

Hong Kong autonomy and the National People's Congress

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Hong Kong's future is [gloomy](#), but it should not be written off yet. It plays a vital role in the interface between the China and the rest of the world. Its future is not and never could be autonomy and most Hongkongers understand that. It may be that outside forces have prompted some to make such demands and exacerbated tensions. [Local protests continue](#), including observance of the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. International action does not help but rather risks dragging Hong Kong into the mess of US–China relations. Hongkongers might achieve better results if left to themselves and using legitimate means.

The terms of Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty were determined by the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, set out in the Basic Law enacted by China's National People's Congress (NPC) in 1990 and accomplished in the handover of 1997. The Declaration is encapsulated in the phrase '[one country, two systems](#)'. This legislated arrangement covers 50 years from 1997–2047. The Chinese government emphasises one country, while Hongkongers are concerned with the preservation of two systems.

Geographically, economically and legally, Hong Kong must remain part of China. Western propaganda and foreign funding have led a minority to [demand autonomy](#) but most locals simply want to preserve their culture. They resist the use of *Putonghua* as the national language and reject the national school curriculum. Hongkongers successfully defied a proposal to introduce a local extradition law that could put people before mainland courts. New protests are centred on a national security law that [compromises](#) the 'one country, two systems' model.

Wang Chen, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the NPC, told deputies last month that legislation was necessary because Hong Kong had never enacted a local security law as required by Article 23 of the Basic Law. This Article has always been controversial and has provoked violent local protests. It aims 'to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition [and] subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets'.

Hongkongers observe that these aims may be arbitrarily defined by Beijing without the right of challenge. Although freedom of speech is guaranteed under the Basic

Law, in the future, criticism of China may be illegal. Those who share concerns with foreigners may be arrested, and if mainland court standards are applied, cases involving 'national security' may be heard behind closed doors without the right to review.

The Hong Kong government is trying to convince people that they have nothing to fear. Justice Minister Teresa Cheng said her department would monitor rulings and inform the NPC if they contravened the Basic Law. Former chief executive of Hong Kong [Leung Chun-ying](#) said that the law might establish a new agency like the former British anti-Communist Special Branch. Such statements do not offer much comfort and discontent is simmering. Hong Kong's commemoration of the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre on 4 June last year attracted 180,000 people. This year, several thousand defied a ban enacted on COVID-19 grounds, while others placed lighted candles in their windows.

The 4000 members of Hong Kong's General Chamber of Commerce generally support the proposed law but worry about US threats of trade sanctions. US President Donald Trump said, 'We will take action to revoke Hong Kong's preferential treatment as a separate customs and travel territory from the rest of China'. Trump announced the State Department travel advisory will be updated 'to reflect the increased danger of surveillance and punishment by the Chinese state security apparatus'. As [announced on 29 May](#), sanctions will affect the 'full range of agreements ... with few exceptions'.

Hong Kong's Financial Secretary Paul Chan [said](#) there is little to fear since direct trade with the United States makes up only a small part of the local economy. Hong Kong is mainly an entrepot for the mainland market and its economy is dominated by the services sector. It is the financial centre and research and development hub of the burgeoning Greater Bay Area in the Pearl River delta. It is also Asia's premier business hub. Last year, Hong Kong was responsible for two thirds of Chinese foreign direct inward investment. Most of China's major companies, such as ICBC and Tencent Holdings, list in Hong Kong in order to expand overseas activities. Foreigners can buy mainland shares through the Hong Kong stock exchange. Many of the 1300 US companies in Hong Kong are in the financial sector. They could certainly suffer. US, Australian and other companies are based in Hong Kong because of its strategic role as a buffer between China and the West. If these companies withdraw, there will be vast impacts on regional economies as well as on China.

Australia's Foreign Minister has issued two joint statements, [the first](#) with Canada and the United Kingdom (UK), and [the second](#) with the UK and France. [The UK offered the right of abode](#) and a path to citizenship to all Hong Kong holders of British National (Overseas) passports and has approached Australia to make a similar offer. As China's dispute with the US deepens, these statements have not been well received in Beijing and it seems once again Hong Kong's fate is being determined by outside forces.

There are peaceful ways for Hongkongers to register opposition to the security law. Legislative Council elections are in September and over 400,000 new voters registered in the past year, swelling the electorate by 8 per cent. Pro-democracy parties are urging people to register to vote in functional constituencies that have in the past been held by pro-government representatives. The democratic process may prove better able to uphold Hong Kong's special status than outside intervention with questionable aims.

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