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Hong Kong and the Limit of U.S. Power

Constraining Beijing will not be easy.

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Since China's brutal crackdown in Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region has lost its international sheen. Foreigners are not the only people leaving. The best and brightest intellectual lights and political activists are either in exile or prison. Tens of thousands of others have relocated, including many young professionals who want to be free to speak their minds and parents who want their children to be free from communist indoctrination.

John Lee Ka-chiu, the Chinese-imposed chief executive, has grown concerned about the city-state's global status. With some Western companies leaving, Chinese enterprises are playing a larger economic role in Hong Kong. In response, Lee has "launched a campaign to convince the world that despite Covid-19 and a brutal security crackdown, the Chinese territory is not only open for business but remains Asia's premier financial center."

However, propaganda can only go so far. The old Hong Kong is dead. The creeping totalitarianism now consuming the mainland cannot help but exterminate what freedoms remain in the once autonomous territory. And there is nothing the U.S. or West can do to halt, let alone reverse, the process.

Only a few years ago a mass democracy movement dominated Hong Kong. The local government withdrew unpopular legislation allowing extradition to China after millions of people took to the streets. Protestors then pushed for the unthinkable: a democratic system. It was a dramatic challenge to Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party. They responded with brutal efficiency. In 2020 Xi Jinping's government secretly drafted and then ruthlessly administered a new "National Security Law." The measure criminalized common criticism as well as active opposition, shutting down dissent as completely as in the mainland.

Today nothing remains of the city-state's once vibrant intellectual and political life. Activists have fled or been jailed; NGOs have shut or been closed; teachers have been cowed or fired; publications have promoted the (literal) party line or been suppressed. Going silent was not sufficient, since the Chinese Communist Party has a long memory. Hong Kong has essentially become just another Chinese city with a similar dearth of political and civil liberties.

Yet, on the CCP's behalf, local Gauleiter Lee continues to squeeze his people ever harder. In recent days his regime has prosecuted past regime critics—including those who sold pro-democracy books, searched public records, held political primaries, and organized Tiananmen Square vigils. Last month, Lee's minions arrested a Hong Kong student who had criticized the

CCP on social media while studying in Japan. Beijing is sparing no expense to protect Hong Kongers, wherever located, from learning adverse facts, debating forbidden subjects, and exercising personal freedom.

The U.S. and allied response to China has been an almost complete failure. What lessons should the West learn from its Hong Kong experience?

Some activists blame the West for their plight. For instance, Nathan Law, who fled shortly before passage of the NSL and has since been charged with its violation, criticized allied policy. Law suggested that Western timidity was the cause for Hong Kong's loss of liberty: "Maybe some of you are afraid of upsetting General Secretary Xi. Maybe some of you don't want to lose the Chinese market. Maybe some of you don't recognize the threat to our democratic values. And that is the reason why we failed." Law also complained that "for too long, the world has embraced the rise of China without developing mechanisms to hold it accountable" and insisted that "we must leverage all we have to ensure that democratic revival is our top priority."

Yet Law overestimates Western influence. In fact, there never was much friendly governments could do to aid demonstrators. The territory's experience offers a sobering reminder of the limits of even U.S. power to force political change in other nations. However desirable it would be to influence internal Chinese policies, doing so is enormously difficult, indeed, essentially impossible.

There was no shortage of Western commentary about the NSL and its malign impact on the Hong Kong people. Lacking was any effective means to coerce Beijing. Moral suasion and diplomacy are useful instruments for achieving many international objectives, but not in dissuading governments from asserting control over their own territory.

Beijing's reputation took a hit from the crackdown, but no more than from the regime's other systemic violations of human rights, like in Xinjiang. Never mind the transfer agreement with London; legally, the territory is Chinese. "The national security legislation for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is purely a matter of China's internal affairs and no foreign country has the right to interfere," declared the Chinese foreign ministry in May 2020.

The U.S. tried sanctions. Based on preexisting law, Washington adjusted tariffs, treating the SAR like the mainland. But additional economic penalties on Hong Kong would have mostly affected its people, with minimal impact on the Beijing government. So Washington targeted personal miscreants, such as Lam and Lee. Their resulting inconveniences triggered abundant, well-deserved schadenfreude, but this tactic had no impact on Chinese policy toward Hong Kong.

The U.S. could have imposed sanctions on the larger Chinese economy, but the problems with that tactic were fourfold.

First, Washington would not have been backed by fellow democracies, let alone the rest of the world. There is great resistance in Asia and Europe to U.S. demands to isolate China and decouple from its economy. Witness the recent visits to the PRC by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (in November) and French President Emmanuel Macron (earlier this month), both with business executives in tow.

Second, even heavy economic penalties rarely convince governments to yield on core policies. For Beijing, repression is a tool of regime survival; political stability is a vital interest. The rising

totalitarian power has little reason to yield. In this case, foreign assaults on CCP governance are more likely to unite than divide the ruling regime.

Third, the PRC's many violations of human rights make it difficult to single out Hong Kong. What was done to the territory was terrible, but not worse than the mistreatment of Uyghurs or the persecution of religious believers. However, sanctioning Beijing for essentially not being a democracy would simply make it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a passable relationship with China on other important issues.

Fourth, the very effectiveness of the protest movement guaranteed its destruction. Hong Kong activists essentially made the SAR ungovernable. Had they only been facing the local authorities, they would have won. But protestors were actually confronting Beijing.

Until the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the Chinese government largely left Hong Kong alone. Protestors then brought part of the city and government to a standstill while demanding what the PRC could never grant: genuine democracy.

In 2016 several democratic candidates, including Law, were elected to the Hong Kong Legislative Council. They altered their oaths to insult China, which caused Beijing to intervene, tossing them from the body and setting new electoral restrictions.

Finally, mass demonstrations against extradition legislation introduced by Lam in 2019 continued even after she withdrew the measure, demanding her resignation and democracy in Hong Kong. The SAR's future as a commercial hub appeared to be in doubt. Perhaps worst of all in Beijing's view, Hong Kongers waved U.S. flags at rallies, seeking Washington's support. This was anathema to the Chinese leadership. (Imagine how most Americans would react to demonstrators here seeking Beijing's intervention.)

The PRC had to decide: grant democracy, which was inconceivable; allow continued chaos, which was unacceptable; or destroy the democracy movement, which was preferable. Hence, the NSL and ensuing crackdown. The threat posed by the territory's democrats to CCP control accelerated Hong Kong's demise.

Of course, none of these factors justify Beijing's savage repression. However, Hong Kong's experience cautions against imagining that Washington could have prevented the tragic evisceration of liberties or can reverse the process. The CCP has a vital interest in maintaining control.

The West still can help, however. For example, the Biden administration recently extended and expanded the Deferred Enforced Departure program for those who left the territory. Lee's government responded by accusing America of "demonstrating sinister intentions and hegemonic bullying" by protecting those who fled its jurisdiction. Washington could announce permanent protection for fleeing Hong Kongers.

Moreover, the U.S. and other states should respond strongly to Chinese overreach within *their* borders. Meddling in other nations' political processes, harassing dissidents and emigres, monitoring and threatening Chinese students, committing traditional and cyber espionage, and more require action, preferably multilateral. Here, America's and its allies' interests are vital.

Similarly, territorial threats and economic coercion can be influenced through deterrence and retaliation in cooperation with friendly states, which should do much more on their own behalf. Constraining Beijing will not be easy: For instance, Taiwan is a matter of both security and nationalism for the PRC and would be difficult for America to defend. Nor is doing so necessarily worth the cost and risk to the U.S. Nevertheless, Taipei could better arm itself and demonstrate its will to fight, discouraging Chinese aggression.

Hong Kong's sad fate was not the West's fault. However, the destruction of liberty there offers important lessons. Most important is the need to recognize the difficulty of forcing any change in domestic Chinese policy. Retaining political control comes before everything else for the CCP. America and other democratic states should focus on defending their societies from PRC threats.

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