

# THE FALL OF HONG KONG

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

In 1982, when they were discussing Hong Kong's fate, Deng Xiaoping said to Margaret Thatcher, "Horses will still run, stocks will still sizzle, dancers will still dance." London's 99-year lease over most of the colony was due to expire 15 years later. Hong Kong Island and part of the Kowloon Peninsula, though, had been ceded to Britain in perpetuity. Deng wanted to bring the whole territory under Chinese control in 1997. His line about horses, stocks, and dancers was meant to convince Thatcher that the city could become part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) without losing its distinctive freewheeling features.

Deng died a few months before the Hong Kong handover of July 1, 1997. This meant he never got to see the territory of the PRC expand, as he had long hoped it would, to include all of the former British colony. But he did live long enough to see two documents drafted that spelled out how the brashly capitalist city was to function as part of a Communist Party-run state.

## Towards national security and peace in Hong Kong

First came the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. It explained that a "one country, two systems" structure would take effect in 1997 and last 50 years. Hong Kong would enjoy a "high degree of autonomy" as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. The local "way of life" would continue, while Beijing oversaw defence and diplomacy. Then came the much more detailed 1990 Basic Law, a constitution-like document. It seemed to offer Hong Kong's people an attractive vision of life from 1997 until 2047. They would no longer be colonial subjects, but they would retain appealing parts of the status quo: a more independent judiciary, a freer press, and stronger rights of assembly and speech than mainland cities. An official selected locally, not in London, would head Hong Kong's government; over time, residents would even get to choose this Chief Executive.

The big question was whether Beijing would keep the promises enshrined in these documents. In 1984, Deng was taking China in a liberalising direction, so it was easy to feel hopeful about Hong Kong's future. A year before the Basic Law was finalised, however, soldiers gunned down civilians in Beijing, crushing 1989's protest wave and raising doubts about Deng's trustworthiness.

Thatcher was among those who did not lose faith — or, at least, did not admit to doing so. A year after 1989's June 4th Massacre, she said that, while appalled by that event, she was heartened that Deng continued to embrace the economic liberalisation that, she remained sure, would bring political liberalisation. She also said that China's leaders would surely respect their pledge to allow Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy after 1997. For they'd want the "forum of the world" to consider them people of their word.

## Escalating tensions: On U.S. closing Chinese mission

After the 1997 handover, hope persisted that Thatcher was right. Hong Kong's courts remained fiercely independent. Its newspapers criticised national as well as local policies. A popular satirical television show, "Headliner," shifted from mocking colonial authorities to mocking representatives of the new order. Democracy was elusive (fewer than 2,000 people got to vote for the Chief Executive, and then just for candidates vetted by Beijing), but it seemed possible that could change.

One ideal date to appraise Hong Kong's distinctiveness became June 4. Each year, the local government gave organisers permission to hold a large vigil honouring the victims of 1989's massacre, while public commemoration of the killing was forbidden across the mainland. In 2020, for the first time, the June 4 commemoration was banned, meaning those who gathered were subject to arrest. Officially, approval for the vigil was withheld because of the pandemic, but this was a flimsy excuse. COVID-19 was largely under control in early June, religious gatherings were being allowed, and the police were turning a blind eye to big parties at bars. (The pandemic was also cited as a cause for banning June 4 commemorations in Macau, the PRC's other former colony turned SAR that has in recent years been the site of much smaller vigils.) The real key difference this June 4 was Beijing's announcement in May that, tired of waiting for the local government to pass an anti-sedition law, it was going to impose one. The National Security Law (NSL) took effect June 30 and makes it possible for not just various actions but also various forms of expression (including chanting slogans and songs heard often at recent protests) to be treated as proof that someone is subversive.

Now that the NSL is in place, it is likely that, even in disease-free years, there will be no more legal June 4 vigils. More broadly, the NSL shatters the "one country, two systems" framework, except insofar as there remains a separate system for making and spending money.

It now seems that instead of taking Deng's 1982 statement seriously, it should have been taken literally. Going forward, Hong Kong will remain a place where horses, dancers, and stocks behave in distinctive ways, but little else differentiates it from mainland cities. "The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its *own* [our emphasis] to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government," Article 23 of the Basic Law states, yet Beijing has usurped the authority to do the enacting. This would provide perfect fodder for a "Headliner" skit — but the show has been cancelled.

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Local courts have continued to dismiss charges against some activists arrested before the NSL went into effect, but in the new order, alleged violators of vaguely defined decrees can be whisked across the border to be tried by courts that virtually never fail to convict those deemed dissidents. The "high degree of autonomy" until 2047 promise has run out more than 25 years early.

Beijing presents the NSL as responding to the 2019 protests that roiled Hong Kong. Its goal, the official media says, is to restore law and order. Only a small number of radicals advocating independence or bent on destruction will be affected.

But these assertions fly in the face of recent history. Even before the NSL passed, some local residents were pointing out that many features of the imaginary tightly controlled Hong Kong of 2025 portrayed in the 2015 film *Ten Years* could be seen in the current city. On July 1, nearly 400 protesters were arrested, 10 of them specifically for breaking the brand new NSL. Hundreds of Hong Kong Twitter users have raced to delete their accounts, fearing that a tweet quoting a now-taboo slogan or song title could lead to them disappearing into a mainland prison. Newspapers are eliminating political cartoons.

And the law was no sudden response to 2019. It is the most extreme, but just the latest, move that undermines Basic Law guarantees. In 2018, the Kowloon West train station opened with a section controlled by mainland security forces. In 2016, a Hong Kong court was considering whether two members of the local legislature should be disqualified for their behaviour. Beijing stepped in and decided the matter. And so on.

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But “horses still run,” as Deng promised. As the spring racing season ended, *The Standard* celebrated the conclusion of “an incredible season for the Hong Kong Jockey Club.” If we accept the idea that “one country, two systems” means that Hong Kong is like a mainland city, but with horse racing, that will conform with President Xi Jinping’s vision. He has praised Macau, which has a similar set-up — just substitute casinos for racetracks.

Perhaps Beijing is no longer concerned with appearing trustworthy in the “forum of the world,” or feels this forum is so eroded as to be irrelevant. Mr. Xi does not seem to feel beholden to protect a true “one country, two systems” framework — the kind in which Hong Kong would enjoy “a high degree of autonomy,” retain “executive, legislative and independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication,” and be nothing like a colony. By contrast, a colonial city is what it is again, or resembles, just with Beijing rather than London calling the shots.

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