

# MANZELLA

## America Can't Save Hong Kong

Doug Bandow

June 9, 2020

Rather like Adolf Hitler's Thousand Year Reich that ended 988 years early, China's guaranteed 50 years of freedom for Hong Kong has ended 27 years early. It's been a good run since 1997, since Beijing left the territory mostly alone for longer than many people expected.

However, the Xi government's plan to directly impose a comprehensive national security law and allow security forces to operate in the special administrative region (SAR) ends any pretense that residents will retain traditional British liberties and enjoy Western-style due process. Nor is there much hope for prudential forbearance in using powers nominally intended for emergencies. Under Xi Jinping the People's Republic of China has ruthlessly crushed any hint of dissent, political, religious, or other, at home; it considers nothing other than immediate and complete obedience as acceptable. The result will be no different in Hong Kong.

Tyranny's approach has triggered an understandable air of desperation in the territory. After the PRC's announcement, protestors at one demonstration called on the U.S. military to intervene. Jimmy Lai, publisher of the *Apple Daily*, who recently was arrested and charged with participating in illegal demonstrations last year, urged President Donald Trump to save Hong Kong.

Unfortunately, there is little Washington can do. And the more Hong Kongers press for outside interference, the greater the likelihood the People's Republic of China (PRC) will enter faster and more firmly. Indeed, opposition missteps—understandable and well-intentioned, but serious mistakes nonetheless—accelerated the destruction of Hong Kong's autonomy.

First, military action is a nonstarter. The U.S. will not go to war, nor threaten to go to war, against a nuclear-armed power on the Asian mainland over that government's human rights violations in territory universally acknowledged to be legally under its control. Nor should Washington do so. Full stop.

Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union slaughtered millions. The U.S. did not start World War III over the issue. Mao Zedong's China slaughtered millions. Washington did not start World War III to stop the Chinese Community Party then.

Pol Pot slaughtered millions. Washington did not invade Cambodia/Kampuchea. Countries as diverse as North Korea and Eritrea established hellish dictatorships. Washington did not bomb or invade them. Horrendous conflicts and civil wars have dotted the globe: Sudan, Liberia, Burundi, Turkey, Rwanda, Syria, Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo. Washington did little-to-nothing in them.

Despite its often soaring rhetoric about freedom, the U.S. government's chief responsibility, and thus the appropriate focus of its foreign and military policy, is to protect America, its people,

territory, and liberties. Washington often does a bad job, creating even greater harm, as in Iraq. But its interventions that purport to be purely humanitarian are few in number—Haiti, Somalia, the Balkans. And none involved serious powers that could defend themselves and threaten retaliation. The PRC would fiercely resist U.S. action. Even an American victory would merely the first round of a conflict bound to play out over years and more likely decades.

Nor does Washington have a political answer for Hong Kong. America's commitment to human rights is inconsistent at best: just ask the oppressed masses under dictators favored by President Donald Trump: Mohammed bin Salman, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Kim Jong-un, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Vladimir Putin, Mohammed bin Zayed, and even, until recently, anyway, Xi Jinping. The U.S. government uses human rights as a cudgel against its adversaries, such as Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela. Otherwise mass repression, including kidnapping and murder, receives short shrift. Remember Jamal Khashoggi?

Moreover, short of war, the U.S. has no way to force even weak governments to change policy. Sanctions usually fail to win compliance with American demands. Especially policies viewed by other governments as vital, essential to maintain authority, enhance power, preserve order, suppress opposition, and deter challenges. Washington has run "maximum pressure" campaigns against Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela. None has yielded. The U.S. applied and continues to apply significant economic pressure on Cuba—after 60 years!—and Russia. Neither has given in. Sudan long was the target of stultifying sanctions, but only a popular uprising last year finally ousted the regime.

For the PRC, a rising nationalistic power, authority over Hong Kong is not a peripheral matter to be bartered away. Indeed, no serious government would willingly surrender such vital or even important interests to a foreign power. Especially Beijing, since reclaiming territory lost during the "century of humiliation" has been a major Chinese priority.

For this reason the belief that the U.S. government might intervene directly in Hong Kong would likely spur a Chinese crackdown. The last thing the Xi government would countenance is direct foreign intervention in what is seen, by the PRC's population as well as government, as an internal affair. If the opposition calls for outsiders to interfere, the regime has an even greater incentive to act quickly, before any such an attempt is made.

Ironically, Hong Kong's best hope is the *threat* of economic retaliation by a broad coalition led by America focused on vital redlines protecting essential liberties, not democracy or independence. Today the U.S. and most countries treat the SAR, and the freedom of its financial system, as very different from the mainland. Instead regulating the territory like the PRC proper would impose severe economic losses on China. The issue is less current production than access to Western capital through Hong Kong, as detailed by a recent study by Hong Kong Watch. Such losses would be painful at any time, but especially after the economic damage done by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The prospect of such economic losses might deter Beijing from putting the SAR under de facto direct rule. The Chinese Communist Party might judge the cost to be too high, the gain to be too little. However, there is no chance that the Xi government would accept either democracy or independence. Doing so would violate the regime's long-term determination to reconstitute historic China. The loss of prestige would be enormous. And the threat of a spreading freedom virus would be too serious. Demanding too much of Beijing ensures losing everything.

Indeed, past overreach cost Hong Kongers dearly. Beijing's intrusions may have been inevitable and in hindsight look inexorable, but the demand for democracy and failure to negotiate for more realistic objectives ensured the failure of the Umbrella Revolution in 2014. Free elections never were going to be and will never be granted by the PRC as presently constituted.

Moreover, the oath-taking contretemps of 2016 unnecessarily attracted Beijing's malign attention, drawing the regime into the territory's electoral affairs and turning democracy advocates into targets. Public contempt even more than resolute opposition was sure to anger the Xi regime, which decided that it had to act. The National People's Congress intervened to set electoral rules and Xi Jinping used his subsequent visits to publicly set a tougher course. Unfortunately, these actions appeared to reflect public as well as elite sentiment in the PRC.

Finally, last year's protests, though courageous, were also chaotic. Forcing the SAR government to suspend the extradition legislation was a notable achievement. Beijing might have been able to accept, however reluctantly, such a setback. However, the demonstrations continued, threatening China's control, creating disorder, trashing the legislative chamber, disrupting the airport, and more. There was no obvious end, since protestors were pursuing seemingly unattainable objectives, namely democracy and independence.

This guaranteed a tougher response. Few governments, even liberal republics, would be willing to accept daily disarray and disruption. The Communist regime proved willing to fill Beijing's streets with blood in 1989 to maintain the party's authoritarian control. A more powerful country under an even more brutal ruler surely is willing to do the same in Hong Kong today.

Of course, the PRC remains to blame for the assault on the territory's rule of law. The opposition's fault is imprudence, understandable but unfortunate. The task today is to salvage as much as possible. The U.S. can help. But not by overt, dramatic intervention which is unrealistic and would force China's hand, ensuring an even tougher and more permanent clampdown.

Hong Kong risks losing what makes it most special, its protection of legal and political liberties. Contrary to the hopes of some residents, Washington does not have the answer. Indeed, the call on America risks triggering an even tougher Chinese reaction. Only a deft game of diplomacy by a united West, threatening realistic penalties focused on the essentials of territorial autonomy, offers any hope for the future.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of several books, including Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World and co-author of The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea.*