

Hong Kong: Signposts Of New Cold War And The Emerging World Order

Abstract: The US and China are invoking threat and security concerns but the approach of the two is different. For the US, the issue is autonomy, freedom, and democracy. For the Chinese, it is terrorism, extremism and separatism from foreign collaboration. Thus Hong Kong is both a pretext and battleground for the Strategic Competition between the US and China.

Saeed Shafqat August 1, 2020

In the past year, Hong Kong has witnessed some of the most vociferous and violent protests. These have been splashed by the Western Media as an assault on human rights, freedom of speech and democratic values. These protests evoked images of two movies in my mind, one Pakistani, reminding me of Comedian Rangeela's popular phrase "Main nay Hong Kong kay Nalkoon ka Pani Pia hai koi huka naheen pia"—I drank the waters of Kong Kong and not a Hub-ble-bub-ble. This conveys that Hong Kong was a tough place and making life was not easy, so one had to be strong and resilient. The other is a Hollywood love story, *The World of Suzie Wong*, featuring actors William Holden and Nancy Kwan. An American falls in love with a young Chinese girl chases her through the sea-lanes, overcrowded ships and boats and walks through the streets of Hong Kong. In the 1970's it was difficult to imagine that Hong Kong would become a model of economic growth, development and a dynamic financial hub of the world. The Hong Kong of 2020 and the protests of 2019 convey a different image of an urban, urbane city, clean, with enthusiastic youth and driven by innovation and technology. This image of peace, order, stability, economic development and Hong Kong as an attractive financial hub has been disrupted by these occasionally peaceful but largely violent protests. It appears that persistence of these protests during 2019, until the emergence of Coronavirus in January 2020, led the Peoples Republic of China to examine the causes of unrest in Hong Kong as a threat to China's national sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity.

Consequently, after deliberation the National Peoples Congress passed a law titled, "The Law of Peoples Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (NSC-Law)". The law comes into effect from July 1st 2020. In promulgating the law, the overriding consideration of the Chinese government has been preserving the territorial integrity of China (Hong Kong being the integral part) and protecting national sovereignty. It is important that the Law is understood and analyzed in the broad context of China's perception of threats to its national sovereignty and territorial integrity within the US- China Strategic Competition. In that spirit, China is claiming to uphold the principle of 'One Country, Two Systems', which is designed to combat counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency in Hong Kong. The Article 4 of the NSC-Law promises and clearly states, "Human rights shall be respected and protected". The law has four components; first, the Law stipulates, it will not allow and tolerate secession in any form; second, subversion of the State power, third, terrorism and fourth, any collusion with foreign power or external element that endangers the national security of China, including Hong Kong. The law is heavy on counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency content and is clearly driven by considerations of security and safeguarding territorial integrity and national sovereignty. The UK and the US administration's, electronic and print media, policy analysts have tended to downplay the

security considerations and overplay the human rights, freedom of expression and association, democracy, free market economy and more broadly compromising the autonomous status of Hong Kong.

More recently, the death of George Floyd on 25th May 2020, followed by an excessive use of police force against mass protests in the US, is indicative of the hypocrisy and double standards of the Trump administration on its human rights agenda. They, therefore, assert that the law has wrecked the 'One Country, two systems' principle. In fact the law reinforces the principle, as it establishes Chinese government's national sovereignty, preserving the territorial integrity of 'one country'.

There are four issues that give salience to why Hong Kong matters; I will focus on two; transition and security. First, the transition from a British Colony to an independent China, and second, national security, financial and economic autonomy, and finally the status and future of human rights and democracy. The 2018 National Defense Strategy, issued by the Trump administration has declared China a 'strategic competitor', a 'security threat' and the Communist Party of China as an 'existential threat'. This questions the very legitimacy of the Chinese political system. The origins of the new Cold War can be traced to the US Presidential Campaign of 2016. However, Hong Kong has emerged as the strategic site and symbol of this new Cold War. Understandably, the Chinese government is motivated to deter the US and the UK from interfering in the internal affairs of China in what they see as pretext of human rights and inciting violence against the governmental authority and through 'collaborators' disrupt stability and political order in Hong Kong.

In fact, the US has selectively been pursuing its human rights agenda. It has energetically voiced concerns over HR violations, yet it has remained absent on many international forums and walked away from several international organisations. Recently, the US was not a participant at the 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council held in Geneva on 30th June 2020 where the Chinese NSC Law was discussed. This is because it withdrew in 2018 from the Human Rights Council. The Chinese National Security Law was discussed at the 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council held in Geneva on 30th June 2020. It was backed by 53 countries, and opposed by 27 countries.

Both the US and the UK have been quick in revealing their intent of imposing economic sanctions and encouraging grant of UK citizenship to Hong Kong fleers. The Economist London calls it as "one of the biggest assaults on a liberal society since the second world war" and recommends "heightened vigilance against China's rise, especially as it affects Taiwan". (The Economist, July 4th 2020.) This reveals that like China, American and British analysts are also preoccupied with strategic considerations, which are as weighty on their minds as freedoms and human rights.

The broad message from the Economist is that the US, EU, the UK must band together and build 'united front' of democracies against the 'inherently immoral' rule of Chinese Communist Party. The irony is they are voicing concerns about human rights and democracy in Hong Kong and suppression of religious freedoms in Xin Jiang—ignoring the same concerns in Palestine, Kashmir, Rohingyas to mention a few. So from rise of China, the focus is shifting towards Communist Party of China as 'existential threat' declaring it as immoral and evil and an 'ideological threat' that is changing China's foreign policy and global outreach which must be contained, curbed and disrupted—regime change and de-legitimation of the Chinese Communist Party as the goal.

Again the message is; it is not simply the Law but the Chinese political system run and managed by the Chinese Communist Party that needs to be dismantled and disrupted because it goes against our cherished values of freedom of expression and respect for human rights. Why such hostility and confrontation?

Let me return to the first point as that illuminates the colonial mindset; (Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: Singapore and the Asian Economic Boom* New York: Harper Collins, 2000—paperback 2011) and provides an insight into the British imperial mindset and the acrimonious nature of transfer; in short, how the British conceived and planned Hong Kong's transfer to China. Yew records, they were, "haughty, aloof, condescending to the locals, even to me, because I was Chinese" (p547). He points out that after 1971, the British policy towards Hong Kong changed somewhat as the Governor was appointed from the British Foreign Service.

Murray MacLehose (1971-87) visited Yew and wanted to learn from the Singapore experience, therefore began to invest in technical education, public sector housing and expanded the banking sector to support the British 'hong—trading companies' that became giant conglomerates. David Wilson, another British Foreign Service officer became Governor in 1987 and remained as such till 1992. The UK-China Basic Law Declaration was signed in 1984 and it provided details on how Hong Kong would make the transition to China. Between 1984-92, the British would 'consult and negotiate' with China before making any policy changes. However, the last Governor (serving between the years 1992-1997, and is also currently the President at Oxford University), Chris Patten, altered this and introduced changes that violated the Basic Law 1984. Chris Patten was and continues to behave like a Churchillian Imperialist, who despises Communist Party and advocates liberal democracy as the bulwark against it. Yew observed that Patten believed that Hong Kong should be transferred to China in a way that some day, it could attain independence — this was against the spirit of the Basic Law. Patten's instrument for such intent was expanding the size of the electorate. This leads Yew to perceptively remark; "Patten spent the last five years of colonial rule entangled in controversy with the Chinese government" (p549).

The Chinese government reacted with anger, and rejected his move of expanding the electorate and formed the preliminary working committee to prepare for the post 1997 period. In August 1994, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress voted to replace the Legislative Council and the urban and regional councils and district boards. The governor and the British government did not take Chinese rejection seriously and went ahead with elections and expanding electoral constituencies not envisioned in the Basic Law agreement. This further widened the gap between the British Governor and the Chinese government on the degree of democratisation in Hong Kong.

In particular, the Chinese saw it as encouraging Hong Kong's independence and they could not tolerate and accept it then, just as they cannot do so today. Yew correctly concluded that, "The Western media wanted to democratize China through Hong Kong, or at least put pressure on China through democratic changes introduced into Hong Kong. So they backed Governor Patten's belated and unilateral political reforms" (p551). The political reform Patten intended left citizen groups in Hong Kong more dissatisfied than hopeful. It was too late, ineffective and divisive. As Yew claims, "Patten had filled the last five years of British rule with acrimony" (p553). In July 2020, its action replay of what was happening in the late 1990's; today through sanctions and protection of human rights, the UK and the US are claiming to preserve democracy and autonomy of Hong Kong. However, China views these as Western attempts to cultivate support for the cessation of Hong Kong if not independence from China. Hence, the NSC-Law must be opposed and if possible scrambled. The US response came with two key counter-measures, it declared the Chinese law as threat to its national security and suspended the preferential treatment that Hong Kong enjoyed. On July 14th 2020, President Trump issued an executive order, The President's Executive Order on Hong Kong Normalization: The Executive Order described the HK-NSC Law as, 'unusual and extraordinary threat' to the national security, foreign policy, and economic interest of the United States'. Under the Order the President has declared a, 'national emergency with respect to that threat' and suspended or eliminated all 'different preferential treatment for Hong Kong'.

The UK's response is equally interesting. Following the adoption of NSC-Law the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson was quick to announce that 3 million Hong Kong residents would be offered the chance to settle in the UK and ultimately apply for citizenship. Ironically though, back when Hong Kong was going to be handed over to China, Westminster had been warned by Scottish National Party leader Jim Sillars that the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration would be unenforceable. However, the then prime minister Margaret Thatcher turned a blind eye to these warnings "primarily because she did not want to grant all 3.25 million British nationals in Hong Kong the right to abode in the United Kingdom."

In my view, both the US and China are invoking threat and security concerns but the approach of the two is different. For the US, the issue is autonomy, freedom, and democracy. For the Chinese, it is terrorism, extremism and separatism from foreign collaboration. Thus Hong Kong is both a pretext and battleground for strategic competition between the US and China.

Frustration and rage of American policy analysts is reaching new heights, the COVID 19 crisis situation is being pushed as Chinese 'opportunism and improvisation' and the Trump administration's chaotic role has created a global power vacuum. China is seen as filling the void. The US needs to divest its Cold War and zero-sum mentality. Any gain of China is not necessarily loss of the US. It is too simplistic to assume that China is gaining at the expense of America. If this trend persists, the battle for Hong Kong could lead to One World and Two Systems, one where the US struggles to preserve its hegemony and the other where China leads by providing a design for multilateralism, global rejuvenation and a vision for shared humanity.

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