

TIMES OF LONDON
2 September 2019

Hong Kong protests: scenarios that could see Beijing send in the army

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Can China really send troops into Hong Kong?

Hong Kong law clearly states that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) may not interfere in the territory unless requested by the Hong Kong government "in the maintenance of public order".

The fact that Beijing has tolerated three months of tumultuous dissent demonstrates its natural aversion to this solution, but there are undoubtedly red lines, although it will not say exactly where these lie. Significant loss of life of protesters or of police might be a trigger, or massive damage or destruction of property. Sustained attacks on Chinese government offices would be a red rag, as would the injury or death of Chinese citizens. Perhaps the most provocative thing would be the establishment of a serious movement to break away from the authority of China.

If demonstrations began to focus on independence from China, and if significant numbers of Hong Kong politicians supported such demands, the scene would be set for the PLA to come in.

What might the consequences be for Beijing?

It would depend on how the intervention was carried out. After hundreds, possibly thousands, of democracy activists were killed by troops in Tiananmen Square in 1989, China faced international censure and outrage that lasted for years. But three decades later, the country's status as an imminent military and, above all, economic superpower protects it against prolonged international sanctions. Many western governments would voice their appalled disapproval, but whether they would stand united in turning away Chinese business is far from certain.

The Chinese authorities have been transporting Muslim ethnic Uighurs to concentration camps in western China to little more than murmurs and frowns from the international community.

China is more likely to arrest its opponents and impose martial law than massacre them. In such circumstances, it might calculate that it is able to weather any storm of disapproval in the West. The problem is that this would only worsen the central problem: the visceral dislike of the dictatorship of the Communist Party felt by most people in Hong Kong.

How would the British government react? Would Britain offer citizenship to Hong Kongers?

Since handing over its former colony to China in 1997 Britain has established a familiar modus operandi: denouncing, weakly to moderately, any imposition on the democratic and civil rights of Hong Kong people while doing nothing that could seriously jeopardise business with China.

In a Britain convulsed by a political crisis about immigration, among other things, it would be difficult for any party leader to promise citizenship to as many as seven million people, even those as industrious and well educated as the people of Hong Kong.

How might markets react? Would an army intervention affect US-China relations?

In the short term, military intervention in Hong Kong would provoke violent instability on equity and foreign exchange markets and have a negative effect on Chinese growth. In the long term, however, China would remain the second-largest economy in the world, still on track to become the largest of all, and a market for financiers, manufacturers and service providers.

President Trump makes little secret of caring more about US-China trade than democratic rights in Hong Kong but he would come under intense pressure from outraged Republicans, and it is difficult to imagine any kind of deal following soon after a Tiananmen-style crackdown by the PLA.