

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, July 2, 2019.

To win the ‘battle for Hong Kong’, Beijing must stop treating it as just another Chinese city

- Hongkongers will not stand for the routine style of mainland governance. There is enough flexibility in the ‘one country, two systems’ model for peaceful relations, as long as the central government can loosen its grip



Tom Plate

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

Beijing achingly wanted Hong Kong and, more than two decades ago, it got what it wanted. But is it that happy with its prize today? As the saying goes: be careful what you wish for in life, because you might actually get it.

The complex passions that ignited the political fireworks of recent weeks didn't flame up overnight and won't blow out of existence tomorrow. Whatever the true headcount of Hongkongers streaming onto the streets (whether anti-Beijing or pro, whether anti-police or pro), the scenes seared themselves onto smartphones and computer and TV screens across the globe.

One way or the other, one of the most significant political events in years and potentially one of the most historic will be known as the “Battle for Hong Kong”. And it is anything but played out.

We need to ask what next steps need to be taken after all that has happened since July 1997. We note, not without sympathy, that Beijing has to work the question of Hong Kong's future against the backdrop of the current reality that relatively few people on the mainland love Hong Kong remotely as much as Hong Kong loves itself. Unfair statement? I don't think so.

The gut resentment over the perceived entitlement mentality of "snooty" Hongkongers is no secret; there may be more love in Kansas for New Yorkers. Beijing could remind everyone that little Hong Kong contributes to China a world of established cosmopolitanism, not to mention major sector utility in banking and finance. But governing Hong Kong was never going to be a simple matter.

This is where, long ago, a touch of political genius came in handy. Not enough observers in the West, especially after all this telegenic turmoil, ever fully appreciated the evolutionary political thought behind Deng Xiaoping's "one country, two systems" instinct. Worse yet is whether his current successors really get it. The innovation was striking in the simplicity of its sophistication and pragmatism.

In its cogency, it offered a plan; and in its direction, it begged for central self-discipline. The hitch was always in the implementation. Avoid the routine style of mainland governance or it would blow up in your face – it was designed for finesse; you either got that, or you missed the whole point.

This is not to bash the Chinese Communist Party. On the contrary, the outside world generally underestimates how creative the party of today has become, certainly compared to many of its hysterically rigid earlier incarnations. This is a survivalist organisation: not for the party to shrink in relevance as once its Soviet counterpart did.

But even a smidgen of hubris can becloud vision. The party must not overestimate its ability to harness all the forces within contemporary China – even all those in Hong Kong.

Although far from directly elected, without the people more or less behind it, the party would find it lonely and even scary at the top. "The [Chinese Communist Party] in this era needs the people more than the people need it," asserts Kerry Brown, director of the Lau China Institute at King's College London, in his insight-filled book, *China's Dream*, adding: "The depth and extent of its repressive powers ... are circumscribed and limited in ways which grow more complicated by the day." The party, he says, is "increasingly seeking to get the people's emotional engagement".

But Hong Kong is so emotionally attached to itself, especially within its youthful sectors, that the party will have to live with Hong Kong, as annoying as it is. And so the need to derive additional mileage out of "one country, two systems" is more urgent than ever.

Rather than seek to impose more discipline on Hong Kong, emphasising the "one" over the "two", if it wants to be successful, the Communist Party needs to develop more intellectual discipline and self-control over itself. I do believe the party is cognitively deep enough to handle a stiff measure of non-binary complexity.

It should be able to understand that to insist on a strict dictionary definition of sovereignty – as if, say, Hong Kong were no more than another Fujian province – would be to push the prodigal special administrative region into the streets, making it a political runaway, and inspiring every anti-unification soul in Taiwan with reason for further resistance.

Better the Chinese central government resign itself to the fuzzy logic of suzerainty than insist on the iron clamp of classical sovereignty. Suzerainty, in a word or two, is sovereignty lite; as the dictionary definition puts it, it means "any relationship in which one region or nation controls the foreign policy and relations of a tributary state, while allowing the tributary nation to have internal autonomy".

This is the only way out. As fate would have it, Mother China has a longer-standing understanding of the practice of suzerainty than, for the sake of comparison, does America of the practice of democracy.

Suzerainty in this content might well evolve into political modernity at its bespoke best. More and more these days, people think of their citizenship less in singularity than multiplicity. “One can be a citizen of the world, a citizen of one’s country, and of one’s city all at the same time,” says American intellectual and Nobel-Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz.

You can see now the potential triangle of a bespoke “one country, two systems” on the relatively small canvas of Hong Kong. What is happening now reflects a major undercurrent in global politics, from Spain to Syria and beyond. Fear it, but also savour it for its profound relevance.

Tom Plate, Loyola Marymount University’s Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies, is the author of “Yo-Yo Diplomacy”, on US-China relations