ONE COUNTRY
ONE SYSTEM
“One Country, One System”
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For Our Freedom and Yours: Hong Kong’s Call for International Solidarity

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Hong Kong’s “summer of discontent” has taken the Carrie Lam government and its master in Beijing by surprise. Essentially, the leaderless nature of the movement has enabled a new form of activism more innovative, participatory and resilient than the conventional one-off protests. The eruption of massive protest against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) has quickly expanded into a movement of movements, calling upon the international community to “Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong!” The evolving protests have succeeded in capturing global attention, generating considerable interest in juxtaposing Hong Kong with opposition movements elsewhere.

Hong Kong’s global outlooks have strong sociodemographic, institutional and cultural foundations. The city’s vibrant civil society and a highly mobile citizenry have developed strong ties with the world. Hong Kong’s connections with North America, United Kingdom, Australia and other parts of the world have been strengthened by its diaspora. This short article puts forward an analytical framework for making sense of the global-domestic connections that have underpinned the 2019 protests. The author is of the view that “One Country, Two Systems” requires more than a flexible balancing act. The city’s cohabitation with the one-party regime can work only as long as Beijing fully respects Hongkongers’ pursuit of democratic self-government. When people’s legitimate expectation is repeatedly denied by Beijing, antipathy is bound to grow; when China moves to usurp Hong Kong’s liberal foundations, high voltage confrontation is bound to take place.

What is happening in Hong Kong is not merely another epic story of “David versus Goliath” but arguably a harbinger of things to come for countries dealing with an increasingly assertive Chinese regime.

A Bastion of Freedom

That international factors matter is an observation shared widely in the literature on Hong Kong Studies. It is a geopolitical reality. Hong Kong’s success as a global city has been inextricably linked with its freedom to articulate its identity, to uphold its values and norms, and to advance its interests the way it sees fit. China’s hostility towards any form of international meddling notwithstanding, the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has embodied complex networks, spanning both the public and private divide and the national-international nexus in order for the city to continue to operate as a non-sovereign international actor.
after the 1997 handover.

It should be noted that both Hong Kong and Beijing leaders have always wanted to win wide international acclaims for what they call “the full and successful implementation of the policy of ‘One Country, Two Systems’”, focusing primarily on the economic aspects. The state of affairs between Hong Kong and the global community is perceived by the ruling political and economic elites through the logic of functionalism, according to which economic and professional ties are both the most acceptable and therefore the least resisted pathways available for the development of Hong Kong’s external relations.

However, as long as Beijing seeks to anchor “One Country, Two Systems” in the international community for reasons of the national interest and its global strategy, international factors continue to matter to the values, principles and institutions of Hong Kong. This is because the need for international recognition has also provided external actors with the necessary advantage, enabling the international community to champion for the maintenance of the city’s distant global identity under the Chinese one-party regime.

International concerns about the city’s “autonomous status” has given rise to connections whereby the city’s financial, political and social conditions are regularly reported and closely monitored. These international actors have accordingly developed a range of legal and policy instruments to delineate the full contours of “One Country, Two Systems”. The perceived transferability and adaptability of international norms and standards has bridged the geographical and psychological distances between Hong Kongers and the rest of the world. At the official level, external influence may occur as a function of Hong Kong’s participation in no less than 88 international organizations and 250 international treaties. Moreover, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Union, international non-governmental organizations and think tanks, and democratic countries such as the United States and Britain have facilitated not only the city’s global status but also the consolidation of shared values and principles. Going beyond the conventional focus on economic relations, there is room for Hong Kong and its international counterparts to work together to boost the collective capacity for promoting institutional reforms and policy innovations in accordance with universal values and international law, in a manner befitting a responsible global citizen.

All this has provided the backdrop against which the 2019 movement has rapidly developed into a global campaign in defense of Hong Kong as a bastion of freedom. The Campaign for Hong Kong consists of advertising, rallies in solidarity with Hong Kong and high profile political lobbying for new measures and sanctions against the Chinese authorities and the Carrie Lam government. The long-drawn-out struggle has made international headlines with analysts around the world tuning in, allowing the protesters to share their hope, dreams and frustrations with a global audience. Leading figures of the pro-democracy movement have been able to conduct meaningful dialogues with the international community about the state of “One Country, Two Systems”.

Hope, Not Defeatism

The unprecedented display of global solidarity with the pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong is one thing, the impacts of the external agents over Hong Kong is another thing. International democracy solidarity with Hong Kong are ipso facto dismissed by Beijing and the HKSAR government as unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of Hong Kong. It goes without saying that the external impact on Hong Kong depends not only on the commitment of the international actors to buttress the defense of human rights and the process of democratization.

Pervasive fear about an endgame has taken some years to grow and spread in Hong Kong society. Understanding that could help us to see why withdrawing the ELAB without addressing the remaining demands, including a call for universal suffrage, was not enough to end the protests. In recent years, top-down integration-cum-assimilation of Hong Kong into the Greater Bay Area and flagship national programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative have cast a long shadow on the autonomous status of the city. As policy-driven integration with China
gained momentum, there have been widespread anxieties that this new direction has taken the city down a slippery slope of “Mainlandization” whereby policy decisions are increasingly informed, and in some ways directed, by national priorities, tipping the balance against the city’s global identity and challenging the prevailing values. In 2017, when the British government highlighted in a report on Hong Kong that “a number of developments [which] caused concern in Hong Kong and internationally, affecting confidence in “One Country, Two Systems”, Beijing dismissed those claims as groundless, as was its wont, adding that the Sino-British Joint Declaration “is a historical document which no longer has any practical significance”.

It is not surprising at all for the Chinese Communist regime to call the 2019 protests a “color revolution” which shows “certain elements of terrorism” in order to provide the pretext for anti-protest mobilizations and to justify heavy-handed crackdowns by police force. At one point, the government has hoped to end the protests by “thinking aloud” about using more aggressive measures such as deploying the People’s Liberation Army or invoking a pre-World War II emergency law to give the government unlimited powers. However, the protesters were undeterred.

Even in the absence of a military intervention, Hong Kong’s autonomy will be severely undermined as Beijing is set to tighten its grip further. On the economic front, Beijing has flexed its muscles to force the business and professional groupings that are dependent on China to toe the line. Cathy Pacific, whose business can be hard-hit if access to the Chinese airspace denied, has been pressured to sack staff members who have sympathized with the protests. Meanwhile, after Beijing’s mouthpiece questioned the Mass Transit Railway for providing services to the “rioters”, it has suspended services and closed stations to assist police actions against the protesters.

**Hong Kong at the Heart of a New Cold War**

At the time of writing, few believe that the embattled leaders know how to steer the city out of a crisis of their own making. Opinion polls continue to show that three in four Hong Kong residents trust neither the government nor the police. The approval ratings of the government and the officials have reached a record low. Small wonder that Carrie Lam has tried but failed to use the city’s 30,000-strong police power to quell the protests, whilst a so-called “platform for dialogues” is almost universally dismissed by both pro-government and anti-government citizens as too little, too late.

As Beijing seeks to tighten its grip over the city, it is tempting to conclude that the endgame is inevitable and confronting China is futile. However, the unrelenting truth is that a majority of Hongkongers have prepared for an uphill battle in defense of the city’s way of living. The will to stand up for Hong Kong is strongest among the young people and the professional middle class, who not surprisingly constitute the mainstay of the pro-democracy movement.

Hong Kong’s struggle with an increasingly aggressive China should tell the rest of the world what to expect. Taiwan, for one, will never agree to the “One Country, Two Systems” policy as a blueprint for cross-strait peaceful reunification. In order for Hongkongers to uphold the city’s integrity, international backing was imperative. Hong Kong protesters are chanting “For Our Freedom and Yours!” Like nations under repression, Hongkongers will fight on. Beijing is watching carefully how the world responds to calls for solidarity with Hong Kong.
Resources

**Timeline of the 2019 Protest Movement**  
(by HKRevInfo)  
https://t.hkrev.info/en/timeline/

**Statutory Powers and Monitoring of the Hong Kong Police Force: Investigation Report**  
(by Netizens Organizing Police Abuse Investigation Data)  
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pUkCW08HzHoQXdhZ98OFgMmTujoc_Wle/view

**How not to police a protest: Unlawful use of force by Hong Kong police**  
(by Amnesty International)  
https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ASA1705762019ENGLISH.pdf

**China’s Sharp Power in Hong Kong**  
(by Hong Kong Civil Hub)  
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1G2kb4jBC9q81qODUyvFTAwlj-EMSVLRw/view
About Hong Kong Civil Hub

Hong Kong Civil Hub is founded in 2018. It aims to serve as a bridge connecting the Hong Kong civil society with international stakeholders sharing the same values in upholding and pursuing the rule of law, democracy and human rights. International cooperation with Hong Kong in these areas will be facilitated. To achieve this goal, Hong Kong Civil Hub plans to provide regular analyses on the latest political and civil society development in Hong Kong to international media, think-tanks, civil society groups and policy communities.

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