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Development of the Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Protest into a “New Cold War”: Shift from Opposing the Fugitive Offenders (Amendment) Bill to Opposing the Hong Kong National Security Law

KURATA TORU

The Hong Kong crisis, which began with massive demonstrations against the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill in June 2019, has persisted over a long period. Although these demonstrations were originally organized to oppose the said bill, the government’s hardline approach to the issue made the demonstrators turn toward using increasingly intense methods of protesting. Further, the original stance of opposing the bill underwent a shift toward opposing the government, finally culminating into a full-fledged pro-democracy movement critical of the system that exists in Hong Kong. Consequently, citizens’ interest in politics increased, the sense of identity as a “Hongkonger” deepened, and even “Hong Kong nationalism” began to stir. Finally, the Trump administration, which had previously paid no attention to these developments, signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act into law and prepared to impose sanctions on China.

In response, in May 2020, the Chinese government declared the imposition of the Hong Kong National Security Law. On June 30, 2020, it enacted the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and enforced it in Hong Kong. This law provides scope for widespread interference by the central government in Hong

Kong’s legislative, administrative, and judicial processes, thereby weakening its autonomy. Not only did the vague wording of the law constrain Hong Kong’s citizens about their freedom being compromised, but it was also implemented as a means to suppress the pro-democracy supporters in Hong Kong. However, the Hong Kong National Security Law was strongly opposed by the international community, and the US began imposing sanctions.

Hong Kong is the front line in a “new cold war” situation between the US and China. The fact that the Hong Kong issue led to US-imposed sanctions on China symbolizes the escalation of the geopolitical “new cold war” in East Asia between these two powers. Therefore, the outcome of the Hong Kong issue could potentially determine the future of this region.

Introduction

Amidst rising tensions surrounding the COVID-19 (coronavirus) crisis, Hong Kong witnessed a completely unrelated crisis. This began with large-scale demonstrations in June 2019 against the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill. It eventually turned into an anti-government and pro-democracy movement of an unprecedented scale and is still ongoing.

The sudden chaos generated by the coronavirus situation enabled the government to use the need to prevent the spread of infection as a reason to impose long-term restrictions on the right to public assembly. This superficially calmed the demonstrations down. However, during this “cease fire,” the central government enacted the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, shifting the focus of the Hong Kong crisis to international relations.

In this paper, the author provides an overview of these developments. The Hong Kong crisis, which occurred against the chaotic backdrop of the coronavirus situation, exemplifies the rapid worsening of the “new cold war.” This paper intends to sound an alarm regarding the crisis, which, at the time of this writing, is not only still ongoing but is also extremely worrisome for East Asia.

Flaring up of the 2019 Hong Kong demonstration: a crisis of the system

From opposing a bill to a pro-democracy movement. The origin of the 2019 Hong Kong crisis was a problem that seems highly apolitical and technical: Revision of the Fugitive Law to allow a man from Hong Kong, who allegedly murdered a woman from Hong Kong in Taiwan, to be extradited to Taiwan. The Fugitive Law in force at the time prohibited the extradition of a person to “any other part of the People’s Republic of China.” Thus, Hong Kong—which views Taiwan as

part of China—was unable to extradite the suspect to Taiwan. Using this as its reason, the government proposed amending the Fugitive Law (the Fugitive Bill) in February. The demonstrations against this move by the general public in Hong Kong gradually increased in scale. After the “1,030,000 People Demonstration” (figure provided by the sponsors) on June 9, demonstrations were organized almost every week and became more intense.

The possibility of extraditing suspects to “any other part of the People’s Republic of China,” would imply the inclusion of not only Taiwan but also Macau and the Chinese mainland. Hong Kong is a “city of fugitives” that includes many refugees who escaped into the region from the mainland after World War II due to their opposition to the Communist Party’s rulers and their descendants. Thus, the government’s proposal to revise the Fugitive Law, enabling people to be extradited to the mainland, was extremely unpopular. However, the government ignored the increasing protests and tried to accelerate the passing of the amendment. The Hong Kong government referred to the June 12 demonstration in which the police clashed with demonstrators as a “riot.” Subsequently, the police increased the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and weapons in a continued attempt to suppress the demonstrators. This further aggravated the public, and the clashes became even more violent.

Likely, this method of handling the demonstrations was not the true intention of the Hong Kong government. According to a recorded statement made by Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, during a private meeting that was leaked to Reuters on September 2, Lam said, “If I have a choice, the first thing is to quit, having made a deep apology.” However, she had few options once the issue had been elevated “to a national level,” a reference to the leadership in Beijing, “to a sort of sovereignty and security level, let alone in the midst of this sort of unprecedented tension between the two big economies in the world.” In such a situation, she added, “the room, the political room for the chief executive who, unfortunately, has to serve two masters by constitution, that is the central people’s government and the people of Hong Kong, that political room for maneuvering is very, very, very limited.”¹ This strongly suggested the central government’s uncompromising stance because Beijing perceived the problem as having reached the level of “national security” and “autonomy” as the opposition to the proposed revision reached the level of criticism of the policy itself. This perception left suppression as the only possible tactic.

However, this tactic failed to calm the people in the midst of expressing their dissatisfaction through enormous demonstrations. Although the government announced on June 15 that deliberation over the proposed revision to the Fugitive Law would be suspended, it refused to rescind the motion altogether. Thus, the “2,000,000 People Demonstration” took place on June 16, during which the demonstrators announced their “Five Demands.” These were as follows: (1) com-

plete withdrawal of the extradition bill from the legislative process; (2) retraction of the characterization of the June 12 protest as a “riot”; (3) no arrest or indictment of protesters; (4) establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into police conduct and use of force during the protests; and (5) resignation of the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam. As the government ignored these demands, on July 1, protesters entered the Legislative Council and caused damage. They also replaced their demand for Carrie Lam’s resignation with the demand for universal suffrage. The methods of protest became increasingly violent, and they qualitatively transformed from criticizing the policy to criticizing the government, eventually turning into a full-fledged pro-democracy movement that was critical of the system in place. Once this happened, the government, on September 4, finally announced that it would retract the proposal to revise the Fugitive Law. However, by this point, this decision was not sufficient to quell the demonstrations. The issue of how to refer to the demonstrations after retracting the proposed revision had arisen; however, no name has still been decided. Some in the media refer to it as the “rebel movement.” The slogan adopted by the demonstrators is “The Revolution of Our Time.” At the very least, what can be ascertained from this phrase is the fact that the demonstration against a revision to a law flared up into a more critical and head-to-head conflict with the government. It now stands to reject the entire system and has assumed the character of a “rebellion against authority” and a “revolution.”

Explosive rise in political awareness and the awareness of being “Hongkongers”. In the past, phrases such as “only interested in making money” were used to refer to people from Hong Kong. However, in recent years, the people experienced a gradual awakening of their political awareness as a result of the 2003 “500,000 People Demonstration” against the National Security Ordinance; the “Anti-National Education Demonstration” against the establishment in 2012 regarding “Patriotic Education” as a required subject in primary, middle, and high schools; and the “Umbrella Movement” against the adoption of “Chinese-style” elections (universal suffrage with screening of candidates by Chinese Communist Party) in 2014. The spirit of resisting the efforts toward “Sinicization” of Hong Kong was what all these movements had in common. This was also the underlying spirit of the 2019 demonstrations. The fact that the “awakening” during the 2019 demonstrations was of a larger scale than what was previously experienced was demonstrated by a series of public opinion polls conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (known as the “Public Opinion Programme, the University of Hong Kong” until June 2019).

Figure 1 shows the results of a survey conducted to determine which of the following type of problems interested the people of Hong Kong the most: politics, economy, social (livelihood). In 1992, when the survey was begun (prior to the

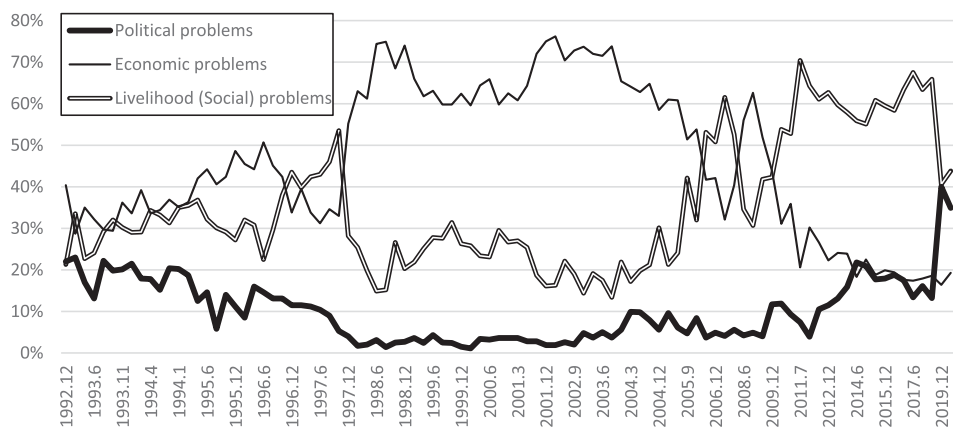


Figure 1. Areas in which the citizens are most interested

Wording of question: Hong Kong is currently facing various problems. What kind of problems are you most concerned about?

Source: Website of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute

(<https://www.pori.hk/pop-poll/current-condition/n002>, accessed on August 27, 2020)

N.B. Since the June 2010 survey, the wording “social problems” was changed to “livelihood problems.”

return of Hong Kong to China), the people indicated “economic problems,” at 40.4%, as the area in which they were most interested. Subsequently, interest in political problems continued to decline, and around the time of the return to China, interest in economic problems had become the overwhelmingly top response due to poor economic conditions caused by the Asian currency crisis. After the economy recovered, interest in social (livelihood) problems, such as the skyrocketing value of real estate, increased. The June 2019 survey, conducted after the current demonstrations had begun, showed that interest in political problems had suddenly increased dramatically to the point that it was nearly the same as the 40.6% indicating an interest in livelihood problems. The latest June 2020 survey may have been a reflection of the difficulties in daily life caused by the COVID-19 pandemic because interest in livelihood problems was at 43.8% and that in politics was at 34.9%. However, the survey results suggested that extreme politicization of the situation in Hong Kong is still underway.

Figure 2 shows the survey results regarding the identity of the people of Hong Kong. This survey was begun in 1997, and the data shown here indicate a change after June 2008, when the highest percentage of people in Hong Kong’s history (38.6%) referred to themselves as “Chinese.” The survey conducted in December 2019 showed the lowest percentage of people (10.9%) referring to themselves as “Chinese.” Conversely, the percentage of people who referred to themselves as “Hongkongers” rose drastically after the demonstrations in June 2019 had started. Subsequently, this figure exceeded 50%.

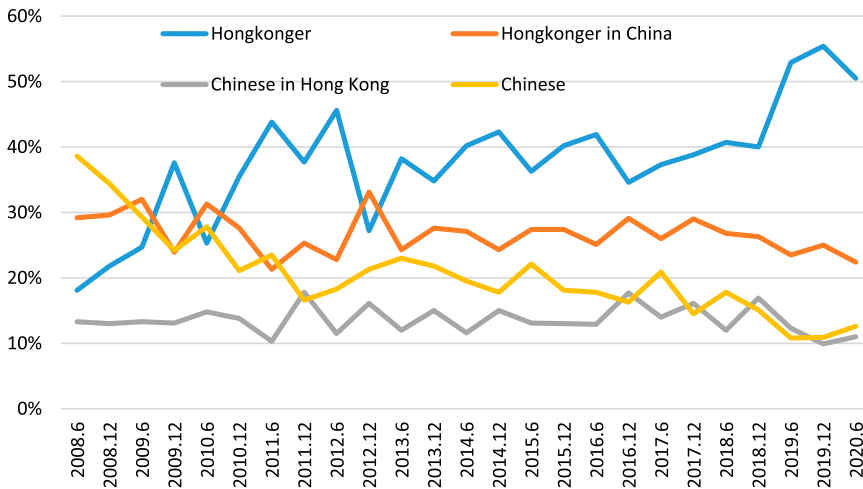


Figure 2. The identity of the people of Hong Kong

Source: Website of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute

(<https://www.pori.hk/pop-poll/ethnic-identity/q001>, accessed on August 27, 2020)

As the data show, the demonstrations against the proposed revisions to the Fugitive Law led to an unprecedented increase in the awareness among the people of Hong Kong and their demand for democracy. In the latter half of September 2019, the theme song of the revolution, “Glory to Hong Kong,” written by volunteers, spread like wildfire after being uploaded to the internet. People sang the song in unison every night in shopping malls and other locations throughout Hong Kong. Many people began to refer to the song as “Hong Kong’s national anthem,” and some critics pointed out that it symbolized the rise of “nationalism” in Hong Kong.²

Attitude of the US: from disinterest to active involvement. The Hong Kong demonstrations had an enormous impact globally. The demonstrations were not sufficiently powerful by themselves to oppose the government of Hong Kong, which is supported by the central government in Beijing. Thus, from the beginning, the protestors sought the support of the international community. Further, they anticipated support from the US because of President Trump’s hardline stance regarding China suggested by actions, such as instigating a “trade war” with China. Hence, the Hong Kong issue could be used by the US as a “weapon” to inflict damage upon China.

According to the United States-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, if the US government determined that Hong Kong was autonomous, it would establish Hong Kong as a customs zone, that is, distinct from mainland China. If the US were to rescind Hong Kong’s independent customs zone status, this would indicate that

the US regarded Hong Kong as part of the same economic region as mainland China. This, in turn, would imply a stricter policy in all regards toward Hong Kong than the one that currently exists. In particular, the position of the International Financial Centre of Hong Kong contributed to the free international flow of finances because the Hong Kong dollar is fixed to the US dollar. Thus, the method by which the US-Hong Kong Policy manifests would significantly impact Hong Kong.

For many years, the US did not show any intention of putting the stipulations of the US-Hong Kong Policy Act into action, despite the several phases the US-China conflict went through over the years. Subsequently, on March 21, 2019, the US government released its 2019 Hong Kong Policy Act Report. This report revised the attribution that Hong Kong was “more than sufficient” as an autonomous entity to receive special treatment from the US. The new attribution identified it as only “sufficient—although diminished.”

However, for a considerable period after the protests erupted, Trump himself remained uninterested in the Hong Kong issue. On August 1, Trump referred to the protests as “riots,” characterizing the problem as an issue between China and Hong Kong. He stated that, as Hong Kong is part of China, “They’ll have to deal with that themselves.” However, a group of participants in the Hong Kong protests gathered in front of the US Consulate and, while waving the American flag, demanded that a “Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act” be passed in the US Congress to fortify the Hong Kong Policy Act. The US Congress accelerated its deliberations over this law, and on October 15, the House of Representatives passed it almost unanimously, as did the Senate on November 19. Trump signed the new law on November 27, after which it came into effect.

This law included a provision stipulating that those who disrespect human rights in Hong Kong will be refused entry into the United States and have their assets frozen. Under this, public officials of both the central government and the government of Hong Kong could be subjected to sanctions. It also prohibited the export of military and commercial dual-use technologies to China. The US, in conjunction with the UN, monitors the status of sanction implementation on North Korea and Iran and would particularly monitor the import of sensitive technologies from Hong Kong based on China’s concept of economic fusion among Guangdong Province, Hong Kong, and Macau. Thus, the US would restrict China’s high-tech strategy using the protection of human rights and democracy as reasons.

Significance of the National Security Law

An enormous threat to freedom, democracy, and rule of law. Amidst protests, COVID-19 struck Hong Kong in January 2020. This made it difficult to hold large-scale demonstrations, which led to a superficial calming of protest activities. However, the Pro-democracy camp was focused on gaining a majority in the Leg-

islative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region election in September.

In response, the central government made a sudden and devastating move. On May 21, the National People’s Congress (NPC), which had been postponed until May 22 due to the COVID-19 crisis, announced that it would be deliberating on a National Security Law for Hong Kong.

Article 23 of Hong Kong Basic Law indicates that laws for preserving the security of the nation were not to be enacted by Beijing, but by the Hong Kong government instead. However, the National Security Ordinance, based on this and proposed in 2003, was rescinded due to the July 1 “500,000 People Demonstration” that year. Legislative processes regarding such a law were stalled ever since. The National Security Law cracks down on four categories of behaviors and activities: dividing the nation, overthrowing the central government, the interference of foreign nations, and terrorist activities. These terms were frequently used by central government officials to criticize the 2019 demonstration. Zhang Yesui, the spokesman for the PRC, stated that the objective of these sanctions was to deal with “new circumstances.” Indeed, the enforcement of the National Security Law on Hong Kong can be viewed as a measure to counter the crisis that developed because of the 2019 demonstrations.

The central government hurried to enact the National Security Law. On May 28, the NPC decided to refer the enactment process of this law to the PRC Standing Committee, which then met from June 18 to 20 and again from June 28 to 30. On June 30, it passed the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which it enforced in Hong Kong at 11 p.m. the same day. The fact that the Standing Committee met twice in the same month, passed a new law, and then immediately implemented it represents remarkably swift action. One of the reasons why Beijing was in such a hurry was the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region election scheduled for September 6. As indicated earlier, the Pro-democracy camp —emboldened by the demonstrations—was now aiming at capturing a majority for the first time in history. This would enable it to reject the government-proposed budgets. According to the Hong Kong Basic Law, if that were to happen, the Chief Executive could dissolve the legislature (Article 50). However, if the newly elected legislature were also to reject the budget proposal, the Chief Executive would be forced to resign (Article 52). Thus, if the Pro-democracy camp were to capture a majority in the legislature, it could force the Chief Executive to resign. From Beijing’s perspective, however, if the Chief Executive, appointed by the central government, was forced to resign, this would be seen as a “revolution.” Such a situation would be absolutely unacceptable to the Chinese Communist Party. If the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong

Kong Special Administrative Region is enacted, candidates in the Pro-democracy camp who criticized it could be stripped of their qualifications to run in the election. This would provide the central government with an additional excuse to keep those in support of democracy out of the election. The inability of the Pro-democracy camp candidates to run in elections would prevent the “revolution.”

Provisions of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region were designed to deny autonomy for Hong Kong on several fronts, allowing the central government to control Hong Kong directly. From the beginning, the NPC Standing Committee enacted the law without any deliberation whatsoever in Hong Kong, ignoring the latter’s power of legislation.

Subsequently, the central government sent an advisor to the newly established National Security Council of the Hong Kong government. On July 3, Luo Huining, Director of the Hong Kong Liaison Office (the branch of the central government located in Hong Kong), was appointed as the advisor. His position was higher than the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, as a leader in the Chinese Communist Party had been installed as an advisor in Hong Kong. Thus, it was indicated that the advisor would lead the meetings. It became considerably clear that the central government had lost faith in the Executive branch of Hong Kong, which was struggling to quell the demonstrations. This suggested that the position of the Chief Executive was being turned into a mere puppet.

The greatest threat was to the legislative branch. The central government set up in Hong Kong a new “National Security Agency” to act as its local proxy, and its personnel were invested with the ability to enforce the law in Hong Kong. This meant that suspects arrested could be extradited to the mainland for their trial, thus ensuring that the provision of the proposed revision to the Fugitive Law that was supposed to have been rescinded—the extradition of suspects to the mainland—was implemented anyway. Additionally, the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region took priority over the existing laws of Hong Kong. It was detrimental to the provisions for safeguarding human rights that had been decided by courts in Hong Kong in accordance with the International Covenants on Human Rights and the judicial precedents set by UK and US law. Judges who were to hear cases related to this law were to be selected by the Chief Executive. This allowed the central government to effectively intervene politically in the determination of courts’ personnel, resulting in a situation wherein the plaintiff got to select the judge.

Evident from the text of this law, the intention was to crack down on the kind of violent actions that occurred during the 2019 demonstrations, such as the destruction of public transportation, by referring to them as examples of acts of “terrorism.” However, although the National Security Law defined secession, the

overthrow of the government, terrorism, and conspiracy with a foreign nation as crimes, it did not specifically define which actions are criminal under the law. Other than violence, nothing clear is stated regarding specifically illegal speech and other types of expressions and related activities. Not knowing what constitutes a crime under the law conversely implies that what constitutes "legal" is also unknown. This means that many activities could potentially be considered "criminal." Needless to say, this places those who enforce the law at an advantageous position and those against whom the law is applied at an extreme disadvantage.

The National Security Law was utilized with ferocity. The first target was the citizen demonstrations that had been taking place since last year. On July 1, the day after the law was put into effect, 10 people were arrested at the locations of the demonstration. The suspected offense of the first person to be arrested was carrying a flag with "Hong Kong Independence" written on it. Government officials then utilized the vague wording of the law to state that slogans that had been frequently used during protests since last year—such as "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times"—and violent responses to police crackdowns were "probably" illegal. They also had the police go to shops and other locations that supported the Pro-democracy camp and remove slogans and other posters that were "probably" illegal. As a result of this powerful suppression, an increasing number of people in Hong Kong began to practice "self-censorship," which led to reduced freedom at an unprecedented speed. Demosisto, the organization to which Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow belonged, and many other political groups whose members included large numbers of young people were pressured to disband on June 30, immediately before the implementation of the National Security Law.

The law was also used to crack down on the political activities of more prominent legislators and activists. The leaders of a student independence group (the youngest of whom was 16 years old) were arrested, and people engaged in activities abroad were issued arrest warrants (one of whom was a US citizen who was working to put pressure on the US government). On August 10, six people were arrested for suspected violations of the National Security Law. These included Jimmy Lai, founder of the Apple Daily newspaper—which is partial to the Pro-democracy camp—and Agnes Chow—who speaks fluent Japanese, has been frequently covered by the Japanese media and is well-known in Japan for her requests for supporting Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement.

It appears that this crackdown was conducted to "provide support" to the explanation provided by the Chinese government regarding the resistance movement that began the following year. This movement was considered a "leaderless movement" because most participants were normal citizens who participated on their own accord in response to calls for participation on the internet and elsewhere. When one considers the victory, confirmed by multiple public opinion polls, of the

Pro-democracy camp in the ward council election held in November last year due to its strong support for the resistance, one sees that a majority of the public supported the movement. However, the Chinese government continued to describe to the domestic Chinese media that the demonstrations were the result of a conspiracy by an extremely small number of leaders who were backed by foreign forces. This was done to instill violent hatred toward both Hong Kong and the US among the Chinese public. To satisfy the Chinese public opinion, it was necessary to crack down on the demonstrators in a way that complemented this story. The government induced many citizens to practice self-censorship and characterized those who kept silent as “good citizens”; simultaneously, they imposed heavy penalties on the leaders to appease the Chinese public.

This suppression of the Pro-democracy camp escalated in ways other than arrests for suspected violations of the National Security Law. The government indicated that even “popularity votes” held by the Pro-democracy camp as a preliminary to the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region election for determining candidates were “probably” in violation of the National Security Law. On the day before the vote was to be held, the police launched an investigation on the sponsoring organization based on suspicion of an unrelated violation and confiscated the organization’s computers. According to the National Security Law, which considers interfering with the government to be a crime, if the Pro-democracy camp were to win an election and oppose government bills, this in itself would be a violation of the law. Arrests of people in the Pro-democracy camp under suspicion of illegal gatherings related to the resistance movement are still being made. This even included the August 26 arrest of Legislative Council member Lam Cheuk-ting, on suspicion of rioting, despite being injured during an incident that took place on July 21, 2019. On that date, a group of mysterious individuals clad in white t-shirts attacked people whom they identified as demonstrators at a railway station, which led to violence inside a railway car into which the demonstrators attempted to escape.

On July 30, the Hong Kong government decided to revoke the candidacy of 12 candidates in the Pro-democracy camp who had applied to run in the Legislative Council election. The reason was that these 12 people had acted in violation of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. On July 31, the government announced the postponement of the election for a year due to the COVID-19 situation. Suppression of the Pro-democracy camp is likely to continue over the course of the next year. Therefore, it is extremely unlikely that the Pro-democracy camp will be able to capture a majority in the Legislative Council.

US sanctions: Hong Kong on the front lines of the “new cold war”. Thus, explanation by the Chinese government was maintained as “fact,” but it came

with a high price. First were the sanctions implemented against China and Hong Kong by the international community because of their strong opposition to China's policies.

On May 22, the foreign ministers of Canada, Australia, and the UK released a joint statement where they voiced their deep concern regarding the damage the National Security Law would do to Hong Kong's "one country, two systems" policy. On May 28, Japanese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Akiba Takeo, made the unprecedented move of summoning the Chinese Ambassador to Japan, Kong Xuanyou, to express the deep concern of the international community and the people of Hong Kong regarding the NPC deliberations over Hong Kong and the consequent situation in Hong Kong. On June 3, a piece written by the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was published in the *South China Morning Post*. In this piece, Johnson described a policy change for 350,000 people granted British Nationals Overseas (BNO) status prior to the return of Hong Kong and at least 2,000,000 qualified individuals whose length of stay in the UK would be extended from 6 to 12 months. This implied that this length of stay could be renewed and that they would have the option of gaining working rights in the UK and citizenship available to them.

The strongest response came from the US. On May 21, China announced that it would hold deliberations on the National Security Law at the NPC. At a press conference held on May 29th, President Trump stated that he directed the US government to start the process of rapidly implementing a series of punitive measures, including revoking Hong Kong's special treatment status, which it was granted based on the "one country, two systems" policy. Others included a halt on the export of some types of technology, the imposition of sanctions on 11 officials in the Chinese and Hong Kong governments who were associated with the National Security Law, including the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, and the announcement that products from Hong Kong would have to be labeled "made in China" rather than "made in Hong Kong."

These sanctions were not as severe as they could have been. Financial sanctions that would interfere with the exchange of US and Hong Kong dollars would inflict immense damage, but the Trump administration was apprehensive that such an action would backfire. Hence, it was not implemented.³ While the prospect of imposing sanctions on top officials in Beijing, such as the Senior Vice Premier, Han Zheng, who was in charge of the Hong Kong issue was considered, these sanctions also were not carried out.⁴ Nevertheless, it would be premature to conclude that the US imposed only weak sanctions. China retaliated to the sanctions. For Trump, who wanted to use his strong stance against China as leverage in the upcoming presidential election, this could be used as an excuse to impose the next round of sanctions. This would most likely be favorable to him. However, sanctions cannot be imposed merely on the personal whims of President

Trump. In a speech on July 23, the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, indicated that the policy of engagement with China, which had been in operation since Nixon, had failed and must be abandoned. This shift in the US policy toward China could entail the persistence of a hardline stance regarding China for decades to come—even assuming Biden's as the next president—and may even gradually escalate.

Conclusion: Concern over increasing instability in East Asia

In only a span of one year since June 2019, a series of major events occurred in Hong Kong, from massive demonstrations to the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law. The fact that several radical changes occurred indicates that East Asia is currently at a turning point during which the conventional order and ideas that are taken for granted will crumble.

Since the US and China reestablished relations in the 1970s, East Asia has existed under a compromise between socialism and capitalism, and the two systems have shared the fruits of development. However, the rise of China gradually collided with the existing order, and Hong Kong, which is the front line of this collision, suffered the greatest strain. The 2019 demonstrations can be thought of as the culmination of opposition by the people of Hong Kong against this strain. Owing to the size of the demonstrations, the governments of both China and the US have been drawn into the Hong Kong issue.

Jeffrey Reeves argued that the fact that the countries in the regions surrounding China—which are vastly smaller than China in terms of population, economic power, and military power—have been trifled with by China and may become an even bigger security problem for China. Reeves analyzed the mechanism by which internal political problems in small countries, such as Cambodia, Nepal, and Mongolia, that are caused by the “China factor” can become security problems for China. With its overwhelming economic strength, China has the power to alter the internal politics of its surrounding nations. Chinese corporations are moving into these surrounding nations in large numbers. These corporations control the economic lifelines of those countries, such as large-scale infrastructure and mine development, and this enables them to influence the politics of those countries. Consequently, the policy decisions made by political leaders who receive finances from China are biased, and corruption has become chronic. Environmental problems have arisen, and public frustration regarding these problems is increasing, thus weakening China's “soft power.” If this continues, the surrounding countries will shift to a more hardline stance against China and increase their dependence on countries that demand balance, such as the US and India. Thus, Reeves argues, the destabilization of smaller countries can backfire on the security of China itself.⁵ The

protestors in Hong Kong have sought US assistance. The US involvement seems to confirm this theory.

President Trump's China policy has escalated into a war of insults because of the trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, compared to the "air battle" being waged between Washington DC and Beijing, the Hong Kong issue represents something far more serious to East Asia. The fact that the Hong Kong issue led to the US sanctions on China symbolizes that US-China conflict has risen to the level of a geopolitical "new cold war" in East Asia. Hong Kong's national sovereignty is rooted in socialist China, but Hong Kong has economic and social ties with the rest of the world, and it shares the same capitalist values as Europe and the United States. Thus, Hong Kong is the front line of the "new cold war" situation. If Hong Kong comes completely under Beijing's control, this would increase the latter's confidence and serve Beijing as an example of the effectiveness and success of its hardline stance. Next, Beijing may intensify its aggression toward Taiwan, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. One way that China could possibly be geographically isolated is through the implementation of US sanctions, which would trigger a 21st century "Truman Doctrine" based on a 21st century "domino theory."

If the US-China conflict becomes colored by geopolitics, then it would no longer be considered an isolated issue by the countries in East Asia that are in proximity to China. After Hong Kong, the next front lines would be Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the East and South China seas. Thus, the outcome of the Hong Kong issue is likely to determine the future of East Asia.

Notes

- ¹ Greg Torode, James Pomfret, Anne Marie Roantree, "Special Report: Hong Kong leader says she would 'quit' if she could, fears her ability to resolve crisis now 'very limited,'" Reuters, September 2, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-carrielam-specialre/special-report-hong-kong-leader-says-she-would-quit-if-she-could-fears-her-ability-to-resolve-crisis-now-very-limited-idUSKCN1VN1DU>.
- ² "(interview) Hong Kong Nationalism: Wu Rui ren, Associate Professor at the Academia Sinica-Institute of Taiwan History in Taiwan," *Asahi Shimbun* (newspaper), November 21, 2019 (morning edition), p. 13.
- ³ "Trump Rejects Ending Hong Kong Dollar Peg as Penalty to China," Bloomberg, July 15, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-13/trump-aides-rule-out-ending-hong-kong-dollar-peg-as-punishment>
- ⁴ "Trump stands against sanctions on Chinese officials for now," *Japan Times*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/07/16/world/trump-chinese-officials-sanctions/>

- ⁵ Jeffrey Reeves, "Structural Power, the Copenhagen School and Threats to Chinese Society," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 217, March 2014, pp.140-161.

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