A Public Unconvinced

Exploring the effects of the Hong Kong government's
attempt to securitize the 2019-2020 protests

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the Hong Kong government's discursive framing of the 2019-2020 protests. By applying the Copenhagen School's securitization theory on a previously untested case, it finds that the Hong Kong government framed the protests as violent, colluding with foreign actors, and with aims to cause harm. Through this portrayal, the government claimed the Hong Kong society needed defending, allowing the Central People's Government to implement the Hong Kong national security law. Despite the performance of a securitizing move, widespread public disagreement with the framing is found. However, with support for the protests decreasing and no longer supported by a majority, along with the implementation of the law, a *partially successful* outcome is noted. As such, the thesis demonstrates the need to view securitizing outcomes on a non-binary scale, also showing the possibility for non-liberal actors to securitize without majority public support. By looking at the limitations of political rights caused by the national security law, the thesis concludes by highlighting the ability for authoritarian-leaning governments to use securitization as a tool to silent critical voices.

Key words: securitization; hong kong; national security law; democratic backsliding; discourse analysis

Words: 9987

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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose and research question

> "Now, Hong Kong people are to run Hong Kong. That is the promise. And that is the unshakeable destiny." (Independent 1997)

These were the departing words of Chris Patten, Hong Kong's last British governor, on the last day before the city's return to China in 1997. 22 years later, when large-scale protests erupted on the streets of Hong Kong against the Beijing-tied government, questions were raised about *who* destiny – in reality – belonged to. With the protests making headlines around the world and further escalating tensions between the Western sphere (in particular, the US) and China (Sing 2020, p.13), the political arena in Hong Kong was changed on June 30th, 2020, when a legislation known as the Hong Kong national security law (NSL) was implemented by the Central People's Government. Several human rights and democracy watchdogs have since criticized the law, highlighting limitations of political rights (Amnesty 2021; Freedom House 2021).

The developments in Hong Kong are far from unique. As a matter of fact, a recent V-Dem Institute report demonstrates increased levels of authoritarianism globally, with the level of democracy enjoyed by the average person the lowest since 1985 (Nord et al. 2024). The processes contributing to this development are therefore of crucial importance to understand. As a *Special Administrative Region* (SAR), the uniqueness of Hong Kong is difficult to dispute. Yet, the events between 2019 – the start of anti-government protests – and the summer of 2020 – the implementation of the NSL – exemplifies a society in a short time span cutting down political rights, along with the many contentions within this process. Using a discursive approach and the application of the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, this thesis aims to understand the role of the Hong Kong government in turning anti-government protests into an authoritarian-leaning law. This is done through the following research question:

How did the Hong Kong government act to securitize the 2019-2020 protests and what were the effects of their securitizing move?

The thesis ties into three under-analyzed aspects of securitization theory, namely the role of the audience, non-liberal contexts, as well as outcomes without a full success. First, a background section is presented, necessary for a highly context-dependent theory, followed by relevant research previously conducted. The theoretical framework of securitization theory is then presented, which incorporates criticism relating to audience, context and results

interpretation. Following a section on methodology and important conceptualizations, the Hong Kong government's securitizing move is analyzed in detail, drawing on a number of official government documents and speeches. Through the study, I demonstrate that, by portraying the protests as harming the wider Hong Kong society, and specifically treasured values of stability, sovereignty and security, the government attempted to frame the NSL as necessary. However, with a strong pro-democratic camp voicing opposition on the streets, in newspapers and on social media, along with Western support, only a minority of the public was convinced of the threatening nature of the protests, despite protest support significantly decreasing. Consequently, the presented policy measures were strongly rejected by a majority. As the NSL was still implemented and significantly impacted political freedoms in Hong Kong society, the study demonstrates how securitization in non-liberal contexts is primarily dependent on formal (elite) support. Nonetheless, a securitizing move can still be used to *increase* legitimacy by convincing a proportion of the general public. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the complexities revolving around who securitizes, while also highlighting how securitization can be used as a tool by authoritarian-leaning governments.

1.2 Hong Kong SAR, China

The following subsection provides background information on the role and status of Hong Kong, as well as a brief overview of major political developments that have occurred in recent decades.

Hong Kong's unique position traces back to the 19th century when it became an important trade base under British sovereignty. An agreement in 1898 specified that the United Kingdom was to *lease* the territory for the next 99 years (Buckley 1997, pp.1-3). During the 20th century, Hong Kong expanded its role as a financial hub, emerging as a bridge between West and East. Simultaneously, however, calls for decolonization grew increasingly strong, both internally and externally. This resulted in the 1984 Sino-British Agreement, with the United Kingdom agreeing to renounce its sovereignty upon the end of the 99-year lease and return Hong Kong to China. The steering component was the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, allowing Hong Kong to retain a separate economic, legal and governmental system at least until 2047 as a *Special Administrative Region* (SAR) (Buckley 1997).

Following the Handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong remained an important financial hub, with "One Country, Two Systems" implemented smoothly (Summers 2021, pp.34-36). The new government system was semi-democratic: while elections determined representatives of the new Legislative Council, the highest leader – the Chief Executive – was decided by an election committee with ties to the mainland, who then nominated the other leading political positions and heads of departments (Summers 2021, pp.30, 44). A major political event occurred in 2003, when a government-proposed national security law received large-scale opposition from the public who feared infringements of political freedoms and the "One Country, Two Systems" principle. With roughly half-a-million gathering in a protest, the law

was put on hold indefinitely, and several influential politicians resigned (Hung 2022, pp.133-134). Following a decade of relative stability, calls for universal suffrage grew stronger in Hong Kong, leading to a "White Paper" released by Beijing in 2014. Here, Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy was emphasized, yet, ultimately in a subordinate position to central authorities. The paper was interpreted by many Hong Kongers as a strong assertion by the Mainland, reminding the local population of who was in control, and rejecting democracy. Following another document, the "8-31" Decision, which reaffirmed the central role of the Election Committee, extensive protests erupted, known as the "Umbrella Movement" (Summers 2021, pp.81-87). Despite major public discontent, no concessions were made, at least partially through a successful securitization of the protests by the ruling elite (Hui 2020).

This contextual background leads us to 2019. On top of a dysfunctional legislative and executive system, a Hong Kong government-proposed bill allowing fugitives to be transferred to Taiwan, mainland China and Macau was met with large scale opposition (Summer 2021, p.129). Pro-democratic voices feared the bill would extend mainland Chinese jurisdiction, impacting the autonomy of the Hong Kong legislative system, including the risk of the bill subjecting regime critics to unfair trials in China (Vukovich 2022, p.25). A protest in June 2019, consisting of roughly one million out of the 7.4 million population, eventually caused the bill to be suspended. However, protesters demanded the full cancellation, drawing even higher numbers in the following weeks. While the bill was eventually withdrawn, protests remained, becoming a general voice against the Beijing-tied government. Protesters were backed by major Western actors, including the US, the UK, and the EU, who called for democratic rights to be respected while tying the discontent to mainland China. Through its internationalization, Western support energized both sides of the conflict (Summers 2022, p.282; Holbig 2020 pp.329-330, 334). While largely peaceful, clashes between smaller sets of protesters and police became a repeated feature, with protesters at times occupying metro stations, urban areas and universities. Over the course of 2019, Chief Executive Carrie Lam continuously acknowledged the political discontent, and encouraged dialogue between all parties. Nonetheless, protests continued and only lost momentum when the Covid-19 pandemic spread in 2020, though remaining in smaller sizes (Summers 2021, pp.130-135).

While formally part of the People's Republic of China, many residents of Hong Kong separate themselves from the mainland population. A December 2019 survey demonstrated that 77,8% of the population either identified themselves exclusively as "Hong Konger" (55,4%) or as "Hong Konger" when in the mainland (22,4%) (Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute [HKPORI] n.d.). As a financial hub, citizens have generally placed little emphasis on political participation. Instead, pragmatism has historically been central, limiting the role of political ideologies. This helps explain why Hong Kong as a full democracy has not always been prioritized, as long as some levels of public consultation have existed (Hui 2020, pp.63-65). As such, stability has been a leading value, with "good citizenship" – the preservation of social stability and contribution to the economy – encouraged, whereas its opposite – caused by troublemakers stirring political and social unrest – is discouraged (Lam 2005, pp.313-314; Hui 2020, p.66). The historically low voter turnouts for the Legislative Council helps exemplify the low interest in politics.

Year	Voter turnout (%)
1991	39.2
1996	35.8
1998	53.3
2000	43.6
2004	55.6
2008	45.2
2012	53
2016	58.3

Table 1: Voter turnout in Legislative Council elections (Hong Kong Council of Social Service n.d.).

Despite relatively low voter turnouts, participation increased with time, along with a larger acceptance and performance of protests following the events of 2003. Nonetheless, protesting has remained based on careful organization and avoiding confrontation, and individuals have participated on conditions of rationality, non-violence, and non-profanity (Cheng 2016, p.390). In relation to the 2014 Umbrella Movement, Hui (2020, p.73) notes: "to win public support, the Umbrella Movement protesters and leaders also had to work around the depoliticized culture and refrain from radical protests". Therefore, when a minority engaged in violent acts, the government successfully managed to portray the protests as violent, leading to their demise (Hui 2020).

1.3 Previous research

Since its mainstream establishment into security studies, securitization theory has been applied to a broad range of topics, including drugs (Crick 2012), migrants (Lazaridis and Wadia 2015), and diseases (Sjöstedt 2008), and in various contexts across the world. This includes studies relating to protest portrayal, where multiple authors have found securitization to be a government tool to decrease tension and combat opposition (Palma 2020; Carvalho Pinto 2014; Hamoudi 2019). One such example, in a context highly related to this study, is Vuori's study of the 1989 Falun Gong movement in the People's Republic of China, proving the theory's applicability in non-liberal contexts (Vuori 2010).

Zooming in on Hong Kong, several securitization studies have previously been conducted. Hui (2020) has demonstrated the successful securitization of the Umbrella Movement through attributing the protests as violent and aiming to destroy the society. The securitizing move allowed the Hong Kong government to gain public support and place greater emphasis on "patriotism" in local politics. Hui concludes by stating: "The Umbrella Movement is not a one-off episode – it is more like the first episode of a television series on the political development

of Hong Kong" (Hui 2020, p.125). Analyzing the political (and security) events of 2019-2020 through the lens of securitization therefore serves as an important contribution to understanding the wider developments in Hong Kong.

Of note is also Stivas and Cole (2024), who have looked at the Hong Kong government's securitization of the Covid-19 movement. They find that, in non-democratic societies, the securitizing move and its accompanying extraordinary measures may be implemented *despite* low public trust or support if there is limited room to voice opposition. Analyzing whether the same outcome is visible in regard to the political sector can therefore help validate these results.

In relation to the political events of 2019-2020, Lai (2023) uses the term "securitization" (though, not as a theory) to describe the increased emphasis on national security in Hong Kong society, establishing how the NSL has contributed to the territory's authoritarian turn in recent years. Furthermore, Vickers and Morris (2022) have analyzed the Chinese Communist Party's securitization of Hong Kong education to a domestic audience, blaming the 2019-2020 protests as a result of a foreign-based curriculum. While demonstrating the usage of securitization as a strategy in China, this thesis shifts focus toward the Hong Kong government as securitizer and the general public of Hong Kong as an audience. As securitization theory is yet to be applied in this context, this has left a research gap to be explored.

As this study finds, the public majority were unconvinced of the securitizing move. Previous securitization research has tended to heavily favor *successful* instances of securitization, which in recent years has been the subject of heavy criticism, not least from Ruzicka (2019). This thesis therefore contributes to securitization literature studying cases without a fully successful outcome. Following Paterson and Mulvey's (2023) claim that securitization studies must learn from failure, the study further displays why developments away from binary understandings of securitizations are important.

2 Theoretical Framework

Having looked at the case background and previous research, I now turn to the theoretical framework. First, the Copenhagen School's securitization theory is presented, with developments to the theory relating to audience, context, and successfulness then incorporated, while also looking at the application of securitization in non-liberal contexts.

2.1 The Copenhagen School's securitization theory

Serving as a critique to traditional understandings of security, securitization theory has gathered widespread attention in recent decades. Originally laid out by the so-called "Copenhagen School", the theory sees no sector (such as the military) as inherently more of a "security issue" than another (Wæver 1995, pp.46-47). Instead, using a constructivist basis, emphasis is put on the intersubjectivity of security: anything can be a security issue if framed and accepted as such. More specifically, security is viewed as the extension of regular politics, allowing for extraordinary measures to be implemented that would not have been possible in a politically contentious setting: "by saying 'security,' a state representative declares an emergency condition, thus claiming a right to use whatever means are necessary to block a threatening development" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, p.21).

The basic process of securitization involves a *securitizing actor*, who upholds large legitimacy and means to be able to convince a target audience. The securitizing actor initiates the process by presenting an issue as an *existential threat* to a given *referent object*, an object or value that is deeply treasured in society and which cannot be abandoned. As the issue constitutes an enormous threat, it must be combated by all means necessary. This allows for exceptional, extraordinary measures to be taken in response (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, pp.22, 36). Therefore, securitizing moves occur through a belief that "if we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, p.24).

With no issue objectively a security threat, security issues emerge when a consensus exists of the necessity to go beyond everyday politics. Securitization therefore serves as an important tool for powerful actors to pursue their agendas and implement policies (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, pp.31, 40-41). Consequently, the negative effects of securitization to an open political system are emphasized:

> "National security should not be idealized. It works to silence opposition and has given power holders many opportunities to exploit 'threats' for domestic purposes, to claim a right to handle something with less democratic control and constraint. Our belief,

therefore, is not 'the more security the better.' Basically, security should be seen as negative, as a failure to deal with issues as normal politics." (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, p.29)

Securitization success is conditional upon the targeted audience agreeing both with the existential threat and the extraordinary policy measures (Salter 2010, p.125). Thus, without audience acceptance, only a *securitizing move* has occurred (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, p.25). Whether an audience accepts is highly dependent on context: the outcome may not be the same across all places in the world and must also connect to shared societal values. For example, portraying witchcraft as an existential threat to society would have different outcomes in 17th century USA compared to today (Ruzicka 2019, p.373).

While different approaches exist on how to understand securitization, the Copenhagen School views security as speech acts (Wæver 1995, p.55). Through rhetorical acts, the *illocutionary* force of language is given central attention, meaning the subjectively constructed utterance by the speaker. Put differently, the speaker uses speech acts to construct an existential threat, aiming for a certain audience response (Sjöstedt 2022, p.6). Evidently, the securitizing actor and referent object comprises two central units of analysis. However, *functional actors* may heavily impact the outcome. These are agents who are neither the creator or receiver of the securitizing move but can either strengthen or weaken the act. For example, media often constitutes a significant role in securitizing moves. Thus, the Copenhagen School view of securitization is based around three components: referent object, securitizing actor, and functional actors (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, pp.35, 149).

Of the five sectors highlighted by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde where securitization may occur, the political sector emerges as the most relevant for this study, as it revolves around non-military threats to political units. Such (portrayed) threats risk harming either the internal political ideology, system, and/or legitimacy of a state, as well as its external legitimacy. Within this realm, securitization is likely to occur when a government is concerned with its own survival, claiming that the territorial integrity of the state is under threat and portraying competing forces as enemies to the state (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, pp.141-151).
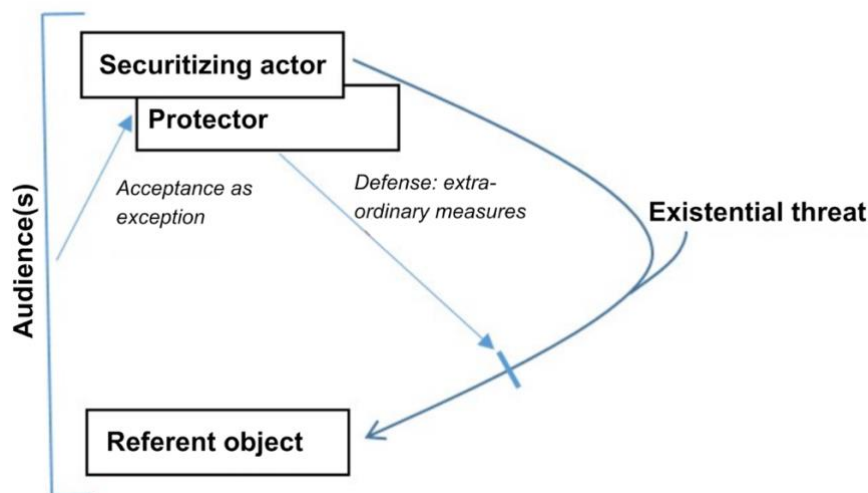

Figure 1: The Copenhagen School's securitization theory, visualized by Wæver (2024).

2.2 Developments and criticisms to securitization

Since its establishment in security studies, securitization theory has been the subject of criticism from multiple ends. This applies not least to the theoretical framework presented by the Copenhagen School. With the theory now broadened, it is no longer possible to incorporate *all* sides of securitization into one study, and multiple coexisting theoretical frameworks have emerged. It is therefore important to clearly establish the used theoretical framework and choices made (Vuori 2016, pp.69-71). While my intention is to use the Copenhagen School's understanding of securitization through speech acts, responding to major criticisms helps develop the framework.

2.2.1 Role of context and audience

Thierry Balzacq (2005; 2010a; 2010b) has been a vocal proponent of securitization theory, but simultaneous critic of the Copenhagen School. Centrally, he argues that the role of the interrelated aspects of *context* and *audience* have been downplayed in analysis. While the Copenhagen School primarily directs attention toward the *illocutionary* effect of speech acts – the utterance itself – Balzacq argues the *perlocutionary* effect – the audience's response – determines the securitization process. Thus, greater attention must be directed to the acceptance of the securitizing move, as, even in the original formulation of securitization, the sole determinant of whether securitization is successful or not is the audience (Balzacq 2005). With securitizing moves more likely to succeed if connecting to the feelings, needs and interests of the audience, Balzacq also emphasizes the need to attach greater focus to the context in which a case occurs inside (Balzacq 2005, p.184). The need to move from a central focus on actors toward one focusing on sociological aspects has been the basis of the so-called second-generation scholars of securitization (Stritzel 2014, p.46).

Additionally, limited focus on *who* constitutes the audience has been highlighted as an underdeveloped component to securitization theory (Léonard and Kaunert 2010, p.57). With time, a broader consensus has been reached that the audience must not be understood as one holistic group, but rather as different groups which may be targeted for various purposes (Léonard and Kaunert 2010, p.63; Salter 2010, p.122). For example, a securitizing actor may require *formal* support (i.e., political) to implement a specific policy, but may also require *moral* support, meaning the need of legitimacy in order to pursue an agenda (Balzacq 2005, pp.184-185). While, for instance, political institutions (an elite-centered audience) will be targeted when the securitizing actor is in need of formal support, the general public constitutes important moral support necessary for government survival (Léonard and Kaunert 2010, pp.61-63). Carefully identifying *which* audience is targeted, and for what purpose, is therefore an important component which is incorporated into this study.

With the aforementioned criticisms relating to the role of context and audience contributing to the development of securitization, these can be incorporated into the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School (Vuori 2016, p.70). While arguably not given sufficient detail originally, both context and audience are presented as central components also by the Copenhagen School. Crucially, the *perlocutionary* aspect has never been fully missing when understanding securitization as speech acts, since the audience would otherwise have been completely irrelevant (Vuori 2008, p.74). As such, the audience can be added as a fourth condition centered in analysis inside this theoretical framework, while directing large attention to context throughout the analysis (Vuori 2008, p.70). This is the approach I have chosen to follow.

2.2.2 Non-successful securitizing moves

In the original presentation of the theory, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde argue that "security analysis is interested mainly in successful instances of securitization, (...) the successful acts of securitization take a central place because they constitute the currently valid specific meaning of security" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, p.39). However, as with any valid theory, failure must be possible to avoid determinism. A few contributions have been made toward a broadened understanding of the successfulness of securitizing moves. Most importantly, Salter (2010, p.119), as well as Paterson and Mulvey (2023, p.671) have noted that the results of securitization are not binary, meaning they are neither fully successful, nor fully failing. Since it is unlikely for *every single individual* in an audience to be convinced, securitization is better understood when placing success and failure on a continuum (Vuori 2016, p.68). From here, it is possible to identify securitizing moves that are simultaneously failing and succeeding in different aspects. For instance, a securitizing move may successfully convince an elite audience but not the public, or succeed in framing an issue as an existential threat, but not convince the audience of the necessity of the extraordinary measure. This helps carefully analyze the outcomes more in-depth than simply classifying each case as either "failed" or "successful" (Paterson and Mulvey 2023, pp.670-672).

2.2.3 Securitization in non-liberal settings

A final criticism relevant to this thesis is the alleged bias of securitization studies towards liberal democracies, with various authors viewing the theory as "Eurocentric" (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020; Wilkinson 2007). A noticeable example is seen through a gendered perspective presented by Hansen (2000), where she has argued that securitization does not tackle the "security as silence" problem, highlighting instances where there are limitations to the ability to voice opinions and concerns. Consequently, those disagreeing with the securitizing move may choose to remain silent (Hansen 2000, pp.294-295). While a fully valid argument, attaching the centrality of context allows one to view how the above example may still be deemed as an example of securitization: while existing in all places, securitization

differs in how it is manifested (Vuori 2008, pp.68-72). For example, Stivas and Cole (2024, pp.134-138) have demonstrated that securitizations can succeed in illiberal settings even when a majority does not agree with the securitizing actor. As shown here, this does not mean that the full speech act – consisting of a framed existential threat to a referent object, together with a presented extraordinary measure – did not exist; it merely demonstrates that securitization appears differently in authoritarian contexts (Stivas and Cole 2024, pp.134-138). This is further proved through Buzan and Wæver's application of securitization theory in various contexts around the world (e.g., Buzan and Wæver 2003), demonstrating how *context* changes rather than the premise of the theory.

3   Methodology

Using a highly context-dependent theory, it is important to be open with choices made to clarify findings. This section is therefore dedicated to the choices made within the study. I begin by presenting research design and the motivation behind choosing Hong Kong as a case study, then moving on to the usage of discourse analysis. I then establish what actors are focused on, and the time frame looked at. Finally, the data and material are presented.

3.1 Research design

The performed analysis is a single-N study with both qualitative and quantitative elements. Basing an analysis on a single case suits research aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding, with all attention being focused on the one instance (Halperin and Heath 2020, p.234). Given the scope of this thesis, a single-N study therefore suits its aims, allowing space to cover all necessary information. On the one hand, the method carries high internal validity with a strong likelihood of explaining the causes behind the phenomenon. On the other hand, however, only focusing on a single case entails lower external validity, since findings may be case-specific, rather than generalizable on other cases (Halperin and Heath 2020, pp.234-235). Nonetheless, as securitization theory is a highly context-specific theory, it is of particular importance to give necessary attention to each case, rather than applying findings on other cases and "stretching" the theory. This does not entail that findings cannot be useful for future studies, but rather that one should be careful not to overgeneralize findings (Vuori 2016, pp.70-71).

3.2 Case selection

The case study of this thesis is the Hong Kong government's act to securitize the 2019-2020 protests. This responds to criticism against securitization theory of a selection-bias built into the theory. As noted by Balzacq (2005, p.34), only directing attention toward successful instances risks *applying* rather than *testing* a theory, only confirming what is already known. With few instances of non-successful securitizing moves analyzed, the study therefore follows the calls of Ruzicka (2019) to look beyond successful cases. Additionally, the selected case focuses on a context away from liberal European states. While reiterating the relatively low external validity of the study, securitization must be tested on all political systems (Vuori 2008, p.67), and findings help contribute to the wider understanding of how the concept may look in a context where relatively little attention has been given.

3.3 Discourse analysis

While securitization studies may be formed in several ways, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998, p.25) have explicitly stated that "the way to study securitization is to study discourse".

A simultaneously interpretivist and constructivist approach, discourse analysis assumes that people's acts are followed by their values, beliefs and ideologies, simultaneously viewing these as having been given a meaning through discourses (Halperin and Heath 2020, pp.365-366). Through the premise that discourses (including language, metaphors and symbols) shape reality (including through speeches, texts and body language), one is therefore interested in understanding what a discourse has contributed to in a given case (Halperin and Heath 2020, pp.368-369). Similar to securitization theory, context is central: only in a specific place and time does a discourse have an effect. Furthermore, understanding power dynamics is crucial, as actors with large means have stronger abilities to create a discourse compared to actors with little resources (Halperin and Heath 2020, pp.369-373).

The method entails the researcher making individual choices in *how* to locate a discourse, and *what* it is shaped by. For this reason, discourse analyses hold a relatively low degree of generalizability, where the exact results may be difficult to replicate (Bergström and Ekström 2018, p.294). Instead, a well-conducted discourse analysis is identified by its ability to demonstrate how a discourse fits into a wider context and can explain a set of events. Through consistently providing transparency and evidence, the method emerges as fruitful (Halperin and Heath 2020, p.373). For this reason, I am throughout the thesis open with data used, interpretations made, and provide multiple examples of how the discourse can be seen.

3.4 Conceptualization and operationalization

3.4.1 Who and when?

As securitization studies and discourse analyses are performed through choices and interpretations by the researcher, there is a need to clearly establish the studied actors and timeline (Paterson and Mulvey 2023, p.661).

In regard to actors, the studied securitizing actor is the *Hong Kong government*. While a more detailed discussion will follow later on the possible influences of the Chinese Communist Party, the local government was nearly exclusively the communicating actor outwards. With the national security law (NSL) implemented by the political elite in Beijing, the focus here is on communication made toward and response of the Hong Kong general public, therefore constituting the audience.

While the protests in focus first appeared in 2019 (and are therefore referred to as the "2019-2020 protests"), I start the analysis from May 22nd, when the securitizing move was initialized. Main focus is on the acts conducted around the implementation of the NSL, though I view it as necessary to look beyond the first few months to understand the wider effects the legislation had. Therefore, I look at the period of May 2020 through June 2021, helping see the "before", "during" and "after" of the securitizing move.

3.4.2 Politicization versus securitization

In all securitization studies, one must carefully distinguish between what is framed as a political and security issue. Here, I follow Sjöstedt's (2008, p.10) operationalization of a *securitizing move*, which is "the public framing of an issue as a national threat, accompanied by a strategy to act". This operationalization clearly establishes an actor going beyond the political sphere, thereby changing the rules for policy implementation.

3.4.3 Successfulness

As securitizing moves are highly unlikely to convince every member of an audience, I follow what is emphasized by Balzacq (2005, p.173) and performed in Hui's securitization study of the Umbrella Movement (Hui 2020, pp.42), which is looking at whether a *critical mass* of the general public was convinced. In other words, for the securitizing move to have been *successful*, I deem this to only be the case if a majority of the Hong Kong public supported both the existential threat and policy measure. In line with the presented theoretical framework, where results are viewed in non-binary terms, I deem the securitization to have been *partially successful* if a clear difference in public opinion can be noted which aligns with the securitizing move.

3.5 Data and material

Conducting the discourse analysis, I primarily use material found on the official website of the Hong Kong government. Here, statements, transcripts and videos from speeches and press conferences are uploaded, and serve as the primary source in the government's outreach to the general public (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region [HKGOV] 2023). Furthermore, I analyze two booklets released by the Hong Kong government, also available through their website. Finally, I use two videos of Chief Executive Carrie Lam, uploaded by New China TV and Bloomberg Television on YouTube. As the videos carry no additional comments, but simply are uploads of speeches conducted by Lam, there is no risk of a bias affecting the content. The selected material represents a significant sample of the discourse and includes all main speech acts within the studied securitizer-audience relationship.

Measuring the audience response follows the common method in securitization studies of using surveys (Hansen 2011, p.360). Several authors have highlighted the risks of analyzing the successfulness through this means, as other independent variables may have impacted public opinion (Balzacq 2010b, p.42; Paterson and Karyotis 2022, p.116). For example, it is relevant to question how one can definitively state that public opinion was shaped by the securitizing move and not anger toward protesters for obstructing traffic or damage inflicted on the local economy. However, this does not change the fact that a noticeable shift in public opinion must be visible for success to be found, correlating with the timeline of the conducted securitizing move.

The thesis analyzes the results of three separate surveys conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (HKPORI), on behalf of the well-reputable international news agency Reuters. HKPORI is an independent research institution founded in 2019 as successor to The Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong (HKUPOP). HKPORI is a member of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University, further establishing credibility. Together with its predecessor, HKPORI carry many years of research experience in surveying Hong Kong public opinion, not least in regard to political events (Roper n.d.). As such, there is no reason to believe that the surveying material would be misleading or biased.

While four rounds of surveying were conducted, the first round occurred in December 2019. As the second round (HKPORI 2020a) was conducted in March 2020, thus in closer proximity to the securitizing move, there is little reason to include the first round. HKPORI's third round of surveying (HKPORI 2020b) was conducted in June 2020, roughly a month into the securitization process, and is therefore used to measure the audience's response to the securitizing move and extraordinary measure. A final round (HKPORI 2020c) was conducted in August 2020. With more time passed since the first speech act, and the extraordinary measure implemented, this further helps analyze the successfulness.

Survey source	Month conducted	Motivation
HKPORI 2020a	March 2020	Baseline – audience view prior to securitization
HKPORI 2020b	June 2020	Audience response to securitization (one month)
HKPORI 2020c	August 2020	Audience response to securitization (three months)

Table 2: Data used for measuring audience response.

In addition to the above material, especially in regard to the effects of the securitizing move and the role of fundamental actors, secondary material is used from previous academic studies as well as news agencies.

4 Analysis

Having presented the theoretical framework and methodology, I now turn to analyzing the securitizing act. Firstly, I look at the role of the securitizing actor, the Hong Kong government. Next, I direct attention toward performed speech acts, focusing on three components: existential threat, referent object, and extraordinary measure. The role of fundamental actors is then looked at, and then, finally, the audience response.

4.1 Securitizing actor

As presented previously, while the national security law (NSL) was implemented by the Central People's Government (CPG), the analysis focuses on the Hong Kong government. As an autonomous actor, the local government is the main responsible actor for legislative acts, fiscal policies, diplomatic meetings, and communication revolving Hong Kong matters (Summers 2021, pp.104-105). Thus, during the implementation of the NSL, the Hong Kong government was the primary conveyer of information and defender of the legislation. With strong ties to the mainland, it is, however, not fully clear whether it acted independently.

Further evidence demonstrating the *difference* between the Hong Kong and Chinese governments can be seen through looking at the public's perceptions: a March 2020 survey demonstrated that 43,5% of Hong Kongers placed most blame for the unrest on the local government, while only 14,2% blamed the CPG (HKPORI 2020a). As emphasized by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998, p.41), a securitizing actor will be more likely to succeed when in a position of strong authority and possibility to claim legitimacy of a state. In this context, it is therefore important to highlight the results of a survey conducted the three days prior to the start of the securitization, where only 27,3% of the Hong Kong public indicated trust in the government, with 62,9% distrustful (HKPORI 2024). This is therefore a crucial aspect to pay attention to ahead of the next sections looking at the securitizing move and its effects.

4.2 Securitizing move

4.2.1 Existential threat

Starting the discourse analysis, I look at the government's portrayal of the protests as an existential threat. Upon the announcement in Chinese media of the planned implementation of a national security law, the first official response by the Hong Kong government was a

statement by Chief Executive Carrie Lam. Here, Lam refers to an "increasingly serious situation" as a result of violence from the protests, referred to as "disturbances" and "riots". Lam highlights the "risk of terrorism" and anti-national nature of the protesters who had been incited into destroying national symbols and asking for foreign interference (HKGOV 2020a). In the following days and weeks, protests continued to be tied strongly to violence and terrorism (HKGOV 2020a; HKGOV 2020e; HKGOV 2020f). This signifies a noticeable shift from the previous 11 months of protests, where political discontent had been acknowledged. Lam even openly took accountability for the situation and expressed a will to find a solution through dialogue (The Guardian 2019; ABC 2019).

The act was performed in a manner where *all* participants were not accused. Instead, the protests were portrayed as the result of a small group of individuals with harmful ambitions misleading the masses:

> "(…) individuals or groups with ulterior motives have recently been using different means to smear the work to enact the national security law, as well as disseminate false and misleading information to deceive the public, attempting to create social instability." (HKGOV 2020h)

As apparent, no acknowledgement of legitimate political ambitions was given by the Hong Kong government, further visualized in a statement released following the first protests since the national security law announcement, where protesters were described as "bringing tremendous harm to Hong Kong" (HKGOV 2020c). In the same statement, the political aims of the protesters were denied by the government, instead described as partaking "on the pretext of opposing the legislation on national security", heavily indicating that this was not their true motive (HKGOV 2020c). This can also be tied to the societal focus on "good citizenship", where those seen as stirring political and social unrest are viewed negatively (Lam 2005, pp.313-314), and therefore utilized as a tool by the government to win over the public.

A major component of the portrayal of the protests as an existential threat was the linkage to foreign actors with destructive purposes. For example, a booklet from July 2020 described the protests as "anti-Chinese" and a "terrorist threat", accompanied with a picture of the Hong Kong police squaring up to a fire, further attaching ideas of destruction and violence to the protests (HKGOV 2020i). In a video speech by Carrie Lam on June 15th, clips showing violent acts from the protests are shown, while clips of American flags being waved appears when Lam mentions how protesters have "colluded with foreign forces" (HKGOV 2020f), further demonstrating the extreme seriousness of the threat.
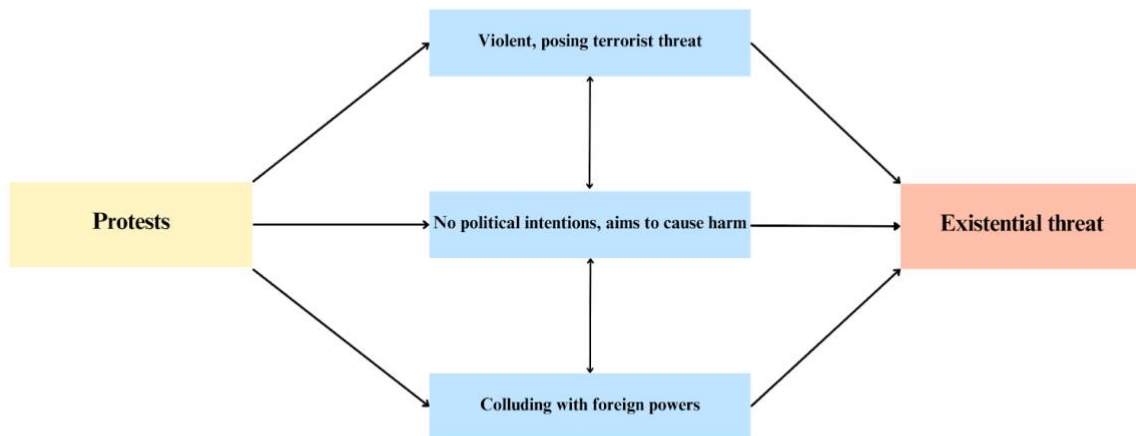
Figure 2: Framing of protests as an existential threat.

4.2.2 Referent object

During the presentation and implementation of the NSL, a broad range of core values in Hong Kong society were mentioned as threatened. A strong example is found in Carrie Lam's letter to the Hong Kong public, published in 13 local newspapers:

> "Over the past year, the Hong Kong community has been traumatised. (…) The opposition forces and organisations advocating 'Hong Kong independence' and 'self-determination' have blatantly challenged the authority of the Central Authorities and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government, pleaded for interference in Hong Kong's affairs by external forces and even begged for sanctions against Hong Kong and thus disregarding the interests of Hong Kong people and our country. (…) Hong Kong has become a gaping hole in national security, and our city's prosperity and stability are at risk." (HKGOV 2020e)

In the above excerpt, *stability* is explicitly mentioned, a consistent feature in the discourse. Continuously the government referred to Hong Kong's stability at risk, while attributing the current state of the territory to its antonym, "chaos" (HKGOV 2020a; HKGOV 2020e; HKGOV 2020f; HKGOV 2020i). The emphasis on "stability" aligns with perceptions in Hong Kong society of the concept as a core value, indicating a strategic decision to explicitly highlight the word to portray the current situation as harmful. Similarly, Hong Kong was on several occasions referred to as being "traumatised" by the current state of affairs, creating harm to all citizens (HKGOV 2020h; HKGOV 2020i).

Another component of the referent object consisted of describing both the Hong Kong and Chinese *sovereignty* and *authority* at risk. By tying protests to foreign actors, this could no longer be taken for granted:

> "This kind of behaviour has crossed the baseline of 'One Country', sabotaging the relationship between the Central People's Government and the HKSAR, threatening China's sovereignty and national security and challenging the authority of the Central Authorities and the Basic Law." (HKGOV 2020a)

Finally, perhaps most glaringly, was the portrayal of a serious threat to the *national security* of Hong Kong and China. Frequently, the government referred to a "gaping hole" in national security, exposed and unprotected as a result of the protests (HKGOV 2020e; HKGOV 2020f; Lam 2020a). In the midst of the disorder, Hong Kong was described as being incapable of protecting its own national security, placing the society at serious risk (HKGOV 2020g; Lam 2020b; HKGOV 2020i).

With a variety of core values and components to Hong Kong society referred to as threatened, and at times referring to the wider society, the broader referent object can be seen as *Hong Kong as a whole*.
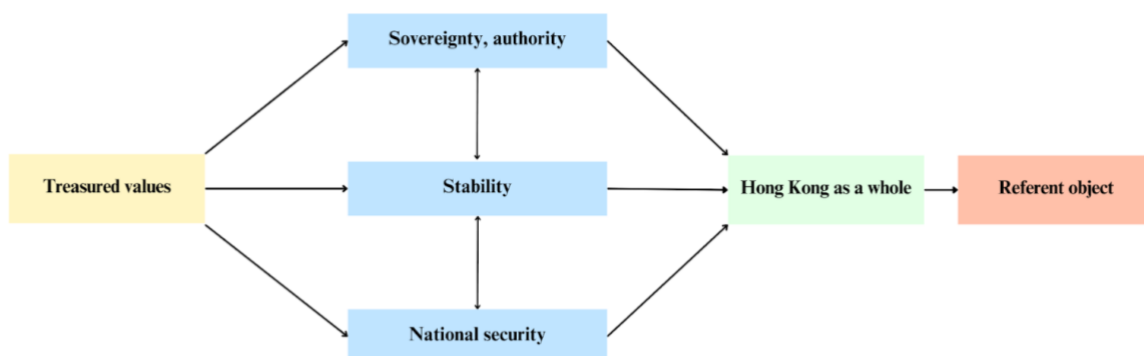

Figure 3: The threatened referent object.

4.2.3 Extraordinary measure

From the start of the securitizing move, Carrie Lam made clear that the current nature of Hong Kong was gravely serious and could not remain:

> "There is both the need and the urgency for legislation, the constitutionality, lawfulness and reasonableness of which are beyond doubt." (HKGOV 2020e)

> "Without protection of national security, many of the things that we enjoy, many of the things that we treasure, will be lost" (HKGOV 2020b)

As a textbook example of the rationality behind the securitization process, a necessity to respond had emerged. With the local government described as incapable to act, there was "no alternative" but for the Chinese government in Beijing to intervene (HKGOV 2020i). The result was the law known as the national security law (NSL), targeting four types of crime: secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign organizations. From the start of the presentation of the NSL, Lam made clear the law would target "only an extremely small minority of persons" (HKGOV 2020f), rather than all participants who had been "misled" (HKGOV 2020h).

> "The national security law is the turning point for Hong Kong to find a way out of the impasse and restore order from chaos. (…) Together, we can relaunch Hong Kong and take forward the city's development." (HKGOV 2020i)

Blaming a minority exemplifies the government attempting to unite the wider Hong Kong public through the policy measure. This was further seen on May 25th, when five heads of different government departments released separate statements in support of the legislation, enhancing a united stance against protesters (HKGOV 2020d).

On June 30th, 2020, the NSL was implemented and entered into force with immediate effect. A Beijing-led National Security Committee overseeing the law was simultaneously opened, while special courts were set up to handle cases relating to the new legislation and could be handled behind closed doors or in mainland China (Hung 2022, p.204). The next day, several individuals were arrested with suspicion of breaching the law by engaging in calls for Hong Kong independence (Davidson and Kuo 2020). Following the NSL, no larger protests were recorded in Hong Kong (Kwong 2023, p.72).

A major question in regard to the NSL was the scope of the law: with rather vague definitions of the crimes, would all pro-democratic voices be silenced? In addition to the culmination of protests, the law soon emerged as a central tool for the government to crack down on pro-democratic opposition. One central event was the raid of the pro-democratic newspaper Apple Daily and the arrest of its owner Jimmy Lai, while in January 2021, 55 pro-democratic individuals were arrested for hosting a primary where the aim was to nominate political representatives for an upcoming – and later postponed – Legislative Election. Therefore, the NSL not only ended all protests, but had a wider significance through limitations to all opposition against the government (Toru 2020, p.103).
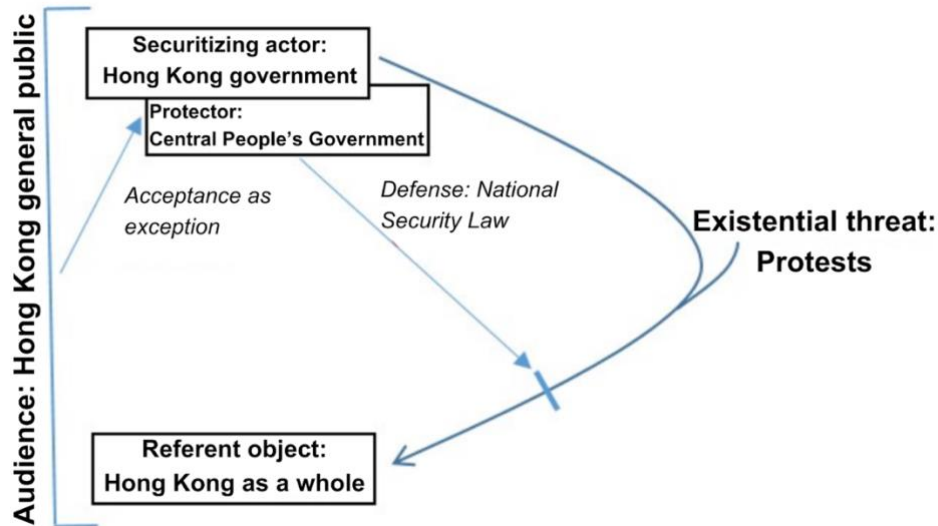
Figure 4: The full securitizing move.

4.3 Functional actors

Having analyzed the securitizer and securitizing move, attention now turns to a third central unit, the functional actors. Prior to the NSL, Hong Kong endured a high level of freedom of speech, though with a degree of self-censorship in traditional media. Thus, it is crucial to note that the government was not the sole actor during the first phase of the securitization, and far from the only conveyer of discourses (Summers 2021, p.101).

Media in Hong Kong has generally been split into two camps: the pro-China camp, and the pro-democracy camp. Pro-Chinese media often carries strong ties to the Chinese government. For example, in 2017, the Chinese state either controlled or had a stake in nine out of the total 26 mainstream media outlets in Hong Kong (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism 2019, pp.134-135). Therefore, unsurprisingly, the anti-protest discourse was reproduced in pro-Chinese media, focusing on protesters as troublemakers (Vukovich 2022, p.10; Lee 2023 p.52). However, throughout the protests, pro-democratic media, together with widespread support from Western media outlets defended the protests. Here, coverage focused on the political demands of the protesters and negative implications on freedom caused by the NSL (Summers 2021, pp.101, 139; Kwong and Wong 2023, pp.329-333). As apparent, with a critical media platform in existence and accessible to the public, the securitizing move faced significant opposition from the pro-democracy camp and Western actors, choosing not to buy into the government discourse.

Additionally, the role of social media as a functional actor needs highlighting in relation to Hong Kong. As a platform increasing possibilities for expression of – and access to – opinion, social media has increased the number of participants influencing securitization (Floyd 2021, p.92). During the 2019-2020 protests, social media was utilized by pro-democratic individuals, who conducted an "information war" against the pro-Chinese establishment (Summers 2021,

pp.101, 136-140). This way, social media became a space to share the protesters' political ambitions, combat misinformation, and spread footage (Lo, Hung and Loo 2021, p.332). During the securitizing act, social media presence was dominated by criticism toward the NSL and government (Kwong 2023, pp.74-81).

While both traditional and social media heavily impacted the securitizing discourse, noticeable changes occurred when the NSL was implemented. Both individuals from the public and media started imposing a greater degree of self-censorship to avoid breaching the law (Lee and Chan 2023, p.925; Toru 2020, pp.103-104), while, as noted, Apple Daily was the subject of a police raid. Thus, the role of the fundamental actors shifted *during* the securitization, effectively changing the power balance more in favor of the government. Nonetheless, access to international media outlets continued and remained popular in Hong Kong, leaving possibilities for the public to access critical perspectives despite drastic changes internally (Lo and Wong 2021).

4.4 Audience response

With the *successfulness* of the securitizing move dependent on the audience response, I now turn attention toward public opinion corresponding to the speech acts.

4.4.1 Views on existential threat

For the audience to have agreed with the securitizing move, a first step is to look at whether they agreed with the portrayal of the protests as an existential threat. In March 2020, roughly two months prior to the securitizing discourse, the Hong Kong general public's opinions of the government were examined in a Reuters survey conducted through the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (HKPORI). Visible was the significantly higher support for the protests compared to opposition against: 57,7% of respondents indicated they either "very much" or "somewhat" supported the protests. At the same time, 27,6% either "very much" or "somewhat" opposed the protests, with remaining respondents indicating either "half-half" or undecided (HKPORI 2020a).

When the same question was asked in June 2020, a month after the initialization of the securitizing move, a dampened support for the protests was visible, yet consisted of a majority of respondents. Support ("very much" and "somewhat") had decreased by 6,6 percentage points, now consisting of 51,1% of respondents. Similarly, opposition ("very much" and "somewhat") to protests had increased by 6,8 percentage points to a total of 34,4% of respondents (HKPORI 2020b).

In the final round of surveys, conducted in August 2020, roughly a month after the implementation of the NSL, support for protests had again decreased significantly, by 6.8

percentage points, now consisting of 44,3% of respondents – a 13,4 percentage point decrease from the March survey. However, opposition against protests had also decreased, by 1,2 percentage points to 33,2% of respondents (HKPORI 2020c).

	March 2020	**June 2020**	**August 2020**	**Total change**
Support for protests	57.7%	51.5%	44.3%	−13.4 percentage points
Opposition against protests	27.6%	34.4%	33.2%	+5.6 percentage points

Table 3: Public opinion of protests.

From the surveys, a clear effect can be noted in regard to public opinion of the protests. The previous majority support had in quick succession decreased heavily and no longer consisted of a majority, while opposition also grew. However, despite notable changes, support for the protests remained higher than opposition, with only a third indicating opposition by August 2020. It is therefore evident that a critical mass did *not* agree with the portrayal of the Hong Kong government that protests were an existential threat to Hong Kong. Nonetheless, the securitizing move had a noticeable effect, convincing a proportion of the public and removing the majority support for protests. Incorporating previous views of securitization success on a continuum, it is therefore possible to state that the securitization was *partially successful*, as it did affect public opinion, in line with the aims of the securitizer.

4.4.2 Views on extraordinary measure

Regardless of the fact that a majority did not agree with the framing of the protests as an existential threat, the NSL was still implemented. Here, I look at the audience response to the new legislation. While the NSL had not been presented to the public by March 2020, the two following surveys analyzed the audience reaction to the legislation. Respondents were asked how much they supported Beijing's move to implement national security legislation in Hong Kong. Again, respondents could respond in supportive fashion ("very much" or "somewhat" support), half-half, oppose ("very much" or "somewhat") or state that they were undecided (HKPORI 2020b; HKPORI 2020c).

In the June survey, a majority indicated opposition to Beijing's move, accumulating 56,5% of responses. Roughly a third, 34,3%, had positive views on the move (HKPORI 2020b). When the same question was asked in the August survey, opposition had grown by 3 percentage points, now up to 59,5% of respondents. At the same time, support for the legislation had decreased by 2,9 percentage points down to 31,4% (HKPORI 2020c).

	March 2020	**June 2020**	**August 2020**	**Total change**
Support for the National Security Law	–	34.3%	31.4%	–2.9 percentage points
Opposition against the National Security Law	–	56.5%	59.5%	+3 percentage points

Table 4: Public opinion of the national security law.

The results demonstrate a largely unsupportive Hong Kong general public in regard to the NSL. A clear majority voiced disapproval of the measure, with less than a third supporting the move. With only a minority agreeing that the protests represented an existential threat, support for the extraordinary measure was, unsurprisingly, low.

5   Discussion

Having conducted the analysis, a few findings can be noted. The analysis demonstrates clear evidence of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests being securitized. As the main communicator to the public, the autonomous government of Hong Kong framed protests as violent, masking political ambitions to hide their aim of creating great harm, and colluding with foreign actors – the opposite of "good citizens". Through this framing, central values of stability, sovereignty, authority and national security were portrayed as being at risk, essentially comprising the foundations of Hong Kong society as a whole. Through this process, the government demonstrated the necessity to implement the national security law (NSL), with emphasis on urgency and protecting the wide majority against the few.

The analysis proves that the pro-democracy camp – through traditional and social media, and Western support – remained firm in their stance, where low government trust further made the speech acts hard-bought by the wider Hong Kong public. Thus, I find that the Hong Kong government did *not* fully successfully convince the masses of the nature of the existential threat, nor the extraordinary policy measure in response. Nonetheless, changes in public opinion were visible, especially in regard to public support for protests which decreased significantly, while opposition also grew. Given this outcome, I argue that the results demonstrate a *partially* successful securitization, as a proportion of the public were convinced by the speech acts. Looking further at the effects of the government's act, it is clear the implemented NSL had significant impacts on the political sphere of Hong Kong. Self-censorship among individuals and media increased, all protests ceased to exist, while pro-democratic figures were arrested. We can therefore clearly note the non-democratic effects of the Hong Kong government's act to securitize the 2019-2020 protests, contributing to its authoritarian turn.

Having looked at the main findings, three points are worth delving into deeper – both for the sake of understanding the case of Hong Kong and for the wider usage of securitization theory. These points are presented below.

5.1 Securitization despite an unconvinced majority

A first point worth discussing further is the interesting outcome in the studied case: the extraordinary measure was implemented *despite* a majority disagreeing both with the protests as an existential threat and – even stronger – with the NSL. Understanding the result requires reiterating the centrality of context-dependency in securitization theory: depending on the political system, the role of the general public as audience differs (Roe 2008, p.620). While the

analyzed securitizing move pertains to the government seeking *moral* support (legitimacy), power over the implemented policy measure was evidently with the political elite in Beijing. In other words, in the illiberal setting in which this case occurred, formal support from the political elite appears of higher importance than moral support granted by the general public of Hong Kong.

The above point leads to another question: did the outcome of the securitizing move not matter? As Vuori (2008, p.68) has demonstrated, the role of the general public in authoritarian cases plays an important role, with non-democratic governments also dependent on legitimacy. Looking closer at the results, it is important to still highlight the changes in public opinion, where protests lost a significant portion of their support within a short time frame, while opposition to protests also increased. Therefore, with the protests no longer supported by a majority and a noticeable portion of the public now agreeing with the government framing, the changes in public opinion may well have been the crucial difference which granted the Hong Kong government necessary legitimacy to survive the policy implementation and quiet down protests.

With the results clearly not demonstrating a fully convinced majority, this study further echoes authors (e.g., Salter 2010, p.119; Vuori 2016, p.68; Paterson and Mulvey 2023, p.671) calling for securitization results to be viewed on a continuum rather than in binary terms. This way, I argue, it is possible to view the results of the securitizing move as *partially successful* as clear changes in public opinion did occur which aligned with the aims of the Hong Kong government. While unclear whether the government's aim was to convince a critical mass or simply decrease support for protests, by avoiding branding the results as a complete "failure", we can see the possible effects the securitizing move had *despite* not convincing the majority.

Looking at Stivas and Cole's (2024) findings, as well as Hansen's (2000) concept of a "security as silence" also helps understand how the NSL could be implemented despite a majority unconvinced. In a non-liberal setting where the consequences of voicing opposition are high, the extraordinary measure may be implemented despite a majority not agreeing with the move. In other words, we can see how the implementation of the NSL *immediately* had a silencing effect on the pro-democratic camp, contributing to the repression of opposing voices, not least as a fundamental actor. This does not mean that securitization did not happen, but rather that, in a non-liberal setting, the extraordinary measure can be implemented even without convincing the masses.

5.2 Securitizer and over-securitizer

A second aspect to discuss further is the complexity of deciphering the exact nature of the securitizer. As established, the nearly exclusive speech utterer was the autonomous Hong Kong government, despite the extraordinary measure implemented by the Central People's Government. Viewing security as speech acts, there is little doubt that the Hong Kong

government was the main securitizer. However, one should not be discouraged from questioning whether the Hong Kong government acted on orders from Beijing. This is especially of importance since the rhetoric tone changed immediately when news of a Beijing-implemented legislation started spreading. Protests went from portrayed as a legitimate voice of political discontent, with dialogue encouraged, to one where they threatened the whole of Hong Kong. In this sense, the case has demonstrated the possibility to talk about a *securitizer* (the Hong Kong government) as well as an *over-securitizer* (the Central People's Government). While this idea needs further investigation in future research, it raises the possibility for one actor to securitize on behalf of another. This may be especially of relevance in cases where a local actor has a stronger connection to the audience than a larger actor, as seen with the Hong Kong government compared to the mainland government. In such cases, it may be strategically sound for the local actor to take primary responsibility in the securitization process.

There are several contexts I can think of where this may contribute to understanding securitization. One example is in regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, where it would be interesting to view securitization as *states acting on behalf of the World Health Organization (WHO)*, who would here constitute the over-securitizer. With states more strongly tied to local audiences, it would be beneficial for them to perform the securitization rather than the WHO. Another example would be in regard to regional government actors acting on behalf of national governments, such as in the case of the United Kingdom (with decentralized Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish political assemblies) or with the United States and governors of their 50 states. In certain cases, securitization could be understood by viewing the local actor as the main securitizer with primary discursive responsibility and the larger actor as an over-securitizer, taking a more passive role.

5.3 Securitization as tool for authoritarianism

A final point worth discussing is how the securitizing move served as an important tool for an extraordinary measure to be implemented which heavily affected the political arena of Hong Kong. With the NSL tying pro-democracy protesters and figures to loosely defined crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign organizations, space for opposition was to a high extent limited. As presented in the analysis, since its implementation, the voice of the pro-democratic camp has largely been silenced, including media and political parties, while protests have fully disappeared. The results of the NSL were even described by Chief Executive Carrie Lam as "remarkably effective" (HKGOV 2020j). Looking at the results of the securitization, the case clearly demonstrates why Wæver (1995, p.56) has proclaimed that "we want less security": placing an issue inside the sphere of security removes the ability to critically debate solutions. With democratic backsliding a worldwide trend, it is equally important to understand *how* this occurs. As this study has shown, securitization can be used by governments to move toward authoritarianism and delegitimize critical voices. Therefore, visualizing the strategical usage of securitization by authoritarian governments is a vital first

step on the path toward understanding how one can combat this – for example through de-securitizing and counter-securitizing moves – which future research may be directed toward.

6 Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how the Hong Kong government acted to securitize the 2019-2020 protests, as well as looking at the effects of their securitizing move. Through the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, the portrayal of the protests as an existential threat has been demonstrated, discursively framed as threatening Hong Kong as a whole. Through the process, the government aimed to legitimize the implementation of the Hong Kong national security law (NSL), yet only received support from a minority. Despite public disagreement with the securitizing move, the NSL was implemented, and quickly repressed critical voices to the government, while silencing all protests. It is therefore established that limitations to the public's political rights was a central effect of the securitizing move.

The thesis has further demonstrated how, in a non-liberal context, a majority support from the general public is not a precondition for the implementation of exceptional measures. Instead, a securitizing move can be partially successful if a proportion of the targeted audience agrees. This, I argue, may well have been the vital difference between impossibility and possibility of implementing the NSL. Additionally, the idea of an *over-securitizer* has been presented – a large actor taking a passive role by allowing another actor with stronger ties to the local public to act as the main securitizer. In this sense, the Hong Kong government can be viewed as acting on behalf of the Central People's Government in Beijing. Finally, the thesis demonstrates how securitization may be used as a tool for authoritarian-leaning governments. By framing opposing voices – such as protests – as harmful enemies, extraordinary measures can be legitimized which limit political spaces in society. As such, the thesis reiterates the non-democratic nature of issues branded as "security".

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