

Trotsky to Xi: no need to throw everything at them

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM August 9, 2019



Illustration: Tom Jellett

Even were the situation in Hong Kong to deteriorate further, it is clear that the turmoil poses little immediate threat to the stability of China's communist regime.

There is no evidence of the protests spreading into the mainland; and while the protesters can seriously disrupt daily life in Hong Kong, they hardly seem capable of overthrowing Hong Kong's administration, much less China's central government.

No one should understand that better than the country's communist leadership, who would have been reared on the Marxist-Leninist theory of revolution. Classically articulated by Leon Trotsky in his analyses of the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, that theory carefully distinguishes

revolutions from mere uprisings.

The defining feature of a revolutionary situation, Trotsky maintained, is not the explosion of popular discontent but the emergence of “dual power” — that is, the development of a centre of authority that credibly challenges the established government’s claim to sovereignty.

For that to be possible, the established government must be poised to disintegrate: as well as having lost legitimacy and its base of support, it must face internal dissension that cripples its willingness or ability to suppress the challenger and reassert its control.

Moreover, for the challenger to convert the revolutionary situation into a revolutionary outcome, it has to be sufficiently unified and disciplined to simultaneously withstand whatever repressive measures the government adopts and erect an alternative regime that can seize control of the state apparatuses.

That, Trotsky argued, requires a very high level of political organisation; and if the challenger lacks that organisation, it will crumble as repression, exhaustion and disillusionment take their toll.

None of those preconditions for revolution is met in Hong Kong. A dual power has not emerged and is unlikely to emerge; the government’s reputation has been thrashed but its capacity to unleash overwhelming force is undiminished; and far from being a tightly structured revolutionary organisation, the protesters are a loose-knit coalition that is vulnerable to internal divergences and the havoc wreaked by agents provocateurs.

To that extent, China’s leaders could adopt the approach France’s Emmanuel Macron has used against the *gilets jaunes*: brutal but not fatal crowd control aimed at frightening away less committed demonstrators without creating martyrs; targeted arrests and convictions to incapacitate

the ringleaders; and the granting of minor concessions while waiting for frustration to drive the protesters into extreme tactics, dividing the movement, eroding its support and provoking widespread calls for order to be restored.

The international context should favour such a measured response. To begin with, a massacre, such as that which took place at Tiananmen Square, would almost certainly ensure the victory of a pro-independence candidate in Taiwan's forthcoming presidential election, worsening the already badly frayed relations across the Taiwan Strait. Even more important, while the administration of George HW Bush moved rapidly to defuse the tensions between the US and China that followed Tiananmen Square, a repeat performance is likely to escalate the present trade war and precipitate American and European sanctions, dealing a further blow to China's slowing economy.

With global bond yields plummeting in recent weeks — signalling a move into recession — the implications for the world economy could be disastrous, compounding the pain for China, not merely economically but also in terms of its international standing.

All that ought to make for caution. But it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the pressures going the other way.

As George Washington University's David Shambaugh has shown, China's leadership views its position as extremely fragile, which is why spending on domestic security has more than tripled since 2007 and now substantially exceeds spending on national defence.

Reflecting that acute sense of vulnerability, many of the key decisions are being taken by the "iron quadrangle" of the ministries of propaganda and internal security, the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police, which have everything to gain and little to lose from an extremely aggressive response.

At the same time, the leadership generally, and President and Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping in particular, have an almost obsessive preoccupation with the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event whose salience has been heightened by the impending 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Normally, Marxism downplays the role of ideas in history; however, Xi and his colleagues view the Soviet collapse as largely due to Mikhail Gorbachev's errors, notably his accommodating attitude towards the US and his willingness to adopt "bourgeois" ideology, especially "bourgeois" democracy and the rule of law.

Those errors, they claim, led to fatal choices, including tolerating the spread of protest in eastern Europe despite the likelihood of spillover effects into the Soviet Union. Given that assessment, the communist leadership is constantly on the lookout for signs of ideological contagion and seeks to eradicate them as soon as they appear. The fact China has a long history of student unrest — stretching, in the communist era, from the Red Guards' uprising in the late 1960s to the protest movements that gripped the universities from 1976 to 1980 and again in 1989 — only strengthens its repressive instincts.

To be sure, military intervention in Hong Kong would have a devastating effect on China's reputation in the West. But with the regime rapidly evolving from mere authoritarianism to bellicose totalitarianism, China scarcely counts on "soft power" or goodwill to achieve its international objectives. Rather, adopting, on an even vaster scale, the Soviet strategy of "Finlandisation", it relies on a combination of heavy-handed threats and the systematic corruption of elites to suborn or at least neutralise countries such as Australia.

That strategy, as Richard Pipes noted, is highly effective in societies where materialism and intellectual shallowness are so dominant in the elites that they have forgotten Lord Acton's warning that liberty is the

“delicate fruit of a mature civilisation”, whose preservation requires vigilance, courage and determination.

However, the people of Hong Kong have not forgotten. Nor are they willing to stand by and see what liberty they have slip away. China’s communist leaders know that. And like all despots, they also know that the fear of repression is not genetically inherited; every generation must be taught it anew.

How soon that lesson will come it is impossible to say. But with Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam ominously declaring that the city is on “the verge of a very dangerous situation”, the people of Hong Kong will need all the vigilance, courage and determination they can get.