



25 years of Hong Kong: Past imperfect, future uncertain

Maj Gen GG Dwivedi (retd) writes: Hong Kong was meant to be special but is now aligning to mainland's norms of political correctness. China has introduced 'patriots' political reforms which ensure that only loyalist can run for parliament and top executive position.

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Taxis are seen near a giant screen showing live broadcast of Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the swearing-in ceremony on the 25th anniversary of the former British colony's handover to Chinese rule, outside a shopping mall in Hong Kong. (Reuters)

The intervening night of June 30 and July 1, 1997 was historic for People's Republic of China (PRC). As the 'Hong Kong Countdown Clock' (Xianggang Zhong) installed at Tiananmen Square, stood still at midnight, large crowds at the Square to commemorate the return of Hong Kong to the motherland broke into an emotional chorus "Laila-Laila-Xianggang Laila" (Hong

Kong has returned). Simultaneously, in Hong Kong, in the presence of Prince Charles and President Jiang Zemin, the flags of United Kingdom and its colony Hong Kong were lowered to the national anthem 'God Save the Queen' symbolising the end of British era. Soon after, the flags of PRC and new Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) were hoisted to the Chinese national anthem, 'March of the Volunteers' to mark the beginning of Chinese rule.

Return of Hong Kong marked the erasure of a major sign of 'century of humiliation', (period from the 'First Opium War 1839-42 to the culmination of the Communist Revolution-1949) during which China was forced to sign unequal treaties. The British Government took control of Hong Kong in 1842 and in 1898, signed 'Second Convention of Peking' with Chinese Qing Dynasty' gaining rights to control Hong Kong and islands surrounding it on 99 years lease. During 155 years as the British colony, Hong Kong emerged as a financial and cultural hub; acquired democratic credentials of freedom of speech and rule of law, in stark contrast to Communist China.

In 1984, 'Sino-British Joint Declaration' treaty was signed between the UK and PRC Government. It set out modalities under which Hong Kong was to be transferred to China and its governance, laying down basic principles of "One Country-Two Systems", a concept enunciated by Deng Xiaoping. It was meant to integrate former colonies of Hong Kong and Macau with China, although originally the proposition was to unify Taiwan with the mainland. The underlying rationale was that there is only one China; while mainland adheres to socialist system, Hong Kong continues to exercise high degree of autonomy, retain its capitalists and social system, besides common law. Consequently, the 'Basic Law' which came into effect on July 1, 1997 became a constitutional document to provide legal framework for HKSAR to retain its unique character for a period of fifty years, post-merger with PRC. It guarantees fundamental rights, freedom of communication, religious beliefs and independent judicial system.

Looking Back at a Roller Coaster Relationship

The grand reunification of Hong Kong with the motherland was envisioned to be the beginning of a new era. However, the relations between Hong Kong and China soured with passage of time. Beijing promised that Hong Kong citizens will be free to elect their local government but in the 'Basic Law', no time frame was set for implementation of universal suffrage. To question PRC's pledge, July 1 protests started as an annual affair by 'Hong Kong Alliance' in support of 'Patriotic Democratic Moments of China' right from the day HKSAR was established. It was not until 2003 that the rally drew huge public attention, with half million marchers opposing the 'Article 23 of Basic Law', an anti- subversion legislation. It was the second largest protest seen in Hong Kong since 1997 handover; earlier one being on May 21, 1989 in solidarity with 1989 Tiananmen. Introduction of Article 23 Legislation was ultimately set aside

In the wake of 2008 Beijing Olympics, there was sudden surge of fascination for PRC amongst Hong Kongers, large numbers identifying themselves as proud Chinese. However, the bonhomie was short lived and don't differences arose the 2012 'locust row'. There was resentment amongst locals towards tourist influx from the mainland who crowded the public places. In 2014, the demonstrators took to streets for several weeks, demanding the right to elect their own leader. It was as a sequel to the new report released by Beijing on June 10, 2014 in the form of "831

decision” of the National People’s Congress of Standing Committee (NPCSC), calling for election of Chief Executive by a 1200-person nominated committee and not through universal suffrage. This drew severe criticism of the Communist leadership, taking the form of “umbrella movement”; symbol of students’ protests. Joshua Wong, Alex Chow and Nathan Law, faces of the protests, were charged and found guilty.

From October to December 2015, disappearances of five staff members of Causeway Bay Books, an independent publisher-cum -bookstore, precipitated an international outcry as cross-border abductions were suspected to be the handiwork of Chinese public security officials. In 2017, the City witnessed protests against the Hong Kong Government’s decision to introduce ‘national moral and civic education’ in all non-international primary and secondary schools to strengthen “national identity awareness and nurture patriotism, which led to 10 days of protests, with up to 120,000 protesters turning up each day. Carrie Lam, who took over as Chief Executive on July1, 2017 prioritised ‘instilling patriotism amongst the pupils’.

In June 2019, the protesters took to streets demonstrating against the ‘Extradition Bill’ which stipulated that those suspected of serious crimes could be sent to China and carried a sentence of minimum seven years. This led to serious clashes between the police and activists as there were apprehension on misuse of the Bill. With estimated one million people protesting across Hong Kong on June 9, 2019, it marked the biggest protest since the handover. Due to this negative response, the extradition bill was withdrawn. Given the tough crowd control measures, the protests were effectively quelled in the wake of the Covid pandemic. On 30 June 2020, the NPCSC passed the national security law for Hong Kong, bypassing local government, in violation of the ‘Basic Law’. It provides Beijing legal framework to criminalise any act of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with external forces. It tantamounts to the erosion of civil and legal protection; paving the way for “establishing a police state” in Hong Kong. In July 2020, US Congress passed an act ending Hong Kong’s special trade privileges, in reaction to Beijing’s passing the national security law for Hong Kong. Frequent protests by the Hong Kongers against the Communist Leadership are signs of growing fissures between Island and the mainland.

Looking Ahead: Future Uncertain

There are mixed views on what the future holds for Hong Kong. Going by the Bloomberg writeup of June 26, 2022, as per Leung Chun-ying, Hong Kong’s third Chief Executive, the Island City is a ‘super connector’; enjoins mainland China with the international community and with broadening role is set to emerge as an even more diverse financial centre. However, Ms Emily Lau, former leader of Hong Kong’s Democratic Party, opines that things are changing rather fast, marked with general sense of anxiety amongst the people. To be an international financial centre, Lau lists three requirements, namely, freedom of money to come in and go out, freedom of accessing information and freedom of movement of people. She is most concerned about the freedom of information, given the arrests of journalists with many leaving the City. Lord Chris Patten, the last British Governor of Hong Kong, underscores that you can’t have a great international financial and trading hub if you try to control information. As per him, Communist leadership in Beijing has always wanted Hong Kong without Hong Kongers.

China's strategy is to leverage the inherent economic, trade, and technological potential of two 'Special Administrative Regions' (SARs)-Hong Kong and Macau—to augment the growth of mainland. Beijing plans to build a high-quality 'Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area' so as to expand cooperation between these regions. It also encompasses building platforms such as Qianhai in Shenzhen, Hengqin in Zhuhai, Nansha in Guangzhou, and Shenzhen-Hong Kong 'Science and Technology Innovation Cooperation Zone'. The Communist leadership also seeks to systematically enhance cross-border exchanges and cooperation to raise national awareness and patriotism among citizens of Hong Kong.

Most agree that over last quarter century, PRC has succeeded in tightening the grip over HKSAR, especially during Xi Jinping Era. Communist leadership will effectively employ combination of instruments including economic means, legal system enforcement mechanisms and coercive policing measures to control Hong Kong to safeguard national security and integrity. Given that any signs of instability in the SARs can have cascading effect on the mainland, the Chinese Government will take no chances whatsoever.

Beijing loyalist and hardliner John Lee, former Hong Kong Security Chief will be assuming office today (July 1, 2022); the swearing in ceremony is being attended by Xi Jinping who will be in the City to mark 25th Anniversary of Chinese rule. The Hong Kong Police will formally swap British style marching for the 'Goose Steps', used in the mainland to promote patriotism. A report in South China Morning Post of June 26, 2022 covering damaged national and Hong Kong flags quotes one Chan who on seeing these flags at Kam Shek House remarked; "We don't need to wait for fifty years. The current Hong Kong gives me the feeling of what Hong Kong would be in 2047".

Hong Kong was meant to be special but is now aligning to mainland's norms of political correctness. China has introduced 'patriots' political reforms which ensure that only loyalist can run for parliament and top executive position. The 'one country-two systems' has gradually eroded, skeptics apprehend that it may sooner or later transform into "one country, one system". The moot question is whether 25 years on, Hong Kong (Xiang Gang-Fragrance Island) still retains its scent, its unique spirit.

(The writer is a war veteran, served as Defence Attaché in China and North Korea; is currently Professor of Strategic and International Relations)