

THE HONG KONG QUESTION

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

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Hong Kong is like a pressure cooker on a stove, hissing steam when the temperature from China rises, and subsiding when the powers that be lower the flame. Last week, over a million protestors, many young, took to the streets to protest a new law that would allow people from Hong Kong to be extradited to China, a move that would threaten critics of the Chinese regime who have till recently found relatively safe haven in Hong Kong. After clashes between the police and protestors, the head of the Hong Kong government, Carrie Lam, was forced to temporarily shelve the extradition law.

The current wave of protests will perhaps gradually die down, but there is little doubt that new explosions are going to occur in the future, just as they have, periodically, over the last decade.

At the heart of the discontent in Hong Kong lies the peculiar arrangement worked out in the 1980s between the then British Prime Minister, [Margaret Thatcher](#), and China's strongman, Deng Xiaoping, for the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty after 150 years of British colonial rule. In order to calm British as well as Hong Kong anxieties about the city's future, Deng propounded the so-called "one country two systems" formula, under which Hong Kong, though part of China, would enjoy a high degree of autonomy and retain the economic and administrative structures that the British had bequeathed, including western liberal freedoms of thought, expression, an independent judiciary, and a liberal capitalist market system. This autonomy is to last till 2047, for 50 years after the British departure in 1997.

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At the time he propounded it, "one country two systems" was hailed as another master stroke of Deng Xiaoping's fabled pragmatism: It ensured Hong Kong's return to the motherland after more than a century of British occupation, while at the same time showing to the world a new, flexible China, shorn of the rigidities of the Maoist era.

But there are contradictions within this arrangement, that both Hong Kong and the Chinese government have found hard to resolve.

Take the incident that sparked the latest troubles: An extradition law that would allow Hong Kong to send wanted people back to China. The fact that Hong Kong, a Chinese city, needs to have an extradition arrangement with the rest of China, is an indication of Hong Kong's autonomy. But it is also bound to cause friction. From the Chinese point of view, if Hong Kong is part of China, then it is necessary to have a mechanism whereby people fleeing from the Chinese authorities should not be able to find safe haven in Hong Kong. Otherwise, what is the point of saying that Hong Kong is part of China?

But those in Hong Kong feel differently. In the 22 years since the hand-over, suspicion of China has increased, and if there is one thing that unites the city, it is the desire to preserve its British

era institutions and Hong Kong's unique way of life, and not become "just another Chinese city."

Hong Kong has always seen itself as a westernised global city, open to the rest of the world, a place where people can go about their daily lives protected by the rule of law. In the eyes of most Hong Kongers, the biggest threat to the city's future comes from its slow, creeping, absorption into the larger fabric of Communist China.

It is particularly telling that the generation that was born and grew up in Hong Kong after the British left, a generation that has known only Chinese rule under one-country-two-systems, is at the forefront of the protests against Hong Kong's further integration with China. China's leaders probably felt in 1997 that with the passing of time, a new generation would be born in Hong Kong that would be increasingly comfortable with being part of China. Instead, the opposite seems to have happened. Hong Kong's young look outward to the rest of the world, rather than inward to China, and see liberal democracy, rather than communist rule, as a political ideal to aspire to.

China had earlier tried to get the Hong Kong government to reform the school education system to instil greater "patriotism" and Chinese "national spirit" among the young. But this only served to spark the first big popular protest in Hong Kong in recent times, forcing the government to shelve plans for patriotic education.

The rising discontent in Hong Kong will be cause for unease in China. Hong Kong's autonomy under the 1997 agreement formally ends in 2047, and by default, the city will become like any other Chinese city. But as new generations of Hong Kongers drift further away from the Chinese motherland, both culturally and politically, the worry in Beijing must be that it will have to contend with an increasingly ungovernable city on its southern coast.

The Chinese Communist Party has traditionally dealt with unrest with a heavy hand, as the violent crackdown on pro-democracy protestors in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 showed. If Hong Kong was any other Chinese city, the response from Beijing would have been harsh. The leaders of the agitation would be thrown into jail for long periods of time, and the protestors would be brutally dispersed.

But this is not an option that China can use in Hong Kong, an international city where events occur under the full glare of the media. Heavy handed repression will set back China's aim of becoming a global leader by several decades.

Repression is not an option, and persuasion to become "more patriotic" has not worked either. The sensible option is to give Hong Kong greater space to run its own affairs, rather than trying to integrate it more closely. But this goes against the grain of all that the Chinese Communist Party has stood for. So there is a real danger that the Hong Kong pressure cooker will reach a point where an explosion becomes inevitable.

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