AFTER THE HONG KONG ELECTIONS: “SLEEPLESS IN BEIJING”

SUMMARY
Hong Kong conducted District Council elections on 24 November 2019. These local councils handle quality-of-life issues for their constituents, but the elections were seen as a referendum on the anti-Beijing protests that have rocked Hong Kong for several months. The election results strongly favored pro-democracy forces. Of the 452 seats contested, 388 were won by pro-democracy candidates and only 62 went to pro-establishment parties.

The clear message that most Hong Kong citizens supported was the call for genuine democracy, which raised the question of how Beijing would proceed if the demonstrations continued. The initial responses of the Beijing government, as seen in official government statements and in comment by official and unofficial media, suggest that Beijing has no clear idea of how to deal with the Hong Kong crisis. President Xi Jinping and the Foreign Ministry had essentially nothing to say about the elections. Commentary in official press relied instead on quoting Chinese academics who took a cautious tone and said it was a time for “reflection.”

Instead, the Chinese government and media focused their frustration on the United States, claiming US interference and condemning the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act signed by President Trump on 27 November 2019. Even that push-back used standard political language, and the only actual countermeasures taken were the cancelling of US Navy port calls in Hong Kong and sanctions against some NGO’s.

Beijing has no obvious options to counter the pro-democracy movement. They cannot agree to greater Hong Kong autonomy without endangering Communist Party rule in China. They cannot crush the protests without endangering their position in the international community. Beijing can hope the protests will just fade away, but if they accelerate, what then?
BACKGROUND
On 24 November 2019, Hong Kong held city-wide District Council elections. There are 18 District Councils in Hong Kong, and their business is usually focused on local living conditions and civic welfare. They are not part of the Legislative Council, Hong Kong’s top-level representative body. However, coming amidst months of anti-Beijing protests that have morphed into calls for true democracy and even independence from mainland China, these local elections were seen as a referendum on the extent of support for the protests and pro-democracy sentiment in the general population.

The results were unexpectedly strong in favor of pro-democracy candidates. Of the 452 seats across the 18 District Councils, 388 were won by pro-democracy candidates and only 62 went to pro-establishment parties. In all, 17 of the 18 District Councils were won by pro-democracy forces. All 18 had previously been held by majorities of pro-establishment representatives, and this election lost them 242 seats.¹

This result was seen as a strong statement that Hong Kong citizens across the board supported the demonstrators and their fight against the Hong Kong government and Beijing’s control. It put the lie to the common Beijing claim that the protestors were an extreme faction and that the average Hong Kong citizen opposed the demonstrations and the destruction that resulted from clashes with police.

While this interpretation was not accepted publicly by the Beijing central government, the pro-democracy message must have been plain to Xi Jinping and the Chinese leadership. In effect, it gave evidence that most Hong Kong residents were in fact on the side of pro-democracy protesters, even if they were concerned about the violent tactics now being employed to make their points.

The question of what China does now about Hong Kong is an open one, given that the election result may force a recalculation by both protesters and the Chinese government on what is achievable. The next steps are not clear.

An examination of the Beijing government response to the elections themselves may give hints as to where this issue is headed. The Beijing view can be deduced from three types of Chinese media sources. First, statements by Chinese government representatives that are carried in various media establish the official line. Second, news coverage by Chinese official media, primarily People’s Daily, Xinhua News, and China Daily, includes opinion pieces that, without saying so, are generally known to be expressing official viewpoints. Third, unofficial Chinese press such as Global Times includes news coverage and editorial material that often has more of a tabloid feel to it while still supportive of the government position. The content in all three of these source types was examined to see how the Chinese government responded to the Hong Kong election results.

CHARACTERIZING THE ELECTION
The election was held on Sunday, 24 November, and the results began appearing on Monday morning. The initial Xinhua coverage of the District Council elections said little more than “the counting of ballots in the Sixth-term District Council Ordinary Election ... has completed as of Monday noon.” It gave no tally of the voting, but instead claimed that “some rioters harassed patriotic candidates” on election day.²

Later that same day, Xinhua reporting briefly quoted President Xi Jinping’s “guidance for Hong Kong to stop violence and restore order” which he gave while on a visit that day to Brazil. In the same article, Xinhua complained that “by creating the ‘black terror,’ rioters and the politicians behind them who are anti-China and want to mess up Hong Kong reaped substantial political benefits. The most urgent task at present is still to bring the violence and chaos to an end and restore order.”³

Xinhua ran a brief article on the reaction to the elections by Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who was on a visit to Japan. Wang Yi apparently said little more than “any attempt to destabilize Hong Kong or to undermine Hong Kong’s prosperity and stability is doomed to failure,” and “no matter how the situation in Hong Kong changes, one thing is crystal clear: Hong Kong is part of China and a special administrative region of China.”⁴

Once the extent of the pro-democracy victory became clear, Beijing initially withheld direct comment and made use of statements by Chinese academics who took a cautious tone. For example, Song Xiuchong, a professor at Shenzhen University, found the results puzzling:

“It appears that voters in Hong Kong cared less about the economy and livelihood issues and wanted to vent their anger at the government. If this is true, then the future governance of Hong Kong could become difficult and there is not much that Beijing can do.”

Li Xiaobing, a Hong Kong specialist at Nankai University in Tianjin, made similar public comments:

“We had hoped for a shift in public opinion as the anti-government protests turned more violent, but it did not happen. The central government needs to handle the situation in Hong Kong in a more pragmatic manner.”

In an online post on the day after the election, Mei Xinyu, an economist affiliated with the Ministry of Commerce, said that, “the landslide defeat in the Hong Kong district council elections could be a good thing if it resulted in deep reflection. The mess in Hong Kong and a big defeat in the district council elections will hopefully kick-start rumination.”

Some of the Xinhua reporting in the week following the elections focused on other issues such as how the protests were affecting the Hong Kong economy. This included stories like:

- “Hong Kong Records Biggest Visitor Decline In 16 Years in Q3”
- “Hong Kong's Retail Sales Register Largest Drop on Record”
- “Hong Kong Likely to Register 1st Budget Deficit In 15 Years”

Rather than critique the results officially, Beijing made broader use of the Global Times for nominally unofficial coverage of the elections. The tone here was frank in terms of the loss but the Global Times also attempted to explain that loss away in several ways.

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Early Global Times coverage acknowledged the pro-democrats’ “big win” and said that the pro-establishment group had called for “a thorough introspection of deep-rooted social issues.” It quoted the chairperson of the pro-establishment DAB group as having apologized for their loss in the elections and stating that “the party will reflect on its failure.”

The Global Times tried to minimize the impact of the elections first of all by quoting Chinese academics who claimed the results were skewed because “ongoing social tensions made public opinion expression highly sentimental,” or who pointed out that “the pro-establishment camp still secured 40 percent of the votes, which means there is no need to over-interpret the victory of pan-democrats.” It also pushed back against the notion that “overwhelming support for anti-government forces showed that Hong Kong has been moving away from the central government,” calling this a “misunderstanding” of the relationship between Hong Kong and Beijing.

Three days after the election, the Global Times interviewed another Chinese academic who claimed that since “the District Council election took place amid social unrest, which hardly delivered a clear message.” He also said that while Beijing needed to reconsider its policies toward Hong Kong, “the central government will continue using its power to safeguard ‘one country, two systems’, particularly to come up with measures to crack down on secessionists.”

During the week following the elections, the Global Times emphasized that China needed to play the role of guiding Hong Kong “toward healthy development under the principles of Basic Law.” They also continued the theme that Hong Kong protests were instigated from the outside:

“The demonstrations became devastating due to the hardline strategy implemented by the US against China. In this sense, dealing with the Hong Kong issue, to a large extent, is equivalent to handling relations with the US and the West.”

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11 www.globaltimes.cn/content/1171168.shtml.
12 www.globaltimes.cn/content/1171168.shtml.
13 www.globaltimes.cn/content/1171466.shtml.
14 www.globaltimes.cn/content/1171472.shtml.
When demonstrations continued into early December, Global Times pointed out that this meant “they are unavoidably being used by external forces to make the city continuously suffer from instability and violence.”

**CONFRONTING THE UNITED STATES**

The strongest responses to the situation were in fact not directed against Hong Kong’s pro-democracy forces but against “interference” in the crisis by the United States. US political comment on the victory for pro-democracy forces made clear that at least parts of the US government celebrated the election outcome. Senator Rick Scott of Florida, said on the day after, “The people of Hong Kong spoke loud and clear that they will not tolerate efforts by Communist China to take away their rights as promised to them during the handover in 1997.” Senator Joshua Hawley from Missouri posted on Twitter, “China take notice. The people are speaking.” Senator Cory Garner of Colorado tweeted, “Today the people of #HongKong turned out to vote in record numbers demanding democracy and autonomy from Beijing. The free world hears you and we #StandWithHongKong.”

These comments were but personal expressions of what the US Congress had done through legislation with its passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019. This Act proposed sanctions against Beijing and Hong Kong government figures associated with any human rights abuses in Hong Kong. The Act was passed by both houses by mid-November, just prior to the District Council elections, and sent to the White House for signature. President Trump signed the Act on 27 November.

The initial formal reaction to Congress’ passage of the Act actually came the day before it was signed by President Trump. Communist Party-Political Bureau member Yang Jiechi “expressed the Chinese side's firm opposition to and strong condemnation of the recent passage of the so-called Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act.” Yang further stated that “the relevant
act of the US Congress has seriously harmed China's interests and undermined Hong Kong's prosperity and stability.”

Once the Act was signed, the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared their official opposition on 28 November. As published by Xinhua, it was succinct:

“The move is a severe interference in Hong Kong affairs, which are China's internal affairs. It is also in serious violation of the international law and basic norms governing international relations. The Chinese government and the people firmly oppose such stark hegemonic acts. We urge the United States not to continue going down the wrong path, or China will take countermeasures and the US must bear all the consequences.”

This “interference in China’s internal affairs” language was essentially a repeat of standard Chinese statements to the United States whenever the US has commented on events in Hong Kong. As such, it did not stand out as a particularly strong rebuke. It was repeated in other forms by other elements of the Chinese government. The Liaison Office of the Chinese Central Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region added:

"The purpose of the act is to disrupt Hong Kong and use it to contain China's development. We express our utmost indignation and condemnation over the series of acts of bullying by the United States. Their vicious plot has been exposed.”

The Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of China's State Council, in their statement condemning the Hong Kong Act, said:

“The act, denounced by all Chinese, including Hong Kong people, is imbued with prejudice and arrogance, and treats Hong Kong with intimidation and threats. Facts have proved that the United States is the biggest culprit in disrupting Hong Kong.”

One other official act was noted as part of Beijing’s push-back. Xinhua reported that the Foreign Ministry summoned the US Ambassador to China Terry Branstad “to lodge stern representations and strong protest” against the move by the United States.

Xinhua was careful to show that there was also opposition to the US legislation from Hong Kong itself. It quoted Hong Kong’s Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (the primary pro-

establishment party) as condemning the US interference in China’s internal affairs and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions’ statement that the US “added fuel to the flames” through the legislation. The Hong Kong government also expressed its opposition to the legislation on 28 November.

Non-government statements included a Xinhua editorial on 28 November that confronted the legislation in strong but typical language:

“The signing of the legislation of the so-called Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019 is a thinly veiled attempt to push Hong Kong closer to the abyss of chaos, and the latest proof of the willingness of some US politicians to use questionable means to undermine China's sovereignty. It is an abrasive intrusion in China's internal affairs and a provocation against all Chinese people, including Hong Kong compatriots, to interfere in Hong Kong affairs by adopting a domestic law. By endorsing violent criminals and going against international law, the act is nothing but a hypocritical effort to intervene in the name of promoting human rights and democracy. Such an agenda is sure to be looked down upon by the international community. China will not be intimidated, and the United States is sure to suffer backlash from all Chinese people, including Hong Kong compatriots.”

The US move drew the expected push-back from Global Times which published articles such as “US Has To Exercise Caution In Using Newly Minted Hong Kong Law” and “Trump Will Think Carefully Before Using Hong Kong Bill Against China In The Future.” Global Times opinion pieces claimed that “Trump's true intention in signing the bill is not about promoting the so-called democracy and freedom in the city, but about keeping his voters happy for the upcoming presidential election.” It quoted academics who said that Chinese countermeasures could include blocking US corporations’ access to the Chinese market or restricting some US politicians from entering China.

Finally, on 2 December 2019, Beijing announced their initial formal response to the legislation on Hong Kong signed by President Trump. Xinhua reported that the Foreign Ministry “has decided to suspend reviewing applications to visit Hong Kong by US military ships and aircraft. China will also take
sanctions against some US non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for their role in the disturbances in Hong Kong. China urges the US to correct its mistake and stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs or interfering in China's other internal affairs by any word and act.”

The Global Times claimed that “China's retaliatory measures showed the Chinese government's resolve to safeguard its sovereignty, security, development, to follow the ‘one country, two systems’ principle, and to resist external interference.”

Thereafter, except for a handful of such statements, little more of an official nature was said about President Trump or the US legislation. An early December 2019 search of Xinhua for references to President Trump or the Hong Kong elections uncovered very few additional articles.

CONCLUSIONS
The most striking aspect of the Beijing response to the Hong Kong elections is perhaps what was not said. In addressing the pro-democracy victory in Hong Kong directly, President Xi Jinping had almost nothing to say. Foreign Minister Wang Yi had almost nothing to say. Academics used as surrogates for the government struck a reflective tone, even saying that “there is not much that Beijing can do.” The Global Times attempted to minimize the impact of the elections and explain away the results.

The strongest response was not to the elections but to the Unites States and the passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act just after the elections. Even there, the initial response was mostly boilerplate language about interference in internal affairs, neither particularly harsh nor original. The official response in the form of NGO sanctions and the suspension of US Navy port calls in Hong Kong does not seem to be something that will cause a lot of pain for the US side. This has been followed by a brief period in which discussion of the Hong Kong elections has all but disappeared from Chinese media.

The nature of the response to date suggests that China has no clear idea of how to resolve the Hong Kong situation. Its actions so far reflect a desire to bring demonstrations to an end without having the crisis blow up in their faces. They officially ignored the protests for months and kept images of the demonstrations out of the Chinese press. When the intensity of Hong Kong demonstrations ramped up in early fall, the Beijing government criticized the violence done by “criminals” and “terrorists” and threatened that violence would not be tolerated. They did make a show of force by briefly moving military forces into Shenzhen near the Hong Kong border. They increased the troop strength in the PLA's Hong Kong garrison, but again took no real action in Hong Kong. The only times that PLA troops have been out of

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30 www.globaltimes.cn/content/1172316.shtml.

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garrison have been to pick up rubble in the streets, appearing harmless in their shorts and t-shirts.

The message of the District Council elections to Beijing is that the majority of Hong Kong residents support the pro-democracy movement and do not want to fall under the control of Beijing, now or in the future. This was made clear to all the world by the election results. Beijing’s decision process is now complicated by official, if limited, US support for Hong Kong’s democracy movement.

What can Beijing do now? It can’t just say, “Hong Kong has the right to a democratic system,” much less “Hong Kong can be independent from the rest of China.” Either of these answers would likely lead to the end of Communist Party rule in China. Beijing cannot respond positively to demonstrations for political liberty without anticipating such demonstrations next in Shenzhen, Shanghai, or Beijing.

Perhaps the best that Beijing can hope for is that some minor concessions short of real democracy will cause the demonstrators to call a halt and go back to school, that life in Hong Kong will go back to “normal.” That could happen, but it does not seem to be within Beijing’s power to make it happen. Their actions so far have failed to dissuade the demonstrators. If the democracy movement maintains momentum, stays on the streets, Beijing can continue to pretend that it’s not happening or that they don’t have to do anything to resolve the crisis. If the protesters themselves are emboldened or energized by knowing now that the city supports them, demonstrations may continue, and violent action could escalate. If the protests don’t stop, Beijing is left with choices of ignoring them or crushing them, neither of which would seem attractive.

As one analyst has characterized Xi Jinping’s problem, he could continue to be “sleepless in Beijing.”

Contact the Red Sky Alliance for more information: 603-606-1246, or feedback@wapacklabs.com

Prepared: Silkworm
Reviewed: B. Schenkelberg
Approved: J. McKee

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