

## Preparing for what comes next

Written by Taipei Times  
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To coincide with the 23rd anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to the People's Republic of China (PRC), on Wednesday last week Beijing activated its new national security legislation for the territory.

China's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office Deputy Director Zhang Xiaoming (張 Xiaoming) crassly characterized the imposition — which extends Beijing's legislation on crimes of sedition, separatism, terrorism and collusion with foreign or external forces to the former British colony — as a “birthday gift” to Hong Kong.

The legislation marks the end of 23 years of Beijing pretending to adhere to the principle of “one country, two systems.”

“The people of Hong Kong governing Hong Kong” has been replaced by one-party authoritarian rule from Beijing.

Chinese President Xi Jinping (Xi Jinping) and his cronies no doubt believe they have pulled off a brilliant coup, but they would be wise to hold off popping champagne corks just yet.

The world is in a state of unprecedented flux and this year is shaping up to be an inauspicious one for China.

From COVID-19, to ongoing severe flooding of the Yangtze River, Beijing has enough on its plate without overextending itself on multiple fronts. If Xi is not careful, he might end up piloting the Chinese ship of state onto the rocks.

On the face of it, Hong Kong's full assimilation into Beijing's orbit appears to be a jingoistic snubbing of democracy, but at its core, Beijing's decision revolves around economic and financial interests.

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Hong Kong was originally a sleepy fishing village. It was only after its incorporation into the British empire that it evolved into the “Pearl of the Orient,” Asia’s foremost financial powerhouse.

Facts are facts: Under British rule Hong Kong flourished and became a vital bridge between communist China and the capitalist world. This was beneficial to the PRC in a number of ways.

However, Hong Kong’s democratic influence on mainland China can be summed up as a 100-year humiliation.

Beijing has benefited from Hong Kong in numerous ways, yet it has always treated the territory as an illegitimate daughter.

When China was poor, it leant on its wealthy daughter to survive, yet once it could stand on its own two feet, it unceremoniously shunned her, in an attempt to prove to the outside world that the all-powerful “motherland” never actually needed her.

Senior Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials always think and act like an authoritarian family patriarch: This is how they maintain their iron grip on all of China.

The principle is the same from Tibet to Xinjiang and from Shanghai to Beijing.

The calamity now facing Hong Kong dates back to the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. British officials were far too naive; taken in by then-Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping’s (邓小平) government, which appeared to be opening up and reforming.

Hong Kongers were given no say in the matter as their destiny was passed from one colonial power to another.

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Just five years later, protests for democratic reform in China were brutally crushed by the Deng regime during the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre.

Despite this harbinger of a pending disaster, the declaration was not revoked by Britain and the Union Jack was duly replaced by the five-starred PRC flag at the 1997 handover ceremony.

At the time, “one country, two systems” with its principle of “the people of Hong Kong governing Hong Kong” for 50 years, seemed to the outside world and most Hong Kongers to be a protective talisman, a firewall that would protect the territory, and simultaneously allow it to reap the rewards of an opening and reforming China.

There was no need to worry about the “black hand” of China’s dictatorship encroaching upon Hong Kong’s liberties.

However, as the stars realigned on the mainland, hopes and dreams faded to dust as Xi pursued an Otto von Bismarck-style “blood and iron” policy to solve the “Hong Kong question” and achieve full unification of “Greater China.”

Events came to head last year when Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam’s (林鄭月娥) administration attempted to pass new laws that would allow the territory’s residents to be extradited to China.

Now, the Hong Kong national security legislation has achieved this aim — and more.

Beijing had always intended “one country, two systems” as a means to connect together two outlying territories on the eastern periphery of its Greater China regional empire: Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Hong Kong’s version of “one country, two systems” was intended as a model for emulation on Taiwan.

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However, a simple time line of events set Taiwan and Hong Kong off on diametrically opposed paths.

It began with the ascent to power of former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) in 1988, followed a year later by the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the introduction of direct presidential elections in Taiwan in 1996, the replacement of Hong Kong's partially elected Legislative Council with an unelected provincial legislature by the CCP after the handover in 1997 and the first democratic transfer of political power in Taiwan in 2000.

An unexpected combination of events that culminated in Taiwan's democratization has actually had the effect of curtailing Hong Kong's sham "one country, two systems" model.

Last year's anti-extradition protests in Hong Kong produced a butterfly effect.

The fluttering of the butterfly's wings in Hong Kong caused a hurricane in Taiwan that helped swing the pendulum away from then-Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), who at the time was riding high on a tidal wave of support in the presidential election.

When Xi prematurely advanced the idea of a Taiwanese version of "one country, two systems" in his new year address on Jan. 2 last year, he was roundly rebuffed by President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and left with egg on his face.

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the strategic conflict between the US and China, Xi has opened a new war on two fronts with Taiwan and Hong Kong, in an attempt to smother unrest within the CCP.

However, tearing up the Sino-British Joint Declaration was no internal matter, and the reaction caused by Beijing's actions has exceeded all imagination.

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The countermeasures taken by US President Donald Trump's administration are the bellwether of this.

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by a virus initially spreading in Wuhan, China, has also been a factor. Beijing's attempts to cover up the virus in its early stages, and then to manipulate the WHO's response and thereby jeopardize the international community, have led to accusations and calls for compensation.

Yet while the pandemic wreaks havoc throughout the world, China continues to intimidate Taiwan, even trying to leverage the pandemic to serve this end.

As a result, the international community's concerns over the plight of Hong Kong have also transitioned to concern for the safety of Taiwan, the exemplar of democracy for the Indo-Pacific region.

There is an argument to be made, as Beijing's intimidation of Taiwan ratchets up a gear and it tightens its grip over Hong Kong, that China is poking an increasingly sensitive geopolitical nerve, as the realization sinks in elsewhere of the importance of ensuring that Taiwan does not fall under Beijing's control.

After all, if Taiwan falls, it would set off a domino effect that would quickly worsen the situation. It is unbelievable that there are still voices in Taiwan saying that China is to be trusted.

Beijing's heavy-handed approach to Hong Kong suggests that the gloves are off in its plans for Taiwan, too.

We need to be extra vigilant in our scrutiny of Beijing's rhetoric and wordplay as it moves beyond adherence to the so-called "1992 consensus," and do not get caught up in textual analysis of the "consensus" as Qing Dynasty scholars did in their obsession with ancient writings.

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Neither the 23 million Taiwanese nor the 1.4 billion Chinese give a hoot for the contents of the “consensus”: We have already moved on to a “Cold War of values” that will appease nobody.

Right now, we need to keep a very close eye on the prospect that Taiwan could well be the next Hong Kong, and the international community’s realization of it.

The flip side of Washington’s support of Taiwan is China’s increased intimidation of it, and we should not look only upon the former while taking our eye from the latter.

It is not only the Taiwan Strait that performs as a buffer between Taiwan and China: It is also our pluralistic democracy that differentiates itself from the model of one-party authoritarian rule. Hong Kong is being merged into China, while Taiwan is accelerating away from China.

When the protection of a democratic Taiwan becomes a necessary plank in the strategy to keep the Indo-Pacific region free and open, China’s military threats against Taiwan become more than simply tensions across the Strait: They are an important part of the international calculus.

For example, one result of the pandemic has been that Taiwan is no longer alone in its quest to secure participation in the WHO. This is a goal that would benefit the international community as a whole.

The passage of the Hong Kong national security legislation has expedited the divorce between the US and China, and there has been an unprecedented amount of military confrontation involving the two parties in the waters and airspace around Taiwan.

Meanwhile, Xi is talking about how the CCP has an unwavering command over China’s armed forces. The drums of war are sounding. With Xi at China’s helm, the world is a powder keg.

The Pearl of the Orient has lost its luster, and Taiwan needs to be prepared for what comes

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