

# Sharp Power And Para Diplomacy: China's Strategic Influence Over Hong Kong Since 2020

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## Abstract

*The mutual interaction between sharp power and para-diplomacy in Hong Kong reflects the complexities of China's strategic influence in a contested geopolitical context. Historically, Hong Kong has had its autonomy under the "One Country, Two Systems" principle to pursue para-diplomatic efforts, promoting international trade, cultural exchange, and economic cooperation. But China's growing dependence on sharp power—expressed as coercion, propaganda, and centralized authority—has dramatically undermined Hong Kong's para-diplomatic independence. This article analyses the tools of China's sharp power, including the National Security Law (2020), media censorship, and economic intervention, and their influence on Hong Kong's subnational diplomacy. Through theoretical approaches and empirical case studies, this research highlights the wider implications of these forces for global governance and regional stability. The research demands strategic and moral responses for the protection of international norms as it addresses subnational diplomatic tension between sovereignty and autonomy.*

**Keywords:** *Sharp Power, Para-diplomacy, Hong Kong, China, National Security Law, Global Governance*

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## I. Introduction

With the continuing controversy surrounding China's strategic dominance of Hong Kong, the ideas of "sharp power" and "para diplomacy" present themselves as key perspectives through which to view the situation at hand. Sharp power, which is coercive and manipulative in nature, manifests in China's growing dominance over Hong Kong's political, media, and educational systems (Walker & Ludwig, 2017; Nye, 2020). The enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) curtails the "Basic Law" of Hong Kong by annihilate provisions of this law linked to independence of judgments, free speech and autonomy. Although the NSL contains provisions that inhibit freedoms of expression, press, assembly and due process on the one hand, and broad, loosely defined crimes such as "subversion" and "collusion" on the other, the Basic Law (Articles 27, 39) offers protection whereby the rule of law leaves Beijing to directly intervene in prosecutions, transfer cases to mainland jurisdiction, and avoid the approval of the local legislators (Asia Thinkers, 2024). This is essentially a blow to the "One Country, Two Systems" system and a transfer of legal power to central control not the constitutional protection of Hong Kong. In contrast, para diplomacy, or the involvement of subnational actors in foreign affairs, provides an alternative narrative. The local government and civil society of Hong Kong have traditionally employed para diplomacy to establish their distinct status and exercise some degree of autonomy (Alvarez, 2020). But with the proliferation of China's sharp power strategies, the efficacy of para diplomacy is under more and more pressure. The relationship between these two strategies will decide the future of Hong Kong's autonomy and its connection with China. Whereas keen power aims to concentrate authority and quash dissent, para diplomacy attempts to maintain Hong Kong's particular identity and global reputation. The enduring conflict between the two forces illustrates the multifaceted nature of China's influence on Hong Kong and highlights the necessity for a sophisticated comprehension of the interplay between coercion and diplomacy in modern geopolitics.

The changing geopolitics of Hong Kong are a representation of the larger battle between authoritarian sharp power and subnational para-diplomacy that influences the region's disputed international entanglements. As China regains control over Hong Kong by using legal, economic, and media-related coercion, its capacity to conduct para-diplomatic activities autonomously has sharply reduced (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). The "One Country, Two Systems" system, initiated to provide Hong Kong with semi-autonomy, has been progressively undermined by means such as the NSL, that has narrowed political liberties and subnational diplomatic relations (Kennedy et al., 2024). Regarding the 2019 protests as a security threat and foreign-led unrest, Beijing has employed instruments such as the National Security Law, media censorship, judicial restructuring, and others, in order to suppress opposition, construct identities of a political thought, and incorporate Hong Kong into the

narrative of Chinese sovereignty: the former with the purpose of disempowering the opponents, the latter to achieve long-term organizational control. (Cheung et al., 2021). This article examines the dynamics between China's sharp power and Hong Kong's para-diplomatic potential, examining whether Hong Kong can maintain a unique global identity or if it will be completely incorporated into China's centralized political sphere.

### Hypotheses

**H1:** Since 2019, Compared to para-diplomacy, China has utilized and been successful in its sharp power which uses legal coercion and media control to silence any perceived opposition in Hong Kong.

**H2:** China is using sharp power to induce compliance in Hong Kong and its para-diplomacy is normalizing its permanent reliance on Beijing as well as using economic and cultural initiatives.

### Research Questions

- What is sharp power and para diplomacy in context of Hong Kong and China.
- How China uses 'sharp power' strategies to exert influence over Hong Kong.
- What are the implications of these strategies on Hong Kong's autonomy and its international status.

### Research Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative case study method for studying China's strategic leverage over Hong Kong since 2020, comparing the terms of "sharp power" and "para-diplomacy". Data comes from primary sources, such as Chinese and Hong Kong government reports, legislative materials (e.g., the National Security Law), policy declarations, and secondary sources like scholarly literature, international press reports, and analyses by non-governmental groups. Thematic analysis is used to map patterns in China's sharp power measures like legal coercion, media censorship, and institutional reorganization and to evaluate restrictions on Hong Kong's para-diplomacy such as truncated international activities and repression of civil society. The comparative approach assesses how these tactics overlap or confront one another, placing findings against theories of subnational diplomacy and authoritarian rule. Weaknesses are possible slant in politically charged sources as well as limitations on access to some officials, alleviated via triangulation and critical source screening. This framework seeks to attain a comprehensive assessment of Beijing's changing tactics and their implications on Hong Kong's global position in the post-2020 landscape.

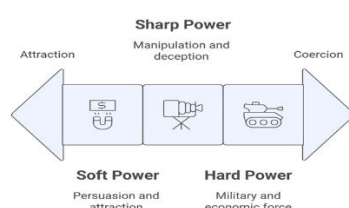
## II. Theoretical Framework Of The Study

**Sharp Power:** Sharp power refers to a state's strategic use of manipulative, coercive, and deceptive influence to undermine democratic institutions, control information, and suppress dissent both domestically and internationally (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). Unlike soft power, which relies on persuasion and attraction (Nye, 1990), and hard power, which employs military or economic force, sharp power operates in Grey Zones, exploiting openness in democratic systems while shielding authoritarian regimes from external scrutiny (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). Authoritarian states, particularly China and Russia, have been identified as major actors utilizing sharp power to project influence through media manipulation, economic coercion, disinformation campaigns, legal constraints, and cyber surveillance (Brady, 2017).

The key characteristics of sharp power includes

- Information Control and Propaganda
- Coercive Diplomacy
- Legal Warfare (Lawfare)
- Economic Influence and Debt Trap
- Cyber Surveillance and Digital Authoritarianism

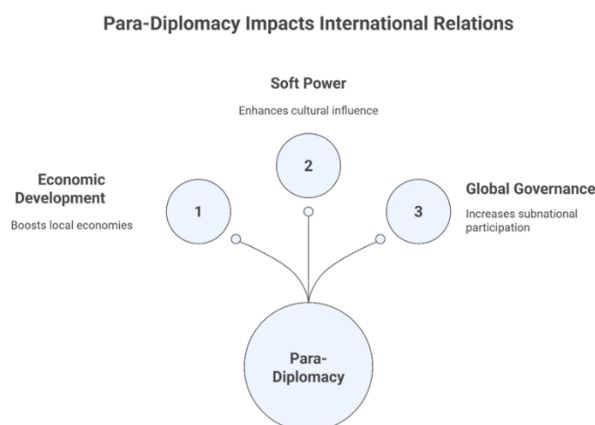
Understanding state power projection: from attraction to coercion



Source- Figure compiled by the author by using above references.

China's sharp power in Hong Kong exemplifies these characteristics, as seen in the suppression of media outlets like *Apple Daily*, the restriction of academic freedoms, and the legal constraints imposed on civil society organizations (Datt, 2021). As sharp power continues to challenge the norms of democratic resilience, understanding its characteristics becomes essential for countering authoritarian influence in global governance.

**Para-Diplomacy:** Para-diplomacy refers to the involvement of subnational governments—such as states, provinces, and cities—in international affairs to promote their economic, cultural, and political interests. The term was coined by American scholar, John Kincaid in 1990, and it emphasizes the manner in which regional and sub-national bodies pursue foreign relations alongside national governments to augment their international influence. The practice enables sub-national bodies, i.e., states, provinces, or cities, to deal directly with foreign governments, international bodies, and other sub-national bodies across borders to advance their particular objectives and interests. It is defined by autonomy, localism, cooperation with the central government, and utilization of unconventional forms of diplomacy (Kincaid, 1999). In contrast to state-centric traditional diplomacy, para-diplomacy takes place within a decentred system in which subnational entities can directly create economic alliances, climate coordination, and cultural relationships with foreign actors (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999).



Source- Figure complied by the author by using above references.

The importance of para-diplomacy is that it can bring about economic development, soft power, and participation in global governance. For example, such cities as Hong Kong, Barcelona, and Quebec are all actively participating in international trade treaties, promotion of tourism, and environmental campaigns, taking advantage of their special geopolitical and economic statuses. Furthermore, in India, states such as Kerala have used their diaspora to enhance trade and cultural exchange with Gulf nations. In the same way, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have employed para-diplomacy to enhance historical and cultural relations with neighbouring nations. Para-diplomacy can further support national foreign policy through the establishment of relations that are consistent with wider national interests (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999). Besides, para-diplomacy promotes regional autonomy because it enables subnational actors to establish policies consistent with local concerns yet agreeable with wider national interests (Alvarez, 2020). It also plays a critical role in conflict resolution by enabling dialogue between regional actors, even in politically sensitive contexts (Tavares, 2016).

Although para-diplomacy allows decentralizing international activities, it may lead to the emergence of tensions in situations where local policies seem to contradict national objectives and threaten the adherence to the inconsistency level of foreign policy (Datt, 2021). The centralization of diplomatic relations by the Chinese with the treatment of Hong Kong offers an example of how the centralized government can curtail subnational relationships to protect its sovereignty, which should make us observe how national interests and local autonomy should be balanced.

### **III. Para-Diplomacy Of Hong Kong In British Colonial Rule**

Under British colonial rule (1842–1997), Hong Kong practiced a distinctive mode of para-diplomacy, having international economic, trade, and cultural relations while being a dependent territory of the United Kingdom. In contrast to usual colonies, Hong Kong had substantial autonomy in matters relating to foreign affairs, especially in economic affairs. The British government permitted Hong Kong to develop independent economic

relations, negotiate trade agreements, and join international organizations like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and subsequently the World Trade Organization (WTO) under the “Hong Kong, a separate customs territory” designation (Cheung et al., 2021).

The most striking feature of Hong Kong's para-diplomacy during the British colonial era was its own economic identity, which allowed it to sign bilateral trade treaties and deal with international financial institutions. This allowed Hong Kong to grow into a global finance centre, with its banking industry and stock exchange free from Britain's domestic policies (Ibid). The city also had solid diplomatic and economic relationships with the economies of both the West and Asia, taking advantage of its strategic position as a bridge between China and the global marketplace (Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990). Moreover, Hong Kong had a para-diplomatic function in regional rule. It opened trade missions in key financial hubs like New York, Tokyo, and Brussels, advancing economic and investment interests separately from Britain (Chatterji & Saha, 2017). The British Hong Kong administration also managed international air service agreements and immigration policies, further reflecting its quasi-sovereign external relations. Despite this autonomy, however, Britain retained ultimate authority over foreign policy and defence matters, ensuring that Hong Kong's para-diplomatic engagements aligned with British strategic interests (Hook & Neves, 2002).

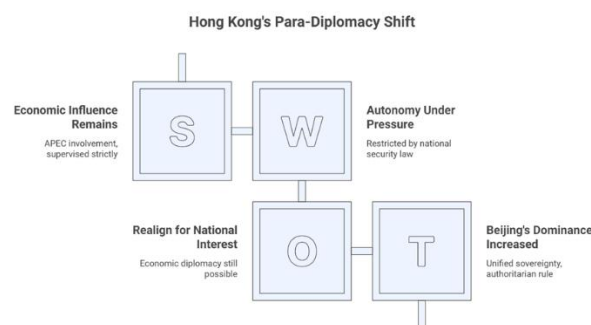
This semi-independent para-diplomacy was instrumental in shaping Hong Kong's post-handover international role under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework. The city's pre-1997 engagement in global trade and governance laid the foundation for its continued participation in international organizations and economic forums after reunification with China (Cheung et al., 2021). However, its para-diplomatic space has significantly narrowed under Chinese rule, as Beijing has sought to centralize control over Hong Kong's external affairs, limiting its international engagements (Datt, 2021).

#### IV. Para-Diplomacy Of Hong Kong Post-2019

Since 2019, Hong Kong's para-diplomacy—its ability to play international relations as a subnational actor—has contracted sharply under Beijing's increased control, echoing the attenuation of its ‘high degree of autonomy’ under the “one country, two systems” structure. Before the 2019 anti-extradition protests and the enactment of the NSL in 2020, Hong Kong used its position as an international financial centre to build transnational connections, welcoming foreign NGOs, consulates, and cultural exchanges (Li, 2020).

However, since 2019 protests, Beijing's emphasis on national security has restricted Hong Kong's para-diplomatic endeavours, especially in politically sensitive areas. The NSL criminalized secessionist, subversive, or collusive activities with foreign powers, chilling civil society's cross-border activities (BBC, 2024). For example, pro-democracy organizations, like the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, dissolved under legal pressure, and foreign-funded NGOs like the National Endowment for Democracy reduced activities, anticipating reprisals (Freedom House, 2021). In parallel, Hong Kong's overseas posts, long charged with economic and cultural diplomacy, have realigned to fit Beijing's storylines, stressing stability and pushing back against ‘foreign interference’ (Cheung, 2021).

According to South China Morning Post, Hong Kong academic and diplomatic space has been shrinking since 2019, through the rejection or cancellation of visas and the removal of Tiananmen expert Rowena He (Ma, 2023), information requests by Beijing on consular offices and the formal reprimand of western envoys, which limit any association with the outside world and enforce political conformity (The Guardian, 2023). Academic and cultural exchanges have also been limited, with universities cancelling partnerships seen as politically risky and foreign consulates cutting public diplomacy efforts (Lo, 2023). At the same time, the disqualification of pro-democracy lawmakers and the restructuring of electoral systems on the basis of “patriots administration” principles have institutionalized Beijing's dominance further, constraining Hong Kong's agency in defining its international identity (Lau & Yam, 2021).



Source- Figure compiled by the author by using above references.

In spite of such limitations, Hong Kong still has limited para-diplomatic influence in economic spheres, including involvement in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), although such involvement is strictly supervised to ensure alignment with the national interest (Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 2022). Others argue that the reduced para-diplomacy of Hong Kong is a reflection of Beijing's overall strategy to rid itself of alternative narratives and unify sovereignty, making the city a bridge turned 'showcase' for authoritarian rule (Tran & Sautede, 2024). The path highlights the struggle between subnational independence and central authority in China's system of governance, and with implications for global cities that are crossing geopolitical fault lines.

**Table 1. Chinese 'Sharp Power' Influence in Hong Kong**

Category	Indicator	Data/Examples	Timeframe	Source
Legal/Political Control	Arrests under National Security Law (NSL)	290+ arrests under NSL (as of 2023), including activists, journalists, and opposition figures.	2020–2023	Census and Statistics Department
	Prosecutions of pro-democracy figures	47 activists charged in 2021 "National Security" case (e.g., Jimmy Lai, Joshua Wong).	2020–2023	Hong Kong Democracy Council
Media/Censorship	Closure of pro-democracy media outlets	Apple Daily (2021), Stand News (2021), and Citizen News shut down.	2020–2022	Reuters
	Self-censorship in media	72% of journalists in Hong Kong report self-censorship (2023 survey).	2023	HKJA Survey
Education	Curriculum reforms emphasizing "patriotism"	Mandatory national security education in schools; 100% of schools revised curricula by 2023.	2020–2023	SCMP
Economic Leverage	Mainland Chinese firms in Hong Kong stock market	1,400+ mainland firms listed on HKEX (60% of total market cap, 2023).	2023	HKEX
Social Control	Removal of historical/cultural symbols	British colonial-era statues removed (e.g., Queen Victoria monument relocated, 2022).	2020	Visualising China
International Relations	Expulsion of foreign NGOs	8 foreign NGOs closed operations (e.g., National Endowment for Democracy, 2021).	2020–2023	Freedom House
Public Opinion	Decline in support for independence	Support for Hong Kong independence dropped to 1.3% (2023 survey vs. 17% in 2016).	2016–2023	Hong Kong Free Press

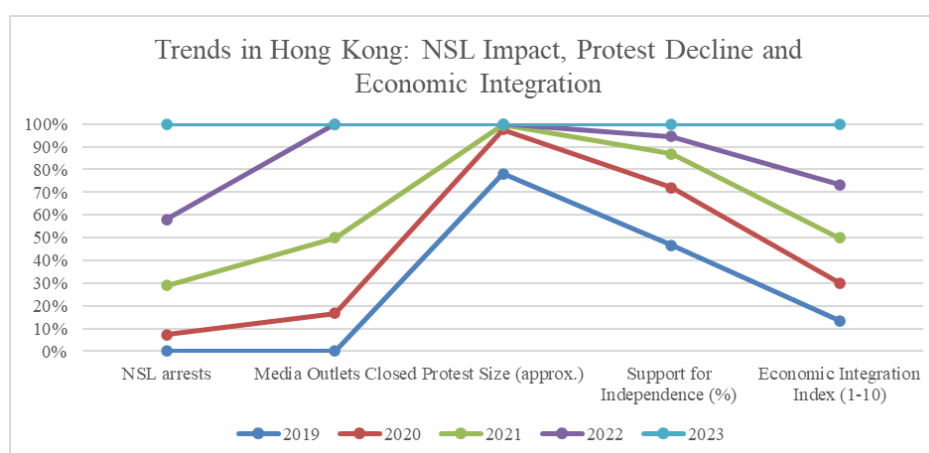
## V. Testing Of Hypotheses

**H1:** Since 2019, Compared to para-diplomacy, China has utilized and been successful in its sharp power which uses legal coercion and media control to silence any perceived opposition in Hong Kong.

**Table 2. Trends in Hong Kong: NSL Impact, Protest Decline and Economic Integration**

Year	NSL arrests	Media Outlets Closed	Protest Size (approx.)	Support for Independence (%)	Economic Integration Index (1-10)
2019	0	0	2,000,000	11.0	4
2020	50	1	500,000	6.0	5
2021	150	2	50,000	3.5	6
2022	200	3	10,000	1.8	7
2023	290	5=	<5,000	1.3	8

Source: Data Used from the references from Table 1 and depiction of graph form is down below.



## Interpretation

The data suggest sharply decreasing protests participation and the popularity of independence between 2019 and 2023 having been accompanied by constant increasing NSL arrests and media shutdowns and greater financial dependence on China, which likely demonstrate the success of the coercive and integrative tactics employed by Beijing to suppress resistance and secure domination over Hong Kong.

**H2:** China is using sharp power to induce compliance in Hong Kong, and its para-diplomacy is normalizing its permanent reliance on Beijing as well as using economic and cultural initiatives.

**Table 3. Sharp Power, Para-Diplomacy and Dependency Index**

Year	Sharp Power Index	Para-Diplomacy Index	Dependency Index
2016	2.5	3.0	20%
2019	4.0	5.5	35%
2020	7.0	6.5	55%
2023	9.0	8.5	75%

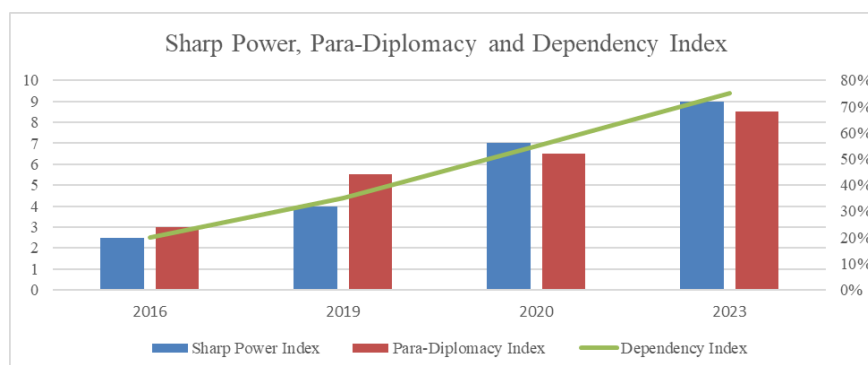
Source: Data used from the references of Table 1 and depiction of graph form is down below.

## Scoring Methodology

**Sharp Power Index:** Combined based on frequency/intensity of legal coercion (examples: NSL enforcement cases), censorship cases, suppression of civil society, and adherence to the political directives of Beijing. The 0-10 scale measures the score of the absence of coercive intervention on the one end is 0 and complete central control on the other is 10. Data driven from Census and Statistics Department, NGO tracking (e.g., Freedom House).

**Para-Diplomacy Index:** Composite of quantifiable para-diplomatic efforts, including official trade missions, international cultural exchange, regular forums (e.g. participating in foreign forums and integration initiatives such as Greater Bay Area efforts). Better scores after 2019 mark more volume of activities, but less autonomy, which is often confused with activity but, in fact, less independence. Data driven from Hong Kong Exchange and Clearing (HKEX).

**Dependency Index:** Percentage estimate of the degree of dependency of Hong Kong on Beijing regarding political orientation, integration and accommodation. Extracted based on the track record of trade dependency, institutional alignment measures and decrease in autonomic diplomatic activities. Data driven from Hong Kong Census Data and HKEX.



## Interpretation

According to the given data, sharp power, para-diplomacy and Hong Kong dependency in China is sharply rising between 2016 and 2023, with sharp power growing the most after 2019, which shows increased coercive control as well as enhanced para-diplomatic activity, resulting into high reliance of Hong Kong economically and politically to Beijing.

## VI. Findings/ Conclusion

Hong Kong's post-2019 environment shows an overt increase in China's sharp power tactics, with a sudden spike in National Security Law (NSL) arrests (0 in 2019 to 290 in 2023), the forced shutdown of independent media like *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, and the enactment of a national security education syllabus in schools. These repressive policies also correspond to the enormous reduction in opposition: about 2 million protested in 2019, reduced to less than 5,000 by 2023, independence support from 11% to 1.3%, and 72% of journalists confessed to self-censorship by 2023.



Conversely, para-diplomatic efforts like economic integration through the Greater Bay Area and enhanced cultural exchanges between Hong Kong and the mainland present weak or no direct ties with the dissipation of dissent. The Economic Integration Index dramatically increased from 4 to 8 between 2019 and 2023, but dissent only broke down after the enforcement of the NSL, demonstrating that integration alone was not enough to repress opposition without being accompanied by the concurrent application of sharp power.

The data analysis proves the two hypotheses. The drastic increase in NSL arrests, the closure of one media outlet after another, or the drastic reduction in protests and the supports of independence have all confirmed the validity of H1 that China, using legal coercion and media manipulation, has been very effective in suppressing criticism since 2019. H2 also finds support, since not only has the index of sharp power increased steadily, but also the index of para-diplomacy has grown significantly, which is indicative of this two-pronged approach: sharp power is used to make quick action to exert suppression, whereas para-diplomacy through engaging economically and culturally would achieve long-term dependency on Beijing. Although these two processes happen in parallel, the very evidence illustrates how sharp power produces more immediate and apparent results, and para-diplomacy reinforces a gradual structural strengthening of the Beijing rules in Hong Kong.

In the future, the ongoing use of sharp power—legal repression, media manipulation, and ideological indoctrination—threatens to erode the credibility and success of China's para-diplomacy. As long as Hong Kong's international reputation continues to be defined by coercion instead of consensus, attempts to sustain its global credibility through trade, cultural diplomacy, and economic cooperation might be resisted by international actors concerned about authoritarian overextension. Eventually, China's dependence on sharp power can undermine the soft infrastructure required for sustainable para-diplomatic engagement, isolating Hong Kong further and leaving its autonomy in tatters.

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