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# China's Crackdown in Hong Kong

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD SEPT. 29, 2014

If China had honored the political commitments it made before taking control of Hong Kong from Britain in 1997, it is likely there would be no protests in the city streets and no crackdown over the weekend by riot police using tear gas, pepper spray and batons against pro-democracy demonstrators.

Instead, the government in Beijing, ever fearful of its people, reneged on promises and allowed or ordered Hong Kong authorities to attack students and other citizens demanding democratic elections in Hong Kong. The pro-democracy protesters were so enraged that thousands defied a government call on Monday to abandon street blockades across the city. On Tuesday morning, tens of thousands, including many new recruits angered by the police actions, had again filled the city center.

When the Chinese Army entered Hong Kong in July 1997 and peacefully reclaimed the city after more than 150 years of British rule, there was reason to hope that China would fulfill its promise to maintain "one country, two systems" until 2047. For one thing, both Britain and the United States offered themselves as guarantors of the transition agreement, although they now seem less interested in that responsibility. For another, Hong Kong had begun to establish itself as an economically vibrant society, which China hoped to replicate on the mainland.

The agreement signed by Britain and China allowed Hong Kong to retain its free-market economy, a legal system with an independent judiciary and other rights, including greater civil liberties than residents of the mainland. China also promised free elections for Hong Kong's chief executive in 2017, but, late last month, China's legislature called for limiting the candidates who would be allowed to run, among other restrictions. With the government insisting on controlling the

nomination process, the protesters' demand for fully democratic elections looked to be slipping away, so they took to the streets.

President Xi Jinping of China has established himself as an autocratic leader, so there is no telling how far he would go if the pro-democracy forces keep standing their ground. He has shown no mercy against Uighur separatists in Xinjiang, and he has made sure that government censors tightened controls on Instagram and other Internet programs in Hong Kong. It is hard not to fear a repeat of the bloody crackdown 25 years ago against protesters in Tiananmen Square that killed hundreds.

Such an outcome would be devastating for the people of Hong Kong and would severely damage — if not obliterate — the political stability that multinational corporations have long relied on for doing business there. In fact, as tensions over the election issue increased in recent months, some risk-averse corporations in Hong Kong have moved their headquarters to Singapore.

The crisis is also raising concerns in Taiwan, a self-governing island that the Chinese government insists is a province of China that must one day be reunited with the mainland. After what's happened in Hong Kong, the Taiwanese will have no reason ever to trust China's promise of "one country, two systems."

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