

The Hong Kong Demonstrators Cannot Win Against Beijing

WASHINGTON – As I look at the developing story of the extremely large Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, my sense is that, despite the huge numbers of people in the streets, the movement lost. It will all be over very soon.

Resist orders from China?

My sense is that Hong Kong is not ready for violent street battles for the sake of democracy. The students know that with their protests they are challenging Beijing's authority, and not just the legitimacy of C. Y. Leung, the Beijing approved Hong Kong Chief Executive.

Indeed everybody in Hong Kong knows that the issue at hand, the decision to have an undemocratic system for "electing" a new Chief Executive, did not originate in Hong Kong. Everybody knows that it was mandated by Beijing.

Beijing will not back off

This being the case, it is theoretically possible, (but extremely unlikely), that the Chinese Communist Party, faced with these unexpected massive street protests in Hong Kong, will accept defeat and back off, allowing genuine elections in the territory.

But it is much more likely that China will not back off. It is likely that the Chinese Communist Party leadership will order a crackdown, even though any use of force in Hong Kong will look very bad, as it will invite comparisons with the June 1989 repression of the mainland pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

Most people in Hong Kong understand that for Beijing

reasserting its authority is much more important than any (most likely temporary) public relations setback.

What will the demonstrators do?

So, here is the dilemma for the protesters. Option one: they will decide to fold, because they know that they are ultimately doomed. Or, option two: they will stand firm, as they believe that Beijing is bluffing, because in the end China does not want to resort to violence, for fear of being blamed for dead people in the streets of Hong Kong.

I suspect that most people believe that when pushed to the brink China will act with all the force that will be necessary in order to assert its authority. Therefore, deep down they know that they have no chance of winning. A strong show of defiance is one thing, risking one's own life to make a point about democratic elections is quite another.

The world does not care

More broadly, while there has been some international sympathy for the young Hong Kong pro-democracy demonstrators, quite frankly I do not believe that the world cares so deeply about the issue of establishing a genuine electoral system in the former British Colony. (Look, the world does not care that much even about Putin grabbing pieces of Ukraine, a sovereign country. I cannot believe that the problem of a non democratic Hong Kong's electoral system inspires more outrage than a Moscow-led insurrection, with thousands of dead people in Eastern Ukraine).

After all, as far as the world knows, the people of Hong Kong have a good life. Since the end of British rule in 1997 China has not interfered with the capitalistic economy. Standards of living are much higher than anywhere else in Asia. The system still allows the enjoyment of basic freedoms.

It is true that the electoral system mandated by Beijing is

not democratic, as it would allow only vetted, pro-China candidates to run. This is clearly a sham. But is this really such a big deal?

Law and order better than chaos caused by a just struggle

In the end, what do Hong Kong citizens care the most about, free elections, or law and order, so that they continue to conduct business and make money? I believe that most people will opt for law and order and getting back to business.

Therefore, while some hardliners will probably try to resist and not disband, despite police orders to do so, most Hong Kong demonstrators, having made their point, will fold and go back home.