



Hong Kong Can't Be Saved. Hong Kongers Can.

BY DOUG BANDOW

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A once great city is now another appendage of dictatorship.

Freedom in Hong Kong continues to die a painful death, strangled by the application of last year's national security law. Chief Executive Carrie Lam, Beijing's factotum, recently expressed her hope that the Biden administration would give the territory "a fair hearing." Alas, its loss of autonomy is too obvious to disguise or wish away. Although the special administrative region will continue to enjoy an extra portion of economic freedom, it will otherwise operate much like any other Chinese city. And there is little that the United States can do to reverse the process.

What to do? The people of Hong Kong understandably do not want to be ruled by a distant totalitarian state that suppresses freedom of information and expression. But they should not put their hopes in Washington. In 2019, some protesters displayed American flags, which had the same effect on Chinese President Xi Jinping as waving a red cape does on a bull. That was reason enough for Beijing to crack down, attempting to foreclose U.S. intervention in the territory's affairs.

Nevertheless, democracy activist Nathan Law, who fled to the United Kingdom and was later indicted for his activities there, tweeted: "Statements of concern and condemnation are not enough — and trade or investment agreements with autocracies are even worse." He urged the European Union to kill the recently negotiated investment treaty and the United States to "continue to consolidate the transatlantic cooperation to combat China's authoritarian expansion." He concluded with a call for "the world to stand up and defend our shared universal values with them, not with feeble words but with real actions, shoulder to shoulder."

American writer Patricia Pan Connor made a similar pitch in the *Washington Examiner*: She hoped the United States could convince Europe not to ratify the investment accord. "The U.S., Europe, and other democratic countries account for over half of the world's GDP. Acting in unison, they can curb China's human rights violations and protect the precious civil liberties of a democratic people."

Alas, absent going to war, nothing the United States nor Europe does will restore Hong Kong to where it was in 2019, or 1996, much less result in the democratic processes that Law and others understandably desire. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin can be taken at his word when he said: "China is not afraid of intimidation by any external forces—our determination is unwavering and unshakable in safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests." Repression is central to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule. The regime will not voluntarily yield control over what it views as Chinese territory, which it has

defined as a red line issue as long as it has Taiwan. The rhetoric against separatism is too strong and the stocked-up prejudice against Hong Kongers themselves now far too large.

Targeted sanctions are a moral vanity, primarily a way for the U.S. Congress to engage in virtue signaling. Denying Lam a bank account, though emotionally pleasing, did not cause Beijing to back down nor will refusing to sign an investment agreement or make a trade deal. There still are benefits to using Magnitsky-style sanctions to punish the Chinese elite who profit from a corrupt regime at home while seeking to enjoy the benefits of the West, including acting as a useful flag on global kleptocracy. However, it won't move the needle in Beijing.

The United States could more broadly cut off Hong Kong entirely, but doing so would hurt Hong Kongers far more than the Chinese government. Washington could launch a broader assault on its economy. That might cost China (and the United States) significantly but not enough to force Beijing to surrender.

Nor are many other countries likely to sever economic ties given the large losses that could result—just look at the recent Sino-European investment treaty. Moreover, this approach risks losing the Chinese people. Even college students who dislike internet censorship typically are strong nationalists and rally around their government when it is under foreign attack.

Nothing is gained by driving the bilateral relationship not just into a ditch but over a cliff, especially since the CCP's most likely response would be to tighten controls. The best hope for improved human rights is change from within China, not pressure from outside. An isolated China, under siege from abroad, is likely to be both more repressive and dangerous.

Moreover, China's future is not set. Mao Zedong dominated and devastated China. However, his death unleashed reform forces that transformed the country. Xi reversed that trend, but he will not rule forever. After him may come another period of liberalization. The United States can work toward building relationships for a better time while setting clear limits on Chinese coercion overseas and attempts to warp the international order toward autocracy now.

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In the meantime, Americans and others should seek to increase information flows to the Chinese people without further inflaming nationalist sentiments. Hong Kong democrats also need help. Any assistance will be painted by Beijing as the black hands of Washington, but aid to Hong Kongers will not only be remembered by them but by those now silenced in China who saw the island as a bastion of relative freedom.

Prisoners and their families need financial assistance. The plight of those targeted by the regime should be publicized. Defendants need legal representation. Western companies should welcome Hong Kong applicants. Western universities should invite Hong Kong students to study abroad. Western nations should accept immigrants seeking freedom. Beijing's loss is the West's gain as the Chinese authorities' petulant fit over the status of Hong Kongers' British National Overseas

passports shows. Talent draining from the island won't cause Beijing to change position, but it will make it pay a cost while other nations benefit at its expense.

Lam called the national security law “remarkably effective.” That is true in a perverse sense. Raymond Chan, a radio host charged under the law, said the measure “is the power for the government to do anything.” Democracy activist Joey Siu complained that “the city itself is dying.”

Certainly, the old Hong Kong is dead. All political opposition to the CCP regime will be crushed, and the territory will be politically no freer than Beijing or any other Chinese city, which means not free. At some distant point, China may liberate itself from the dead hand of Maoist repression again. But while Hong Kongers can be rescued, Hong Kong by itself cannot.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World.