

US sets stage for anti-China sanctions over Hong Kong

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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday formally declared that Hong Kong no longer had “a high degree of autonomy” from China—a step that opens the door for Washington to impose a raft of economic and trade sanctions that will potentially damage Hong Kong's position as a global financial hub.

Pompeo's decision is a further step in the Trump administration's anti-China campaign, which has rapidly accelerated in recent months, including the vicious scapegoating of Beijing for the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The moves towards new sanctions over Hong Kong make clear that the targeting of Beijing is aimed not just at deflecting attention from the criminal responsibility of the White House for the huge US death toll, but is part of intensifying efforts to undermine China economically and strategically over the past decade and prepare for war.

Pompeo's statement came in response to last week's announcement by China that its annual National People's Congress (NPC) will pass a new national security law covering subversion, terrorism and foreign influence in Hong Kong. The Chinese legislation, which is likely to be passed today, effectively overrides Hong Kong's legislature, which attempted but failed to pass such a law in 2003 in the face of mass demonstrations.

Last November, following months of protests in Hong Kong against a proposed extradition law, the US Congress passed legislation which requires the US State Department to certify Hong Kong's autonomy from China. Pompeo's declaration now allows the Trump administration to override US legislation passed prior to the British handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, which maintained pre-existing economic and trade relations with the former British colony.

Its special economic status enabled Hong Kong to retain its position as a global financial hub for trade in and out of China, as well as hosting the regional headquarters of hundreds of US and other corporations operating within China. In 2018, the US had a \$33 billion trade surplus with Hong Kong. Some 8 percent of mainland China's exports to the US, and 6 percent of China's imports, took place via Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has benefitted from looser export controls than mainland China and agreements on technology transfers, academic exchanges, taxation, currency exchange and sanctions. All of these are now in question.

Earlier this week, President Trump declared that the US would respond “very powerfully” if the NPC passed the national security legislation. US Assistant Secretary of State David Stilwell confirmed that discussions on punitive measures were taking place, declaring that the US was seeking to “mitigate the impact globally, [and] on the Hong Kong people.”

However, any erosion of the Hong Kong economy will hit the working class the hardest, leading to rising unemployment and further cutbacks to the territory's limited social services. While Washington may be concerned about the impact of sanctions on US corporations in Hong Kong and China, it has no concern for the plight of working people there, much less their democratic rights.

Further protests took place in Hong Kong yesterday both against the proposed national security legislation and also a law being considered in the Hong Kong legislature to outlaw any denigration of the Chinese anthem and flag. The limited size of the protests is a result not only of the COVID-19 restrictions and substantial police presence on the streets, but also the right-wing orientation of the protest leaders.

What began last year as huge protests against the extradition legislation, expressing the legitimate concerns of the majority of the population over democratic rights, increasingly came to be dominated by the reactionary outlook of groups and parties hostile to the working class. These forces promoted anti-Chinese mainland xenophobia and oriented to the major imperialist powers, particularly the US, to intervene on their behalf.

The response of former student Joshua Wong, a leader of Demosist?, in support of Pompeo's announcement is a graphic demonstration of the pro-imperialist orientation of these organisations. "Our hope is that a drastic change of American policy will encourage them [China] to reverse course on Hong Kong," he declared.

Wong has spoken recently to US Senator Josh Hawley, who last week introduced a resolution to condemn China's national security law. Last year, Wong, who was feted in Europe and the US as well as in the media as the face of the Hong Kong protesters, met with top political figures and addressed the US Congress.

The statements of concern for the Hong Kong people by Pompeo and other Trump officials are utterly hypocritical. US imperialism is no more interested in "human rights" in Hong Kong or China than it was in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria or Libya, where the issue was exploited to justify its criminal wars. Whether it is Hong Kong, Taiwan or the Uyghur minority in western China, Washington uses "human rights" as a convenient tool for undermining the unity of China, which it regards as a dangerous barrier to reasserting US dominance internationally.

Promoting the illusion that the US will defend democratic rights in Hong Kong or anywhere else plays straight into the hands of the Chinese regime and sows divisions in the Chinese working class—the only social force that is capable of challenging the police state regime in Beijing.

The Trump administration's decision to confront Beijing over Hong Kong is just the latest front in its provocative campaign against China, which includes: new measures targeted against Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei; restrictions on investment in Chinese stocks; threats to impose new taxes on American companies producing in China;

confrontational US naval operations in the South China Sea.

Trump's campaign has bipartisan backing as a continuation of the Obama administration's so-called "pivot to Asia," involving an aggressive confrontation with China across the board—diplomatically, economically and militarily. By the end of this year, the Pentagon will have stationed 60 percent of its naval and air assets in the Indo-Pacific region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and accelerated the weakness and historic decline of US and global capitalism and greatly heightened geo-political tensions. The US ruling class is determined to bolster its global position against its rivals by all available measures, including military, even if that plunges humanity into a catastrophic nuclear war.



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