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By Peter Symonds
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US takes punitive measures against China over Hong Kong

The Trump administration has seized on China's passage of a national security law covering Hong Kong to ramp up its condemnations of Beijing, impose sanctions against Chinese officials and begin to dismantle US legislation granting special status to Hong Kong after its transfer to China in 1997.

Washington's increasingly shrill campaign is part of a US confrontation across the full range of issues—diplomatic, economic and military—that are leading to war. Amid the worsening global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, US imperialism regards China as the chief threat to its world dominance.

China's National People's Congress passed the national security legislation on June 30, making major inroads into basic democratic rights in Hong Kong. The offences of subversion, terrorism, promoting secession from China and collusion with foreign forces, all defined in sweeping terms, are now punishable by up to life in prison.

Chinese authorities established a new national security office in Hong Kong on Wednesday, allowing Chinese security agents to openly operate in the city for the first time and investigate anyone suspected breaching the laws. The first most obvious targets will be protest leaders and opposition politicians critical of Beijing's intrusion into Hong Kong and opposed to the new security law.

Even before the office was opened, a 23-year-old man, Tong Ying-kit, on Monday became the first person to be charged under the legislation—with terrorism and inciting secession. Flying a banner emblazoned with "Liberate Hong Kong," he allegedly rode a motorbike

into a group of police officers last week, injuring three. The decision to charge him under the law, rather than existing laws, was clearly designed to intimidate other protesters. Tong was remanded without bail.

A purge of literature from libraries and schools appears to be underway. Books written by prominent protest leaders and opposition politicians were removed from public libraries last weekend. Hong Kong's cultural services department said the books had been withdrawn while it determined whether they violate the national security law. The education bureau announced a similar "review" of books used in schools.

Britain's transfer of Hong Kong to China in 1997 took place under the "one country, two systems" formula whereby Hong Kong would largely retain the legal and political systems established under British colonial rule. This principle was enshrined in the Basic Law governing the territory for 50 years. The national security law makes inroads into Hong Kong's legal system by allowing its chief executive—appointed by a handpicked pro-Beijing committee—to appoint judges to hear national security cases and allows serious cases to be heard in Chinese mainland courts.

Beijing's imposition of these anti-democratic laws reflects deep fears in Chinese ruling circles that waves of mass protest in Hong Kong—the latest against the security law itself—have the potential to trigger opposition on the Chinese mainland over the lack of democratic and social rights. Those concerns have grown as the pandemic has hit China's already slowing economy, raising the spectre of widespread unemployment and social unrest.

At the same time, Beijing fears that demands for the independence of Hong Kong will fuel separatist movements in other parts of China, including Tibet, and among the Muslim Uyghurs in the western province of Xinjiang. It is concerned that the US and its allies will exploit such movements to break up China. Protest leaders in Hong Kong have played into the hands of the Chinese regime by appealing for the US and Britain to intervene against Beijing.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared: "The United States will not stand idly by while China swallows Hong Kong into its authoritarian maw." The US, he said, will "respond to Beijing's attacks on freedoms of speech, the press, and assembly, as well as the rule of law, all of which have, until now, allowed the territory to flourish."

These remarks are utterly cynical. The lack of democratic rights in Hong Kong derives from the long period of British rule, during which a colonial governor had extensive,

autocratic powers. Once again, the US is selectively exploiting “human rights” to advance its own imperialist interests, as it has done for wars of aggression in the Middle East.

Even before China’s national security law was passed, the Trump administration announced that it intended to overturn Hong Kong’s special status with the US, covering trade, investment and legal matters such as extradition. The White House has begun by halting defence exports and restricting Hong Kong’s access to high-technology products. The Department of State also announced it will bar Chinese officials allegedly responsible for rights abuses in Hong Kong from entering the US.

Late last week, the US Senate passed a bill aimed at blocking US banks from doing business with Chinese officials responsible for the Hong Kong security legislation. The bill was passed unanimously, demonstrating the bipartisan nature of the US anti-China campaign. Leading Democrats, such as Joseph Biden, are criticising Trump for not being tough enough and demanding even more aggressive action.

On Thursday, Pompeo also announced sanctions against Chinese officials over the widespread detention of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang in so-called re-education centres. At the top of the list is Chen Quanguo, who is a member of the Chinese Communist Party’s Politburo and party secretary for the Xinjiang region. The sanctions come amid an increasingly hysterical campaign in the US media and political establishment, typified by a *Washington Post* editorial alleging that China is carrying out “genocide” against the Uyghurs.

Just a day earlier, on Wednesday, the Trump administration imposed visa restrictions on Chinese officials involved in policy on Tibet, supposedly in protest at the Beijing’s refusal to allow American tourists, journalists and diplomats to visit the strategically-sensitive area. The US has for decades established close relations with Tibetan, as well as Uyghur, exile organisations, campaigning for secession from China or greater autonomy.

The Trump administration’s ramping up of measures against Beijing over Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang is aimed at undermining China by fostering its break-up and also vilifying Beijing as the US prepares to take further steps toward open economic war and military conflict.

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