



With autocrats on defensive, US has opportunity

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Moscow detains nearly 1,400 protesters after a bloody crackdown and returns its most prominent opposition figure to jail after what he suspects was a state-ordered poisoning that put him in the hospital. Beijing hints that it will send its army to quell protests against Hong Kong's China-backed government.

For all their outward self-confidence, the governments of Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping seem unusually unnerved by recent protests, perhaps reflecting unstated concerns that the protests could threaten both regimes.

That's unlikely, but those governments would be wise to take nothing for granted. After all, no one knows what will trigger an uprising that's large enough to topple a government, or a series of them. No one could have predicted the Soviet crack-up of three decades ago or the "Arab Spring" of more recent years, however much the populations in both places were itching for change.

Moreover, autocracies face new challenges to maintaining power. Modern communications - computers, mobile phones, social media - make it harder for autocracies to prevent their constituents from securing information from the outside and, in turn, comparing their plight with their brethren in freer and more democratic societies.

That reality presents more opportunities for the United States - long the global beacon of freedom and democracy - to reach oppressed populations, inspire would-be democrats, and put autocratic regimes on the defensive. The only question is whether Washington will seize the opportunities.

In Moscow, authorities are opening criminal cases after weekend protests against the local government's decision to ban about 30 candidates from the ballot for September elections. As thousands marched peacefully in Moscow, police attacked with batons, leaving some bleeding from the head and arms. Those charged in connection with the unauthorized protest could face up to 15 years in prison.

In the meantime, more than 40 people are serving jail terms of three to 30 days just for attending the protests, including some banned candidates. Aleksei Navalny, Russia's most prominent opposition figure, who is serving 30 days for calling the weekend protest, spent a few days in a hospital due to facial swelling, eye problems, and a rash, prompting Navalny to suspect a poisoning.

The protests are part of a burgeoning movement against the continued rule of Russian leader Vladimir Putin, whose popularity has plummeted in recent years due to declining living standards as well as a series of discreet controversies - such as the government's decision to raise the age for receiving pensions.

In Hong Kong, meanwhile, the government charged 44 people with rioting, which could land them in prison for years, as protests that began weeks ago over legislation to allow extraditions of suspects to China have expanded into broader calls for freedom - and as Beijing signals that it may send its army to restore order.

Chinese officials called the protesters "radical elements," said they committed "evil and criminal acts," and blamed Washington for stoking the uprising. *The China Daily*, a Communist Party news outlet, disparaged the protests as "of the same hue as the color revolutions that were instigated in the Middle East and North Africa - local anti-government elements colluding with external forces to topple governments utilizing modern communication technology to spread rumors, distrust and fear."

In recent days, Chinese officials also said that Hong Kong could invite China's army to restore order, and they praised the army as a "pillar" of Hong Kong's stability. Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, visited a Chinese army garrison in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, Chinese troops are reported to be congregating along Hong Kong's border.

The good news is that Moscow and Beijing's struggles are Washington's opportunity to help itself and the world at large.

In the unlikely event that the protests grow large enough to topple either regime and replace it with a democracy, Washington would benefit greatly - because a freer, more democratic world would be a safer, more prosperous one for the United States and its allies.

But Washington doesn't need a revolution to benefit from the unrest. The more Moscow and Beijing are preoccupied with protests at home, the less time they can devote to causing trouble outside their borders.

President Donald Trump has a choice: He can stay quiet and give the autocrats in Moscow and Beijing free rein to crack down more harshly - or, as his predecessors did with similar protests of earlier times, he can put America's moral voice behind the brave protesters in Russia and Hong Kong, inspiring them to greater action.

The gap between what America is currently failing to do and what it could be accomplishing has rarely been greater.

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