

Faced with massive electoral losses and relentless protests, Carrie Lam flew to Beijing on the December 16 to meet with Xi Jinping in order to reassess short-term priorities when it comes the Special Administrative Zone. Some were expecting this meeting to lead to the resignation of Lam. However, support for Lam was reiterated and the discourse remained more or less the same. The main differences lie in the meeting itself and in one crucial discourse variation.

### *Two meetings, no solutions.*

Lam was first met by Premier Li Keqiang on December 16 before lunch time. However, Li was waiting for her in the Great Hall of the People – Hong Kong hall, and not at Zhongnanhai (where Xi and the rest of the Chinese team was). This could prove to be yet another facet of Li's isolation inside the Politburo amidst the ongoing factional struggle and personnel reshuffling. Li was then accompanied by Han Zheng, his own personal mishu Xiao Jie (now General Secretary of the State Council), Zhang Xiaoming (Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office), and Wang Zhimin (Hong Kong Liaison Office for the Central Government).

The second meeting is more peculiar, especially when it comes to the list of attendees. Xi was, of course, present, in addition to Han Zheng, Ding Xuexiang (General Affairs Office), Yang Jiechi (Central Committee's Foreign Affairs working group), You Quan (United Front Department), but also Guo Shengkun, the sitting Party Secretary of the National Political and Legal Affairs' Commission. This strikes us as odd, since Guo is an ally of the old "zhengfa clique" of Zhou Yongkang, but also because it is the first time Guo is involved in the matter.

The content of the discourse did change ever so slightly. In the now infamous "3+3+3+1" allocation<sup>1</sup> given by Xi back in November, the second "3", which is the "3 firmly supported elements" 坚定支持, was altered in its latest December version. The third point, which should read "firmly support Hong Kong's judiciary system in punishing violent criminals (according to the law)" 坚定支持香港司法机关依法惩治暴力犯罪分子, now reads "firmly support the patriotism (towards Mainland) and love the strength of Hong Kong" 坚定支持爱国爱港力量<sup>2</sup>.

This new twist on words is confusing, maybe even by design, and provides little insight as to what is actually being supported by the Party. Is it a call to restore Hong Kong's economic strength while crushing the protests in order to demonstrate the administration's patriotism? Or more of an educational project – as rumored before – focused on promoting patriotism in Hong Kong in order to avoid generational chaos? Or could it be an offer by the Political and Legal Affairs Commission to provide resources to Lam in order to deal with the ongoing situation in Hong Kong? All of this remains unclear for the time being.

### *The rules of engagement*

Although it is also rumored that the Party is planning several personnel changes in the upcoming weeks and months – especially in the Civil Affairs, Security bureau and Justice departments – Xi has continued to express his support for Hong Kong's government and basic law, even more so than during his earlier November meeting with Lam. Yet the more the support from Beijing, the lower their (Hong Kong's current top civil servants) approval rate among the local population. Even in this context, Lam remains unable to "move" as the protesters do not intend to let her go (as her whereabouts are constantly being posted and updated on Liandeng 连登网 for protesters to corner her), nor is the Party willing to let her resign for the time being. As such, it seems Beijing is going for the long haul solution – that is, to let the protesters create sufficient economic damage to affect the silent majority, who may in turn also take their frustrations to the streets. As of yet, waves of layoffs have been somewhat limited to tourism, retail and transportation. As such, this quasi-recession has yet to truly affect the ordinary citizens of Hong Kong. This lack of action from Beijing might actually in the end play in its favor by potentially setting up social forces against each other when a crisis hits consumer goods.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-11/17/c\\_1125241601.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-11/17/c_1125241601.htm)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-12/16/c\\_1125353595.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-12/16/c_1125353595.htm)