

Hong Kong Protests: Now the Hard Part, Kick out the US, Build National Consensus

By [Kevin Zeese](#) and [Margaret Flowers](#)

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When protests in Hong Kong exploded people looked for US involvement. It was not hard to find. The overt intrusion of the US is available in budgets, documents and websites; the covert involvement has not yet been uncovered but is no doubt there. What does US involvement mean for the credibility of the protest movement and the future of Hong Kong?

The issues raised by the protests, democracy and unfair economy, are very real. But so are the concerns of Beijing for economic growth and continuing to lift people out of poverty, something China has done remarkably well. Those who seek to transform governance and create a more equal economy now have a more challenging task than organizing protests, they must build national consensus on their issues in Hong Kong and in China's leadership.

Now that the US has been exposed, it needs to be removed. US goals are very different than the people in Hong Kong. The US is in the process of encircling China militarily and economically. It sees China as a competitor, a nation that can undermine the US as the single world superpower. Conflict between Hong Kong and Beijing would serve US interests but undermine the Hong Kong economy which is tied to China. The protest movement has already begun to separate itself from people too close to the US. Hong Kong needs to go further and expel US influence, remembering the historic imperialism of the US in China and noting the current strategic goals of the United States.

The Occupy Central Movement Gets the Attention of the World

The Occupy Central movement, or Umbrella Revolution, has gotten the attention of the world and challenged Beijing. The protests are at a turning point. The next few days will determine its immediate impact, its longer term effects are impossible to predict. It has shown an awakening of hundreds of thousands in Hong Kong and if political leadership in Beijing and Hong Kong does not respond to the issues raised, more insurrections will follow.

The protesters have gained sympathy because of their consistently nonviolent behavior which is emphasized in their [Manual for Disobedience](#). They have also cleaned up, even dividing their trash for recycling being [labeled](#) the polite protest. And, they have used excellent symbolism and rhetoric. They have broadened participation in the protests and have not only included students - a powerful force in their own right - but the elderly, families and workers. The protesters have strategically escalated their actions and increased pressure on the government.

October 2nd and 3rd were turning points as the chief executive of Hong Kong gave a Mubarak-like speech and [refused to resign](#) but agreed to negotiations with the protesters. When the protests began he refused to negotiate so his position has changed. Yesterday

saw Occupy Central protesters having a sophisticated debate about whether to block a key road, with some arguing that it would undermine their primary goal of garnering broad public support emphasizing that the goal of the protests was to show the people of Hong Kong were with them. Few protests movements are sophisticated enough to see the goal of protesting the government is directed more at the people, for their support, to build national support.

On October 3rd, anti-occupy protesters, some wearing masks, came into the protest areas and [violently attacked](#) occupy protesters demanding they stop. Police and occupy protesters report that some of the attackers were [members of the Triad](#) organized crime group, perhaps encouraged by the government. Occupy Central [announced](#) that due to lack of action by the police to stop the attacks they would not be meeting with the government to negotiate. The next morning the occupiers had rebuilt the destroyed tents and other infrastructure of the protest. On October 5th the students [agreed to return to negotiations](#) but among their requirements was investigation that the government indulged the attacks on them.

This weekend and Monday will need to show signs of continued strength in the streets in order for the protest to build its impact. Monday is turning to be a [pivot point](#) in the current protests as the government insists on re-opening schools and businesses; so far, protesters are ignoring threats and remaining.

If they succeed in sustaining the protest and keeping public support, more compromises, even the replacement of the chief executive are possible. If not, then the negotiations with the government need to be pursued and reported on widely by the protest movement so if they fail - and it is hard to imagine the governments in Hong Kong and Beijing compromising sufficiently without more protest - the democracy can re-energize and take the streets again to show their displeasure.

While the Federation of Students has made clear that their movement is "[absolutely not a revolution](#)," even if Leung Chun-ying resigns, the issues raised will not be resolved. The major changes being sought will require ongoing work, building on the awakening of recent days and convincing the population and leadership that the changes are necessary and beneficial. This will take deep organizing, persistence and refusal to compromise.

What has been the US involvement?

Complicating the protest, and undermining it, was reports documenting US involvement in the democracy movement. Those of us who follow US actions around the world are not surprised by this; indeed, we'd be surprised if the US were not involved in fomenting unrest in Hong Kong. The US consistently uses legitimate concerns of people to build its Empire and challenge perceived enemies. China is at the top of the list for the US with the Asian Pivot of military forces to the region, building military relationships with Asian allies and negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership that excludes China - all isolating and threatening China with economic and military force. It is not surprising that the aspirations of the people of Hong Kong are being used by the US.

Sadly, US involvement will undermine the credibility and goals of the protests because the US agenda is not the people's agenda. And, if the revolt were to succeed, what kind of influence would the US have over the selection of the next leader? Would Hong Kong end up with a leader like Ukraine, where the US [spent \\$5 billion](#) to foment revolt and now

has [President Petro Poroshenko](#) who, according to Wikileaks documents, has been known in the US government as “Our Ukraine Insider” for being an informant for the State Department since 2006. Will the next government protect neoliberal capitalism that allows the US investor class entry into China through Hong Kong for their benefit and not the benefit of the people?

Already there are signs that the Occupy Central leadership, which has US ties, is not trusted. As one participant on the ground [reports](#) “the dynamic the movement has taken on” its own energy and it is now “the actions of ordinary people in their struggle for democracy.” Now “the movement can now be considered largely leaderless.” As examples the author points to the protest beginning two days before the Occupy Central leaders wanted and the refusal to follow the order to leave after police attacks last Sunday. Instead thousands stayed. *Revolution News* [reported](#) how a group of students climbed over the fence of the Central Government Offices Complex, remaining there and facing arrest the entire time, without the support of the elders of ‘Occupy Central’ for the next two days. Thankfully students came to their rescue.

On October 2nd, a *Mint Press News* article [exposed US support](#) for democracy movements in Hong Kong. The article described what it called “a deep and insidious network of foreign financial, political, and media support. Prominent among them is the US State Department and its [National Endowment for Democracy](#) (NED) as well as NED’s subsidiary, the National Democratic Institute (NDI).”

The article describes work by the NDI in Hong Kong dating back to 1997, so it has been a long term strategy of the United States to foment a democracy movement in Hong Kong. “Democracy movement” means keeping Beijing from selecting who can run for office in Hong Kong and universal suffrage. NDI writes that it has been training young leaders in Hong Kong since 2005 on “political communication skills.”

The US has been funding various civic organizations in Hong Kong to work on these issues including a think tank at the University of Hong Kong, the Centre for Comparative and Public Law, from which Occupy Central “self-proclaimed” leader Benny Tai served on the board and collaborates. Another notable Occupy Central activist, Audrey Eu Yuet-mee, works closely with Tai and speaks at numerous US funded forums.

Other Hong Kong democracy movement figures in bed with NED include, according to *Mint Press*, Martin Lee ([here’s his bio on NED website](#) and [the award the NED gave him](#)), founding chairman of Hong Kong’s Democrat Party, who this year came to Washington, DC, [met with Vice President Joe Biden](#) and Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). Lee took part in an NED talk hosted specifically for him and his agenda of “democracy” in Hong Kong. Anson Chan, another prominent figure currently supporting the ongoing unrest in Hong Kong’s streets, was also in DC and met with Biden and Pelosi.

Revolution News went further into US ties to the Occupy Central movement [examining](#) the budgets of US ‘democracy’ institutions. They report that one of Occupy Central’s key tactics this summer, a “referendum” on democracy signed by 780,000 Hong Kong residents, more than 1/5th of Hong Kong voters, was funded by the US State Department. (A similar tactic was used in the Egyptian protest against Morsi that led to the Sisi dictatorship.)

Revolution News follows the money and reports that: [USAID Hong Kong budget for](#)

[2012](#) was \$754,552, in [2010](#) it was \$1,591,547. One of the key projects funded by the US has been the Hong Kong Transition Project. The project has been regularly surveying the views of the people of Hong Kong regarding democracy since 1991. In a [HKTP report](#) from January 2014 they write the purpose of the polling is how people view “the fairness of the current consultation process and initial reactions to a possible confrontation with Beijing.”

The Transition Project has been doing in-depth public opinion research every [three months](#) that not only looks broadly at public opinion but zeroes in depth on key groups like [youth](#). They also did an in-depth study of who is likely to [support Occupy Central](#) and under what circumstances in January 2014. In April of this year they did a report examining public opinion that [described](#) a looming confrontation and broad-based support for democracy in Hong Kong. This type of public opinion research is never available to grassroots movements but is invaluable in deciding when to act, how to act, who to focus on in outreach and tactics of any protest.

In addition to public opinion research, funding key organizations and activities, the NDI monitors the movement. For example, the impressive young, iconic leader Joshua Wong, the founder of [Scholorism](#), has been [monitored](#) by NDI since he was 15. (No documents indicate that he has been co-opted.)

Revolution News also reports on numerous [Wikileaks cables](#) that show the close involvement of the US State Department in monitoring the development of the democracy movement in Hong Kong, turnout at protests, rhetoric of organizers and how to improve future organizing and mobilizing.

We do not report US involvement because we oppose the movement for democracy and a fair economy in Hong Kong, quite the contrary. We agree with [Revolution News](#) which introduces its article making the following points:

We Fully Support A People’s Movement In Hong Kong. As we explain further details about ‘Occupy Central’, it is the intention of this article to help the students and Hong Kongese people who are fighting for the future of Hong Kong make informed decisions on who they join in coalitions with and choose for Chief Executive when they achieve True Universal Suffrage.

We also agree with Hong Kong born writer [Ming Chun Tang](#) who points out that “prospects are only diminished by the involvement of the United States, with its own neoliberal and far-less-than-democratic agenda.” Like Tang, we are not surprised to see US involvement and urge it to stop or be stopped by activists in Hong Kong, Tang writes: “I am not surprised at this, nor do I welcome it, given the United States’ questionable record (to put it nicely) at bringing ‘democracy’ to countries where it has intervened in the past. It is most likely in Hong Kongers’ best interests that the US withdraw its monetary support for Occupy Central, as unlikely as this is to happen.”

Despite US involvement, the people of Hong Kong have very real grievances not only regarding self-governance but also regarding the economy. And, we also recognize that the protesters are people not acting for the United States, indeed the vast majority have nothing to do with the US or organizations the US has funded, but acting on their own accord. We hope exposing US involvement diminishes those in Hong Kong who work closely with the US and encourages the movement to remain independent of the United States.

Beyond Democracy: Economic Issues are a Major Part of Protest Movement

While democracy has gotten the headline, economic injustice in Hong Kong is also a driving force of these protests. The fact that the right-wing Heritage Foundation applauds the Hong Kong economy as the [world's freest economy](#) is really a signal that it is among the most unfair; i.e., poor worker and environmental protection and lack of regulation preventing corporate abuse. Life in Hong Kong for most people is difficult, Ming Chun Tang [writes](#):

As City University of Hong Kong professor Toby Carroll [points out](#), one in five Hong Kongers live below the poverty line, while inequality has risen to levels among the highest in the world. Wages haven't increased in line with inflation – meaning they've fallen in real terms. [The minimum wage](#), only introduced in 2010, is set at HK\$28 (US\$3.60) an hour – less than half of that even in the United States. The average workweek is [49 hours](#) -- in case you thought 40 was rough. Housing prices are among the highest in the world. Even the neoliberal Economist placed Hong Kong [top of its crony capitalism index](#) by some distance.

Or, as Jeff Brown, author of [44 Days Backpacking in China](#), [writes](#):

The middle class and poor are being decimated by the Princes of Power's draconian, libertarian capitalist policies of pushing the Territory's profits to the 1%, at the expense of the 99%. Students are graduating from college and finding it difficult to get good paying jobs or affordable places to live. . . . Standards of living for the 99% are cratering. Like in the US, Hong Kongers are having to work 2-3 jobs and much more than 40 hours a week, just to pay the bills, never mind prosper.

There is a trade union in Hong Kong with 160,000 members and 61 affiliates in various sectors, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, which is represented in the Legislative Council of Hong Kong pushing for greater worker protections and union rights. There is also a pro-Beijing trade union – the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions.

The economic challenges in Hong Kong are, in part, related to its changing role in China. The [Guardian reports](#) that when Deng Xiaoping announced economic reforms in 1978 Hong Kong was the entry point into China. This led to the 'golden era' of Hong Kong. It attracted major financial institutions and transnational companies that wanted to participate in Chinese economic growth. This made Hong Kong a wealthy city. But, China has grown and become more open so Hong Kong is no longer the entry point or financial center of China. The [China Daily bluntly reports](#):

Much has changed since 1997. Hong Kong has lost its role as the gateway to the mainland. Previously Hong Kong was China's unrivalled financial centre, now it is increasingly dwarfed by Shanghai. Until recently, Hong Kong was by far China's largest port: now it has been surpassed by Shanghai and Shenzhen, and Guangzhou will shortly overtake it.

[Martin Jacques](#) of the *Guardian* writes that while this has caused "a crisis of identity and a sense of displacement" the reality is Hong Kong's "future is inextricably bound up with China." When it comes to Hong Kong's economic future, he concludes: "China is the future of Hong Kong."

The Awakening of the Democracy Movement Now Requires Perseverance to Build National Consensus

Hong Kong has had [two successful revolts](#) against the government prior to these protests. In 2003 protests of 500,000 people stopped the implementation of a national security law that would have undermined civil liberties. And, in 2012 students were able to stop a new curriculum from being put in place that would have emphasized patriotism for China in schools. Many of these students are involved in the current protests. Thus, the people of Hong Kong have experienced political success.

The protests today are facing a much more difficult issue, the doctrine of 'one country, two systems' is at a potential breaking point because the idea of self-governance, real democracy where Beijing does not approve candidates who run for office, challenges Communist Party rule. In addition, the Hong Kong challenge should be looked at in light of widespread economic and environmental protests in China. Researchers at Nankai University [estimated](#) that there were 90,000 protests in China in 2009.

Activists should not feel like they accomplished nothing if these protests do not gain them the democracy they want. The awakening of a national democracy movement is a major advancement and it is common for [successful social movements](#) to go through a mass awakening followed by no immediate change. After the protests the job of the movement is to persevere and develop national consensus that cannot be ignored. They must convince the people of Hong Kong and the leadership in Beijing that their vision of real democracy and a fair economy are the best path for the nation. They have started down a historic path and must continue to succeed.

Kevin Zeese, JD and **Margaret Flowers, MD** co-host [Clearing the FOG](#) on We Act Radio 1480 AM Washington, DC, co-direct [Its Our Economy](#) and are organizers of the [Occupation of Washington, DC](#). [Read other articles by Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers](#).

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