

China faces tough choices in bid to end ongoing Hong Kong protests

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Contents

- [1. More of the same](#)
- [2. Give in](#)
- [3. Up the ante](#)
- [4. Send in the troops](#)

China has only tough choices as it looks to end more than two months of pro-democracy protests in its semi- autonomous southern city of Hong Kong.

The protesters have shown no signs of backing down, despite increasingly violent confrontations in which HongKong's police have regularly fired tear gas and rubber bullets.

The protests were triggered by opposition to a planned law that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China, then evolved into a wider movement for democratic reform and a halt to eroding freedoms.

Here are the potential options for the central government as it seeks to end the crisis, and the problems associated with each:

1. More of the same

Beijing's current approach has been to express **firm public support for the Hong Kong police and the city's chief executive, Carrie Lam**, while warning the protesters their actions are "intolerable".

*"Beijing has adopted an intimidation strategy and is trying to **wait it out until at least early September, when (school) term starts** – many protesters are high school and university students,"* said Hong Kong-based political analyst Dixon Sing.

The party is also preparing for the 70th anniversary of the founding of modern China, and is unlikely to want to take antagonistic steps ahead of that.

The wait-and-see approach is similar to how it approached the 2014 pro-democracy "Umbrella Movement" in HongKong.

The 2014 events saw protesters occupy parts of the city for more than two months but faded away without winning concessions from Beijing after key leaders were arrested.

But this may not be enough.

*** By waiting, it risks further embarrassment for a government led by Chinese President Xi Jinping** that tolerates no dissent.

"The protests in Hong Kong are a serious loss of face for Beijing, and presents a key political and strategic dilemma for the Chinese authorities – do we intervene, when, and how," Michael Raska,

assistant professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, told AFP.

2. Give in

Beijing could pressure Hong Kong's government into **adopting a more conciliatory tone and finding some way to compromise** with the protesters.

Their demands include an independent inquiry into police methods, and the permanent shelving of the extradition bill.

The government could also orchestrate Lam's resignation, another key demand of the protesters. *"Lam has become a colossal political liability both locally and internationally,"* said Sing.

*** However, doing so would be seen to be giving in to the protesters and rewarding their actions.**

"The likelihood of Beijing adopting non-violent, conciliatory measures is low," Hong Kong-based political analyst Willy Lam told AFP.

3. Up the ante

The central government could **step up its pressure and intimidation** tactics against the protesters. There has already been increasingly strident condemnation from authorities and state media.

The Chinese military last week described the unrest as "intolerable" and released a slick propaganda video showing a drill of armed troops quelling a protest in Hong Kong.

"At this stage, (Chinese president Xi Jinping) is gravitating towards a more hardline stance," Lam said.

*** But** if Beijing does not plan to carry out such threats, then there is a **risk** of needlessly causing further panic. This could **trigger a flow of money and companies out of the global financial hub.**

4. Send in the troops

The most dramatic - and risky - strategy for the central government would be to send in military reinforcements.

There is already a garrison of thousands of troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) stationed in HongKong, though they generally keep a low profile.

While Hong Kong's law states PLA troops *"shall not interfere in the local affairs of the region"*, it also says they **can be deployed to "maintain public order."**

*** But this last resort could spell financial disaster for Hong Kong and wholesale global condemnation for the Chinese Communist Party.**

"It would seriously undermine the political legitimacy of Xi Jinping and the CCP, both internally as well as externally, with widespread international condemnation reminiscent of the 1989 suppression of Tiananmen Square protests," said Raska.

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