

Is China testing how far it can go?

Written by Palden Sonam
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China seems to be testing the reaction of the international community if it were to repeat another Tiananmen-like massacre in Hong Kong.

However, before getting there, it is important to review what has been going on in the past weeks and to identify some of changes that have taken place in the territory's pro-democracy movement.

The ongoing political crisis in Hong Kong has been growing in multiple ways since it started with protests against a proposed extradition bill that was formally rescinded on Wednesday.

First, its scope has increased as protesters' demands include not only the complete withdrawal of the controversial bill, but also the resignation of Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥); an independent investigation into police violence; exoneration of those already arrested; and universal suffrage for all Hong Kong residents.

The current protests have resurrected the 2014 "Umbrella movement" and its leaders, such as Joshua Wong (黃之鋒).

Second, the number of people joining the protests is steadily increasing, with the highest attendance hitting a record 1.7 million people. In addition to the growing numbers, the diversity of people joining the movement has also expanded to include students, teachers, lawyers and even civil servants — the latter to the embarrassment of the authorities.

Giving the huge number of people participating in the marches without organized leadership, the rallies are by and large peaceful and orderly.

However, there have also been several cases of physical confrontations with the police. Most of the clashes with the police appear to be a defensive reaction rather than an offensive strategy. Aug. 25 turned more violent due to the actions of a small group of protesters who broke away from the main approved rally and threw Molotov cocktails at police.

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In retaliation, the police used water cannons against protesters — for the first time in the past 12 weeks. Could that be an indicator that violence will escalate in the coming days?

Third, the crisis is getting internationalized as more and more governments remind Hong Kong authorities to exercise restraint in response to attacks on the police.

During a telephone conversation with Lam, the UK condemned the violence from all sides and called for a probe into the violence, while emphasizing Hong Kongers' right to protest.

The EU and Canada also called for restraint and to respect the “fundamental freedom” of Hong Kongers to assemble.

Despite the elusive and erratic nature of US President Donald Trump's statements, US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's statements have been direct, reminding Lam to end police violence and to grant universal suffrage to Hong Kongers.

China's stern response to international criticism has further added to the global dimension of the Hong Kong issue.

Hong Kong support rallies and Chinese nationalist counterprotests in different cities and campuses around the world have also given more international attention to the issue.

As Hong Kong's protests spread far and wide after the Lam administration failed to lead the territory out of the current political situation, China entered the scene on an offensive note.

Using its huge state propaganda machinery, Beijing produced a massive vilification campaign against the protesters by portraying them as violent rioters, criminals, mobsters, extremists and fanatics to the domestic Chinese audience. This has fomented Chinese nationalistic feeling

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while depicting the protesters as traitors in collusion with foreign powers.

Resorting to nationalist rage demonstrates Beijing's inability to face the Hong Kong challenge in a reasonable and matter-of-fact manner. It is also being used to legitimize a potential Chinese military crackdown in Hong Kong by drowning the whole nation in nationalistic fervor. This denigration is not confined to Chinese audiences.

By exploiting the open public spaces of the free world — especially social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook — China has launched a massive disinformation campaign against the pro-democracy protesters, portraying them as violent rioters.

Both social media giants took down China-run accounts and pages spreading fake news and false information about the Hong Kong protesters. Similarly, Google has taken down 210 channels on YouTube that were engaged in spreading disinformation about the Hong Kong protests.

From Beijing's perspective, the disinformation offensive undermines the legitimacy of the pro-democracy movement and can serve as a pretext for a potentially violent response to the protests. However, this strategy seems to have backfired.

Whether it is the warnings from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) garrison in Hong Kong with a video boasting its strength, the statement from China's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office or the military drills in Shenzhen, China is engaged in a psychological game.

At face value, these stern warnings are intended to strike terror in the minds of the protesters and confuse them. However, there is something more sinister about them.

All these actions and statements signaling the possibility of military action against the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong are being used to test the likely reactions of the international community to such a response.

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It could also be an exercise to desensitize observers to the idea of possible military intervention in the territory before it actually takes place — creating a political and psychological situation suitable to Beijing before it pulls the trigger.

Recently, China has made strong statements about its military resoluteness and the legality of a military solution to the Hong Kong problem. By asserting the correctness of the 1989 massacre of pro-democracy students, the Chinese defense minister even tried to legitimize similar bloodshed in Hong Kong.

How will Hong Kong react to a second Tiananmen? Whatever solution(s) Beijing has in store, any form of excessive force will only create more international sympathy for the protesters.

There is a parallel between the escalation of police violence and the increasing number of people joining the democracy movement. Harsher measures have only swelled the crowds joining the rallies rather than reducing them.

In that context, it is likely that police violence, such as using rubber bullets and tear gas, would bring more support to the protesters' cause. A violent operation involving the PLA or People's Armed Police (China's paramilitary forces) crushing the protesters would bring the whole territory into the streets.

Such a scenario is the last thing Beijing wishes to see.

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