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Watching China's Protests: First Do No Harm

Doug Bandow

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Scarcely a month after the People's Republic of China held its party congress and anointed Xi Jinping dictator-for-life, streets across the country filled with protestors. Their anger surged across geography, wealth, and class, fed by continued Covid lockdowns and destruction of normal civic life based on propinquity to someone who might have been in the same room as a person with possible Covid symptoms sometime in the previous several months.

Most ominous for the Chinese Communist Party were demonstrators denouncing dictatorship, Xi, and the CCP, and demanding freedom of expression, democracy, and the rule of law. One Shanghai protestor told the *Economist*: "We want our basic human rights as citizens." Another declared: "The whole system, the whole regime, is not correct." Notable was the role of younger Chinese: "members of China's Generation Z stopped lying flat and joined the protests targeting Covid lockdowns."

Observed Bill Bishop, who writes the well-regarded Sinocism blog:

China has hundreds [of] protests every day around the country, but some of the protests over the last few days have been remarkable for their size, messaging, and geographic and demographic distribution. Perhaps most worrying for the leadership and the security services, for whom "political security" is task number one, are the gatherings at many universities around the country, given the long history of student movements in modern China.

The regime blamed local governments for mishandling Covid and quickly stiffened its police response, occupying protest sites, searching onlookers' phones, sending students home, and detaining demonstrators. The police are tracking down and arresting individual protestors. Today's activists might be surprised by such tactics, since they are too young to remember the 1989 Tiananmen Square killings, which were followed by a national roundup of activists and purge of CCP members.

Still, the Quincy Institute's Michael D. Swaine has that dissatisfaction might again burst forth: "even if the regime weathers this outbreak of protest, the Chinese New Year is coming up in late January, a time in which Chinese traditionally visit their families. If the draconian Zero-COVID policy is still in place at that time, and travel and homecomings are obstructed, it is extremely likely that protests will reemerge in even greater force."

The unexpected eruption discredits the claim that the Chinese people have lost their desire for liberty. The regime has instituted so-called “patriotic education,” invigorated the state censorship machine, and created an internal security apparatus that costs more than external defense. People across China, and especially students—at some 80 universities—turned out to demand what people around the world want: to be allowed to make their own decisions regarding their own future, including that of their families and nations.

Administration officials approached the situation cautiously, as they should. Unfortunately, GOP legislators immediately sought to win political points and called on the Biden administration to do something (unspecified) to support the protestors, as if the president wielded a magic wand. (Similar demands were made to back the ongoing Iranian demonstrations.)

Obviously, the sight of the Chinese people challenging their overseers is wonderful to behold. However, Washington’s influence is minimal. External factors did not spark the protests, which reflected domestic dissatisfaction with the government. Popular anger burst forth despite Beijing’s best efforts to censor and block anything not approved by the CCP. Powerful personal grievances caused people to defy a brutal security apparatus.

Most Americans would like to help, but proposals to intervene are myopic, even reckless. There is little meaningful that Washington can do. Sanctions have increasingly become the U.S. government’s “go-to” response. Alas, personal sanctions—used against officials in Xinjiang and Hong Kong—are almost entirely symbolic. They do not change government policies even if they inconvenience the guilty. Broader economic penalties are more consequential, but still will not end repression that in practice is the foundation of regime security. Indeed, the broader America’s controls and demands, which have expanded dramatically under both the Trump and Biden administrations, the less likely a country such as China will comply.

Of course, Washington can still verbally support the protestors. However, given how sharply the U.S. has regularly criticized the Xi government, if protestors can hear Western criticism today despite the Great Firewall, they have probably heard the same many times before. New U.S. pronouncements are not likely to make the Chinese people want freedom more or take greater risks to overturn Xi’s or the CCP’s rule. America’s example, despite its many flaws, may have helped convince some protestors, and especially students, to reject communism. A statement of support from the often doddering and incoherent Joe Biden isn’t likely to have comparable impact.

Indeed, students I have spoken with, including some hoping to study in America, often bridle at Western criticism of their government. Official U.S. attacks on Beijing might discourage some Chinese who would fear seeming to follow the Biden administration’s lead. They would risk being tarred as unpatriotic by the state and perhaps even their peers. Robert Daly of the Wilson Center warned against lending “credence to Chinese government claims that these tentative, spontaneous demonstrations are the result of a foreign plot.” One need only revisit fevered American foreign policy debates to recognize the potential for demagoguery. For instance, the George W. Bush administration and its backers accused critics of the disastrous invasion of Iraq of being “traitors” and “pro-Saddam Hussein.”

Chinese activists presumably would benefit from technological assistance, such as communications gear, but there is no practical way to distribute such aid, even if the protest movement were organized. A spontaneous eruption is much more difficult to engage, especially by outsiders seeking to evade a pervasive surveillance and enforcement system.

Equally problematic would be the Chinese government's response. Beijing already sees the U.S. as attempting to contain it geographically and prevent it from increasing its influence in the Asia-Pacific. Xi & Co. also see Washington waging economic war, working to wreck or at least degrade the PRC's high-tech industries. And the CCP, like Russia today, fears Western promotion of regime change, mimicking "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine. With some protestors explicitly denouncing Xi and the CCP, Beijing almost certainly would see Biden administration support for the movement as aimed at regime change.

That would likely cause the Chinese leadership to strengthen its domestic response, deploying more resources and displaying less restraint in extirpating mere criticism, let alone opposition. Moreover, an American attempt to meddle in internal PRC politics would discredit any Chinese official who counseled restraint and accommodation to defuse the protests. Indeed, the timing couldn't be worse. Earlier this month Biden and Xi met to reset relations. Less important than their tête-à-tête was the plan to reestablish working groups to address specific policy disagreements and potential crises.

The point is not that U.S.-China relations are likely to greatly improve if administration officials remain silent about the protests. It is that the relationship could crater if Washington seeks to intervene and Xi believes the U.S. is actively seeking to overthrow him. In that case, one could imagine the PRC further limiting economic and cultural ties, hiking arms spending, pursuing a more aggressive policy in the Pacific, and moving toward North Korean-style information controls at home. In today's world keeping ties between Beijing and Washington reasonably stable even if cold is an important objective.

Nevertheless, Americans and others of good will should independently weigh in and encourage Beijing to allow the Chinese people to express their opinions and address their grievances. Best would be to emphasize support for the rights of the Chinese people rather than hostility toward the Chinese government. Individuals and NGOs can communicate this message without degrading official government ties.

Moreover, tech leaders and innovators should work on tools to burrow through the Great Firewall, allowing Chinese to get information uncensored by the CCP. These demonstrations occurred because people learned the truth despite official controls. It is critical that they remain well informed. Tools that help disguise the identity of those online and allow them to communicate with one another also would be useful.

Swaine suggested that Washington add a positive gesture, offering to provide additional Covid vaccines for distribution in the PRC. Americans then would be seeking to help the Chinese people, instead of campaigning against the Chinese government. Beijing might, indeed, likely would, reject the gesture; if so, the regime would suffer a further loss of public confidence in its handling of the pandemic.

For years, the CCP tolerated local protests, which could be met by addressing complaints and sacrificing local scapegoats. Xi's government has been less forgiving and quicker to suppress even distant popular outbursts. The latest eruption unsettling for the Red Emperor and his court.

The regime likely will muddle through the current crisis, making only a few superficial concessions. After all, at the recent party congress, which formalized a return to Maoist dictatorship, Xi insisted "that the party will never change in quality, change its color, or change its flavor." However, many Chinese now have dramatically demonstrated that they don't like the CCP's quality, color, or flavor. The government's failure to address popular grievances, which evidently run deep, makes a future and bigger popular explosion more likely.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.