

Hong Kong's student protests scare Beijing

✘ Some have described it a “Little Tiananmen” but the leaders of ‘Occupy Central’ have a clearer notion of what they want to achieve than their Chinese cousins in 1989. This is because, unlike the citizens of the People’s Republic of China, the inhabitants of Honk Kong know what freedom, democracy, and rule of Law mean. This means that they are prepared to endure any sacrifice to convince Beijing to listen to their demands. Predictably, nobody in Beijing is going to listen, much less go along with them. The protests intensified over the past weekend and they have waned somewhat on Monday; however, the movement will not be dissolved by mere the police’s tear gas. Furthermore, should the protests continue, intensify and lead to the police being forced to using arms, there is no telling what ripple effects it could have in the heart of the Chinese mainland, where social conditions and, paradoxically, the emergence of middle class in the urban areas, might well respond in tune with Hong Kong’s students. Beijing is facing a significant challenge and it will have to address it with finesse.

In 1997, Hong Kong changed status from being a British colony to a Special Administrative Region; the architects of the transformation were UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping. The former colony has always lived with the idea of being special, free and independent. Hong Kong and China have always had a special relationship but the city’s streets have always feared the possibility of a sudden invasion from the mainland. Many Hong Kong residents actually fled in 1997 because they were convinced that Beijing would impose its own political customs to the island, crushing freedom and independence, including through violence if necessary. Well, looking at what’s going on in the streets of

Hong Kong today, with police charging the barricades constructed by the students and their professors, one might call it a delayed reaction. The city-state cannot help but fear the worst, because the situation has the potential for exacerbating out of hand.

Hong Kong will become to all intents and purposes Chinese in 2047; however, the students have taken to the streets now because they fear that China is fully ready to take over now. They have read the signs, which include Beijing's lifting of freedom of the press to the imposition of higher education curricula and the appointment of the gubernatorial candidates, who would be allowed to campaign to run the Island. In other words, the Communist Party will choose who can and cannot run for power in Hong Kong. The 'democratic candidates' will be chosen by the Executive Committee of China, effectively rendering the entire electoral process, pointless. Surely, Beijing has imposed too much too soon even if Hong Kong has lived under the illusion that it could remain "special".

Universal history has taught that when the dialogue degenerates into struggle, it is difficult to keep the situation under control and under reason. The fear is that, with neither side willing to give in, this very difficult confrontation could escalate and do so suddenly. China, however, is acting rationally because it worries that the democratic wind from Hong Kong could easily reach the island of Macao – just a few dozen kilometers away – and then hit the Mainland, threatening the power of the Communist Party itself. The students, for their part, have excellent timing. President Obama and western nations have spoken about democracy and freedom at length throughout the duration of the UN General Assembly over the past week and throughout the Ukrainian crisis that has intensified since last January. Beijing clearly fears the inevitable moral support for the protesters in Hong Kong from the British, the former colonial rulers, and from Washington. The Chinese government has, in fact warned

the United States and other foreign nations, not to interfere in Hong Kong's internal affairs of Hong Kong, stressing that it is a Chinese internal matter. Ignoring the appeals of the Hong Kong and Chinese Government, thousands of people have stayed in the streets to protest. Braving the risk of bursts of tear gas and batons, thousands of protesters continued their protests over the weekend.

The protesters have chosen the umbrella as their symbol, given its ability to protect from the scorching sun and from tear gas such that in social media, the Hong Kong protest has already earned the title of the umbrella revolution". The student protesters also remind observers of 'Occupy Wall Street', the protest movement that began in the United States on September 17, 2011 in an effort to block New York's financial centre. In fact, the students have blocked the financial center of Hong Kong. 'Occupy Central', the name of the Hong Kong protest, has a founder, Benny Tai Yiu-ting, Associate Professor of Law at the University of Hong Kong, who started the civil disobedience movement in January of 2013. Tai Yiu-ting has been careful to keep the protest focused on Hong Kong rather than try to appeal to the West and its regional allies; however, Taiwan has already expressed its support to the people of Hong Kong. Some Taiwanese students have exhibited signs that read "Today, Hong Kong, Taiwan tomorrow", expressing the hope, therefore, that the island of Formosa can finally get rid of Beijing.

The protests in Hong Kong come at a time of tension in the East China Sea with Japan and the South China Sea with Vietnam and other regional powers. However, the repercussions will be more economic than geopolitical at first. Hong Kong serves as the financial link between China and the world. Should the protests turn into a sustained political movement the resulting turmoil will have deep economic repercussions. While the students have expressed concern over freedom, democracy and human rights, Hong Kong's business leaders, care more

about stability and their wealth. They have accused the students of damaging Hong Kong, threatening its wealth. The financial markets have reacted in tune with the business leaders' concerns, as shares took a bearish turn. Ironically, Beijing, which has celebrated China's 'conquest' of Wall Street as Alibaba (NYSE: BABA), amid concerns of lower economic growth, scored the largest ever IPO, will side with the business elite rather than the idealistic students. Karl Marx is surely rolling in the grave. The students can leverage the economic concerns on both sides because a compromise may be the only solution that would ensure business stability and China's long term full absorption of Hong Kong, averting a wider national and international crisis – and its inevitable economic effects.