust required for workers to feel comfortable sharing information takes time, and these relationships must be maintained for the long haul.

Building trust at that level pays off in ways that can save people from harm. In 2018, a local worker informed us where a militia group had established a roadblock for the purpose of kidnapping foreigners. In Hong Kong, we have kept abreast of protest activity in real time, allowing us to safely move about the city.

Expansion into new markets is never a guaranteed success in the best of circumstances. When that market is a developing country where political instability, corruption, conflict, the economy, and food security are ever-present challenges, the task becomes exponentially more difficult. If your industry is viewed by the public or press as controversial, the difficulties mount.

Timely and accurate information informs decisions from where to locate your infrastructure and with whom to work, to understanding cultural, ethnic, religious, and tribal sensitivities. Employing atmospheric intelligence early could significantly lower your cost of market entry.

CNN or the BBC might show the latest riot or bombing in a far-off city. Accurate and bespoke atmospheric intelligence informs you where and how serious the risk is in relation to your specific interests. When hundreds of millions of pounds or dollars are at stake, "go" or "no-go" business decisions require more than a two-minute television news story.

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