

“Global shift – the US, China, and the Hong Kong Protests”

Duck of Minerva February 7, 2015

By Grant Dawson and Cyrus Janssen

<http://duckofminerva.com/2015/02/global-shift-the-us-china-and-the-hong-kong-protests.html>

The global order established by the West and led by the US since 1945 is gradually changing. China and the ‘rising Rest’ are catching-up to the US and the West in terms of economic and political power. Unfortunately, as was clear during the Hong Kong protests, the West’s ideas and attitudes about China are not keeping pace, and may lead to misunderstandings that undermine political relations during a crucial transitional period for everyone.

China’s rise is part of the most far-reaching power transitions in centuries, in which global order is slipping out of the West’s control. To see the direction we’re heading, look to Asia. China had a lead role in founding, without US participation, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. China and its partners, frustrated by lack of voice in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, established this international institution in October 2014.

However, western publics and governments rarely hear of how strong China has become, how it has already made satellites out of countries like the UK, how it is projecting power and expecting respect, and how it wants global order to reflect these new realities. There is lots of media coverage of China’s power projection in China, but much less of this sort of information that could sensitize publics and local and national governments in the West.

A negative perception of China prevails. For example, Canadian journalist John Ibbitson mentions China in the same breath as Nazi Germany. Citing Stephen Green’s book on German history and culture entitled *Reluctant Meister* (2014), he noted that for both China and Germany memories of past humiliations influenced relations with neighbours and the world. Will China lash-out like Germany did, to divert its people’s attention from internal problems? Making sure that the answer is ‘no,’ Ibbitson argues, is the ‘challenge of our century.’

Sometimes the US and the West, through misperception or arrogance, do not see things as they are and assume the worst of China. The most recent example, as mentioned above, is the Hong Kong protests. Through the media, the West suggests the people of Hong Kong were protesting for what they have already – democracy – rather than slightly different issues, relating to the preservation of local autonomy.

Instead of accentuating differences, the US and the West should be building bridges. Through the prism of the Hong Kong protests, the challenge and opportunity ahead can be seen. This part of our argument can be distilled to three points: democracy, dislocation, and global order.

Democracy:

People often mistake the protests to represent a struggle between communism and democracy with the Hong Kong Chinese living under suppression from Beijing. The reality is

China created the very political system Hong Kong has enjoyed for so long and has kept its word on maintaining a high level of autonomy for the city.

In the 1980's Deng Xiao Ping had the vision to create a "One Country, Two Systems" form of government which united China as one country but gave distinct areas such as Hong Kong their own capitalist economic and political systems.

Since the handover in 1997, China not Britain gave the Hong Kong people the chance to vote in elections. During Britain's 156-year rule of Hong Kong no free elections were ever held in the city as all Hong Kong governors were directly appointed from London.

China has proven to the world that there is more than one type of government that can be successful for its people. Plus China and the 'rising Rest' are catching-up or sprinting ahead of the West in material and economic terms, and do not accept the West's ideological leadership.

Dislocation:

For the Hong Kong Chinese, the protests are actually about their acute sense of dislocation. Hong Kong people believe their city is rapidly becoming just another Chinese city and are trying their best to maintain their distinctiveness.

Hong Kong Chinese speak a different language (Cantonese instead of Mandarin), use a different currency, and drive on the opposite side of the road. They have a deep history of British influence and consider themselves to be vastly ahead of their Mainland counterparts.

China's economy has become a powerhouse, and millions of Mainlanders now flock to Hong Kong to associate themselves with China's most westernized city. As a result Hong Kong's sense of superiority is eroding and the Hong Kong Chinese see their city's status and autonomy diminishing.

Mainland Chinese are buying up goods and straining the city's services, while soaring property values deny most Hong Kong Chinese the opportunity of buying a home.

It's a double-edged sword for Hong Kong, as its citizens try to maintain their individuality while also embracing their new economy, which has become dependent on Mainland China for growth.

Global order:

The West's judging of China matters. The West has dominated for two centuries. Perhaps without thinking about it very much, the West has profited enormously from the spread of its ideas and values (such as democracy and capitalism) and sway of its international institutions.

Now the West is losing its material and ideological lead. The West's misperceptions stigmatise China, and make it more difficult for western publics and governments to face up

to the task that lies ahead. As Charles A. Kupchan argues in *No One's World*, the West needs to strike a bargain with China and the 'rising Rest' on the new rules for order, by fashioning a consensus on legitimacy, sovereignty, and governance.

This room for manoeuvre will not exist forever. A new order will emerge even if the US and the West do nothing. But it may be less conducive to the US' and the West's interests. And once established, global orders stay a while. The West must therefore review and revise our understanding of China, and on global order encourage timely international dialogue.