

Beginning in May 2019, Hong Kong has witnessed mounting protests triggered by an extradition bill. The bill would have allowed the rendition of anyone in Hong Kong to mainland China. The bill was widely feared because it removed the final firewall that protected Hong Kong residents from the arbitrary judicial system across the border.¹ Resistance began with pan-democratic legislators disrupting the legislative process in May (for which they were subsequently arrested on November 9). Protests soon spilled to the streets. Ahead of the bill's expected passage, one million, out of a total population of 7.5 million, demonstrated on June 9. Tens of thousands further surrounded the Legislative Council building and blocked the meeting scheduled for June 12. The police used excessive force against what they labeled "riots." Chief Executive Carrie Lam initially denounced the protests but then, on June 15, "suspended" the extradition bill. The public was both emboldened by this small victory and enraged by the police's excessive use of force. Two million turned out on June 16 to press for the formal withdrawal of the bill. They also called on the authorities to drop the "riot" characterization of the protests, release the arrested, and open an independent investigation into police abuses. A fifth demand was for Lam's stepping down, but it was later changed to genuine universal suffrage as promised in the Hong Kong Basic Law.

The authorities rejected the various demands, but belatedly announced withdrawal of the bill on September 4. In the interim months, the police increasingly resorted to brutal tactics and the protestors too turned from umbrellas to firebombs. Ever-escalating cycles of violence have produced massive arrests of 5,500-plus and even more injuries by the time of this writing (November 26, 2019).²

Analysts sighed with relief that the People's Liberation Army did not intervene.³ The Chinese military garrison in Hong Kong did send a threatening message, however, by releasing a video on July 31, that showed Chinese troops practicing anti-riot drills. PLA troops marched out of the barracks in unison on November 16, though to help with clearing barricades in civilian clothes rather than armed with guns.⁴

Yet Beijing has better options than rolling out military tanks onto Hong Kong's business streets in Tiananmen-like fashion. Even in mainland China, Beijing has perfected "stability maintenance" since 1989, putting down "mass incidents" not by the military but by the police and thugs as well as by economic incentives and patriotic education. These are the same tools that Beijing has utilized to end the unrest in both the short- and long-terms.

Beijing's "Strengthening of Comprehensive Control over Hong Kong"

According to Hong Kong-based news reports, President Xi Jinping issued an internal directive in mid-July calling for the "nondeployment of the Hong Kong garrison, the avoidance of bloodshed, and the strengthening of comprehensive control over Hong Kong" (不動用駐港部隊、不流血、加強全面對港控制).⁵

The Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO) soon called rare pressers to publicly reiterate similar messages with increasing intensity. On July 29, spokespersons Xu Luyin and Yang Guang highlighted the central government's support for the Lam government and the Hong Kong police to stop unlawful acts.⁶ On August 6, they reiterated their backing of Lam and called for the police to end the unrest, noting that the protests had "changed in nature."⁷ On August 12, the

spokespersons complained that the protests were showing “signs of terrorism.”⁸ On September 3, they continued to condemn the “political terror” and entreated all branches of government and all public agencies to join forces to end the violence and restore order.⁹ Wang Zhimin, director of Beijing’s Liaison Office in Hong Kong, enjoined the “patriotic camp” to combat the “war of life and death” and the “war of defense” for Hong Kong’s future.¹⁰

The Communist Party’s official mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, has echoed the party line. It published front-page editorials condemning the protestors’ desecration of the national emblem outside the Liaison Office,¹¹ highlighting the “true face” of the violence among the “peaceful protestors,”¹² and expressing “staunch support” for the Hong Kong police.¹³

Yet, the protests continued to escalate. On November 1, the Fourth Plenum of the Nineteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued a decision on Hong Kong. Shen Chunyao, chair of the Basic Law Committee and the Political and Legal Commission under the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, elaborated on the key resolutions:

1. Hong Kong should be ruled by patriots (which suggests no concession on democracy).
2. The central government should have appointment authority over the chief executive and principal officials (which hints at further erosion of the Hong Kong government’s autonomy).
3. The legal system, the enforcement mechanisms, and the laws to safeguard national security should be perfected (which means the re-enactment of the National Security bill once blocked by mass protests in 2003, and a more proactive role by the National People’s Congress Standing Committee to interpret the Basic Law).
4. Hong Kong should be better integrated with the Greater Bay region (which points to higher mainland influences on the local economy).
5. Public officials and youth should enhance national education and develop a patriotic spirit (which implies the reintroduction of patriotic education once shelved after protests in 2012).¹⁴

Among these priorities, HKMAO Director Zhang Xiaoming not just lamented the absence of a national security law, but also underscored the need to ban the pro-independence Hong Kong Nationalist Party and to disqualify localist legislators -- developments that predated the current protests.¹⁵ The Plenum’s decision for the central government to “exercise governance” (管治) in Hong Kong thus represents a major move that has been long in the making. Indeed, Beijing already asserted its “comprehensive jurisdiction” to ward off Hong Kong people’s call for “genuine universal suffrage” in 2014.

Hong Kong-based analyst Ching Cheong observes that the Plenum decision involves “a fundamental overhaul of the ‘one country, two systems’ model.”¹⁶ The decision may not introduce new measures, but it formalizes the ultimate absorption of the “two systems” by the “one country.” Beijing and Hong Kong have long had diametrically opposite understandings of “one country, two systems.” As Brian Fong puts it, “Hong Kongers aspire to maintain a permanent ‘two systems’ under a rooftop-like ‘one country,’ while Beijing treats the ‘two systems’ as a transitional phase moving toward greater centralization under the ‘one country.’”¹⁷

Hong Kong has a saying that the promise of “Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong” has in reality meant “the Western District [where the PRC Liaison Office is located] ruling Hong Kong.” During the course of the anti-extradition protests in 2019, Beijing has come out of the shadow and asserted even more direct interference. Hong Kong has been put under the direct supervision of the Central

Coordination Group for Hong Kong and Macau Affairs (港澳工作協調小組). It is chaired by Vice Premier Han Zheng and composed of the director of the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party Ding Xuexiang, director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Yang Jiechi, minister of the United Front Department You Quan, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi. The Communist Party's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (中共中央政法委员会)¹⁸ is also involved in broadcasting core messages, most notably by publicly denouncing Hong Kong's richest tycoon Li Ka-shing for suggesting to provide a way out for young people.¹⁹

Beijing's official statements have reiterated the need for all branches of government to join forces in "stopping the violence and ending the turmoil."²⁰ With this level of central oversight, the Chief Executive Carrie Lam seems to enjoy little autonomy as stipulated in the Basic Law. She admitted in a leaked audio that, "Once an issue has been elevated ... to a sort of sovereignty and security level..., the political room ... for maneuvering is very, very, very limited."²¹ The day before Lam "suspended" the extradition bill on June 15, she had a meeting with Vice Premier Han Zheng in Shenzhen. For the rest of the summer, she stubbornly refused to formally withdraw the bill (not until September 4). When a Reuters correspondent asked Lam if she had the autonomy to withdraw the bill, she had no answer.²²

Lam's administration does not seem to have the autonomy to even command the police. When Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung, the second in command, apologized that "the police's handling [of gangster violence in Yuen Long on July 21] fell short of the residents' expectations," he was publicly rebuked by the Police Inspectors' Association.²³ One anonymous statement read: "Matthew Cheung, why do you deserve to represent the police force? If you want to apologize, you should resign. If you don't step down or apologize to the whole force, you will be a sworn enemy of the police!"²⁴ HKMAO Director Zhang Xiaoming told 300 pro-Beijing Hong Kong elite at a Shenzhen meeting on August 7 that the Hong Kong police force was "the pillar to maintain Hong Kong's social order" and "the last line of defense to maintain social stability."²⁵ Chris Tang, who became the new police commissioner on November 19, changed the force's motto from "We Serve with Pride and Care," which suggests some public accountability, to "Serving Hong Kong with Honor, Duty and Loyalty," which underscores loyalty to the power that be.²⁶ Days earlier on November 14, Xi Jinping personally called on the Hong Kong police to take "forceful actions" against "rioters."²⁷

How has this police force, that no longer answer to Hong Kong, carried out its mission of "stopping the violence and ending the turmoil"? The authorities' attempts to quell the protests without making concessions have corrupted the Hong Kong police, turning them from Asia's finest²⁸ to "just another mainland force."²⁹ Police actions have roughly tracked Beijing's calls for stronger responses, with the early HKMAO press conferences on July 29 and August 6 leading to dramatically more brutal arrests and torture from August 11 on, the National Day celebration on October 1 correlating with the mask ban on October 5, and the Plenum decision on November 1 and Xi's statement on November 14 associating with assaults on university campuses from November 11 on.

Physical Crackdown on Protestors

As the Chief Executive had no autonomy to withdraw the extradition bill between June 15 and September 4, the only way to end the protests was to arrest the hard-core and intimidate the rest.

On June 12, when protesters surrounded the Legislative Council building to prevent it from deliberating on the extradition bill, the police had already been criticized by local and international observers for beating unthreatening protestors with batons, for firing excessive rounds of rubber bullets, and spraying pepper spray, beanbags, and tear gas.³⁰

After HKMAO's first press conference on July 29, the Hong Kong police began to undertake a campaign of massive arrests and serious injuries short of killing.³¹ Officers sought to "arrest as many as possible" "until there is nobody left" (「拉得幾多得幾多」, 「拉到無人為止」).³² They have also aimed to inflict debilitating injuries so that protestors would not recover easily. The police have since routinely shot protestors at high velocity, at head level, and at close range.³³ They have also regularly pinned down the arrested, rubbed their faces against the ground, broken their bones, and beaten them on their heads with batons.³⁴ Officers further fired live ammunition with near fatalities on October 1 and November 11. The police have committed much brutality and torture in front of professional and smart phone cameras, suggesting that "they understand they are immune from redress."³⁵

The new police commissioner, Chris Tang, immediately assumed command of an assault on the Polytechnic University. Hong Kong analysts suspect that he had a deliberate strategy to lure hardcore protestors to "defend" Polytechnic — then arrest them all in one sweep.³⁶ Police arrested more than 1,000 protestors in this single operation, adding to nearly 4,500 arrests before the siege.³⁷ The police further rammed their vehicles at high speed into nearby crowds, causing a stampede and more arrests.³⁸

Additionally, the police arrested social workers and elected councilors who had attempted to mediate between the officers and the protestors for "obstructing police operations." They also directly fired tear gas and pepper spray at journalists who were reporting on police actions.³⁹ More torture awaited out of public view, where the detained were denied access to families and to lawyers for hours.⁴⁰ Some detainees, especially those taken to the infamous San Uk Ling Center after August 11, suffered from serious bone fractures and brain bleeding.⁴¹ Women have complained of sexual assault,⁴² even rape,⁴³ in detention centers.

Medical staff, who know first-hand the extent of the injuries, have staged sit-ins under banners bearing the slogan "Hong Kong police attempt to murder Hong Kong citizens."⁴⁴ A nurse anonymously recounted how one detainee's wrist was so broken that an x-ray showed that it was connected to the hand only by skin.⁴⁵ Doctors and nurses have also complained about inhumane rules and procedures: emergency workers are required to seek police permission and are often obstructed at protest sites; police arrest suspected protestors at hospitals so that the injured are fearful of seeking medical treatment; and medical staff are restricted from calling families on behalf of their patients. Chow Tsz-lok, the first undeniable protest-related death, died partially because the police had blocked an ambulance.⁴⁶

Just as alarming, the police are credibly suspected of collusion with criminal gangs who have assaulted protesters, reporters, organizers, elected councilors, and District Council candidates. In a July 21 incident mentioned above, hundreds of suspected triads dressed in white shirts indiscriminately beat locals with wooden sticks and metal rods at the Yuen Long train station.⁴⁷ The police did not show up until after the gangsters had left, and senior officers were filmed speaking with the men in white shirts prior to the attacks. Junius Ho, a legislator with strong ties to the Liaison Office, was also seen shaking hands with gang leaders. Zachary Wong, a local district councilor, received death threats for speaking to the media about police-gangster collusion. As it became increasingly clear that the police would look the other way, the number of cases has climbed. The list includes pro-democracy legislators Lam Cheuk-ting and Kwong Chun-yu, district councilor Andrew Chiu (who had his ear bitten off), convener of the Civil Human Rights Front Jimmy Sham, an organizer in Yuen Long Max Chung, and an unnamed reporter for the pro-democracy *Apple Daily*. The pro-Beijing Ho was also assaulted, but the video footage oddly does not show any sign of panic that one would expect from a surprise attack.⁴⁸

Construction of the “Riots”

Given that the protests have continued and the violence has intensified, it would be tempting to conclude that the crackdown has failed. However, if President Xi ultimately aims to “strengthen comprehensive control” over Hong Kong, chaos offers the best environment to erode Hong Kong’s preexisting freedoms and to impose emergency measures that would otherwise have been impossible under normal circumstance. The months-long “riots” have given the authorities excuses to drastically curb the longstanding freedom to protest, deny “no-objection” permits to peaceful protestors, and impose a ban on face masks. (A local court ruled on November 18 that the mask ban was unconstitutional, Beijing officials quickly denounced the court’s exercise of constitutional review as guaranteed in the Basic Law.⁴⁹) Hong Kong commentator Chi-kin Lo points out that the chaos allows Beijing to impose its rule on Hong Kong, replacing top officials, forcing big corporations to sell their holdings, suppressing the professional elite, compelling locals to leave the city and encouraging mainlanders to take their place. On November 5, the Hong Kong edition of *People’s Daily* online miswrote “stop the violence and end the turmoil (止暴制亂)” as “stop the violence and manufacture turmoil (止暴製亂).”⁵⁰ It was an apt Freudian slip.

In Hong Kong, as in the rest of the world, turmoil can be readily created by authoritarian regimes. As Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow argue, when “counter-protestors, the police, or the state respond with rigor, challengers often escalate and radicalize their claims.”⁵¹ In the case of Hong Kong, thuggish violence, police brutality, and state repression have all contributed to escalation and radicalization. It is a time-honored authoritarian strategy to use state-sanctioned violence to provoke violence by the opposition so as to justify a harsh crackdown. If the opposition is to maintain nonviolent discipline, it requires tight leadership, organization, planning, and training—elements that the Occupy Central with Love and Peace (or Umbrella Movement) had in 2014 but that the “leaderless” anti-extradition movement in 2019 lacks.⁵²

It is noteworthy that Beijing had the foresight to characterize the protests as “riots” as early as June 12.⁵³ Protestors continued to stage peaceful demonstrations throughout June, with up to 2

million appearing on the streets on June 16. Opposition crowd-sourced funding to place full-page advertisements in major international newspapers on the eve of the G20 summit and peacefully marched to 19 consulate offices. Yet, weeks later, Beijing succeeded in turning empty accusations into reality.

In a game-theoretic sense, the simplest regime tactic is not to make concessions, thereby forcing the opposition either to stop or to step up their actions. The authorities' unresponsiveness convinced many Hongkongers to escalate, in particular to take a stand against the symbols of political authority. Protestors stormed into the Legislative Council building on July 1 and sprayed the following graffiti: "It is [you] who taught us that peaceful demonstrations are ineffective." When protestors further defaced the national emblem outside Beijing's Liaison Office on July 21, the authorities got the vandalism it needed for "riots." A spokesperson for China's Ministry of National Defense accused the "radical" actions of "challenging the central government's authority" and the bottom line of "one country, two systems." Hong Kong-based academic King-wa Fu observed that the Chinese media created a narrative of "Hong Kong independence" even though it was not one of the five demands. They did so by stopping to censor the term in the *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, and on Weibo since July 22.⁵⁴

Another common regime tactic is to introduce harsh measures to provoke strong responses. It is often argued that police brutality backfires. This has indeed been the case in Hong Kong, yet the backfire may be intended to incite more violent reactions. Why have riot police beaten up protesters in plain view of live-streaming media and passers-by, if not to incite such a "backfire"?⁵⁵ Why did the police relax the manual on how officers should use live fire on the eve of October 1? (The updated guidelines removed the long-standing line that "officers will be accountable for their own actions" and only stated that "officers on the ground should exercise their own discretion to determine what level of force is justified in a given situation."⁵⁶) Why did the authorities impose the mask ban on October 5, knowing full well that it was going to escalate the chaos?⁵⁷ (While many officers have masked both faces and IDs to act with impunity, the ban forbids ordinary citizens from hiding their identity.) Why would the police blatantly collude with gangsters and thugs to beat up protestors, organizers, and journalists, if not to arouse vigilante justice by the protestors?

The escalating violence by both sides has the additional effect of creating social distances between officers and protestors. It was only five years ago when demonstrators expressed goodwill by shielding officers from the rain with their own umbrellas. Today, the police call ordinary people "cockroaches," while the protestors call police officers "dogs."

Another regime tactic to radicalize the opposition is to equate nonviolence with violence and to outlaw nonviolent protest actions or render them ineffective.

The *China Daily*, for instance, denounced both violent and "nonviolent approaches" because the latter show "common elements of color revolutions," which "include strong specific political demands, interference by external forces, attempts to motivate the public, social standoffs and turmoil, huge pressure upon the authorities, and pursuit of a power transfer." A HKMAO spokesperson explained that the protestors' "goal is to paralyze the Hong Kong government, seize power for governing the SAR and make 'one country, two systems' an empty concept."⁵⁸

On strikes, a spokesperson described them as “radical violations of public order and laws, challenging the bottom lines of ‘one country, two systems’ and national dignity,” with the motivation to “destroy and ruin Hong Kong.”⁵⁹ As to class boycotts, the HKMAO stated that “the opposition camp... is just trying to ‘use young people as bargaining chips in their struggle with the government.’... Teachers are supposed to educate pupils, but some in Hong Kong are instilling students with political ideas.”⁶⁰

The following are nonviolent protest actions that have been rendered illegal and/or ineffective:

- The simplest police weapon in Hong Kong is to restrict freedom to protest by refusing to issue a “no-objection notice.” Such refusals were rare for two decades, but the police have repeatedly used this card after the August 18 demonstration. This has rendered further protests “unlawful assemblies.” Police officers have then shown up in force for massive arrests.
- Human chains are peaceful but constitute “unlawful assemblies.”
- Lennon Walls— democracy walls with simple post-it notes and more elaborate art works— have been repeatedly destroyed by both thugs and the government. Young people guarding them have been attacked with knives.
- A statute of lady liberty was set up on the top of Lion Rock but it was damaged the next day.
- People who participate in strikes can be fired from their jobs, as what occurred to Cathay Pacific staff after a general strike on August 5.
- Students at secondary schools and universities have staged class boycotts. The Education Department has warned students in public schools to stay away from political activities.
- Targeted consumer boycotts have been effective in other countries, but they have been far less so in Hong Kong. State-owned enterprises and pro-Beijing businesses have so much economic power that even international companies have silenced their criticisms.
- Elections constitute a peaceful means to expression opinions. However, young activist Joshua Wong was disqualified from running in the District Council election on November 24. (More below.)

Justified or not, protestors’ turn to violent methods has opened up opportunities for agents provocateurs to create even more chaos. This is particularly the case when protestors are masked, which makes it difficult not only for the police to identify protestors but also for protestors and others to identify the police and thugs who are camouflaged as protestors. Police officers were first caught dressed as protestors on August 11. Since then, people looking like vandals have been filmed saying “our own people (自己)” to the police and then being escorted away.⁶¹

There is speculation that the massive destruction on the day of the mask ban on October 5 was committed by people other than protestors. A Hong Kong–Guangzhou through train was attacked in Fanling but the through train does not usually stop there. To add to the mystery, Fanling is where the Police Tactical Unit is based.

Yet such forensic analyses of which side did what is beyond the attention span of most international observers. Protestor violence has helped to support the official line of “riots” and to distract attention from police brutality. The United Nations human rights office went from denouncing police actions for “creating “a considerable risk of death or serious injury” in

August⁶² to decrying protestors' violence in November.⁶³ The U.S. Department of State issued a rare statement on November 11 condemning "violence on all sides," both police and protestors.

Whole-of-Society Repression for Comprehensive Control

What is worrisome to Beijing is not only the determination of protestors but also the broad social support for them. Across the city, many professional groups organized protests in succession in late July and August: medical staff, social workers, journalists, civil servants, lawyers, airline crew, teachers, accountants, surveyors, architects, financial-sector staff, and many more. Various surveys have consistently revealed majority support for the protests.⁶⁴ This societal backing became unmistakable in the District Council elections held on November 24. Candidates who upheld the 5 protest demands won 57% of the popular vote and 391 out of 452 seats, taking the majority in 17 of 18 district councils.⁶⁵

Beijing is responding to this whole-of-society support with whole-of-society purges.

In addition to ensuring that top positions are occupied by "patriots," the authorities also began to cleanse public-sector employees. Civil servants who are arrested during protestors are subject to immediate dismissal.⁶⁶ Beijing has also compelled the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway Corporation and the Airport Authority to shut down so as to hinder protests since August.⁶⁷

Beijing's heavy hands have gone from public sectors to private sectors. It has forced Cathay Pacific Airways to choose between its China business or its employees. The management was told on August 9 to ban crew members who supported the general strike on August 5. This pressure led to the resignation of CEO Rupert Hogg and his deputy Paul Kar-pui Loo, and the sacking of many pilots and ground staff.⁶⁸ The airlines have since instructed its employees to blow the whistle on one another.⁶⁹

The big four accounting firms in Hong Kong were told to identify employees who placed an advertisement in the pro-democracy *Apple Daily* newspaper in support of the protests on August 16.⁷⁰ Mainland Chinese Internet users have warned them against "becoming the next Cathay Pacific."

Hong Kong's tycoons and big firms were pressured to place front-page advertisements in local newspapers to publicly pledge their support for the Hong Kong police. Even U.K.-headquartered banks, such as HSBC and Standard Chartered PLC, followed the pack.⁷¹

The last step in an all-out repression is to mold not only what Hong Kong people say and do but also what they think. The last two elements of the Plenum's decision suggest that Beijing hopes to promote economic growth and patriotic education in Hong Kong as a long-term solution. The party successfully transformed mainland university students from regime critics into patriots in the aftermath of Tiananmen. Similarly, it will likely attempt to create "umbrella and extradition amnesia" among Hong Kong youth.⁷² Universities and schools will be the targets of a new wave of white terror.

Concluding Thoughts

Beijing's attempts to exert overall control in Hong Kong through the extradition bill have created unspeakable chaos for the city and horrors for the arrested and the injured. Yet Beijing is not winning this war. By deploying the police to do whatever it takes to end the protests, Beijing has only intensified the sense of threat and stiffened the will to resist, driving normally peaceful moderates to sympathize with the violent escalation.⁷³

Chinese leaders may think that if they could make the “stability maintenance” model work for the Tiananmen generation in mainland China, then they surely can make it work in Hong Kong as well. Yet, if there is anything left to the Hong Kong system, it is the people of Hong Kong and their will to continue to defend their system. There is suspicion that Beijing will tackle this obstacle by flooding Hong Kong with millions of mainlanders – and it has successfully diluted the local population of 6 million with close to 1.5 million mainlanders since the handover. Yet, doing so would turn Hong Kong into just a mainland city.

Herein lies the dilemma: Beijing can establish iron rule over Hong Kong only by killing it. Even if the protestors do not win their demands, they have made it be known to the world that an embattled Hong Kong calls for closer scrutiny of its current special customs status.⁷⁴ The U.S. has signed into law the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. A better, win-win solution is to accept the protestors' demands and to return to Beijing's original respect for Hong Kong's autonomy.

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