

'ONE COUNTRY, TWO SYSTEMS' AND MANY PROBLEMS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

A protester throws back a tear gas canister during clashes with police.AFP

Protests in Hong Kong, now in its 13th consecutive week, have brought a decades-old policy of China back into focus — 'One Country Two Systems'.

The protesters, who started occupying the city's streets in April after the local government proposed an extradition law, say Beijing is trying to violate this policy by infringing on Hong Kong's autonomy. They want China to end its interference, while Beijing says it sticks to the principle and has likened the protesters to terrorists.

So, what's this One Country Two Systems principle?

Origin of policy

To put it simply, it means Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions, both former colonies, can have different economic and political systems from that of mainland China, while being part of the People's Republic of China.

The policy was originally proposed by Deng Xiaoping shortly after he took the reins of the country in the late 1970s. Deng's plan was to unify China and Taiwan under the One Country Two Systems principle. He promised high autonomy to Taiwan. China's nationalist government, which was defeated in a civil war by the communists in 1949, had exiled to Taiwan. The island has since been run as a separate entity from the mainland China, though Beijing never gave up its claim over Taiwan.

Under Deng's plan, the island could follow its capitalist economic system, run a separate administration and keep its own army, but under Chinese sovereignty. Taiwan rejected the Communist Party's offer.

Back to China

The idea of two systems in one country resurfaced when Beijing started talks with Britain and Portugal, who were running Hong Kong and Macau, respectively.

The British had taken control of Hong Kong in 1842 after the First Opium War. In 1898, the British government and the Qing dynasty of China signed the Second Convention of Peking, which allowed the British to take control of the islands surrounding Hong Kong, known as New Territories, on lease for 99 years. Macau, on the other side, had been ruled by the Portuguese from 1557.

In the 1980s, China initiated talks with both Britain and Portugal for the transfer of the two territories. Beijing promised to respect the region's autonomy under the One Country Two Systems principle. On December 19, 1984, China and the U.K. signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which set the terms for the autonomy and the legal, economic and governmental systems for Hong Kong after the British exit. Similarly, on March 26, 1987, China and Portugal

signed the Joint Declaration in which China made similar promises for Macau.

Hong Kong returned to Chinese control on July 1, 1997, and Macau on December 20, 1999. The regions can have their own currencies, economic and legal systems, but defence and diplomacy will be decided by Beijing. Their mini-Constitutions will remain valid for 50 years — till 2047 for Hong Kong and 2049 for Macau. It is unclear what will happen after this term.

Current crisis

In recent years, there has been a growing outcry among Hong Kong's pro-democracy activists against China's alleged attempts to erode the city's autonomy.

In 2016-17, six legislators critical of Beijing were debarred. In 2018, the Hong Kong National Party, a localist party, was outlawed. This year, Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, proposed the extradition Bill, which sought to extradite Hong Kongers to places with which the city doesn't have extradition agreements. Critics said it would allow the city government to extradite Beijing critics to the mainland China.

This triggered the protests, and they went on despite Ms. Lam's decision to suspend the Bill. The protesters, who often clashed with the police, now want the Bill to be formally withdrawn, Ms. Lam to resign, the arrested protesters to be released and the city's electoral system to be reformed.

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