

Hong Kong and the Demise of “One Country, Two Systems”

Joseph Bosco

Hong Kong’s students, joined by large segments of the territory’s population, have taken to the streets to protest Beijing’s renegeing on its promise of local political autonomy. Since 1997, Chinese authorities have offered to Hong Kongers the “universal suffrage” denied to the rest of the Chinese population. But the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress announced in August that voters can only choose from chief executive candidates approved by the Chinese Communist Party. The left hand took away what the right hand had given: authentic political choice.

Deng Xiaoping first announced the promise of local autonomy after a decision of the Sixth National People’s Congress in May 1984, which he said was affirmed in “[t]he contents of the Sino-British talks.”¹ Deng’s purpose in declaring the policy was two-fold: to facilitate the British hand-over of Hong Kong in 1997 and to entice the people of Taiwan to accept eventual unification with China.

We are pursuing a policy of “one country, two systems” . . . [T]his means that within the People’s Republic of China, the mainland with its one billion people will maintain the socialist system, while Hong Kong and Taiwan continue under the capitalist system.²

Deng considered “one country, two systems” not only innovative for China, but also

¹ Deng Xiaoping, “One Country, Two Systems,” June 22-23, 1984, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol3/text/c1210.html>.

² Ibid.

somewhat self-servingly a potential model for other nations to emulate:

The successful settlement of the Hong Kong question may provide useful elements for the solution of international questions. Has any government in the history of the world ever pursued a policy as generous as China's?³

Deng understood that unification with Taiwan was a long-term project, and that Hong Kong's integration would have to be accomplished first:

China has not only the Hong Kong problem to tackle but also the Taiwan problem . . . There are 13 years left until 1997. We should start working now to gradually bring about a smooth transition.⁴

Deng stressed that the first and overriding principle in applying "one country, two systems" to Hong Kong was for both China and the West to recognize the local population's inherent capacity for self-government:

We should have faith in the Chinese of Hong Kong, who are quite capable of administering their own affairs. The notion that Chinese cannot manage Hong Kong affairs satisfactorily is a leftover from the old colonial mentality . . . We are convinced that the people of Hong Kong are capable of running the affairs of Hong Kong well.⁵

The Basic Law for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region codified Deng's commitment:

The socialist system and policies shall not be practiced in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years.⁶

The 1997 Law also reflected Deng's professed confidence in Hong Kong's self-governing talent when it described "the method for selecting the Chief Executive in

³ Deng Xiaoping, "One Country, Two Systems," June 22-23, 1984, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol3/text/c1210.html>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China," Article 1, Section 5 (1997), <http://www.constitution.org/cons/hongkong.txt>.

accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress”:

The ultimate aim is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures.⁷

The smiling, diminutive Deng seemed beneficent enough when he made these pledges to the people of Hong Kong and Taiwan. As he dramatically liberalized China’s own economy, all three societies pondered with cautious fascination the possibilities Deng’s reforms seemed to offer. Even Mainland Chinese began to hope that some of Deng’s professed tolerance for limited democracy might rub off on his rule of the broader China.

However, on 4 June 1989, their collective dreams were shattered under hails of machine-gun bullets and the crush of rolling tanks as Deng, the Chinese Communist Party, and the People’s Liberation Army made war on the Chinese people precisely because they had dared to seek a measure of political freedom. The world took note, but the citizens of Hong Kong and Taiwan remember. Every year on the anniversary of Tiananmen Square, crowds of people of all ages gather in Hong Kong’s Victoria Park and Taipei’s Liberty Square to commemorate the tragic events with flowers, signs, and speeches. This year’s twenty-fifth anniversary drew huge throngs of people in both places.

After a subsequent quarter-century of economic growth in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Mainland, it seemed to China’s leaders and many Western scholars that the luxury of democratic governance had fallen safely behind economic prosperity as the public’s dominant aspiration. Neither the Chinese government nor the Chinese people would allow human rights to disrupt business as usual. Similarly, in the United States, mounting reports of China’s human rights abuses did not dissuade Republican and Democratic presidents and secretaries of state from pursuing normal relations with China on a range of economic and geopolitical issues.

During that period, Taiwan’s government entered into a number of economic arrangements with Beijing and many observers saw the prospect of peaceful, consensual political unification as only a matter of time. Western governments welcomed and even urged growing cross-Strait ties as the way to ease political

⁷ “The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China,” Article 45 (1997), <http://www.constitution.org/cons/hongkong.txt>.

tensions.⁸ Chinese leaders and Western experts seemed hardly to notice what polls were telling them over and over: the Taiwanese identity among the people was growing stronger every year and would ultimately affect Taiwan's relationship with China. In a 2011 poll, 72 percent of respondents identified themselves as Taiwanese, while only 17 percent saw themselves as Chinese.⁹

Instead of accepting this reality and its long-term implications, self-proclaimed political realists (i.e., experts who believe in the inevitability of Taiwan's "peaceful" acquiescence to political union with China) reassured themselves with polls showing small minorities of Taiwanese favoring either formal independence or unification while an overwhelming 80 percent preferred the status quo.¹⁰ The conventional illusion was that the glass was three-fourths full when it was actually three-fourths empty.

The numbers, properly read, told a more sobering story for China and Western advocates of unification; almost 80 percent of Taiwanese want either *de jure* or *de facto* independence (i.e., the status quo). China's Anti-Secession Law (discussed below) makes clear that neither is acceptable to Beijing.

Moreover, for years, pollsters ignored an underlying reality: the percentage of those supporting the status quo over *de jure* independence was always skewed because people were answering the question strategically, factoring in China's threatened use of force. When recent polls explicitly or implicitly removed war with China as a hypothetical possibility, support for unification declined to as low as 7 percent, with independence support creeping up to 24 percent and 66 percent preferring the status quo.¹¹ When respondents were asked to eliminate the status quo as an option, the results were 71 percent for independence and 18 percent for unification.¹²

⁸ See, for example, David B. Shear, "Cross-Strait Relations in a New Era of Negotiation," (Speech, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 7, 2010).

⁹ TVBS Poll Center, "Ouhuhui hou meizhongtai guanxi mindiao" 歐胡會後美中台關係民調 [Popular Survey of U.S.-China-Taiwan Relations after the Obama-Hu Summit], February 2011, http://www1.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/DL_DB/rickliu/201102/rickliu-20110201165030.pdf.

¹⁰ "Between 1994 and 2001, an average 78 percent of Taiwanese preferred maintaining the status quo, 4.5 percent supported immediate independence, and 2.6 percent favored immediate unification." Tsai Chia-hung, Wang Ding-ming, and Livianni S. Tossutti, "Between Independence and Unification: An Ordered Probit Analysis of Panel Survey Data on Taiwan's Constitutional Future," *Issues & Studies* 44, no. 4 (December 2008): 74.

¹¹ "Taiwanese prefer independence over unification: survey," *Taipei Times*, October 31, 2013, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2013/10/31/2003575806>.

¹² *Ibid.*

A 2014 poll showed the dramatic influence of changing demographics. 47.8 percent of participants in the poll said that “Taiwan should declare independence and become a new country.”¹³ But among those in the 20-to-29 age group, the number rose to 68 percent.¹⁴ Similarly, 64 percent of participants overall opposed unification, compared to 82 percent in the younger age group.¹⁵

With the ascendancy of the independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan, some Chinese officials began paying attention to the demographic realities. In a private conversation in 2003, a Chinese embassy official told me that, contrary to conventional wisdom, he thought time was not on China’s side, precisely because of a growing Taiwanese identity. “Every day,” he said, “people on Taiwan with loyalties to China are dying, and every day people are born who will know only Taiwan as their motherland.”

Confirming the official’s pessimism, Beijing began to prepare for the reality that, for its purposes, Taiwan’s status quo is unsustainable over the long run. In 2005, it passed the Anti-Secession Law.¹⁶ The ASL served four objectives: (1) To issue a severe warning to President Chen Shui-bian that a declaration of independence or substantial moves in that direction would invite a Chinese attack; (2) To create a “legal” counter to Washington’s Taiwan Relations Act, which established a statutory basis for U.S. security aid to Taiwan, including the sale of defensive arms; (3) To reaffirm the “one country, two systems” promise as long as unification is achieved peacefully; and (4) To disabuse Taiwan’s people of the notion that the status quo could go on indefinitely. If a peaceful avenue to achieve unification were “exhausted,” the ASL declared, China would resort to force anyway. De facto independence, in other words, is ultimately just as unacceptable to Beijing as a formal declaration would be. To avoid the resort to “non-peaceful means,” the ASL proposed “personnel exchanges across the Straits . . . in steps and phases.”¹⁷

American officials and China experts pressed Taiwan to work out a political accommodation that would satisfy Beijing. Henry Kissinger warned Taipei at the

¹³ “Majority rejects unification: TISR poll,” Taipei Times, February 23, 2014, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2014/02/23/2003584139>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ National People’s Congress, People’s Republic of China, “Anti-Secession Law,” March 14, 2005, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200503/14/eng20050314_176746.html.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Asia Society in 2007 that “China will not wait forever.”¹⁸ During Taiwan’s presidential election the following year, Beijing and Washington made clear their preference for a Kuomintang (KMT) victory as the way to improve cross–Strait relations damaged under Chen.¹⁹ Their hopes were restored with the election of President Ma Ying-jeou, who vigorously pursued ever deeper economic ties with China. The two capitals again put their thumbs on the scales of Taiwan’s 2012 election, helping to ensure four more years of the KMT’s hold on power and continued efforts to move closer to China.²⁰

While Taiwan was holding its election, student protests were breaking out in Hong Kong, ostensibly the model for Taiwan’s political reconciliation with China. The issue was an official revamping of the public school curriculum to align it with the “patriotic education” taught in Mainland China. Hong Kongers were irate that “The China Model” handbook—which criticized multiparty systems, such as the very system promised Hong Kong—had been rushed through without public consultation. The demonstrations, numbering in the tens of thousands, forced the government to back down and withdraw the proposed changes. The events were fully reported in the Taiwan media, though not in mainland China.

After his reelection, Ma moved aggressively to expand China–Taiwan economic cooperation through a series of trade and technical agreements. In February, his administration also intensified political talks with China by participating in the first official meeting between the two governments’ representatives. Beijing hailed this as the start of a “first step, second step, third step” process toward political reconciliation.²¹ It would move the parties forward in the “steps and phases” toward peaceful unification envisioned in the ASL.

However, when a cross-strait service trade agreement was quickly passed in the Legislative Yuan earlier this year without full vetting by the political opposition or the public, Taiwan’s young people rose up. The Sunflower Movement occupied government buildings and held massive street demonstrations to protest Taiwan’s inexorable march toward economic dependency on China. The students, and the

¹⁸ Henry Kissinger, interview with Orville Schell, Asia Society, January 30, 2007, http://fora.tv/2007/01/30/Henry_Kissinger.

¹⁹ Richard Bush, “Taiwan’s Elections and United States Interests,” Brookings Institution, September 15, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/09/15-taiwan-presidential-election-bush>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Taiwan, China exchange views on potential presidential meeting,” *China Times*, February 14, 2014, <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20140214000072&cid=1101>.

thousands of workers and professionals who joined them, had seen how, two years earlier, the people of Hong Kong had successfully defied and reversed an official fiat from Beijing. Taiwan's protesters only had to overcome resistance from their own elected government, and they ultimately did, with no violence on either side.

In a reversal of roles, the young people of Hong Kong were now paying attention to what was happening in Taiwan, the other member of Deng's one country, two systems fraternity. They could see that while Hong Kong was supposed to be moving closer to Taiwan's political model, its societal freedoms were under increasing pressure from Beijing. Meanwhile, Taiwan was becoming ensnarled in the same economic net that bound Hong Kong to China and—Taiwan's students feared—would lead to political subservience.

Still, Hong Kong's hopes for preserving its Western-style freedoms and way of life rested on Deng's promised political autonomy, scheduled to go into effect in 2017 with the direct election of the city's chief executive. Yet, in August, the Chinese Communist Party abruptly snatched that democratic lifeline away, declaring that only Beijing-selected and-vetted candidates could compete for the position. This announcement ignited the latest protests. As with Hong Kong's earlier education protests, Taiwan's Sunflower movement, the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, and other mass protests in Chinese history, this latest one started with students but soon swelled with participants from the general population.

Taiwan's people and government have publicly sided with their democratic brethren in Hong Kong.²² In both societies, Beijing has lost whatever moral credibility it may have retained after Deng's "one country, two systems" pledge was tarnished by his Tiananmen Square catastrophe and subsequent human rights abuses.²³ Taiwan's President Ma has flatly declared: "The one country, two systems formula practiced in the special administration region is not acceptable to Taiwan."²⁴ But the Taiwanese look beyond Hong Kong to democratic development in China itself. As Ma has repeatedly said, only when "mainland China moves toward democracy and allows more freedom to its people" would Taiwan seriously consider closer

²² Cindy Sui, "Watching Hong Kong: Taiwan on Guard against China," *BBC News*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29592881>.

²³ Benny Avni, "Beijing's Crushing of Democracy in Hong Kong Sends Chills through Taiwan," *Newsweek*, October 20, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/10/31/beijings-crushing-democracy-hong-kong-sends-chills-through-taiwan-278455.html>.

²⁴ "Ma Reaffirms Policy on Cross-Straits Relations," *Taiwan Today*, November 4, 2014, <http://www.taiwan-today.tw/ct.asp?xitem=223693&CtNode=414>.

political association.²⁵

The question for Xi Jinping—widely seen as the strongest, most capable Chinese leader since Deng—is whether he will honor his renowned predecessor’s democratic promises or repeat his authoritarian mistakes.

Since the founding of the People’s Republic, the default response of China’s leaders to any internal challenge has been Mao Zedong’s teaching that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” The question is whether Xi will follow the Maoist model as faithfully as he has adopted some of its ideological rhetoric. If so, Beijing will authorize a stronger use of force to prevent Hong Kong’s people from getting the new autonomy Deng promised and ultimately to take away the independence Taiwan already has. Alternatively, Xi has the opportunity to demonstrate that China has finally reached a higher level of maturity, self-confidence, and humanity. The people of Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and the world await his response.

Joseph Bosco is Senior Associate for the Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Previously, he taught at Georgetown University and served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He also served as special assistant to Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe. Mr. Bosco holds a J.D. from Harvard Law School, and a B.A. in Government and International Relations from Harvard College.

²⁵ “Ma Reaffirms Policy on Cross-Straits Relations,” *Taiwan Today*, November 4, 2014, <http://www.taiwan-today.tw/ct.asp?xitem=223693&CtNode=414>.