

Hong Kong Seeks US Support, and We Must Respond



Human Rights and Democracy Act March to the Consulate

HONG KONG - “If we burn, you burn with us!” is a *Hunger Games* inspired saying of defiance that has become the unofficial anthem throughout Hong Kong’s summer of protests. The emotion and spirit of the millions of Hong Kong people are embodied in this statement, as clashes between pro-democracy protesters and police have become more frequent and chaotic. After a summer of protests, many Hongkongers are now hoping to get America’s support in the movement.

The Chinese Communist Party in Beijing has tried to violate citizen’s rights under the “one country, two systems” framework, and the Hong Kong people are desperately trying to save their city’s autonomy. However, the government has seemingly lost patience and has resorted to intimidation and violence in an attempt to silence protestors. Leading pro-democracy activists and politicians (Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Andy Chan) have been arrested, and Chinese troops have begun assembling at the Hong Kong border. As a large-scale crackdown by the Beijing government looms in the distance, Americans need to take this as a cue to step out from the sidelines and help Hong Kong, while also empowering Hong Kong to help itself.

In June, the world watched as over two million people took to the streets to protest the controversial extradition bill that would allow Hong Kong to detain and transfer suspects to China and be tried under the mainland’s judicial system. Critics of the Bill believed that it would undermine the city’s judicial independence and kill the “one country, two systems” deal that

gives Hong Kong more rights and freedoms than mainland Chinese citizens. This is only one example of the many ways in which China has broken its promise to the Hong Kong people and undermined its trustworthiness to other nations. In 2014, the Beijing government also drew back on their previous commitment of granting universal suffrage to Hong Kong citizens, which sparked the [Umbrella Movement](#) where tens of thousands of Hongkongers peacefully occupied major areas of the city in protest. The government also disqualified pro-democracy Legislative Council lawmakers because of their controversial interpretations of Hong Kong's constitution.

Beijing has backed out of its promises too many times, so it is no surprise that protesters continue to remain skeptical even as Carrie Lam announced the full withdrawal of the extradition bill. [Joshua Wong](#), a Hong Kong pro-democracy activist, believed Lam's announcement was not a "sincere move" and that the Hong Kong and Beijing government "have conceded nothing in fact, and a full-scale clampdown is on the way." He also made a plea to the American government to help Hong Kong by passing the [Human Rights and Democracy Act](#) that would enable the US to impose individual sanctions on Hong Kong and Chinese government officials if they undermine the city's autonomy.

Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) is the co-author of the Act and has been an outspoken advocate for American involvement in Hong Kong. In a recently published [op-ed in *The Washington Post*](#), Rubio argued that we are able to fight back against China precisely because Beijing benefits economically off of Hong Kong's special trading status. America also has a "nuclear" option of revoking Hong Kong's status, which would significantly hurt China's market during the ongoing trade war.

In an attempt to garner more attention from America, Hong Kong protesters held a march to the US Consulate and named it "The Human Rights and Democracy Act Assembly." Thousands showed up at the rally, urging the US president and politicians to help their cause by taking diplomatic action against the city's government.

The march was a powerful and emotional scene to witness, with old and young people alike holding signs that said, "Help free Hong Kong" and "Pass the Human Rights and Democracy Act!" I felt the sentiments of the protesters and sensed the disillusionment that they had with their own government, which made it clear to me why they were seeking help from America. If they cannot trust their own internal institutions, then why not go to a democratic government that has the ability and resources to help? One protester even said, "I don't think the Hong Kong government can do anymore because they have to obey the Chinese Communist Party. America can help us by passing the Human Rights and Democracy Act."

Some analysts argue that America has no business in getting involved with Hong Kong affairs because it seems paradoxical for protesters to support self-determination while calling on a foreign power to help them. While this does seem counterintuitive, we must acknowledge that the Act does not automatically mean that the US is going to preside over all of Hong Kong affairs and only gives us options in how we can respond to potential threats in Hong Kong. As [reported](#) it includes, "protections for visa applicants arrested at protests (Section 4), it seeks to encourage economic cooperation between the US and Hong Kong (Section 3), it promotes the implementation of universal suffrage in Hong Kong (Section 3), and requires the Executive

Branch of the United States to submit a report to Congress outlining those responsible for the Causeway Bay kidnappings in 2015 (Section 7)".

The Act mostly seeks out justice for Hongkongers and benefits those who have been wrongly apprehended and handled by the government. It also gives America the option to impose harsher sanctions and consequences on Beijing if things turn for the worse. President Xi Jinping is likely not going to make any bold moves before the 70th National Day on October 1st, but it is unclear what will happen after, and we should not wait for another Tiananmen Square Massacre to occur. By passing the Act now, we would be sending the Beijing government a strong and clear warning that stricter punishments are on the horizon if they continue to utilize violence and intimidation against Hong Kong.

The Act, undeniably, has many positive aspects that benefit the pro-democracy cause, so it is easy to see why Hong Kong protesters are attracted to it. However, from an American perspective, some might ask how passing it and helping Hong Kong would benefit the US. The answer to this question comes from three main concepts: economic interest, national security, and strategic competition with China.

The US has [significant economic interests](#) in Hong Kong with over 1,300 US firms and 85,000 Americans residing in the city. Hong Kong alone was the 10th largest export market for the US, with a total of \$67.3 billion in goods and services traded with Hong Kong. Therefore, an effort to help the city maintain autonomy benefits America and many Americans' prosperity.

A free Hong Kong is also good for the United States' national security. Hong Kong is a part of America's counterterrorism efforts and helps track and cut off funds for terrorist and criminal organizations. Most notably, Hong Kong serves as a window for outsiders to have a peek into China and enables the West to gather more information and intelligence about their activities. If Hong Kong were to lose its political and judicial independence, then our small window of visibility into China would be cutoff, and our national security could be jeopardized.

Lastly, China has become more authoritative and more powerful over the last decade. Because of this, the US needs a strategic way to undermine China's power, and Hong Kong enables us to do so. By helping Hong Kong gain freedom away from Chinese Communist influence, we would be engaging in a strategic competition with China and showing the international community that the United States has the power to push back against China's global economic and military influence. In 1989, Western powers let China get away with the Tiananmen Square Massacre in hopes that continued economic engagement would create a more democratic China. This strategy, however, was ineffective and America has a chance to learn from the past by passing the Human Rights and Democracy Act.

Helping Hong Kong is mutually beneficial to both Americans and Hongkongers and will empower the Hong Kong people to continue fighting for the universal values that we all cherish. As [Denis Ho](#), a Cantonese pop star and prominent Hong Kong pro-democracy activist said, "This is not a plea for the so-called 'foreign interference'...this is a plea for universal human rights. This is a plea for democracy. This is a plea for the freedom to choose."

America has the freedom to choose, and I hope that we can look back and celebrate our choice to stand on the side of democracy, freedom, and the people of Hong Kong.