“If we are in a new Cold War, Hong Kong is the new Berlin,” Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong (□□□) said on Sept. 9 at a party hosted by the German-language newspaper Bild.

This analogy is not a new one. At the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Hong Kong was already considered “the Berlin of the East” by British policymakers, including then-prime minister Clement Attlee and foreign secretary Ernest Bevin.

This month marks 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it is an occasion for all who care about the global prospects of democracy — under its new threats — to reflect on how similar and different these two cities are.

Hong Kong has become a strategic frontier between two political prospects — democracy facing down one-party dictatorship — which makes it an analogue to Berlin before 1989. Nevertheless, it is questionable how far the conflict in Hong Kong resembles that which divided Berlin.

Is it a conflict of ideology? The US has long regarded Hong Kong as an outpost driving China’s liberalization. In a speech on Oct. 24, US Vice President Mike Pence emphasized that Hong Kong is an example of what can happen when China embraces liberty.

Correspondingly, China takes advantage of Hong Kong as a gateway to the global market, and thereby exerts its growing influence worldwide. Yet, the ideological exchange is mostly unilateral.

Due to the massive benefits Hong Kong brings the Chinese economy, Beijing has no desire to convert it into a communist territory.

Instead, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party’s first generation decided not to invade the British crown colony in exchange for a long-term utilization of this precious gateway.

This policy continued when Beijing promised “one country, two systems” and granted a special administrative status to Hong Kong after the handover of its sovereignty.

Moreover, after the end of the Mao Zedong (□□□) era, China gradually succumbed to a market economy, so that today it only remains a communist regime in name, and has drifted far away from leading an alternative ideology to the capitalist systems that reign across its borders.

Is Hong Kong then simply dragged into the power struggle between the rivals?

Despite the repetitive warnings from Beijing against any foreign interference in Hong Kong’s affairs, it is an undeniable fact that the international community is a stakeholder in one of the financial capitals of Asia.

However, it is doubtful if sufficient international solidarity has been generated to back Hong Kongers, especially in comparison with the case in Berlin.

During the Cold War, West Berlin was considered the last bastion of freedom against communism, since the widely circulated domino theory had convinced people that its fall would result in the eventual collapse of Western Europe.

According to Gallup polls taken in 1961, an overwhelming majority of US citizens demanded that its military remain steadfast in West Berlin, even at the risk of war.

The mood of solidarity reached its peak when then-US president John F. Kennedy on June 26, 1963, proclaimed “Ich bin ein Berliner” in front of the Schoneberg Town Hall.

In contrast, the protests against totalitarian rule in Hong Kong are not obviously supported by an outside party.

On the one hand, unlike the divided Berlin, the sovereignty of the territory is now tightly held by China alone, hence Beijing's perception that the crisis in Hong Kong is nothing but "internal affairs."

On the other hand, both before and after the outburst of democratic protests in Hong Kong this summer, business brands from "the free world" successively bowed to the Chinese market and vowed loyalty to Beijing — a sign that China appears more as an irresistible trading partner than as a threat to the West.

If the unrest in Hong Kong is not a mere bargaining chip against China, it is also not obvious that the protestors could expect any prompt and persistent intervention from the liberal West.

As a thought experiment, imagine that tomorrow Hong Kong completely loses its autonomy. Would the traditional free world still continue to do business with China? This is an open question.

However, the previous experience of Taiwan already says a lot. If Hong Kongers look for a sincere coalition, the closest allies are from Taiwan, as well as from Tibet and the Uighurs in Xinjiang — the repressed peoples at the edge of the empire.

If a new Cold War has started, we would still have to understand how the new threat from China differs from that of the Soviet Union.

The analogy drawn between the two countries is not made simply out of terminological laziness, as Yale University Cold War specialist Odd Arne Westad has said.

What we see instead are bargaining tables here and there on which Hong Kong is handily traded.

The tragic fate of this orphan territory has not significantly changed since the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, when the future of Hong Kong was settled by the great powers without consulting its residents.

Today, the violence at the edge of the Chinese empire is escalating at an alarming pace.

The time — at the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall — has come for raising our alertness to any novel and probably more penetrating form of totalitarianism.

Wir fur Hongkong is a group of Hong Kongers in Germany, volunteering to support the democratic movement in Hong Kong.

Source: Taipei Times - Editorials 2019/11/22