

## Making the Case for the People's Republic of China

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Visiting the People's Republic of China cannot help but impress. Over the past half century China has gone from impoverished pariah to incipient great power. East Asia essentially is the PRC and the others. Beijing's rise is the chief reason America's "unipolar moment" after the end of the Cold War turned out to be only a moment.

The rise of China certainly is the most important international event since the Soviet Union's collapse. However, Soviet communism appears to be only a historical interlude, which formally lasted barely 74 years. The PRC's impact is likely to last far longer.

Beijing's potential influence is heightened by the role of the Chinese diaspora around the globe. Even during Imperial China's great weakness, Chinese civilization lived on in part through this larger Chinese community. In general, these members have applauded the PRC's success as attributable more to a broader conception of China than the communist state particularly.

Carefully nurturing this wide circle of support would enhance Beijing's political influence and soft power around the globe. The desire to see China, which today happens to be in the form of the PRC, succeed creates a friendly global constituency. Only India possesses a similarly extended network.

Yet the current government in Beijing risks losing this asset. The PRC appears to be running up against an even greater commitment to liberal values by Chinese whose loyalty upon which it was counting. In 2017 President Xi Jinping asserted that "Blood is thicker than water" when speaking of Taiwan and Hong Kong. He promised to "develop and strengthen the ranks of patriots who love our country," by which he meant in the form of the PRC.

However, ethnic Chinese in both of these territories are demonstrating a very different view of patriotism. For instance, the Taiwanese public, and especially young people, are moving away from any identification with the government in Beijing. Support for reunification is at the vanishing point.

Even more significant may be events in Hong Kong. Never independent, never democratic, never sovereign, this Special Administrative Region nevertheless has a population which appears to be drifting away from China's current government. There never has been a vote on the territory's future, but one suspects that control by Beijing would not triumph, almost irrespective of the alternative offered. When a fourth of the population turns out to demonstrate against legislation

perceived as facilitating rendition to the PRC, their view is anything but “blood is thicker than water.”

What, then, for Beijing to do? China has the military power to impose its will in both cases. But the cost of doing so would be huge. The PRC would wreck the territories it sought to absorb. Beijing would sacrifice much of its ethnic Chinese support network around the world. People who cheered when Hong Kong returned to China from the United Kingdom would be appalled if the returned territory was despoiled.

The PRC would destroy its carefully cultivated reputation for patient, reasoned, and measured action. China would shred its business appeal: foreign companies would see the mainland as well as Hong Kong as a less hospitable commercial location. While the West likely would eschew a military response, it would have little choice but to act. Diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions would be inevitable. Moreover, the PRC’s neighbors would grow more anxious and even hostile, likely increasing their own defense efforts as well as movement toward larger nations, including India, Japan, and especially America.

These effects would last much longer than the impact of the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square. Then the PRC was far weaker and less significant internationally. Moreover, the events were seen as wholly internal. Today repression in Hong Kong and conquest of Taiwan would be seen as international acts by a far stronger and more dangerous China. A host of global relations would be disrupted for a significant period. By no measure would the benefits match the costs.

Lesser forms of coercion would not likely have much positive effect. People willing to demonstrate are unlikely to be moved by “patriotic education” on behalf of a government they distrust. Mandating respect for the Chinese national anthem would merely create another arena for calculated disobedience. Once free, people would more firmly resist attempts at social engineering.

Instead, President Xi and the rest of the Chinese leadership need to focus on making prospective rule by Beijing into an attractive option for those who expect more than shared blood. The PRC’s economic success has been extraordinary. In a much faster time than the Roman Empire, Spanish Empire, United Kingdom, or America, China has become a leading state with global influence.

The leadership needs to make the case — and demonstrate the latter’s truth in action — for accepting Beijing’s leadership. That surely includes increasing trust in the PRC’s commitment to one country, two systems. Also needed are specifics on how submersion of such small political communities within the Chinese colossus would benefit them. The perspective of China’s leaders reflects their presence on the global stage; residents of Hong Kong and Taiwan start from a very different point, concerned about preserving their much more personal homelands.

Lest the need to persuade seem humiliating, it would stand the PRC leadership in good stead in dealing with the rest of the world. A number of President Xi’s initiatives, including China Dream and the Belt/Road project, have been greeted skeptically. Fair or not, such doubts are best met by better arguments and examples. Such as provided by increased support in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

All great nations face serious challenges. What matters most is surmounting them. Recent protests in Hong Kong should be seen by Beijing not as an occasion to crack down, but as an

opportunity to showcase the PRC's virtues. The ability to persuade others to follow is the ultimate test of leadership.

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