

The True Geopolitical Significance of the Hong Kong Protests

Interview with Lawrence B. Wilkerson, former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell

By [Col. Lawrence Wilkerson](#) and [Emanuel Pastreich](#)

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This is an interview between Emanuel Pastreich and Larry Wilkerson.

Lawrence B. “Larry” Wilkerson was chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell. Upon retirement, he has become a critic of US foreign policy. **Emanuel Pastreich** is an American author and academic based in South Korea.

Emanuel Pastreich: *The recent protests in Hong Kong were powered by a free-floating discontent among youth who feel they have no future. Yet, much of what we see taking place today cannot be explained in terms of the discontent of young people. Could it be that the US is interfering with, or participating in, the present political crisis in Hong Kong?*

Larry Wilkerson: Of course we [the US] are involved—just as we were, and are, in Caracas. I saw just how fiercely we tried to overthrow Hugo Chavez, then the president of Venezuela, in 2002. And we did not give up on our hopes to alter the politics there. Now we are working on Nicolas Maduro. But we have only brought to Venezuela incompetence, and incompetence’s standard accomplice, failure. We were only successful in punishing hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans with sanctions and doing great damage to their economy.

Although the media never compares Caracas with Hong Kong, we have clearly deployed the usual suspects in Hong Kong, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, which has suddenly become very active under the dubious auspices of teaching the young citizens of Hong Kong about democracy.

My fear is that, just as we did in Hungary in 1956, we are setting up these young people for a crackdown. We will push them, as we did then, and then when there is a crackdown, we will do nothing, just as we did nothing when the Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary in 1956 and crushed that rebellion.

It is an open secret that one of the forces behind the National Endowment for Democracy, and other such NGOs, is the CIA.—sometimes wittingly, with regard to the NED itself, and sometimes unwittingly.

But there are aspects to this campaign that are different from what happened in Hungary. We use social media, and vivid breaking news broadcasts as part of a more sophisticated

approach to conducting covert operations against our supposed enemies, in this case China.

Xi Jinping must be very cautious about how he responds, and whether or not he ultimately cracks down hard on the protestors because his actions will send an unmistakable signal to the more than 23 million people who live on the island of Taiwan. If Xi mishandles this case, Taiwan will be utterly opposed to any rapprochement with the mainland for a generation.

Pastreich: But Trump clearly does not have the sophistication to manage this sort of operation. Trump personally would rather open a few more Trump casinos in China. Who exactly are the forces driving this move back in DC?

Wilkerson: Up until now the entire show has been run by John Bolton. As national security advisor, John Bolton launched one operation after another to undermine relations with China and other countries. He did so with some help from the "Torture Queen" Gina Haspel at the CIA. One thing is certain, the shots are called by a handful of people.

Pastreich: So, will the departure of John Bolton offer us an opportunity for a real shift in US foreign policy?

Wilkerson: John Bolton's departure, as I indicated on Chris Hayes' show last week, changes very little. It is true that a true warmonger has left the position of National Security Advisor. But the influence of that position is entirely determined by the President. Ronald Reagan had six such advisors in just 8 years. The reason was simple: Reagan thought that being president meant making the decisions himself. The case was entirely different for Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter. They shared power regarding foreign policy with Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, respectively.

The best way to make sure the president makes all decisions is to change your national security advisor regularly.

Trump is not Reagan, not by quite a stretch. So, most likely the people around him, from Mike Pompeo, to Gina Haspel, to Stephen Miller and Steven Mnuchin at Treasury, will continue to pursue their agendas, for better or worse. Trump is incapable of managing them all single-handedly. But with the new appointment of Robert O'Brien as national security advisor, a more sycophantic assemblage around the President will in fact "make him President". The decisions will be increasingly unaffected by any counsel and advice. They will be "all Trump". You will have to determine for yourself if that's a positive development. I rather think not.

[Trump Regime's Hardball with China: A Losing Strategy](#)

It's great that John Bolton is gone. I know him and I can say that despite all the hype about him being brilliant and evil, he's only evil. Arron Burr was brilliant and evil; John Bolton is only evil.

Yes, it is excellent that an evil man has been removed from an important job. But the incompetent man who put him there in the first place, the President himself, remains there. That's the rub.

Pastreich: Much of the rabble rousing in Hong Kong is directly linked to Taiwan, even encouraged by the current administration there. I was a bit surprised by President

Tsai's [talk](#) to the American Legion recently. Tsai made extreme statements that tried to paint all of China as a malevolent force, rather than logically and systematically addressing real concerns of citizens. I have not seen this sort of rhetoric on the Taiwan side since the 1980s, and it seems rather short-sighted. If anything, such talk by the President of Taiwan will encourage many Chinese to see Taiwan as a puppet of the Western far right.

Wilkerson: Chen Shui-Bian from time to time talked in a similar vein in the early 2000s. Recall that Tsai was addressing the American Legion, a red-meat audience that is most responsive to that sort of language. She made shrewd use of the somewhat limited audience list she is allowed to address. Even though Bolton may have wanted her to address a joint session of the US Congress *a la* Bibi Netanyahu, there remain one or two people in Trump's administration who are not completely insane when it comes to China and Taiwan. From her perspective, the remarks were precisely what she thought were necessary for both her audiences, the American Legion and the US—as well as Beijing. In that regard I thought her remarks were circumspect and well-couched.

That said, she could have been more globally-oriented, as you suggest, with such existential threats as climate change leading the way. But for that particular audience such remarks would have been utterly wasted.

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Pastreich: Doubtless many youth became involved in these Hong Kong protests because they were concerned about the increasingly bleak future that they face. But their so-called leaders meet with Pence and Bolton, and their protests are silent about the impact of climate change on Hong Kong, the radical concentration of wealth in Hong Kong (worse of any other city in the world), the indifference of the elites to their problems right in Hong Kong. Why are the most critical issues left out?

Wilkerson: We are looking at an age-old phenomenon. People let the things closest to them fester while they reach out for the sexy, the dramatic, and the dangerous. Just look at Trump's supporters in the US. Trump's economic policies, whether it is his tax cuts for the rich or his trade tariffs, all punish his political base mercilessly. But they don't seem to care so long as he promises to reverse *Roe vs. Wade* and to bring Christian prayer back to the White House.

The Hong Kong protesters are reaching for the stars while the Earth that they stand on grows sick, struggles, and may die in their lifetimes.

Pastreich: And then there is the simple logic of the Military Appropriations Bill. If that much money is suddenly slated for the preparations for a war with China, no matter how thoughtful government officials in the US may be, they will be under institutional pressure to drive for a confrontation with China.

Wilkerson: Are you referring to that of Taiwan, or of the US, or both?

Pastreich: The overwhelmingly significant budget is that of the US for military, now officially \$750 billion dollars and much of the expensive systems funded by that budget are aimed at China.

Wilkerson: There is no question about the implications of the gargantuan size of the US national security budget—and it's more like 1.3 trillion dollars, when you throw in Veterans Department, Homeland Security, nuclear weapons at Energy, the intelligence budget outside the Department of Defense, plus the CIA, the Director of National Intelligence and State's International Affairs account. The threats that are promoted by that sort of a budget form self-fulfilling prophecies in many respects.

All one need do is look back at what happened during the Cold War to see how budgets drove the arms races, both nuclear and conventional, and impacted strategic decisions at every turn. A massive budget that supports a China-oriented military and economic strategy is an additional push for eventual war.

Pastreich: So what might be some ways we can take this source of tension and conflict and move it in a positive direction? Could we somehow organize an event and bring in people from Hong Kong and other local governments around the world to talk about real issues for youth, about climate change, about the threat of militarization of the economy (in US, but also in China)? Or might there be some other creative approach possible.

Wilkerson: We could try something positive. But I doubt any effort to promote a discussion of real issues would have much effect. Unless one has the assets — the money, the people, the organizational strength — to match, and even surpass, the CIA's efforts — and perhaps MI6 as well — there is not much hope of overcoming their efforts by promoting a wiser, smarter, and more relevant dialog. I do not say that to be discouraging, but just to suggest that organizers of such efforts must be realistic.

Pastreich: But Hong Kong is intimately connected to the question of what US policy in Asia should be. We should have a policy and it should be constructive.

What, concretely, might be a more effective policy?

Wilkerson: We should return to the position we took previously, since George H.W. Bush's administration and the end of the Cold War: a watchful wariness coupled with the strategic intent to compete peacefully.

Our aim should be peace and economic integration. We should work together to meet the challenges of international crime, a changing climate, massive refugee flows — 70 million now and growing—all over the world, and other challenges that no single nation can respond to successfully. All the while we need to hedge our bets by maintaining alliances such as those with Japan and Korea, expanding relationships with countries such as India, and prepare a ready, but far less costly, military. But all in all, our objective must be peace and peaceful competition.

Pastreich: There are many thoughtful American intellectuals who could visit Hong Kong, or Taipei, Shanghai or Beijing for deep and meaningful discussions with their peers about our shared future. If those scholars, together with ordinary citizens, started talking about common concerns, and engaging Chinese intellectuals, that could turn things around. If we have a meaningful dialog on climate change, social and economic problems, and the future

of cyberspace, we could fill up that space in media with some positive messages.

Wilkerson: I agree that such a move would be most welcome. And it would help immensely if we had a president, and a national security council, a State and Treasury Department, filled with good leaders and with people who understood this wisdom.

Pastreich: Why does the current administration feel that it needs to conduct foreign policy in the shadows? How can we end these covert efforts to undermine other nations and go back to actual cultural engagement, thereby redirecting the real energy of youth in a positive direction?

Wilkerson: First things first: we need a new administration, a smart one. We need new members of Congress who understand the issues that we are discussing here. And we need a new media—one that doesn't think that labeling China as the opponent in a new Cold War is its primary job. And then, of course, we need a wide range of committed scholars and citizens to carry forth the dialog.

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