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Democracy in Hong Kong? Only Over Beijing's Dead Body -- But Hopefully Not Over The Demonstrators' Bodies

By Doug Bandow

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Hong Kong is part of China, but enjoys a charmed existence. Administered separately from the rest of the People's Republic of China, the territory respects civil liberties while hosting the world's freest economy. But democratic Hong Kong is not.

Demonstrators are pressing Beijing to make good on its promise to Great Britain to provide what London never did while the territory was a British colony: democratic rule and free elections. But the PRC will not, indeed, cannot, give residents of Hong Kong what it refuses to give the rest of its citizens. The city's future depends on finding a compromise that preserves Hong Kong's freedom and peace.

The British colony grew out of Imperial China's weakness. As the empire fell from dominance to irrelevance Great Britain seized territory. Portugal did the same with Macau, a short distance away.

Britain's imperialist land grab redounded to the benefit of Hong Kong's residents. China was badly ruled even while independent. The country suffered through foreign intervention, revolution, war lords, Japanese invasion, civil war, and Communist control. In contrast, people in Hong Kong prospered, enjoying economic liberty, rule of law, and civil liberties. All they had to sacrifice was democracy, which they wouldn't have had in China, and certainly not under the PRC.

Alas, all good things come to an end, at least when it comes to foreign policy. Great Britain took three bites at the apple: it seized Hong Kong Island, then the Kowloon Peninsula, and later "leased" the New Territories. In 1997 the latter's 99-year term ran out. At which point Beijing was legally entitled to take back the New Territories.

Dividing Hong Kong would have been a practical nightmare. And Beijing might not have continued to honor territorial cessions forced more than a century before. So in 1984 Britain's famed Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, agreed to the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which committed her government to the full territory's return.

The transfer left one of history's great "What ifs"? What if Prime Minister Thatcher announced that even though the initial land grab was unjust, the result was a unique political community independent of the PRC? The territory never had been subject to the mainland's communist government, two revolutions away from the imperial court which yielded Hong Kong to London. What if the Thatcher government went on to explain it was scheduling a referendum in which the territory's residents could freely express their decision: join the PRC, remain British, or become independent?

Few likely would have opted for Beijing. China in 1997 was very different from that ruled by Mao Zedong, who died 21 years before. But the PRC still was a poor, authoritarian state, early in the process of economic reform. None of Hong Kong's residents could remember life under China. Today barely one-fifth of the city's 7.2 million residents even identify as "Chinese."

At the time a still weak and isolated Beijing probably would have felt little choice but to accept an adverse vote. However, such a strategy would have inflamed the PRC's desire to reverse prior injustices. China might have chosen to bide its time, as it has done with Taiwan. Then Hong Kong today would be another fractious, potentially violent, territorial dispute in East Asia.

While returning Hong Kong was Britain's safe course, doing so meant transferring millions of people to communist China. The PRC committed to respect Hong Kong's uniqueness for a half century. So far the denizens of Zhongnanhai have fulfilled their promises. A friend of mine—a lifelong resident who preferred continued British rule and feared the Chinese takeover—reluctantly admitted that Beijing largely had kept its hands off. Indeed, he argued, the British authorities actually were more likely to call a critical journalist. Obviously, there remains cause for concern: for instance, advertising boycotts have punished papers deemed too critical of Beijing. However, the territory still is remarkably free.

The PRC also kept the letter if not the spirit of its agreement regarding Hong Kong's political system. Beijing never promised to hold fully free elections. Rather, the 1984 declaration stated: "The chief executive will be appointed by the Central People's Government on the basis of the results of elections or consultations to be held locally." Thus, even if London could enforce the pact painstakingly negotiated with China, it wouldn't matter.

The Basic Law (essentially the territory's constitution), approved six years later by Beijing, provided for "nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures." The PRC claims that is what it is implementing. As of 2017 residents will be able to elect their ruler, but only from candidates vetted by Beijing. It won't be real democracy, but then, there never was much chance that the Chinese Communist Party would institute real democracy in any area under its control.

That's not fair to Hong Kong's residents. But fairness has little to do with international politics. After all, people living in Hong Kong generally are more prosperous and freer than anyone else in China. The press and internet are not censored. Most anyone can travel to and from Hong Kong. Demonstrators act without fear of a brutal crackdown. So far, at least.

It's impossible not to admire the protestors, who took over much of a central city district. However, the demonstrators' very passion threatens their objective. They have divided over tactics, while paralyzing city life, thereby sparking criticism from some other residents. Even many who sympathize with the protestors fear a crackdown. Pro-Beijing elements responded with violence; the authorities, city and/or Beijing, were suspected of enlisting Triad (criminal) gangs to do the dirty work.

However, the greater risk is that the Chinese leadership, which fears political instability at home, might believe it must choose between repression and either chaos or democracy. To Beijing, Hong Kong is not just Hong Kong, but an element of China's overall security. Violent protests and strikes already are common—numbering in the tens of thousands annually—in the mainland, especially in nearby Guangdong province. Seventeen-year-old Joshua Wong, one of the best known student leaders, said: "We are not seeking revolution. We just want democracy." But it's not clear Beijing sees the difference. In 1989 the CCP sent in tanks to clear democracy-minded demonstrators out of Tiananmen Square.

Beijing would pay an even higher price for cracking down in Hong Kong. With unfettered media and internet freedom, any bloodshed would be transmitted around the world. Business and capital would flee. Repression would undercut Beijing's attempt to conciliate Taiwan. Still, Hong Kong matters far less economically to the PRC today than in 1997. And the CCP places self-preservation above everything else.

Moreover, if China violently dispersed the protestors, it would not likely stop there. Media freedom and judicial independence also would be at risk. Under Britain Hong Kong illustrated how liberty could exist without democracy. The PRC would not hesitate to highlight how destroying liberty could prevent democracy. It would be foolhardy for demonstrators to risk the territory's uniqueness in a Quixotic attempt to force Beijing to accept in Hong Kong what it used force to suppress in the rest of China.

This week crowds thinned and demonstrators cleared a path for government workers. The tension further eased as demonstrators and government officials agreed to talks. Democracy advocates should temper their idealism with an acute sense of pragmatism. Beijing might sacrifice the territory's chief executive, Leung Chun-ying, to gain peace. Zhongnanhai also might be willing to make other concessions, such as broadening the nomination process, so long as it retained ultimate control. Indeed, public protests in 2003 and 2012, respectively, caused the PRC to back down on proposals to enact an authoritarian "security" law and mandate "patriotic" education. But those were peripheral issues compared to democracy in a territory governed by Beijing. The PRC will insist that Chinese officials, not Hong Kong residents, be in charge.

Nothing the U.S. does can bring democracy to the territory. To the contrary, the more Washington attempts to intervene, the more likely China is to believe the demonstrators to be threats. Beijing has blamed the protests on Western "meddling." Moreover, Zhongnanhai's residents already perceive the U.S. to be engaged in an attempt to contain the PRC, for instance supporting Japan and the Philippines in their territorial disputes. Beijing would treat as more provocative American intervention in what even U.S. officials acknowledge to be part of China. Washington should privately warn Beijing that a violent crackdown would damage the PRC economically, diplomatically, and politically. But U.S. officials should

not try to dictate any particular electoral system, especially publicly. Doing so would make compromise in Hong Kong even more difficult to reach.

The demonstrators have moral right on their side. They understandably worry that that lack of democratic rights places their other liberties at risk. And whatever happens they have changed the territory. Observed billionaire publisher Jimmy Lai, residents formerly were like diners forced to eat anything served by Beijing, but “Now they are all in the kitchen cooking for themselves.” The people of Hong Kong deserve the world’s admiration and support.

Still, raw power is likely to prevail in any showdown. “One nation, two systems,” obviously can mean different things, but even without democracy Hong Kong residents enjoy significant liberty. Beijing might pay a price to peacefully end the protests which have convulsed the city. But Chinese officials almost certainly would pay a much higher price to avoid chaos or democracy. The protestors must not allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good for their own sake—and ultimately that of Hong Kong and China as well.

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