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Opinion

To end the Hong Kong protests, the Chinese leadership must blink first and offer to negotiate



- In a protracted dispute, the stronger party must initiate negotiations so that the other side does not feel it has been forced to surrender
- By directing the Hong Kong government to offer to start unconditional negotiations, China's leaders can show the world a more nuanced face amid the trade war

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A protestor holds up a poster during a march on June 9 against the Hong Kong government's decision to amend the city's extradition law to allow the transfer of prisoners to mainland China. Since then, the protests have spiralled into violence. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

Democracy is best viewed not as an end point but (when the system works properly) as an ethical method of getting to a better place. Just as there are places without democracy whose people wish they had it, there are democratic countries that wish their democracy were far better.

In this sense, the impeachment hearings in the United States are no less dramatic than the street demonstrations in Hong Kong; they are only superficially bloodless and reveal the heart of the US polity as perhaps as emotionally divided as Hong Kong. The unhappy Hongkonger and the unhappy American have more in common than the news media might reveal.

Hong Kong protesters, who are sincere in their desire for greater democracy in their city, should know that Americans might be more emotionally involved if they were not so agitated about the state of democracy in their own polity.

History throws up heroes as well as villains. The US is now getting a picture of a sector of heroes ordinarily mostly invisible. Last week, US foreign service careerists testified before a Congressional committee looking into accusations that US President Donald Trump froze US military aid to get Ukraine to investigate the family of his potential 2020 election rival Joe Biden. One was a woman who had won State Department honours several times in her 33-year career. Earlier this year she was US ambassador to Ukraine, then one day she was not: US President Donald Trump had pulled the plug on her for reasons shadowy.

This is not quite the same as, say, the torching of a mass-transit station. But it is ugly all the same and an arrow to the heart of a great meritocracy: the US foreign service. If nothing else emerges from the Trump impeachment hearings, US taxpayers will have got their money's worth if they gain an appreciation of the special quality of our diplomats. By proud tradition, they are the last to give up on a peace process, and so the sight of their reputations being tainted by grandstanding politicians made me want to go out and torch a mass-transit station myself – I am almost not exaggerating.

By contrast, the heroes of the Hong Kong stand-off would be – for most people – the protesters who do not burn anyone or make bombs or shoot arrows at police officers. But good people are being used by self-absorbed radicals putting at risk the moral high ground and global and local support.

If the Hong Kong protests are to continue, the way forward is to follow the path of a Gandhi, not of Godzilla. Protester violence only triggers the natural instinct of the tired but trigger-ready police, armed with a superiority complex and more advanced weapons. Violence plays into their hands; bullets will fly. This is not a syndrome unique to Hong Kong.

Is Mother China asleep? Leaving aside its indifference to reforms that might have made “one country, two systems” work and look better, especially to Taiwan, Chinese President Xi Jinping's government has skirted direct intervention. Artful dodging to avoid Tiananmen 2.0, or a negligence of governance once the grim direction became clear?

Yes, images of People's Liberation Army soldiers in civilian dress cleaning up streets near their garrison headquarters were a nice public-relations touch while also making a symbolic point: is it necessary to destroy Hong Kong to save it? This crisis requires more than nice gestures; hard decisions must be made.



PLA officers help clear bricks used to block roads outside the Baptist University campus in Kowloon Tong on November 16. Photo: Edmond So

While it is not in the nature of the Communist Party to admit mistakes, now is the time for Beijing to demonstrate historical alertness. The best move would be to permit the Hong Kong government to offer unconditional negotiations on all issues in return for calm and order. This must include offering an expansive measure of suffrage.

The overall stability of China is not at risk, as it was in 1989: this matter concerns but more than 7 million people among 1.4 billion.

For his part, Xi needs to be bold – like Mao Zedong was in inducing then US president Richard Nixon over to China for talks. Without this, tragedy beckons. Hong Kong won't go quietly. Negotiating free of a gridlock always requires one side to make the first move.

On this point, I recall good discussions with Ban Ki-moon, the former United Nations secretary general (2007-2016), surely as unappreciated as was Asia's only other UN secretary general, U Thant (1961 to 1971). In gridlock, Ban would always say, the strongest party to the dispute must make the first move, for otherwise the weaker party would in effect be hoisting the white flag.

In the Hong Kong case, with the West staying out of it, Beijing can trigger the beginning of the end by taking the road of unconditional negotiation. Nothing else will work.

For Americans, this would present the nuanced side of Beijing, whose leader is currently portrayed with hard lines only. An adept move by Xi might even put more international pressure on the US to be reasonable on trade. For certain, it would be a huge boost for Hong Kong.

As the Chinese saying goes, "While drinking water, one should not forget those who dug the well." Decades later, people will remember who provided the stream of clear water that helped cleanse the rivers of blood.

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