



Chinese strongman Xi Jinping (习近平) hasn't had a very good spring, either economically or politically. Not that long ago, he seemed to be riding high. The PRC economy had been on a long winning streak of more than six percent annual growth, catapulting the world's most populous nation into the second-largest power, behind only the United States. Hundreds of millions had been brought out of poverty. Beijing's military too had emerged as the most powerful in Asia, lagging only behind the US, the long-time leader on the global stage.

One can attribute much of the recent downturn to the international economic slump, triggered by the sudden onslaught of the worst global pandemic in over a century. But other factors are at work as well. Xi's dictatorial instincts have placed a real cramp on political life in China. He has systematically reduced the power of any presumed rivals, while using 21st century technology to impose a medieval style of one-man rule over 1.4 billion subjects. To top it off, he has announced his intention to eliminate term limits and become a self-styled ruler for life, echoing the unfortunate example of the PRC's first leader, Mao Zedong (毛泽东).

Perhaps even more alarming, Emperor Xi has in recent months ratcheted up the pressure on free and democratic Taiwan to accept the return to the "motherland" on Beijing's terms. Xi is certainly frustrated by the eclipse of KMT rule in Taiwan, which had once hinted at a more subservient place for the island under Ma Ying-jeou (马英九). Now having gained a second term in office with a resounding electoral victory this past January, DPP President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) is turning aside the hollow promises of her mainland counterpart, focusing instead on strengthening Taiwan's economic and political freedom.

With a solid legislative majority, Madame Tsai also enjoys robust American support for her country's autonomy. Washington has maintained its implicit pledge to support Taiwan's freedom through all available means. This has been made explicit in the sale of tens of billions of dollars of military equipment, including more modern fighter aircraft, submarines, tanks, missiles — and the training to use them effectively. Behind all this — and including longtime support from a stout majority in the US Congress — remains the implicit pledge by the United States to use all means to prevent any attempt to threaten or attack the island.

Xi is not content with saddling his own people with a throwback political system, that ended with Mao's death over forty years ago. He has now turned to Hong Kong, the uniquely open Chinese commercial center inherited from Great Britain just 23 years ago. Let us recall that Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) had famously pledged in a bilateral treaty reached with Great Britain's Margaret Thatcher in 1984 to accord Hong Kong — once it returned to formal Chinese sovereignty in 1997 — at least 50 years of “a great deal of autonomy.”

The 1984 deal paved the way for resumed mainland sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997 after 150 years of competent rule by Great Britain. Under its terms, Hong Kong was also promised a path toward true democratic rule for the territory's 7.5 million residents. The people of Hong Kong have taken to the streets in massive but peaceful demonstrations several times over the past twenty years, each time triggered by breaches of promises by China's increasingly authoritarian leadership.

The ascension to power eight years ago by Xi Jinping has only worsened things. Xi, who styles himself a second Mao Zedong, both in power and longevity, has shown increasing impatience with Hong Kong since rising to the top tier of power. Instead of honoring Deng's pledges, Xi has curtailed Hong Kong's ability to move toward democratically elected leadership, while stifling free speech and assembly there.

As best as I can figure, Xi fears that the contagion of free elections in Hong Kong could spread to the mainland itself, despite the draconian police state he presides over there. Having now declared himself ruler for life, Xi may also fear backlash from his own inner circle, since they have effectively been denied the possibility of ever rising to the top as long as Xi still lives.

The world has seen this naked power grab for what it is. From London to Washington, it has reacted with strong admonishments and rhetorical pledges to support Hong Kong's people, though our actual ability to influence events there is limited. True, the outside world can withdraw trade and commercial benefits, and multinational companies can reduce or withdraw their presence from Hong Kong. But the real price to be paid will be by those Hong Kongers who do not enjoy a foreign passport or residency they can flee to in Canada, Australia or the US.

For now, as things continue to play out, Taiwan can only reinforce its longstanding position that

Stephen M. Young On Taiwan: Beijing's disturbing new turn

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the island is a free and democratic state, with no desire to “reunite” with the autocratic regime on the mainland under any foreseeable future scenario. The Trump Administration has been saying all the right things, though the current US president’s transactional politics and unseemly admiration for authoritarian leaders like Mr. Xi and his fellow autocrat Putin make one wonder.

It would be wonderful if the brave stand of the people of Hong Kong could stimulate a greater push within China for a less authoritarian hand in Beijing. But champions of democracy around the world have long been disappointed on this score. In its absence, it is incumbent on free societies around the world to call China out on its authoritarian practices, and in particular its current approach aimed at neutering the freedoms it promised the people of Hong Kong.

As for Taiwan, it must continue to look to its own defense, while maintaining the vibrant democracy and flourishing economy that has gained the admiration of much of the world. President Tsai’s vocal support for Hong Kong, and openness to providing refuge for those who may soon need it, is no less than I would expect. Washington, London, Brussels, Tokyo and the world must stand by Hong Kong, and strive to make the price as high as possible, should Beijing persist in its errant policy.

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