

TRUMP'S APPEAL IN ASIA

Standing Up to China

LARRY DIAMOND

Those who value democracy in Asia—and even many who don't—are desperate for a counterweight to the rise of a new authoritarian superpower.

f

🐦

G+

✉

🇺🇸

in

Anyone who thinks Donald Trump must be reviled around the world for his bigotry, ignorance, and simplistic hyper-nationalism might be surprised to visit Asia. Here, in eight days of intensive conversations in India, Hong Kong, and now Taiwan, from where I'm writing, I find—as I expect I would encounter in other conversations, from Japan to Singapore—surprisingly frequent gratitude for one simple thing: Finally, there is an American President who is standing up to China.

Briefly set aside the damage that Trump's self-declared trade war may do to many American farmers and to some American manufacturers, if not to the American economy as a whole. Suspend for a moment the natural liberal instinct to assume that people elsewhere around the world who value equality, civility, and the rule of law must be just as appalled by Trump's antics and impulses as so many Americans are. And just view the world through worried Asian eyes.

Look at Southeast Asia, which is living under the growing shadow of Chinese military expansion, economic domination, and political penetration. Look at the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, which have seen their logical (just look at the map) and legal claims to sovereignty over portions of the South China Sea flicked away by a People's Republic of China that is bound and determined to dominate the whole maritime zone, is overfishing it with abandon, and is brazenly creating new militarized islands to create "facts on the sea." Look at India, whose 2,100-mile land border with China remains in dispute, and which sees China projecting its naval power and economic

hegemony deep into the Indian Ocean—most spectacularly, by using the classic neo-colonial method of debt diplomacy to pressure Sri Lanka into granting it a 99-year lease over the strategic port of Hambantota.

Or look at Australia, which has recently woken up to the alarming scope of China’s covert intrusions into its politics, media, and civil society in order to mute Australian criticism of (not to mention resistance to) Beijing’s geopolitical ambitions. In late June, the Australian parliament passed a bill—hailed as “the most significant counter-espionage reforms in Australia since the 1970s”—that strengthens the state’s ability to prosecute covert foreign influence operations in politics and civil society and another that creates an American-style registry of foreign lobbyists.

f

🐦

G+

✉

🌐

in

Australia has been on the front lines of China’s projection of “sharp power,” which uses covert, coercive, and corrupt methods to burrow into the political, civic, and economic life of democracies. But many democrats view Hong Kong as the real canary in the coal mine. Pointing to China’s relentless, multifaceted efforts to penetrate and subvert the politics, media, and organizational life of an open society, a veteran Hong Kong democratic politician warned me, “Our past is your present, and our present is your future.”

The warning was obviously melodramatic; since 1997, Hong Kong has been part of the People’s Republic of China, giving Beijing degrees of access and control well beyond what it can achieve in any sovereign country. But under the terms of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, Beijing committed to a system of “one country, two systems,” in which Hongkongers’ basic “rights and freedoms, including those of the person, of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, . . . [and] of academic research,” would be respected and ensured for at least 50 years after the 1997 handover. It is those basic rights that are under growing pressure as the Beijing authorities threaten and punish freedom of expression.

A critical juncture in Hong Kong’s downward spiral came with Beijing’s 2014 pronouncement—what came to be known as the “31 August Decision”—closing the door on democratic aspirations in Hong Kong. The people of Hong Kong had been waiting since 1997 for the right to choose their chief executive in a reasonably free, fair and open election, and for the right to directly elect all of the seats in their parliament, the

Legislative Council or “LegCo”. Since 1997, they had been stuck with a system in which half of the seats in parliament are filled through more or less narrow “functional constituencies”, and in which the chief executive is chosen not through universal suffrage but by a narrow “selection committee,” dominated by Beijing loyalists.

Article 45 of Hong Kong’s Basic Law—the constitutional document which sets forth the rules of authority in Hong Kong and its relationship to the central government in Beijing—states that “the ultimate aim” of Hong Kong’s political development is “the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures.” Hong Kong’s pan-democrats—who have consistently won a majority of the democratically elected LegCo—believe that article promised a democratic election for executive authority, even if its corollary embrace of “the principle of gradual and orderly progress” required a waiting period.

f

🐦

G+

✉

🌐

in

After Beijing rebuffed their aspirations for democratic change in 2007, claiming Hong Kong was not yet “ready” for democracy, Hongkongers looked to 2017. After all, how could anyone reasonably claim that twenty years after the handover of power, Hong Kong—one of the richest and most highly educated societies in Asia—would not be “ready” for democracy?

When Beijing cavalierly rejected democracy then as well—making, in its 31 August 2014 Decision, a take-it-or-leave-it offer of a chief executive election in which only two or three Beijing-friendly candidates would be allowed to contest—the society erupted. In what came to be known as the Umbrella Movement, tens of thousands of young people and other Hong Kong citizens took to the streets to demand a free election with universal suffrage. For 79 days they occupied key streets and public places, pressing their political demands. But as so often happens in prolonged street demonstrations, the movement split between radical and moderate forces, and the public grew weary of the disruption. Several movement leaders, including youth activists Joshua Wong and Nathan Law and Hong Kong University Law Professor, Benny Tai, were prosecuted. The prison authorities tried to break and humiliate the slender 20-year-old Wong, along with other detainees, but they utterly failed.

Wong and Law, along with Agnes Chow and other student activists, then turned to electoral politics, forming a political party, Demosistō, that advocated for a referendum on Hong Kong's sovereignty after 2047, and electing the 23-year-old Law to the LegCo in 2016. Soon thereafter, however, Law and five other newly elected LegCo members were disqualified for allegedly not taking the oath of office properly and respectfully. In this way, and through numerous other means, Hong Kong's government and the Communist Party authorities in Beijing are trying to whittle down the ranks of opposition in the LegCo, grind down the resolve of Hong Kong's democrats, and bury aspirations for freedom in Hong Kong.

Gradually, Hong Kong's democrats feel the noose of Chinese Communist repression slowly tightening. In late 2015, five staff members of a dissident Hong Kong bookstore went missing, only to surface in China and elsewhere, the apparent victims of abduction and coercion by agents of Chinese authority. The abductions, which, according to the *South China Morning Post*, "raised fears for the city's autonomy and concerns over the potential loss of freedoms," continue to cast a chilling pall over civic life in Hong Kong. Increasingly, academics associated with the democratic cause find their careers threatened and journalists watch with alarm as their media enterprises are acquired by pro-Beijing tycoons.

On Tuesday, Beijing's office in Hong Kong lambasted the Foreign Correspondents Club for hosting a speech that day by Andy Chan, leader of the pro-independence Hong Kong National Party, which the authorities are moving to ban. By continuing its relentless bullying of views it does not like, Xi Jinping's government is only confirming a central theme of Chan's speech: that China's increasingly authoritarian communist party-state now constitutes "a threat to all free peoples in the world."

Democratic forces in Hong Kong are in the eye of the storm, but Taiwan, which is one of Asia's most liberal democracies, has the most to lose. As China's military modernization speeds forward, along with its continuing efforts to deprive Taiwan of the ability to participate in international affairs, there is keen awareness here of the gathering danger. Hence, President Tsai Ing-wen is carefully avoiding provoking the PRC government, at the same time that she increases defense spending and pushes a "Go South" policy to expand trade and

f

🐦

G+

✉

🌐

in

investment with Southeast Asian nations and thereby reduce economic dependence on Beijing. Increasingly, though often discreetly, she is getting a sympathetic reception in the region and beyond. For it is not only Asia's democracies that are alarmed. From Singapore to Vietnam, authoritarian regimes as well feel their sovereignty under pressure and their national security at risk.

All of this serves to explain Donald Trump's strange appeal in Asia today—even to progressives, gay rights activists, and leftwing intellectuals who would be appalled by his politics in any other context. Those who value democracy in this region—and even many who don't—are desperate for a counterweight to the rise of a new authoritarian superpower, and they know that can only come from the world's other superpower.



Published on: August 17, 2018



Larry Diamond is senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. He coordinates the democracy program of the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) within the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI).

