

Hong Kong: A Global Ideological Clash

by [Enzo Reale](#) (June 2020)



Hong Kong at Night, Tinyan Chan, circa 2000

In a crucial but not unexpected step, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) definitively tightened its grip on Hong Kong and strangled its residual democratic ambitions, already reduced to a flicker after years of an artifice called “*one country, two systems*.” The Chinese government’s request to the Standing Committee of the National People’s Assembly (the regime’s puppet parliament) to draft a new national security law

applicable to the Special Administrative Regions (SAR—Hong Kong and Macau) is only the last link—probably the definitive—of a chain of abuse and repression that began in 1997, when the former British colony was returned to China. The law, whose approval is taken for granted, represents only the formal coverage of an authoritarian normalization process that has been ongoing for more than twenty years and has intensified in recent times despite the resistance of a large part of the population, who has not hesitated to challenge the threats of the dictatorship with massive protests. There are two elements especially relevant in Beijing's decision to force the situation to a breaking point. The first is the overtaking of the Hong Kong Legislative Council, paralyzed by the clash between the pro-China and the democratic factions: in the impossibility of executing art. Article 23 of the Basic Law (the *de facto* constitution) which precisely provides for the approval of laws against "*any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government,*" CCP takes the initiative with a legislation imposed by the center. The second issue concerns the same content of the legislation which, in addition to the cases indicated in the Basic Law, explicitly introduces the concepts of "*terrorist activity,*" "*foreign interference,*" and widens the range of criminal options to "*any act that endangers the national security*". I'll get back to this soon because it is an essential point. First, though, a little context.

The legislative process in China is a fiction, since the national parliament is nothing more than an assembly that only ratifies the decisions taken within the Party. In the absence of the rule of law, the principle of legality simply becomes the formal coverage of the arbitrariness inherent to single party systems. If for mainland China this has been the reality since 1949, for Hong Kong it turns into a real drama in 2020. The defense of its autonomy, or what is left after the

“restitution,” has become an integral part of its existence, the true material constitution of the region. Beijing’s attempt to introduce the *National Security Bill* in 2003, essentially a foretaste of the current confrontation, led to a massive popular reaction that resulted in the historic demonstration on July 1st and in the withdrawal of the measure after months of tension. But it was last year’s protests against the infamous extradition law that accelerated the showdown with the former British colony. The demonstrations, at times violent, have been considered in Zhongnanhai to be the most serious crisis since 1997, also due to the inability of the regime to deal with the flexible structure of the movement, without visible leaders, difficult to refer to the rigid control and repression schemes normally adopted. Not surprisingly, the proposal for the new national security law was preceded last month by the arrests of 15 dissidents, including Martin Lee, the eighty-one-year-old historic exponent of the democratic front, arrests that Beijing has directly linked to that wave of protests.

In line with the CCP’s doublespeak tradition, Zhang Yesui—National Assembly spokesperson—said the decision to impose the Chinese ax on Hong Kong is intended to *“restore legal and constitutional guarantees”* and *“consolidate the principle one country, two systems.”* But, significantly, he omitted any mention of an autonomy that, evidently, Beijing considers exhausted. *The Global Times*, the international face of the regime press, highlights in an [editorial](#) the chaos caused by the latest demonstrations and the need to prevent *“interferences of foreign forces in internal affairs.”* According to the piece, thanks to the new legislation, *“HK capitalism would begin to reveal the common traits it shares with developed societies rather than underdeveloped ones,”* a statement that, applied to one of the main financial centers in the world, is a quite strange declaration of intent. But to

understand exactly where the latest authoritarian grip comes from, we need to take a step back to May 8, when the government news agency *Xinhua* published an [analysis](#) with the eloquent title *"Home-grown terrorism intertwined with separatism poses great threat to Hong Kong."* The article cites hand grenades, incendiary materials, dangerous chemical substances, relating them to recent unrest and concluding that *"separatist forces advocating Hong Kong independence are becoming even more extreme."* The explicit inclusion of terrorism among the crimes that the new national security law will prevent is especially revealing. It is on charges of terrorism that the Communist regime justified the decade-long repression of political and religious claims in Muslim Xinjiang, up to the creation of the current system of internment camps for *"re-education"* against the Uyghur minority. This subsumption, which exceeds and expands the formula of the Basic Law, is completed by another key provision: local sections of the security agencies, directly dependent on the motherland, will be established *"if needed."* That means the extension to Hong Kong of the police state already in force in the rest of China. It is no coincidence that Joshua Wong, another leading figure of the movement for democracy, focuses especially on this point: *"This new secret police body will probably supersede Hong Kong government and police forces and launch secret arrests of all dissidents in the city, just like what they did to human rights defenders and dissidents in China"*. The combination of these factors provides a disheartening overall picture for the Special Administrative Region prospects of freedom, effectively and legally dismissing the formula *"one country, two systems."* A formula, however, already largely emptied of content due to the institutional mechanisms through which Beijing has always guaranteed control of political activity in the *"rebel"* territory, heavily conditioning in its favor the election of the members of the Legislative Council and imposing the local Executive Chief, a simple emanation of the Communist Party. Carrie Lam, who currently holds that place, immediately

lavished praise for the new legislation that certainly, from her point of view, will avoid many of the headaches that have characterized her mandate to this date. The mess of the extradition law, the obvious shortcomings in the management of protests and the need to please her bosses make her the emblem of the ongoing crisis. Even if she was seen applauding and smiling at the full session of the National Assembly, Carrie Lam is a lame duck that the regime will sacrifice without any scruples when it deems timely.

In sum, Xi Jinping has decided to close the Hong Kong issue once and for all. In doing so, he sent a blunt message, directed—as always—to a multiplicity of recipients:

- to the democratic opposition, whose room for manoeuvre will be essentially zero starting from the approval of the restrictive measures: any protest could be pursued as an attempt to subversion, but also public statements critical with the central government, tweets, meetings, assemblies, appeals for democracy;
- to Hong Kong civil society, professionals, entrepreneurs, local administrators, whose loyalty to the Party line will become an essential condition for the exercise of their activity;
- to pro-Beijing politicians, to whom the regime sends a warning: if you are unable to control the situation, we will be obliged to intervene directly with draconian measures that will also influence your life;
- to Taiwan, threatened by military maneuvers and by the prospect of imposition, by hook or crook, of the “*one country, two systems*” model, which has now revealed its true face. For the first time the adjective “*pacific*” has disappeared from official documents in reference to the reunification of the island with the continent;

- to Western democracies, to whom China reiterates that it will not accept any kind of interference in “*internal issues*”, confirming that it interprets the current one as a clash for hegemony in which the promotion of its ideological model becomes a key element: the total assimilation of Hong Kong to the China system and the shadow of the dragon looming over Taiwan are direct attacks on the liberal conception of politics, economics and law, launched on geographically close territories but precursors of broader developments.

An offensive that Beijing promotes just when the United States and Europe are licking their wounds after the passage of COVID-19, the Wuhan virus: one hundred thousand American deaths, almost the same number of victims in the old continent and tens of millions of lost jobs, with catastrophic prospects for economic recovery. In the midst of this battlefield, what is China doing? It decides to strangle Hong Kong and increase military spending by 6%. That’s why talking about “*internal issues*” is phony.

With perfect timing, just twenty-four hours before the announcement of the new legislation, the White House made public a [document](#) on the new strategic American approach to the People’s Republic of China. Recognizing the failure of the engagement policies pursued in the last decades, in the hope of making Beijing an international actor that acted in compliance with the rules, and highlighting instead its intention to undermine the compactness of the democratic field, the United States reaffirms the need for protection of its national interests in a context of “*strategic competition.*” Concerning Hong Kong there is a significant passage that reads: “*The President, Vice-President and Secretary of State have repeatedly called on Beijing to honor*

the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and preserve the high degree of autonomy, rule of law, and democratic freedoms which enable Hong Kong to remain a successful hub of international business and finance." Behind this premonitory statement, in addition to the declarations of principle, there are concrete reasons. By the end of the month Washington, according to the *Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019*, should have ratified the commercial privileges granted to Hong Kong on the basis of its real autonomy from China. It is not a secondary circumstance because, beyond the immediate economic effects, a decision in the opposite direction would give the international community a signal of distrust very difficult to amortize. Pompeo, in commenting on the bill proposed by the National Assembly, immediately made it known that "*actions like this complicate the situation*" and a few days later finally [announced](#) the revocation of the former British colony's "special status" under U.S. law. In Hong Kong, 1,300 American companies are operating right now.

The legislative process will be rapid because Beijing is in a hurry. *The Global Times* has explained that almost [everything is ready](#) (there's no doubt about it) given that the legislation is "*urgent.*" It's all been ready for months, actually, but the choreography wants its rituals, even in dictatorships. On May 28th, the People's Assembly passed the resolution unanimously, then the Standing Committee will be in charge of drafting the clauses that will divest the legislative bodies of the Special Administrative Region and effectively unify the judicial system of Hong Kong with that of the motherland. The national security law will be imposed using Annex III of the Basic Law, which contemplates Beijing's direct intervention in the field of national defense and foreign affairs: a difficult circumstance to justify from the juridical point of view but the will of the Party will prevail over any formalism. A matter of weeks, then. What will Hong

Kong do in the meantime? In a sad Sunday (May 24th), the first signs of what will come: in full curfew from COVID-19, strategically extended until Tiananmen anniversary, protests and clashes happened in the city center, with arrests and injuries. Joshua Wong preconized a hot spring, *"we can't just stand idle."* Ahead, many significant dates: on June 4th Hong Kong do usually remembers the massacre of 1989, then the annual remembrance of July 1st and the legislative elections in September, with the expected victory of the oppositions: the electoral system will neutralize the likely outcome but, morally and symbolically, it could further shake Beijing's fragile certainties. After all, the decision to end the game by force is nothing more than an admission of a weakness that undermines the authoritarian system from the foundations: China has already lost Hong Kong, the CCP is seen as an enemy who has renounced even appearances, only the stick remains. Will the West just watch or understand that a vital clash is taking place? That, as in the Cold War, a global game is played on the corpse of the hongkongers' freedoms and that all of us seriously risk losing? It's possible to be Chinese and free, prosperous and autonomous, the districts of Causeway Bay and Wan Chai shout aloud. Beijing cannot let go, it knows that democratic contagion can spread faster than the Wuhan virus, for that it represses and threatens. But are we still willing to believe in the *"soft power"* of the greatest dictatorship on the planet? Until when? *"First they came for the Jews, and I didn't say anything because I wasn't Jewish."* I'll tell you a secret: Xi Jinping's China won't stop here.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Enzo Reale is an Italian journalist living in Barcelona who writes about international politics. His articles have appeared in [Atlantico Quotidiano](#), *New English Review*, *L'Opinione*, and *Il Foglio* and he is the author of [1972 \(I posti della ragione erano tutti occupati\)](#). You can follow him on Twitter at [@1972book](#).

NER on Twitter