

RAJA MANDALA: XI'S HONG KONG HEADACHE

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Can what happens in Hong Kong stay in Hong Kong? The consequences of the continuing protests in the city against a proposed law that lets authorities extradite citizens to mainland China may not remain confined to the island. The simmering discontent in Hong Kong threatens to become a prolonged political headache for President Xi Jinping.

This month saw thousands of people in Hong Kong march in protest against a bill that seeks to prevent the city from becoming a haven for criminals. But the protestors fear the law will be misused to target political dissidents and ordinary citizens and send them to summary trials in China.

Caving into the pressure from the protestors, which escalated after clashes with the police on June 12, the Hong Kong administration suspended action on the bill at the end of last week. The chief executive of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam, announced there will be more consultations with the public on the issues involved. The protestors, however, have continued their marches. Nearly two million people turned out on Sunday demanding that the bill be withdrawn and not merely suspended. They also want Carrie to resign. On Monday, Beijing said it stands firmly behind Carrie.

Protests are not new to Hong Kong and have erupted frequently over the years. Five years ago in late 2014, the "Umbrella Revolution" mobilised people against the proposed electoral reforms that fell way short of the public expectations for deepening representative government. The protests ended after a crackdown by the authorities.

Back in 2003, there were protests against the efforts to implement a new law that sought to criminalise sedition and subversion against the People's Republic of China (PRC). The protests compelled Hong Kong government to withdraw the bill and its chief executive to step down.

The trouble is rooted in the special nature of the relationship between Hong Kong and the PRC. Imperial China ceded Hong Kong to Britain in the 1840s after the First Opium War. Hong Kong soon became a thriving international commercial centre with its special access to southern China. Hong Kong continued to serve as the gateway to China even after the Communists took

charge in 1949.

When Deng Xiaoping opened up China for foreign investment in the 1980s, low-cost production from Hong Kong moved across the border. As most of its manufacturing moved into China, Hong Kong reinvented itself as a major financial centre servicing the rapid growth across East Asia.

As he leveraged Hong Kong to modernise China's economy, Deng was also determined to bring Hong Kong under PRC's sovereignty. In 1984, the politically inventive Deng negotiated with Britain a framework for Hong Kong's integration with the mainland based on the principle "One Country, Two Systems". Under it, Hong Kong would become a part of China but retain a significant measure of autonomy for half a century. Integration over an extended period, it was hoped, would be painless. Britain handed over Hong Kong to China in July 1997, just a few months after Deng passed way.

Under the agreement called the Basic Law, Hong Kong retained its currency and political-legal system for 50 years — until 2047. But the inherent contradictions soon came into view as China sought to accelerate the extension of its sovereignty over Hong Kong amidst the city's resistance.

Hong Kong is not a democracy by any stretch; the city's focus has always been commerce and China's growth has energised Hong Kong. Yet, as the frequent protests show, Hong Kongers are reluctant to give up the few political liberties they have — including the freedoms of speech and assembly.

If China had become more liberal, the absorption of Hong Kong could probably have been easier. But China under Xi has moved towards greater political conservatism and ideological rigidity. The Communist Party has probably bet that Hong Kong was too minor a matter amidst China's rise and the grander scheme of things that Xi had in mind.

But the Hong Kong trouble comes at an inopportune time for President Xi. He is locked in a trade war with the US. The US Navy is pushing back against the Chinese naval assertion in the Indo-Pacific and strengthening its security partnerships in the littoral.

The long-dormant Taiwan question seems to be back in play. Beijing does not rule out a forceful unification of Taiwan that it calls a "renegade province". The US insists on a peaceful process of unification that is in tune with Taiwanese popular sentiment. Washington is lending credibility to that proposition with intensified diplomatic and military support for Taiwan. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong protests rob the credibility of the proposition that Taiwan can unify with China on the basis of "One Country, Two Systems".

Sections of the Chinese media have accused the US of orchestrating the protests. But the Trump Administration has shown little interest in promoting human rights anywhere; its main focus is on trade. The US Congress, however, is threatening punishment — by taking away some of the special privileges that Hong Kong enjoys under US law. Trouble in Hong Kong might well provide Trump additional political leverage in the unfolding "systemic rivalry" with China.

With the political aura of invincibility that he has constructed for himself, President Xi can't be seen as bending under American pressure on any issue. Putting the extradition bill on hold last week was a rare political retreat for Xi. He can't afford to have the Hong Kong protests, which are gaining widespread support within the city, linger on.

The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for [The Indian Express](#)

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