

## BEHIND THE WALL: From Tiananmen to Hong Kong

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*How would today's liberal democracies react to an even more forceful repression of the protests in Hong Kong? How would they handle a repeat of the events of 1989 in Tiananmen Square? Liberal democratic states have never been so reluctant to proselytise about their system of values and institutions. Thirty years on from the fall of the Berlin wall, its significance has faded from the collective memory and the optimism that prompted a belief in a coming wave of democracy has mutated into a sterile Western pragmatism towards the Asian economic colossus.*

By a quirk of history, the protests against authoritarianism in Hong Kong coincide with the thirtieth anniversary both of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Tiananmen Square massacre. In Germany, breaking down the partitions and taking the checkpoints symbolised vindication for citizens and the beginning of the end of Soviet despotism and oppression. A new era marked by the victory of the rule of law and liberal systems of democratic representation began. In China, the repression by the People's Liberation Army elicited angry responses from the hyper-optimistic democracies and strong economic sanctions and condemnation from the United States, the United Kingdom and what was then the European Community. Liberal voices declared that this was no longer acceptable, that Budapest in 1956 was a long time ago. Many saw it as the late lashing out of a regime becoming aware of its weakness before an incoming wave of democracy. With the wall down and the Soviet Union defeated, they thought China would inevitably stick to the liberal textbook and, thanks to the market economy and the consequent emergence of an empowered middle class, in the space of a few years it would be just one more democracy.

Three decades after the wall fell, not only has that not happened, but democracies around the world seem to be **in retreat** and frightened. Thirty years of ups and downs have returned us to where we started: students in Chinese streets demanding more democratic rights. The changes of these past three decades and the path of the liberal democracies themselves provide some clues as to what we might expect from them today if history repeats itself.

## **From victory to euphoria**

Many saw the end of the Cold War, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin wall, as a victory for democracy. The view of the conflict as bipolar in essentially ideological terms or as a competition between political and economic systems meant that the disappearance of one system seemed to confirm the validity – and even superiority – of the other. A collective euphoria seized the democracies, awakening a powerful optimism that proclaimed “the end of history” and the inevitability of a definitive and lasting victory. One authoritarian regime after the next would succumb to the “wave of democracy”. The role of liberal democracies, therefore, should be to “accelerate history”. This democracy spreading involved working towards the economic liberalisation that would, in the medium term, result in political liberalisation. This can be clearly seen in the global multilateralism of the 1990s: for example, the United Nations’ *Agenda for Peace* (1992), the GATT’s transformation into the World Trade Organization (1995) and the Wolfensohn era at the World Bank (1995–2005).

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## **From euphoria to recklessness**

Democratic optimism immediately generated a climate of euphoria that led to over-action. Liberal interventionism in the Third World in the 1990s is the best example of this. Largely unsuccessful military interventions in Somalia (1992), Djibouti (1992) and Haiti (1994) that fell between humanitarianism and the rationales of regime change and democracy promotion were the result of such optimism. The recklessness was aggravated by the sense of helplessness generated by the genocides in Rwanda (1994) and Srebrenica (1995). Initial judgements were that nothing could or should be done, but they were soon used as compelling moral arguments to justify subsequent interventions. East Timor and the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War (both 1999) also fit this description. The Asian financial crisis (1997), which showed both that sustained growth was difficult to achieve and that the market economy and democracy were not necessarily connected vessels, also did little to dampen the euphoria. After the September 11th 2001 attacks, and with the added ingredient of fear and the “war on terror”, some democratic states embarked on a second round of reckless activities whose central narrative was to promote liberal democracy as an antidote to radicalism and terrorism. The invasion of Afghanistan began an attempt to change a regime that almost twenty years later seems to be resulting in certain Taliban-lite figures returning to power. And then there was Iraq.

## **From recklessness to failure**

The invasion of Iraq (2003) – archetype of the *neoccon* “democracy promotion” and “regime change” paradigm – was the ultimate expression of recklessness. In Iraq, reality dealt a blow to the republican ideal that democracies could do everything, even in the most difficult settings. Approximately 200,000 fatalities into the intervention, the feeling in the proselytising capitals was that the price to be paid had already become unsustainable, especially for such a poor, fragile result. It was a definitive moment of realisation that, beyond spurious desires, the capacity to build a democracy imported by force did not exist. In the hardest way possible, they discovered that a victory for democracy would not be easy and was far from inevitable; that a moral imperative can exist only in regard to what you can do, and not about what lies beyond your reach. Years later, the so-called Arab Spring (2011) was the final nail in the coffin. Libya ratified the failure of interventionist proselytising; Syria confirmed that it was a thing of the past.

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## **From failure to nihilism**

After thirty years, with the significance of the wall coming down now faded from the collective memory, the euphoric soufflé has sunk. Now we face the return of doubt. Democracies themselves not only question their capacities to generate effective changes but also the validity of democracy as a universal aspiration. Never before have liberal democratic states been so reluctant to proselytise about their system of values and institutions. In fact, they even seem to have given up the idea that what is good for them is good for humanity as a whole. Through its actions, the misnamed West, in particular, is betraying its founding humanist values both in its internal evolution and its capacity for external transformation. Democratic nihilism prevails.

And in the midst of so much doubt appears Hong Kong. The nihilism generated over the past three decades makes it likely that a sterile, economy-focussed pragmatism will prevent even voices being raised against the Asian economic colossus. The acceptance of an inability to press for democratic progress – or even a minimal respect for the rule of law, the separation of powers and the most fundamental human rights – is the result of awareness of all previous failures. Looking the other way becomes the only possible collective response.

But while euphoria proved dangerous, nihilism also casts a shadow over the essence of democracies. Accepting that you cannot always do what you want does not necessarily mean systematically ceasing to denounce. To say that nothing can be done for the future of democracy in Hong Kong is comparable to giving up on even saying that what we see offends us and that we believe in ways of acting and governing that differ from those imposed by repression. Tiananmen was the symbol that something was changing; Hong Kong should not be the sign that in thirty years we have not learned which world we want.