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14. ABSTRACT In 1997, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) passed the Basic Law and the United Kingdom transferred Hong Kong sovereignty to China. The Hong Kong Basic Law established the “one country, two systems” construct, designed to protect freedoms of speech and assembly while establishing a goal of universal suffrage by 2047. Tensions between Beijing’s authoritarian government and Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement culminated in 2020 when the CCP passed the National Security Law, effectively crushing Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement and eradicating the freedoms and autonomy established in the Basic Law. Most case studies on Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement center on authoritarianism, hybrid regime categorization, or authoritarian repression tools used to suppress social and political movements. This research paper finds the CCP’s suppression of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement is actually a reflection of the CCP’s ability to reframe the movement into an issue of foreign intervention and sovereignty, the CCP’s deftness in applying all instruments of its national power to address the movement, and the CCP’s assertion of its great power status. This paper’s findings entail implications for national security professionals, as well social and political conflict scholars. This paper urges a more comprehensive approach to studying China in order to avoid further deterioration of democratic dreams across the globe.						
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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: Dreams of Democracy: How a “Modern” China Suppressed Hong Kong Hopes

Author: Major David Ryan Laine, United States Air Force

Thesis: The Communist Party of China suppressed the vibrant Hong Kong pro-democracy movement while still maintaining an aura of prosperity by reframing the movement into an issue of foreign interference and national sovereignty, employing all instruments of its national power, and asserting its great power status.

Discussion: China’s ability to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement confounded American and western observers. Western analysts came to expect authoritarian regimes to rely upon military force to squash social and political movements. China not only avoided the use of military force in suppressing the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, but it did so while continuing to build its influence on the world stage. China successfully reframed the movement by broadcasting a foreign interference and sovereignty narrative. Additionally, China leveraged all of its national instruments of power in concert to suppress the movement while garnering international support. China’s meteoric rise as a great power caused states to turn a blind eye or even support China’s actions in Hong Kong in order to benefit from relations with China. When faced with denunciations and sanctions by the United States and its allies, China relied upon its great power status to build allies and partners of its own, to persevere due to its economic prowess, and to create new international norms of prioritizing “sovereignty” over human rights.

Conclusion: China suppressed the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement by employing all of its national instruments of power in a whole-of-government approach. China took advantage of an opportunity provided by international distraction due to the COVID-19 pandemic to capitalize on domestic goals. United States national security professionals must learn from the case study of China suppressing the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. President Xi and the Communist Party of China have made it clear that they intend to reincorporate Taiwan, using force if necessary. China could look to its success in squashing the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement without using force and without facing a coherent, strong response from the international community in order to refine its Taiwan reincorporation plans. If so, Department of Defense efforts to better posture the force for great power competition, like the United States Marine Corps Force Design 2030 initiative and the Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concept, will be incapable of and irrelevant to deterring China from achieving its goals. The United States, its allies, and its partners must more effectively employ the diplomatic, information, and economic national instruments of power to compete with and deter China from aggressively pursuing its goals at the expense of other states. Only by flipping the “sovereignty” script on China, whereby nations in the Pacific and across the globe care more about their sovereignty than succumbing to China’s pressures, will the United States find success.

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Preface

The American military is in the midst of a significant organizational mindset shift. Its military professionals have been steeped in lessons on counterinsurgencies and counterterrorism following two decades of fighting the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Our nation's top national security concerns are increasingly defined by the return of great power competition with China and Russia. Simultaneously, though, American military professionals find themselves in a world consumed with intense social and political unrest. I devoted my research efforts during Marine Corps Command and Staff College to better understand how China was able to squelch the vibrant pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. In doing so, I aspired to discern the impacts of China's actions in Hong Kong on America's military initiatives during the return to great power competition.

I am grateful for Dr. Claire Metelits's and Dr. Craig Hayden's patient mentorship throughout this research effort. Without their guidance and instruction, I would not have had the foundational understanding of social and political conflict to consider approaching this topic. Additionally, their encouraging support led me to explore an academic area I was initially uncomfortable broaching, while their guidance empowered me to focus my research on a consequential topic that fascinated me.

Introduction

In June 2020, the Communist Party of China (CCP) passed the National Security Law targeting any subversion to the CCP, leading Joshua Wong and other leaders of pro-democracy groups like Demosisto to disband.¹ Of note, the new law included language for extraterritorial action against individuals associated with Hong Kong's pro-democracy movements, resulting in arrest warrants for six individuals abroad, to include one United States citizen.² By November 2020, the CCP had removed four pro-democracy Hong Kong officials from their offices, causing fifteen other pro-democracy officials to step down from their positions in protest, leading one to exclaim that this marked the end of the "one country, two systems" construct.³ The CCP's incredibly swift and effective actions to counter the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement in 2020 left many analysts stunned. During a podcast interview, Axios's China reporter, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, describes the distinct challenge posed by the CCP's version of authoritarianism and its actions regarding the pro-democracy movement:

The Chinese Communist Party's version of authoritarianism challenges American and western perceptions of what authoritarianism looks like. We think [of] Cold War era tanks and barbed wire, but China has learned how to suppress people while still having the appearance of prosperity and modernity. And we don't understand that. We don't know how to expect that or how to stop that. The Chinese government has learned how to effectively crush a vibrant political movement without the use of military force, but it accomplishes the same purpose. And that's what we're not really capable yet of responding to in an effective way.⁴

Allen-Ebrahimian's emphasis on "the appearance of prosperity and modernity" denotes the CCP's ability to squash the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement while still garnering support from the international community, gaining new economic partnerships, and maintaining a largely untarnished reputation as a world power. This confounds Americans and westerners who stereotype authoritarian governments as employing brutal suppression tactics against

movements, presenting a reprehensible image that dissuades nations from associating closely with the authoritarian regime.

How did China effectively crush a vibrant political movement without the use of military force and in a manner where China was able to retain its world prestige? In order to answer this question, this paper examines the existing scholarly understanding of growing authoritarianism in Hong Kong. The paper draws from two lines of inquiry: efforts to categorize Hong Kong's governance as a hybrid regime in order to understand its propensity to act toward political movements in certain ways and efforts to explain the CCP's movement repression playbook. Taken alone and within their silos, neither of these perspectives adequately address the complexity of the situation in Hong Kong. This paper leverages insights from both areas of research and current events to reveal that the CCP suppressed the vibrant Hong Kong pro-democracy movement while still maintaining an aura of prosperity by reframing the movement as an issue of foreign interference and national sovereignty, employing all instruments of its national power, and asserting its great power status.

This paper presents a case study of rising authoritarianism in Hong Kong. It draws on existing scholarly studies of events unfolding in Hong Kong, as well as news reports and other media of current events regarding the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement to answer the research question. The next section of the paper provides historical background on the situation in Hong Kong, followed by an overview of the scholarship on characteristics of Hong Kong governance and key observations from studies on China's political suppression in Hong Kong. The paper then uses the "DIME" framework to analyze the different diplomatic, information, military, and economic instruments of national power used by China to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement.

“DIME” is used for three main reasons. First, “DIME” is a doctrinally preferred term for U.S. military professionals, so it provides a commonly understood structure to organize and evaluate CCP actions. Second, the CCP frames the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement as an issue of foreign interference and national sovereignty. Given this perspective, “DIME” is a useful tool to understand how the CCP employs all instruments of its national power to suppress the political movement. Finally, using the “DIME” framework to understand how the CCP squashed the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement illuminates a critical finding of this paper—the CCP maintained its aura of prosperity while squashing the movement *due to China’s great power status*. According to Dr. Yuval Weber, “Great powers are identified as those states able to impose foreign policy decisions on others and to resist the impositions of others; they are the ‘makers’ of the international order with other states being ‘takers’ of international order.”⁵ This paper’s use of the “DIME” construct illuminates China’s ability to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement while building partners and allies, persevering in its actions despite U.S. and western states’ pressures, maintaining domestic stability, and furthering its economic prosperity. The implications section offers recommendations to American national security professionals and policymakers based on the findings of this research.

Background

When the United Kingdom (UK) transferred Hong Kong to China in 1997, the Basic Law established the “one country, two systems” principle that protected freedom of speech, safeguarded freedom of assembly, and outlined the goal for Hong Kong’s chief executive to be chosen by “universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee.”⁶ These protections and Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy established in the Basic Law were meant to be guaranteed until 2047 under the UK’s agreement with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Since 1997, pro-democracy sentiments in Hong Kong have been

brewing alongside China's meteoric ascension to a great power on the international stage. On several occasions, tensions boiled over between the CCP and the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong due to the CCP's desire to completely reintegrate Hong Kong under its rule.⁷

In 2003, China attempted to introduce anti-subversion legislation to Hong Kong in order to bring Hong Kongers more closely under China's fold. However, Hong Kong pro-democracy activists mobilized over 500,000 protestors who viewed the legislation as an infringement on their rights protected under the Basic Law and successfully deterred the government from passing the bill.⁸ According to Andrew Scobell, the CCP's top strategic priority is to maintain political control and internal stability, and "the CCP feels particularly vulnerable to concepts of democracy and human rights."⁹ Undoubtedly, the 2003 pro-democracy protests rattled the CCP, but if those protests caught the CCP's attention, then the Umbrella Movement in 2014 brought Hong Kong and its pro-democracy movement directly into the CCP's crosshairs.

In 2014, 17-year-old Joshua Wong helped lead a pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong that sought universal suffrage to elect the city's chief executive instead of the proposed system where the CCP would control the nominees on the ballot. In this case, the CCP-backed Hong Kong government deployed police measures including pepper spray and tear gas to suppress the protests, resulting in the protestors using umbrellas to defend themselves. Polarizing images of armed police pitted against protestors with umbrellas bestowed upon the demonstration its Umbrella Movement name. The government's brutal efforts to squash the protest also served to mobilize more Hong Kong residents to the movement's cause and triggered a greater realization of the disparity between the CCP's intent to control Hong Kong and the city residents' desire for more autonomy.¹⁰ The Umbrella Movement failed to generate its desired outcomes of universal

suffrage, but the protest assuredly drew the battle lines for the CCP against the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

From the Umbrella Movement in 2014 through the beginning of 2020, the pro-democracy movement gained momentum at seemingly every turn. Joshua Wong and other movement leaders expanded the movement's repertoire. In June 2019, the pro-democracy movement mobilized an estimated 2 million protestors in opposition to a proposed bill that would enable seamless extraditions of Hong Kong residents to mainland China.¹¹ In November of 2019, President Trump signed a bi-partisan bill entitled the "Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019" signaling American support for the pro-democracy movement and infuriating the CCP.¹²

In January 2020, pro-democracy candidates won the majority in seventeen of the eighteen Hong Kong districts.¹³ Hong Kong district council elections are the city's only elections where officials are chosen in a direct vote and without formal processes for the CCP to control the outcomes.¹⁴ With more than seventy percent of Hong Kong's four million eligible voters turning out for the district elections, the results marked the clearest signal from Hong Kongers that they preferred pro-democracy candidates over candidates aligned to the CCP's authoritarian government.¹⁵ The Hong Kong pro-democracy movement's decades of efforts seemed to be finally gaining tangible successes until the CCP swiftly and unapologetically erased any notion of a future autonomous democracy in Hong Kong in a matter of months.

After passing the Hong Kong National Security Law in June 2020, the CCP continued to take actions to tighten its control over Hong Kong. In December 2020, the CCP charged Hong Kong media Tycoon Jimmy Lai with colluding with foreign powers under the National Security Law.¹⁶ Lai is Hong Kong's most vocal pro-democracy elite, and the CCP consistently portrays

him as an agent of the United States to advance its foreign interference and national sovereignty narrative to domestic China, Hong Kong, and international audiences.¹⁷

In January 2021, the CCP arrested and charged over fifty pro-democracy movement actors under the National Security Law. This prompted U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to state the CCP had “broken promises to the world about Hong Kong’s autonomy and democratic rights,” while UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab asserted that the law is “being used to eliminate political dissent rather than restore order – contrary to what the Chinese government promised.”¹⁸ On the heels of these arrests, the CCP passed another piece of legislation in March 2021 empowering the CCP to vet and ensure all Hong Kong legislative candidates are pro-Beijing “patriots.”¹⁹ Following questions on how the new legislation appeared distinctly undemocratic, a prominent pro-Beijing Hong Kong government official retorted “a democratic system has no intrinsic value unless it can deliver good outcomes...we have had twenty-three years of experiments with democracy, the outcomes are far from satisfactory.”²⁰ Likewise, when pressed on the new legislation, the Chinese embassy in London declared China and the UK have “different definitions” of democracy.²¹ In the “Democracy Index 2020,” Hong Kong fell twelve spots and was downgraded from a “flawed democracy” to a “hybrid regime” due to the passing of the National Security Law.²² After the rash of arrests in 2020-2021 and the latest CCP “patriot” legislation, Hong Kong’s democracy rating will likely continue to plummet and land in the “authoritarian” category in future indexes.

Existing Literature

The majority of studies on the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement focus on one of two fields. First, social scientists focus extensively on the relationships between democracy and authoritarianism. Comparative political scientists evaluate Hong Kong’s regime type because of

the idiosyncrasies resulting from CCP supervision interwoven with guarantees of autonomy in the 1997 Basic Law. Given this construct, most studies consider Hong Kong a hybrid regime because it encompasses both democratic and authoritarian characteristics of governance.²³ Second, numerous studies focus on China's particular tools of repression to squash the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. This paper refers to China's collection of repression tools as "the playbook." Neither studies on comparative political science nor studies on China's repression playbook present compelling arguments for China's ability to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement *while maintaining an aura of prosperity*. Instead, this paper reveals the necessity to view China's suppression of the movement through the lens of China's great power assertion.

Classifying Hybrid Regimes

While the study of authoritarianism and democracy has produced a vast field of literature, the analysis of pseudo-democracies – regimes that lie somewhere between these two types – has burgeoned since the 1990s. The competitive authoritarian regime subtype provides one of the more nuanced understandings of hybrid regimes and their ability to repress social movements in order to maintain internal political stability.²⁴ Levitsky and Way find that moments of intense democratic contestation result in contradictions that are inherent in competitive authoritarianism. This forces autocratic leaders to choose between violating democratic norms at the cost of international condemnation and domestic conflict, and permitting challenges to their rule to proceed at the risk of being defeated.²⁵ Other scholars note similar characteristics of hybrid regimes as those interested in projecting the appearance of a democracy while taking actions to prevent opposition political movements from gaining enough traction to endanger the regime's stability.²⁶

Regime Behavior

Some scholars focus their study of hybrid regimes on the regime's policies and behavior. Some address repertoires within repression. Rebecca MacKinnon, for example, identifies repression in the information environment, which she labels "networked authoritarianism."²⁷ In a networked authoritarian state, the government monitors, censors, and manipulates the information environment to shape the narrative in its favor, identify and jail actors who voice opposition to the government, and suppress actors' abilities to use digital platforms to organize opposition movements.²⁸ The work on networked authoritarianism provides specific insight into the ways in which the CCP suppresses pro-democracy efforts.

Building on the works of Tilly (1978), Franklin (2009), and Cai (2010),²⁹ Samson Yuen and Edmund Cheng claim that "tolerance" should not be considered a lack of government action. Rather, "tolerance" can include a government's adherence to one response to a movement, what they call "attrition."³⁰ Zeynep Tufekci, in examining responses to pro-democracy movements, refers to government response as "tactical patience."³¹ By outlasting protestors, then, one can understand why hybrid regimes tolerate some street occupations. Rather than fighting the protestors, governments can eliminate political opportunities by fostering elite cohesion, increasing the costs of participation, and bolstering legitimacy by using the judicial system.³² In the study of the CCP, this helps understand the type of responses to political movements in Hong Kong.

Some of the more compelling work on hybrid regimes and their management of anti-government movements examines the fluidity of both these groups and the government.³³ The preponderance and most persuasive research focuses on the increased use of governance, administration, and legal action to quell the pro-democracy movements. Stephan Ortmann, for

example, describes how the CCP changed laws to ensure that Hong Kong's chief executive would be closely aligned with the Chinese government.³⁴ By ensuring CCP officials – and not Hong Kong officials – remain the de facto law-making body for Hong Kong, the CCP strengthens its one country two systems agenda.³⁵ Even though Ortmann published his research in 2016, it was clear to Sinologists and pro-democracy actors that the CCP could one day exert legislation and enforce something like the National Security Law, crippling the pro-democracy political movement.

The Study of Authoritarianism and Hong Kong

Researchers of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement establish a foundational understanding about the Hong Kong government regime type to better understand the government's actions regarding the political movement. Most of the research on the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement over the last two decades centers on hybrid regimes due to the peculiar construct of its governance and CCP oversight. Some studies evaluate the Hong Kong government and CCP's actions toward the pro-democracy movement after the Umbrella Movement to discern changes in government repression following the rise in "localism." Notably, Ying-ho Kwong identifies that the CCP initially tolerated some pro-democracy efforts but harshly suppressed movement actions that espoused Hong Kong self-determination, a CCP red line.³⁶ Since 2019, the CCP broadened its claim to paint all Hong Kong pro-democracy movements as "localists" or separatists, thereby creating opportunities for the CCP to reinforce its sovereignty narrative and the CCP's necessity to restore order. Kwong's Hong Kong case study reconfirms previous hybrid regime research that identified the key to a hybrid regime's longevity rests in its internal political cohesion and the regime's ability to diminish pro-democracy movements.³⁷

Other studies focus on authoritarian “playbooks” to counter movements. Some, for example, emphasize the increase in counter-movement framing and mobilization efforts on the part of governments.³⁸ A variety of scholars describe the CCP’s use of force, to include tear gas, as one of the moves in the CCP playbook. Ortmann describes the impact of Beijing maneuvers that increased the Hong Kong economy’s reliance upon its ties to Beijing as a repression play by incentivizing Hong Kong business elites to favor the CCP over pro-democracy movements.³⁹ While the CCP certainly employs the above plays, these particular moves seemed to have less correlation to the CCP’s actions that put the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement on such a dire course in 2020.

A prominent subset of the literature over the past decade on the CCP playbook is what MacKinnon coins “networked authoritarianism.” MacKinnon outlines the CCP’s employment of the “fifty-cent party” to promulgate pro-CCP narratives online, as well as the CCP’s use of censorship, offensive cyber actions, device and network controls, domain-name controls, localized internet restrictions or disruptions, and surveillance as plays within the CCP authoritarian playbook.⁴⁰ Tufekci supplements this research by identifying the CCP “strategy for managing the internet is also centered on a deep understanding of the importance of attention and capacity to movements, rather than merely blocking information.”⁴¹ In “How ‘Networked Authoritarianism’ was Operationalized in China: methods and procedures of public opinion control,” Wen-Hsuan Tsai asserts that the CCP mastered “networked authoritarianism” to control public opinion and strengthen its authoritarian grip on every aspect of Chinese life.⁴² Evidence from 2019-2020 news reports reveals that the CCP continues to leverage its “networked authoritarianism” plays in its suppression of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement.

There is tremendous value in understanding Hong Kong's regime type and the CCP's counter-movement playbook. The existing literature, though, fails to answer how the CCP was able to suppress the vibrant pro-democracy movement while still presenting the appearance of prosperity and modernity. Glaringly absent from existing literature is scholarly dialogue on the interconnectedness of the geo-political context and China's actions in the international arena interwoven with the CCP's ability to squash the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. Understanding this interconnectedness between regime type, political movement suppression, and the geo-political context of a great power is critical for three reasons. First, gaining a better appreciation of the nexus between the CCP's actions to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement and the CCP's actions on the international stage postures American national security leaders to better understand and anticipate the CCP's actions as China's great power status grows. Additionally, research on the convergence of the CCP's actions on the international stage and its actions to squash the pro-democracy movement contributes to the existing comparative political science literature. In particular, this paper highlights the importance of studying a regime's suppression of political movements in the context of the regime's geo-political actions. Finally, this case study offers a more nuanced understanding of hybrid regimes in general and indicators that those regimes can backslide into authoritarian regimes.

In order to fill the gap in existing literature and evaluate how the CCP has been able to dash Hong Kong's dreams of democracy while presenting an aura of modernity, the next section outlines CCP counter-movement actions through different national instruments of statecraft. CCP actions are organized using the "DIME" acronym for national instruments of power to reveal how the CCP exerted its diplomatic, information, military, and economic power to squash the movement. Through the "DIME" framework, the key to China's ability to dismantle Hong

Kong's dreams of democracy becomes clear – China's ascension to a great power status empowers the CCP to squash the movement while maintaining the aura of prosperity.

National Instruments of Power

The CCP uses all means of its national power to maintain internal stability and to present an image of modernity internationally while suppressing the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. This section of the paper uses the doctrinally preferred “DIME” acronym to convey CCP actions against the movement.⁴³ The purpose of organizing this section using the “DIME” acronym is threefold.

First, the acronym provides a commonly known framework among national security professionals to help categorize CCP actions. Second, the “DIME” acronym is used to convey a broader finding of this research paper. The CCP uses many tools at its disposal to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, but the CCP employs each of these tools in what American national security professionals call a “whole of government approach” to squash the movement. Finally, using “DIME” is significant for the Hong Kong pro-democracy case study. “DIME” is traditionally used to describe a state's employment of national instruments of power in an international context. In the case of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, the use of the “DIME” framework is appropriate given the CCP's assertion that any notion of Hong Kong independence, sovereignty, or governance outside the will of the CCP constitutes a foreign threat.

This paper identifies three primary findings by using “DIME” to assess China's actions against the pro-democracy movement that previous studies focused on Hong Kong's hybrid regime and the CCP repression playbook failed to recognize. First, the CCP's symbiotic nature of its domestic and international actions improves its ability to propagate its narrative that Hong

Kong is a matter of sovereignty and foreign interference. Second, the CCP employs all instruments of national power to squash the movement, maintain internal order, externally build allies and partners, and exert its influence to shape international norms. Finally, when viewed collectively, China's actions against the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement display its great power status through the CCP's ability to shape the international system while simultaneously resisting impositions from other states like the U.S. and UK. Through this lens, China's great power status *enabled* the CCP to squash the movement *while maintaining an aura of modernity*.

Diplomatic

Corresponding with its return as a great power, China increasingly flexes its diplomatic muscles in the international system. With respect to its actions to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, the CCP's diplomatic power is the source of its ability to squash the movement while maintaining the appearance of a modern state. The CCP maintains its modern aura by intentionally and systematically engaging with the United Nations (UN), the same international institution that could take action against the CCP. The CCP's primary diplomatic objective regarding the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement is to reframe it, centering on the notion of sovereignty.

Despite the high degree of autonomy guaranteed until 2047 by the Basic Law, the CCP has managed to convince several members of the international community that the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement is actually a matter of China's sovereignty. The CCP learned from the previous pro-democracy protests of 2003 and the Umbrella Movement of 2014 by identifying a small subset of the movement that advocated for complete Hong Kong independence. Instead of permitting the conversation about the movement to center on its actors' desires to democratically elect Hong Kong officials in accordance with the Basic Law's goal of universal suffrage, the

CCP began reframing the movement by claiming that its overarching goal was to seek Hong Kong independence from China.⁴⁴ By reframing the movement as separatist in nature, the CCP garnered domestic support in mainland China, while simultaneously enabling CCP diplomats to propagate the narrative that the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement was a sovereignty issue for China to handle internally.

The CCP's efforts to reframe the movement as a sovereignty issue and away from a human rights concern was a major success for the CCP and a further revelation of China's growing status as a great power. The clearest expression of the maneuver space the CCP affords itself regarding Hong Kong can be seen through China's actions at the UN. Following the passing of the National Security Law in June 2020, fifty-three states at the UN expressed their support for the CCP's actions while only twenty-seven states admonished the CCP's actions.⁴⁵ Of note, the United States railed against the CCP's actions in Hong Kong but was not included in the twenty-seven states that opposed China because America withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council in 2018.⁴⁶ The UN statement from the fifty-three states supporting the CCP's actions asserted that "not interfering with a sovereign state's internal affairs is the basic principle of the UN Charter and international orders. The National Security Law for Hong Kong is China's legitimate power. This is not a question about human rights and should not be discussed at the human rights council."⁴⁷ Clearly, these fifty-three states accepted the CCP's reframing of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement as an issue of sovereignty.

The CCP garners international support despite slashing guarantees found in the Basic Law due to years of diplomatic efforts. In a speech on June 26, 2020 entitled "The Chinese Communist Party's Ideology and Global Ambitions," National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien outlined how the CCP maneuvers to hold key leadership positions in international

organizations, including the head position for “four out of fifteen UN specialized agencies, more than the U.S., UK, France, and Russia, the other members of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, combined.”⁴⁸ The CCP’s diplomatic strategy pays off, as members of the UN Human Rights Council and the greater UN body view the National Security Law and the CCP’s actions in Hong Kong through the CCP’s desired frame – sovereignty. According to Allen-Ebrahimian, “Beijing has effectively leveraged the UN Human Rights Council to endorse the very activities it was created to oppose.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the international community thought voting China into the UN in 1971 would bring the PRC more in line with western ideals and values over time; instead, however, the CCP has managed to transform the UN to yield to its norms.⁵⁰ The ability to change the international system to a state’s preference is an indicator of a great power.⁵¹ Accordingly, the CCP’s ability to bend the UN to China’s desires is a reflection of China’s great power status. The new international norms China establishes through its diplomatic instrument of national power reduces the risk of international interference when the CCP takes assertive measures to squash the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement.

Information

The CCP wields its information instrument of national power in order to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, too. While other pro-democracy movements have exploited networked technology for the benefit of the movements, the CCP learned over decades to manage technology and information in order to influence public opinion in the favor of the CCP and inhibit social and political movements.⁵² In the case of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, the CCP reinforces Wen-Hsuan Tsai’s findings that China is a “networked authoritarian” state where the government actively pursues opportunities in the information

environment to suppress the movement while also flooding the environment with pro-CCP narratives.

As discussed in the previous section on the CCP's diplomatic efforts, the CCP successfully reframed the movement to focus on the issue of sovereignty, both domestically and internationally. The CCP accomplished this reframing in large part due to its ability to influence the information environment through censorship, disinformation campaigns, and information prevention through the Great Firewall. While the CCP historically attempted to control social media inside the Great Firewall, the CCP adapted its networked authoritarian repertoire in suppressing the pro-democracy movement by supplementing its internal control measures with external disinformation campaigns more reminiscent of Russian tactics.⁵³ Evidence of the CCP's disinformation efforts emerged in August 2019 when Facebook and YouTube removed handfuls of accounts tied to CCP officials spreading disinformation, while Twitter removed over 900 accounts spreading disinformation and an additional 200,000 accounts amplifying the disinformation.⁵⁴

The CCP's actions in the information environment regarding Hong Kong are reflective of its broader goals to maintain domestic political stability while generating domestic and international support for its actions to suppress the movement by emphasizing its sovereignty narrative. External to the Great Firewall, the CCP's disinformation actions identified by Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube focused on promulgating key themes of sovereignty, while spreading disinformation that the movement actors were using brutal tactics against law enforcement officials and were being instigated and resourced by western governments.⁵⁵ Analysts revealed several instances where CCP-affiliated social media accounts and state-run media agencies spread propaganda to further this narrative by asserting that pro-democracy actors were using

American-made grenade launchers, when fact checkers revealed the proclaimed grenade launchers were actually toys.⁵⁶

The CCP also censored information inside the Great Firewall by quickly removing pro-democracy movement social media posts,⁵⁷ while promulgating posts that framed movement actors as separatists and terrorists.⁵⁸ Then, the “50 cent party” amplified pro-CCP narratives to “cheerlead the state” and effectively distract its citizens from any stray pro-democracy movement posts, a CCP play coined “strategic distraction” by Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts.⁵⁹ Efforts in the information environment stimulate nationalist sentiments in China, further securing internal stability and domestic support for the CCP’s actions to squash the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement.⁶⁰ The CCP’s use of its information instrument of power affirms Wen-Hsuan Tsai’s claim that the CCP mastered “networked authoritarianism.”⁶¹ This mastery resulted in the CCP’s ability to exploit the information environment to enable its suppression of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement while maintaining the aura of modernity through its sovereignty narrative.

Military

At an initial glance, it might seem odd to include a section on the CCP’s military instrument of power in this paper. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was not deployed in offensive actions against the Hong Kong pro-democracy actors. However, China’s military instrument of national power played an important role when reviewing the CCP’s ability to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. Analysis of how the CCP used its PLA and when it chose *not* to employ the PLA demonstrates the CCP’s ability to play the long game and learn each step of the way.

The PLA doubled its forces in the territory of Hong Kong in the fall of 2019, claiming the increase in troops was due to routine force rotations, but most analysts view the increase in forces as directly correlated to the vibrant pro-democracy movement's mobilization of millions of protestors.⁶² By the spring of 2020, the CCP stationed more PLA troops in the territory of Hong Kong than at any point in history.⁶³ In May 2020, PLA Major General Chen Daoxiang commented in an interview with Chinese media that “garrison officers and soldiers are determined, confident, and capable of *safeguarding national sovereignty* [emphasis added], security and development interests and maintaining the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong.”⁶⁴

The pro-democracy movement clearly had the attention of PRC President Xi Jinping. Under his authoritarian rule, a decision to increase the PLA's footprint in Hong Kong is intentional and calculated. Xi likely intended to signal to Hong Kong residents and pro-democracy movement actors the extent to which he was willing to go to suppress the movement. In particular, Xi must have anticipated Hong Kongers recalling the images of the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. While most residents wanted to avoid a situation like Tiananmen Square, some of the more extreme protestors “welcomed a crackdown.”⁶⁵ Xi understood from CCP history, though, not to actually employ the PLA against the movement actors. Xi anticipated that the international community would quickly intervene if the PLA caused another event like the Tiananmen Square Massacre in Hong Kong. Xi also learned from the Umbrella Movement, when local law enforcement's employment of brutal tactics against protestors actually resulted in an increase in protest mobilization.⁶⁶

The broader context of Xi's decisions and PLA actions are important when considering China's use of the military instrument on the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. According

to U.S. intelligence, a senior PLA general officer issued orders to initiate border skirmishes with the Indian Army in early June 2020.⁶⁷ Though the CCP failed to quickly gain territory in this skirmish, the timing of this PLA action compared to the CCP's actions to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests should not be overlooked. The CCP likely attempted to exploit an opportunity structure that presented itself from the COVID-19 pandemic. As Paul Shinkman from U.S. News reported, China's border skirmishes with India "come amid U.S. fears that Beijing has successfully exploited the international fallout from the coronavirus pandemic to secure territorial claims along other portions of its border, including in the South China Sea and Hong Kong."⁶⁸

By playing the long game and learning from past actions, the CCP seized an opportunity afforded by the international community's distraction with COVID-19 to pass the National Security Law on 29 June 2020 and effectively suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement without the PLA ever raising a weapon. By choosing *not* to employ the PLA, Xi and the CCP gave the impression of stability to mainland China and international audiences, thereby mitigating the risk of worldwide condemnation and retribution. China's ability to suppress the movement without the use of military force less than one year after two million Hong Kongers mobilized in its support while also thwarting the potential for international intervention is another demonstration of China's great power status.

Economic

Perhaps the CCP's strongest instrument of national power is displayed through its economic actions in support of its objectives in Hong Kong. The CCP took a number of steps to display its economic power while squashing the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, ranging from actions that impacted individuals, corporations, and the international community. Notably,

the CCP's ability to continue to grow its economy during the COVID-19 pandemic created incentive structures for entities to partner with China even when they disagreed with the CCP's actions in Hong Kong.

In today's global economy, sanctions are one of the primary tools in a state's economic toolbelt. The CCP demonstrated its economic resiliency throughout the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement by withstanding a series of U.S. sanctions against China due to its actions to suppress the movement.⁶⁹ Not only did the CCP withstand pressures from U.S. sanctions, but the CCP also issued sanctions against five American democracy and human rights leaders and six members of congress in August 2020.⁷⁰ Regarding the rationale for imposing the sanctions, CCP Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said, "The relevant actions of the U.S. blatantly intervened in Hong Kong affairs, grossly interfered in China's internal affairs, and seriously violated international law and the basic norms of international relations."⁷¹ Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of the Human Rights Watch, was one of the Americans hit with CCP sanctions. In response to being sanctioned, Roth made the following pithy response:

Beijing has apparently calculated that one of the best ways to prevent Hong Kong's democracy movement from spreading to the mainland and jeopardizing the Communist Party's rule is to make it seem foreign. Given the mainland's highly censored media environment, Beijing seems to hope that any snippets of news that people in China might nonetheless receive about Hong Kong — or any ideas about rights — can be countered by the foreign-influence explanation.⁷²

The CCP's decision to impose sanctions reveals two key points regarding its use of the economic instrument of national power on the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. First, the CCP views sanctions as another tool to spread foreign intervention and sovereignty narratives, rather than impose economic hardship. Roth and the other sanctioned Americans indicated the sanctions would likely have little actual impact on their personal lives.⁷³ Second, the CCP's use

of sanctions further signals its great power status, as sanctions have become one of America's preferred tools on the international stage.⁷⁴

The CCP unleashed its economic influence in an attempt to frustrate and deny individuals the ability to prosper if they were connected to the movement. The CCP blacklisted Cantonese pop singer Denise Ho from mainland China after she participated in the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and took an increasingly more active role in the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong since 2014.⁷⁵ Denise Ho also experienced self-censorship due to her advocacy of the movement, where some of her friends from the corporate sector avoided taking pictures with her out of fear that their occupations could be negatively impacted.⁷⁶ In a podcast with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, she described how nine out of ten venues in Melbourne, Australia denied her request to host an event due to "security concerns or [because] the nature of our events [was] not appropriate in their venues."⁷⁷ China's economic might and significance to the global economy enables the CCP to negatively influence individuals who support the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement.

Similarly, the CCP's actions in Hong Kong are perilous for corporations that advocate for the movement. The most stunning situation transpired in October 2019, when the National Basketball Association (NBA) Houston Rockets general manager, Daryl Morey, tweeted "stand with Hong Kong."⁷⁸ The CCP quickly denounced the tweet. Chinese affiliates of the NBA suspended relations with the Houston Rockets, Chinese sponsors withdrew their money, and Chinese television outlets announced that they would stop broadcasting Rockets games.⁷⁹ The CCP's actions drew a flurry of apologies from NBA officials and players. As the NBA commissioner expressed, "the economic impact...[was] already clear."⁸⁰ This type of "kowtowing" response from an American corporation and players resulted in bipartisan

exasperation by US political leaders.⁸¹ Senator Rick Scott declared, “As Americans, it is our duty to stand together against injustice, and that means standing up to Communist China and President Xi as he violates the rights guaranteed under the 1997 handover of Hong Kong,” while Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer tweeted, “No one should implement a gag rule on Americans speaking out for freedom.”⁸² This episode in the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement exemplifies the CCP’s ability to exert its economic instrument of power to bend others to its will – even American businesses.

The CCP found similar success in applying its economic instrument of power to the international community. Despite denouncing the CCP’s actions in Hong Kong, strong US allies like Australia, Japan, and New Zealand joined China in establishing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November 2020, the largest free trade agreement in history.⁸³ Additionally, the European Union agreed to an investment deal with China in the waning days of 2020, despite vocal critics from the European Parliament over China’s human rights actions in Hong Kong and elsewhere.⁸⁴ The CCP’s ability to forge these international economic partnerships, including states that condemn China’s actions against human rights abuses in Hong Kong, demonstrates China’s position as a great power. China’s great power status and its ability to leverage its strong economic instrument of national power resulted in a situation where the CCP was able to sustain its repression of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement despite international condemnation.

Implications

Comparative political scientists often conduct studies on cases like the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement around questions such as, what are the ingredients of hybrid regimes or what are the impacts of different practices of repression? The case of the Hong Kong pro-

democracy movement, though, is indicative of China's demonstration of its great power status. In Hong Kong, China demonstrates that it can achieve its objectives in the face of a vibrant pro-democracy movement amid backlash from international pressures by another great power and its allies. Scholars must be cognizant of how China and great powers can accomplish this. This case study reveals the imperative for comparative political scientists to avoid divorcing the analysis of authoritarian or hybrid repression from geopolitical great power assertion.

One of the reasons why Americans find it difficult to understand how China can suppress a vibrant political movement in Hong Kong while simultaneously presenting the image of modernity is due to our perspective of the world. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. has enjoyed superpower status in a largely unipolar world. When other states acted outside of the western democratic norms that America championed, the U.S. or the international community could take action to reassert the values the leaders of the international system espoused.

China's ability to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement amid outcries from the western democratic world while retaining the ability to forge international partnerships like the RCEP with pro-democracy nations signifies that it is no longer ascending to the level of a great power. Instead, China has arrived. The CCP achieved its goal of attaining the type of power the U.S. exhibits in being capable of shaping international norms. China continues to advance its efforts to replace the U.S. as the leader of the rules-based international system.⁸⁵ The CCP demonstrates China's great power status through its ability to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement using all of its national instruments of power. Despite diplomatic and economic pressure from the west over Hong Kong, the CCP prevails in achieving its territorial ambitions while retaining domestic stability and legitimacy.

National Security Implications

The findings of this paper entail several implications for American national security professionals. First, the CCP is intent on reshaping the world order to benefit China at the expense of human rights. The U.S. and its allies that espouse human rights must unite to prevent these actions from becoming international norms. President Biden seems poised to accomplish this, as he intends to make democracy and human rights the central theme of his foreign policy and vows to bring together other democratic states at a “global Summit for Democracy.”⁸⁶

Second, American policymakers must wisely plan and resource all instruments of national power to confront the CCP before opportunities arise that enable the CCP to exploit international distraction for its domestic gains. In this vein, the Department of Defense (DoD) focuses too myopically on conventional military power when considering how to compete, deter, and win in this era of great power competition. New organizational changes like the United States Marine Corps (USMC) Force Design 2030, new concepts like the USMC’s Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), and new weapons systems like the F-35 are necessary advancements to meet the demands of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. However, prioritization of efforts like these also reveals the DoD’s fundamental misunderstanding of how the PRC intends to achieve its objectives during this era of great power competition. If strategists do not appreciate the PRC’s capability and intent to suppress social and political conflict and achieve its national objectives by employing all instruments of power, then conventional measures of American military power to achieve US political objectives will be overcome by events before the first kinetic shot is fired. The Hong Kong pro-democracy case study demonstrates the CCP’s desire and ability to achieve its objectives while preventing the situation from escalating to armed conflict or international intervention.

Third, the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement case study should sound alarm bells regarding Taiwan, as Xi has clearly expressed the CCP's intentions to reincorporate Taiwan by 2050, using force if necessary.⁸⁷ Previously, the CCP's goal was complete reincorporation of Hong Kong by the end of the Basic Law in 2047. However, the CCP exploited international distraction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and passed the National Security Law, effectively ending the "one country, two systems" construct in Hong Kong in June of 2020 – twenty-seven years ahead of schedule. After the CCP passed the National Security Law, a prominent Beijing legal scholar declared, "I believe that in the future, you could just change the name of the Hong Kong national security law, and substitute instead 'Taiwan national security law.'"⁸⁸ During the same timeframe when the CCP announced it would pass the National Security Law and initiated border skirmishes with India, numerous social media accounts inside China's Great Firewall called for the CCP to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to invade Taiwan and reincorporate the island by force.⁸⁹

In the early months of 2021, China increased its military activities in the vicinity of Taiwan due to "secessionist forces" and "collusion between Taipei and Washington."⁹⁰ On 9 March 2021, Admiral Philip Davidson, the commander of United States Indo-Pacific Command, told Congress that he assessed that China could invade Taiwan within the next six years.⁹¹ That same day, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman proclaimed, "China's position on the Taiwan question is consistent and clear. There is but one China in the world, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory."⁹² China's use of a similar foreign intervention and sovereignty narrative and its increasingly bold actions should instill a sense of urgency in American leaders, especially after witnessing the CCP's suppression of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement. Admiral Davidson suggests American leaders should revisit the official

US stance of “strategic ambiguity” on Taiwan while simultaneously warning that China is moving to supplant the U.S. as the leader of the rules-based international order.⁹³

The contexts of Taiwan and Hong Kong are certainly different. However, as China’s great power status continues to rise and the CCP continues to attract partners across the globe, the CCP could attempt to reintegrate Taiwan if given an opportunity. If so, China will likely harken back to the statement of support it received from the majority of UN Human Rights Council member states proclaiming the CCP’s actions in Hong Kong are a matter of China’s sovereignty. Given China’s meteoric rise and its demonstration of great power status through its actions to suppress the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, America should feel compelled to act quickly. America not only needs to reconsider its “strategic ambiguity” policy toward Taiwan, it also needs to proactively partner with democracies around the world to prevent Taiwan from succumbing to a similar fate of Hong Kong. America and its allies must ensure the CCP’s actions against the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement do not set a precedence for future CCP actions against Taiwan.

Finally, the U.S. must accept that it is no longer the world superpower and is instead a great power operating in a multi-polar world. By doing so, America can most effectively defend itself, its prosperity, and its allies and partners by championing western democratic values. These values, including human rights, must become the center point of diplomatic, information, military, and economic strategies and actions. The U.S. must deliberately return to leadership positions within international organizations consistent with its values – most importantly, the UN. The rules-based international order is not static – it is perpetually shaped and molded by the actions of its states. The form it takes is largely driven by great powers’ abilities to garner partners and impose their desires on the system. As China’s influence and power grows, states

must choose between valuing human rights or yielding to the desires of an authoritarian CCP regime that shapes international norms for its own benefit.

Scholarly Implications

Following the passing of the National Security Law and mass arrests, pro-democracy Hong Kong politicians claimed that 2020 marked the end of the “one country, two systems” construct.⁹⁴ With the CCP passing its “patriot” legislation in March 2021, the regime in Hong Kong should be considered fully authoritarian.⁹⁵ As such, further scholarly research is required to understand the implications for Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement under a fully authoritarian regime – the CCP.

Further research into the Hong Kong case study could result in a more nuanced understanding of hybrid regimes in general and how these governments can backslide into authoritarian regimes. In particular, further research could center on whether pro-democracy movements in hybrid regimes can achieve *catastrophic success*. In other words, can movements experience such great success in mobilizing the population and garnering international support that the authoritarian aspects of the regime move to eliminate the pro-democracy threat? Using Tufekci’s terminology, catastrophic success is akin to a movement signaling such strong capacity that the government perceives that its control is threatened to such a degree that the regime takes action to annihilate the movement. This seems to be the case in Hong Kong, where the vibrant pro-democracy movement ostensibly demonstrated signs of success by early 2020. Yet within one year, the CCP dashed Hong Kong’s dreams of democracy, passed the National Security Law, arrested and charged pro-democracy leaders, and fundamentally reshaped Hong Kong’s electoral system to prevent dissent from mainland China.

From a broader perspective, this research paper demonstrates the necessity to take a more comprehensive look at how China wields its power. Many studies approach the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement case study simply through a hybrid regime lens or through the CCP's counter-movement repertoire. Other fields of study examine how China broadly projects its great power internationally, to include works like Mandip Singh's "From Smart Power to Sharp Power: How China Promotes her National Interests."⁹⁶ This research paper's examination of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement case study implores scholars to consider the convergence of multiple fields of study when conducting research on China. Moving forward, the conversation must center on what the Hong Kong case study means to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

The CCP's ability to suppress the vibrant Hong Kong pro-democracy movement while maintaining the aura of modernity confounded American and western observers. To its own detriment, the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement's catastrophic success focused the CCP's attention and resolve to eliminate its perceived threat to domestic political stability. As the movement gained traction and international support, the CCP reframed the movement to promote a foreign intervention and sovereignty narrative. In doing so, the CCP's networked authoritarian state leveraged all instruments of national power against the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement while enduring international condemnation and U.S. sanctions. The CCP's ability to suppress the movement while simultaneously forging international economic partnerships and establishing new international norms demonstrates China's arrival as a great power. America must rally democracies around the world to effectively compete with China and prevent a similar outcome in Taiwan. Only by flipping the "sovereignty" script on China, whereby nations in the Pacific and around the globe care more about their sovereignty and human rights than

succumbing to China's pressures, will the United States, its allies, and its partners prevent China from dashing more dreams of democracy.

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