

Hong Kong's Extradition Bill Is Not in China's Interests

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One country, two systems. One event, two interpretations. The crisis in Hong Kong was sparked by chief executive Carrie Lam's efforts to champion an extradition bill that would allow both residents and visitors to be sent to China for trial.

It backfired. Beijing is furious for two reasons. First the massive demonstrations it ignited and secondly the central government insists it gave no instruction or order concerning this issue. It looked, Beijing officials insist privately, that Lam was trying to curry favour and had overstepped the mark. This was not a prime example, according to this narrative, of Beijing again trying to stamp its authority on Hong Kong.

The mountains are high and the emperor is far away. This is an old saying in southern China. But the reverse is also true. From Beijing, Hong Kong is far away. Antigovernment protests in the former British colony are not a cause for emergency meetings though Lam's future is under serious discussion.

At the time of the rain-drenched handover in the summer of 1997, Hong Kong accounted for about 20 percent of China's GDP. Today it accounts for 3 percent.

This statistic does not cause sleepless nights in Zhongnanhai, the leadership compound off Tiananmen Square. If anything, it provides reason for a good night's sleep. It proves, from Beijing's perspective, not Hong Kong's decline, but the healthy development of the national economy. The Hong Kong economy has grown since the handover but China's growth has been supercharged.

This is the crux. China's economy has to keep growing, not just for the betterment of the people but to ensure stability.

Human rights are viewed through a different prism in China than in the West. The imposition of, and here it gets complicated, what China considers the West considers as human rights, is feared. Support for the corrupt regimes of South Vietnam, the Philippines under Marcos and the so-called War on Terror are a small but telling sample and proof, in Beijing's eyes, of a less than fully altruistic approach to human rights by Washington.

Many in China believe that without strong central government the country would descend to mass violence and disintegration. This does not let the government off the hook. Chinese people want corruption to be tackled with greater determination and focus. They want to be rid of the scourge of pollution, linked to corruption through the bribing of officials. They want the ruling party to be more accountable. What they do want from the West is teachers, engineers, specialists and trade.

The unwritten deal between the government and the people is you will be better off, leave the politics to us.

With 10 percent of the world's arable land, China feeds 20 percent of the planet.

But the Ministry of Agriculture admits that 40 percent of this land is poisoned by pollution and the decline of nutrient rich top soil.

If it keeps on industrializing food security could be further eroded. This is one of the reasons China is trying to turn to green energy, not to lessen dependency on fossil fuels but to protect its food sources. China is in pole position globally in renewable energy production. The world's largest producer of wind and solar energy, China is also the largest domestic and outbound investor in renewable energy.

But now for the great contradiction. It has not turned its back on cheap coal. Beijing plans to build at least two large coal power stations a month for the next 12 years. This translates to between 300 and 500 new coal power plants by 2030. Beijing needs an energy source it can rely on. Oil imports must navigate maritime chokepoints, the Strait of Hormuz and the Malacca Strait. Green energy is not yet up to the task. King Coal is economically cheap but it comes at a political cost.

About 1,000 "mass incidents" (protests involving more than 100 people) take place every day in China. Many of these are pollution or climate related.

The economy is stuttering and facing the possibility of a sharp downturn as trade with the US is ruptured. Such a downturn would see these mass incidents rising sharply, endangering the basic structures of the country. More coal-fired power stations, more mass incidents. Hong Kong is not the burning issue for Beijing. Pollution and a faltering economy is what is keeping those who reside in the leadership compound awake at night.

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