

Why Did Beijing Decide to Apply the Security Law to Hong Kong Now?

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Abstract

In 1997, after a century in which Britain ruled the Hong Kong, the United Kingdom transferred responsibility over the colony into China's hands. Twenty-three years later, in early July 2020, Beijing passed a security law that expanded China's powers over Hong Kong, at a dramatic time when China is also involved in border struggles and the global sphere deals with the coronavirus. What led China to make this dramatic move? Chinese leaders have done so because they are capable of doing so and can do so and want to continue to expand China's sphere of influence. Judging by the words of Zhang Xiaoming, former director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, who said, "The era when the Chinese cared what others thought and looked up to others is in the past, never to return," events in Hong Kong seem to be indicative of Beijing's plans for the future development of things.



(Photo by Iris Tong, Voice of America Cantonese Service)

Figure 1. Hong Kong protests. On 1 July 2020, the first day of the implementation of the Hong Kong version of the National Security Law, tens of thousands of protestors gathered on the streets in Causeway Bay to march.

Introduction

In 1997, after a century in which Britain ruled the Hong Kong, the United Kingdom transferred responsibility over the colony into China's hands. Twenty-three years later, in early July 2020, Beijing passed a security law that expanded China's powers over Hong Kong citizens and the city's highly developed economy.¹ This was in contradiction with agreed upon terms between China and the United Kingdom regarding Hong Kong's status—an agreement made when China was not yet at its peak like it is these days. As expected, the protests led by Hong Kong citizens, which receive great support from the US president and other people from the West, in recent months have been of no avail, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has forced the new law upon Hong Kong. CCP leaders did so without consulting the local parliament as prescribed under the agreement signed with the United Kingdom before the transfer between the countries.²

The Law

Under the new law, Hong Kong's 7.5 million citizens will be subject to the same restrictions imposed on citizens of mainland China, according to which a life sentence threat will hover over anyone convicted of subversive acts against the government.³ This has been used at times by the Chinese government to detain those who oppose the regime and human rights activists. One of the most recent examples of this was the case of law professor Xu Zhangrun from Tsinghua University, detained for his criticism of the Xi presidency.⁴ To add to the symbolism surrounding the unveiling of the new law, Beijing opened its national security office in Hong Kong in a hotel near a city-center park that has been one of the most popular venues for pro-democracy protests.⁵

The passage of the new law probably is the most significant political change that has taken place since Hong Kong was transferred to China. Therefore, it is hard to ignore the timing in which China chose to declare the new law—a time when the entire world is confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic that began in China at the end of 2019.⁶ It is also a time at which China is involved in border struggles with India, Bhutan, Russia, and other and, above all, engaged in a seemingly ever-growing struggle or impending war with the United States for global hegemony.⁷ What led China to make this dramatic move at this time? The following lines will answer this.

Why Now?

Due to the fact that Hong Kong is unnecessary for China's current expansionist needs, Beijing chose to apply the law now. In the past, Hong Kong was the

most important port for China, but now Shanghai and a few other ports in mainland China are playing increasingly important roles, reducing the earlier prominence of Hong Kong, which is no longer so critical to China's ambitions. Additionally, Beijing needed Hong Kong's unique system spur the nation's dramatic economic growth; however, CCP leaders have now concluded that Hong Kong's centrality in that growth has declined and therefore the new law can be applied to bring the city under central control and forestall the spread of nonconformist ideas from spreading to the mainland. By applying the new law, the Chinese leadership also sends a clear message to the Taiwanese people and government that Beijing intends to use all its tools to reunite China, putting Taipei on notice that it could be next.⁸

Another reason why the Chinese have done so is simply to demonstrate that they are capable of doing so, sending a clear message to the entire world that the regime is efficient enough to carry out such change while handling other conflicts and continuing to expand China's sphere of influence. What can expansion mean in this case? For a long time now, Beijing has been examining how the US-led international arena is responding to China's actions in domestic, regional, and international arenas. The US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said Washington had failed to understand how China would behave and even called this misunderstanding "the greatest failure of American foreign policy since the 1930s."⁹

In the domestic arena this pertains to the Chinese attitude toward the Uighur minority living in Xinjiang, who the government has forced into reeducation camps.¹⁰ Within the regional arena this *examination* pertains to Chinese operations in the South China Sea directed toward almost all its neighbors.¹¹ And, in the international arena, this pertains to the emergence of the Chinese-origin Coronavirus, which largely can be blamed on the Chinese leadership for choosing not to report this epidemic in a timely fashion. Despite all these, most of the world has remained silent, and the voices who call for China's accountability are very few.

In each of these arenas, China has remained virtually unscathed, which has greatly strengthened Beijing's self-confidence. It is this confidence that empowered China to apply the security law in Hong Kong at this time, as global inaction has already proven to the Chinese themselves and to the international arena that the world allows Beijing to do whatever it wants, without being held accountable. With the new law CCP leaders seek to reach for even greater power. Judging by the global response so far, it seems that the Chinese will not suffer any serious harm as a result of forcing the new law on Hong Kong. The difficulty facing the countries of the world is clear: can any country or international organization allow

itself to face China and lose the opportunity to trade with it? Also, if the United States, supposedly the world's only superpower, failed to force Beijing to meet China's obligations, who could do so? And which country will jeopardize its trade relations with China?

China, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, seems to be seeking to declare to the world that Beijing does not recognize the existence of any legitimate criticism and that any critique of the party's conduct, whether internal or external, immediately becomes a threat to the Party's very existence. In response to sanctions by the US Senate on Beijing, Zhang Xiaoming, now deputy director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, stated, "The era when the Chinese cared what others thought and looked up to others is in the past, never to return." Judging from such assertions, events in Hong Kong seem to be indicative of Beijing's plans for the future development of things, domestically and internationally.¹² The main question that remains is whether in the near future Western countries will read the warnings apparent in the ever-changing international map or whether they will continue to bury their heads in the sand.

This development should be seen through the full range of the Chinese president's activities. Since Xi came to power, he has acted to fortify China's position in the global arena and his own place as its undisputed leader. On a personal level, the main event highlighting this trend was Xi's declaration that he will take on the role of China's leader indefinitely. On the political level, the defining moment might prove to be the foisting of the security law on Hong Kong and the ending of the "One country, two systems" paradigm that had previously served as the constitutional principle between China and Hong Kong.¹³

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Notes

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