



Who Lost Hong Kong?

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September 4, 2020

Hong Kong is dead—or at least, the rule of law and civil liberties there is. The imposition of China’s wide-ranging national security law, enforced by mainland security agents empowered to drag suspects off to the mainland for trial, makes any criticism of both the Hong Kong and Chinese governments deeply dangerous. Even foreigners will have to act as if they are living in the People’s Republic of China.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. In 1997, the United Kingdom transferred Hong Kong to the PRC with the promise that Beijing would apply the “two systems, one country” standard for 50 years. Many Hong Kongers were skeptical that China would keep its promise and looked for an exit from the territory. Some residents went elsewhere for citizenship and returned after the Special Administrative Region appeared to continue operating largely unchanged.

Still, the Chinese Communist Party’s forbearance never was likely to last a half century. President Xi Jinping’s rise in 2012 accelerated the destruction of the territory’s uniquely liberal atmosphere. He proved intent on dramatically tightening CCP control over the rest of China and Hong Kong was unlikely to escape his ill attention.

Yet it took a few years for him to act. What triggered his assault on the autonomous territory that had provided such benefit for the mainland?

The PRC’s rapid economic growth and development of other financial centers diminished Hong Kong’s importance. Xi also was more concerned than his predecessors about ensuring regime control and preserving national order. Xi wanted nothing and no one to get in the way of his plans for the PRC. Fears of party authority slipping away, whether culturally, religiously, or legally, haunt his speeches.

At three critical points, Hong Kongers effectively challenged Xi’s vision of control—prompting a decisive and brutal revenge from Xi. The fault remains his, not theirs, but the lessons learned are useful.

The first misstep was the 2014 Umbrella Revolution. The grassroot protests demanding democracy, sparked by plans to change the method of choosing Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, were dramatic and might have succeeded in a Western nation. However, the movement was hampered by the lack of leaders who could negotiate and strike a bargain. Worse, the Hong Kong authorities, who might have been inclined to deal, were not in real control. Beijing was, and would never meet the demonstrators’ demands for genuine democracy.

Although the Xi government might have been willing to make a deal to end the protests, it would never abandon control. Although the Xi government might have been willing to make a deal to end the protests, it would never abandon control. At the same time, the central government could not countenance the sort of chaos and disorder that resulted when protestors shut down major roads and intersections for 77 days. If nothing else, Beijing realized that Hong Kong hosted a mass protest movement and the local authorities could not govern. PRC officials blamed outsiders for instigating trouble in the SAR, which their own ideology insisted was the only possible explanation for the protestors' antagonism toward China. The loss of a sense of Chinese—meaning, CCP-compliant—identity, as they saw it, was the root of the problem.

Events quieted down until 2016. Chinese interference in the territory escalated—for instance, publishers of books critical of China were kidnapped and prosecuted in the mainland—but such activities were covert. In October of that year, several democracy activists were elected to the Legislative Council. That was no surprise: The voting system ensured establishment control but allowed some open elections to give people a voice.

However, this time a number of those elected used their oaths of office to show their contempt for Beijing. They were disqualified but allowed to retake their oaths. Unfortunately, their actions—foolishly juvenile and needlessly confrontational—split the democracy movement. Far worse, the controversy drew Beijing into Hong Kong's affairs. The central government insisted that the affected candidates be barred from retaking the oath and that advocates of independence be disqualified from running, barring several other democracy activists. Worse, the National People's Congress insisted that it could interpret the Basic Law governing Hong Kong and set new election standards.

Events again quieted down, though with another increase in central government interference. Presumably at Beijing's behest, Hong Kong subsequently arrested leaders of the Umbrella Movement—charged for illegal protests years after the events occurred. Several activists served prison terms of various lengths. And advocacy of anything deemed to be pro-independence prevented people from running for office.

The third and final act occurred last year. Millions of people protested a proposed extradition treaty that could send Hong Kongers to the mainland. Chief Executive Carrie Lam at first suspended rather than withdrew the legislation. The demonstrations became violent—though the police and CCP-allied thugs behaved much worse—and chaotic, such as blocking the airport and trashing the Legislative Council chamber. Lam finally yielded, but protestors expanded their demands, including universal suffrage in electing the Hong Kong government.

Had democracy activists pocketed Lam's concession and deescalated, perhaps Beijing would have waited. However, the protestors again demonstrated that the local authorities were not in control and could never approve the long-delayed national security law. Worse, activists seemed intent on making Hong Kong ungovernable unless Beijing granted their impossible demand for democracy. Indeed, protestors appeared prepared to shut down commerce in the territory, something that might provide leverage in the West but which the PRC could never accept.

Democracy activists misunderstood who and what they were fighting: a system that over the last seven decades had imposed mass repression, implemented totalitarian controls, and caused tens of millions of deaths on the mainland. Against the Hong Kong government, they might have succeeded. Against Beijing, they were doomed to failure.

Moreover, some protestors publicly and dramatically called for American assistance, waving U.S. flags at rallies, and urged congressional approval of sanctions legislation. The Heritage Foundation's Walter Lohman wondered if the "protesters in Hong Kong ever understood the limited impact American power could have on Beijing's calculations"? Apparently not. Alas, Xi and other CCP grandees also saw those demonstrations. The plea for U.S. intervention was sure to enrage, providing another humiliation at the hands of activists seen as enemies of China. Such language also offered evidence for those who believed the United States instigated the protests and may have sparked fears of more direct American intervention in the future.

At that point, Hong Kong's fate was sealed. For a government dedicated to control and order, the situation in the territory had become intolerable. It is hard to imagine anyone in Beijing arguing against a proposal to crush the protests, though the regime undoubtedly preferred to do so in a way that avoided mass casualties. The regime also hoped to maintain the fiction of respecting "two systems, one country." The National Security Law, with an assist from the COVID-19 epidemic, turned out to be an almost perfect vehicle. Xi and his colleagues proved to be tragically perceptive in how to quickly and effectively break the opposition.

The loss of Hong Kong is a tragedy and offers important lessons in dealing with China—asking for what cannot be given and insulting proud nationalists might be morally inspirational, but is a bad strategy. Hong Kongers will pay the price for this.

Hong Kong will survive, but eventually will look like any other Chinese city—advanced, busy, and prosperous, but without many of its most creative and inventive residents, or the rule of law and relative transparency that underpinned business in the city.

China was always going to eventually retake full control: The CCP does not want its people to be free. Protests might have sped up the process, but a crackdown of some kind under Xi or his successors was inevitable. But Beijing is also a loser here. With Hong Kong increasingly treated like the mainland, where the CCP applies repressive legislation broadly, takes Westerners hostage in disputes with foreign governments, and treats economic information as secret, over time U.S., European, and Asian companies will shrink their presence or leave entirely. And Beijing has also demonstrated that its international commitments are worthless. The West won't be able to reverse China's action, but it will approach the PRC with ever greater caution and skepticism in the future.

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