

Hong Kong and the Next Steps of China's Territorial Integrity

By Arkar Kyaw

Research Intern, Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)

Issue Paper No. 001

2020 has presented us with a myriad of complex issues regarding social, political, and global changes throughout the world, ranging from racial tensions and social upheavals in America, and a global pandemic to momentous political transitions in Hong Kong. Despite the outbreak of the coronavirus, the CCP has moved forward with its aims in attempting to exert more control over Hong Kong.

Historical context

Hong Kong is the manifestation of the West's destructive imperialism and represents the naivety of the Qing Dynasty. This naivety paved the way for the century of humiliation for the Chinese people and remains a hurtful thorn in the side of the Chinese people. Even after World War II, the British retained colonial rule over Hong Kong. However, in 1984, Great Britain and the People's Republic of China signed the Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong. The declaration states that the sovereignty of Hong Kong will be handed over to the PRC on 1 July, 1997 and that the capitalistic economy and the way of life of the people of Hong Kong will be retained for at least 50 years after the handover.¹ This made way for the infamous phrase: "one country, two systems." This model under the Basic Law supposedly promised the people of Hong Kong "higher degree of autonomy" and shielded them against the lurking communist regime of mainland China to a certain degree.

It remains vital to remember that this promise was made in 1997 which was 23 years ago. Due to the momentous growth of China's economic, political,

¹ Martin C. M Lee, and Tom Boasberg, "Broken Promises: Hong Kong Faces 1997," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 2 (1994): 42-56, [doi:10.1353/jod.1994.0034](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1994.0034).

and military power over the last 23 years, it is only fair for China to begin to exert more control and authority over Hong Kong. Certain significant changes in the political nature of the people of Hong Kong have taken place in the second decade after the conversion. Some people in Hong Kong who were a part of the anti-government camp became engaged in disruptive and unpredictable protests. This is fairly problematic for the CCP as this means the protests in Hong Kong will become more difficult to control in the coming future. Furthermore, Beijing has changed the electoral procedures for the Chief Executive and the Legislative Council. Beijing insisted that all registered voters should vote for the chief executive instead of the election committee, but the caveat was that the clone of the election committee be the one to nominate the candidates.² This meant that Beijing was able to choose whoever candidate it preferred and thus the will of the people of Hong Kong will not be represented in the legislative scene. This highlights a consequential change in the political system of Hong Kong.

Current Situation

The current unrest in Hong Kong was sparked by the introduction of the controversial extradition bill on 29 March 2019. The extradition bill would allow Hong Kong the transfer of wanted criminals to countries with which Hong Kong has no former extradition agreements. It remains imperative to remember that Beijing's influence on the electoral process earlier means that Beijing has complete authority in choosing the political candidates.³ While the extradition bill excludes political charges, it is difficult for the Hong Kong leader to deny the request of the mainland China officials to extradite criminals. Hong Kong's dominion status makes it increasingly difficult to repel China's requests.

² Richard C Bush, "How Hong Kong Got to This Point," BROOKINGS, September 12, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/09/12/how-hong-kong-got-to-this-point/>.

³ Mike Ives, "What Is Hong Kong's Extradition Bill?," The New York Times, June 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/world/asia/hong-kong-extradition-bill.html>.

The extradition bill was met with overwhelming opposition from the people of Hong Kong who are threatened with a legal bill that could place dissidents from Hong Kong under the jurisdiction of the communist regime in mainland China. People took to the streets to protest and immense disruption to daily life and violence followed. The demonstrators saw the bill as a violation of the “one country, two systems” by the PRC.⁴ Due to public pressure and protests, Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam announced on 9 July 2019 that the bill would be suspended, but not fully withdrawn. The suspension of the bill meant a temporary blip in the wider PRC attempt to exert more control over Hong Kong.

What followed Hong Kong after the extradition bill proved to be far more draconian and treacherous. The new security law for Hong Kong was passed by China parliament’s top decision-making body. The decision was unanimous citing security concerns over violent pro-democracy protests, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces.⁵ For the first time ever, mainland China will be able to set up its security apparatus in Hong Kong. The new security law is very much in violation of the high degree of autonomy Hong Kong has enjoyed since its handover from the British.

The latest developments have shown that “one country, two systems” will not be able to flourish much longer. Here, it remains important to understand the CCP’s view on solving territorial integrity. Regaining Hong Kong and making it part of mainland China will bolster the CCP’s image even though its new security law has received international condemnation. Territorial integrity remains one of the highest priorities for the CCP and being able to remedy the damage caused by the century of humiliation will be a huge morale booster for the CCP. There have been attempts by the West to undermine the security law.

⁴ Jessie Pang and Twinnie Siu, “Hong Kong Extradition Bill Officially Killed, but More Unrest Likely,” REUTERS, October 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests/hong-kong-extradition-bill-officially-killed-but-more-unrest-likely-idUSKBN1X200F>.

⁵ Chris Buckley, Keith Bradsher, and Tiffany May, “New Security Law Gives China Sweeping Powers Over Hong Kong,” The New York Times, June 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/world/asia/china-hong-kong-security-law-rules.html?searchResultPosition=1>

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced on June 3, 2020 that he would amend immigration laws that would grant 3 million Hong Kongers a gradual pathway to British citizenship.⁶ The Hong Kongers who were born before 1997 were handed the BNO (British National Overseas) passport which allows them to stay in Britain for 6 months, but not the right to work. Johnson's new immigration amendments will grant those Hong Kongers the right to work.

This announcement was met with staunch opposition from the PRC. Great Britain itself is going through historic and crucial changes following its departure from the European Union. The country is in dire need of economic partnerships now that it is out of the European Union. China- the world's second largest economy- will play an important role in shaping the actual outcome of Johnson's proposed amendments. For the PRC, this is an internal affair and any foreign involvement means intrusion in the PRC's internal matters and a violation of national sovereignty.

Local opposition to the new security law is evident. On July 13, 2020 more than 600,000 Hong Kongers defied government warnings and COVID outbreak to vote in unofficial primary vote to choose opposition candidates to compete in the city's legislative elections on September 6.⁷ The people of Hong Kong believe that pro-democracy protests have been threatened by the new security law, and that only voting is risk-free. Opposition candidates who were a part of the protests are at risk of being deemed subversive and hostile to the CCP, and can be barred from running in the elections.⁸ However, overwhelming local support for the opposition candidates highlights that the Hong Kongers will not be

⁶ Shibani Mahtani, "Boris Johnson Offers Refuge, British Citizenship Path for Nearly 3 Million Hong Kongers," The Washington Post, June 3, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/boris-johnson-hong-kong-national-security-law-bno-passport/2020/06/03/3ec6ddf0-a545-11ea-b619-3f9133bbb482_story.html.

⁷ Natalie Lung and Iain Marlow, "600,00 Hong Kongers Voted in Unofficial Primary Election, Despite Warning It Could Violate National Security Law," Time, July 13, 2020, <https://time.com/5866190/hong-kong-primary-election/>.

⁸ Austin Ramzy, Elaine Yu, and Tiffany May, "Hong Kong Voters Defy Beijing, Endorsing Protest Leaders in Primary," The New York Times, July 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/13/world/asia/hong-kong-elections-security.html>.

standing by and let the CCP take over Hong Kong. This sends a warning to the CCP that whatever control they exert upon Hong Kong will be met with fierce opposition.

The Path Forward

The path forward seems utterly grim for Hong Kong. The United States has stripped Hong Kong of its special status, taking away the island's trading privileges.⁹ This will be a painful kick in the guts for Hong Kong which is the financial hub of Asia. The local economy of Hong Kong is bound to suffer in these trying times. The outbreak of the coronavirus will undoubtedly exacerbate the situation. Is there a way out for Hong Kong? Pragmatically speaking, there seems to be no viable way out for Hong Kong right now. The pro-democracy protesters can definitely keep disrupting daily lives, but China's new security law allows the PRC to be more straightforward in dealing with the protestors. The West seems unable to construct the critical narrative to accurately address the Hong Kong issue. We are 27 years away from 2047, the proposed time to start thinking about Hong Kong's future. Unfortunately, due to the CCP's aggressive and dynamic tactics in acquiring its territorial goals, Hong Kong is reaching its darkest moment.

Arkar Kyaw is an undergraduate student studying International Affairs at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University. He is working as a research intern at the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies. The views expressed in this paper are entirely the author's, and do not represent that of MISIS.

⁹ Shaun Tandon, Jerome Taylor, and Su Xinqi, "United States Revokes Hong Kong's Special Status," ASIA TIMES, May 28, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/united-states-revokes-hong-kongs-special-status/>.

Works Cited

- Buckley, Chris, Keith Bradsher, and Tiffany May. "New Security Law Gives China Sweeping Powers Over Hong Kong." *The New York Times*, June 29, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/world/asia/china-hong-kong-security-law-rules.html?searchResultPosition=1>
- Bush, Richard C. "How Hong Kong Got to This Point." BROOKINGS, September 12, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/09/12/how-hong-kong-got-to-this-point>.
- Ives, Mike. "What Is Hong Kong's Extradition Bill?" *The New York Times*, June 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/world/asia/hong-kong-extradition-bill.html>.
- Lee, Martin C. M, and Tom Boasberg. "Broken Promises: Hong Kong Faces 1997." *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 2 (1994): 42-56. doi:10.1353/jod.1994.0034.
- Lung, Natalie, and Iain Marlow. "600,00 Hong Kongers Voted in Unofficial Primary Election, Despite Warning It Could Violate National Security Law." *Time*, July 13, 2020. <https://time.com/5866190/hong-kong-primary-election/>.
- Mahtani, Shibani. "Boris Johnson Offers Refuge, British Citizenship Path for Nearly 3 Million Hong Kongers ." *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/boris-johnson-hong-kong-national-security-law-bno-passport/2020/06/03/3ec6ddf0-a545-11ea-b619-3f9133bbb482_story.html.
- Pang, Jessie, and Twinnie Siu. "Hong Kong Extradition Bill Officially Killed, but More Unrest Likely." REUTERS, October 23, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests/hong-kong-extradition-bill-officially-killed-but-more-unrest-likely-idUSKBN1X200F>.
- Ramzy, Austin, Elaine Yu, and Tiffany May. "Hong Kong Voters Defy Beijing, Endorsing Protest Leaders in Primary ." *The New York Times*, July 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/13/world/asia/hong-kong-elections-security.html>.
- Tandon, Shaun, Jerome Taylor, and Su Xinqi. "United States Revokes Hong Kong's Special Status." ASIA TIMES, May 28, 2020. <https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/united-states-revokes-hong-kongs-special-status/>.