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CHINA: Xi Chooses Inaction on Hong Kong amid Internal and External Constraints

Summary: Chinese President Xi Jinping's reluctance to intervene in the protests in Hong Kong likely stems from fear of global political and economic repercussions. At the same time, Xi's nationalist base is pushing him to take a hardline approach. On balance, these various factors will likely lead Xi to choose inaction, allowing the protests to continue and run their course, possibly emboldening other separatist movements.

Background: On 31 March, protestors began demonstrating across Hong Kong against a controversial bill proposed by the Hong Kong government. The bill would allow China to force the extradition of suspected criminals to China for prosecution. More broadly, protestors are demonstrating for their overall autonomy from China. Protestors are using a variety of tactics to cause havoc in Hong Kong and generate international attention including forcing the shutdown of public transit and the Hong Kong airport for hours at a time.

Potential Damage to Xi's image: Xi likely fears that harsh action against the protests would hurt China's international and domestic image. Suppression of the protests will likely embolden the protesters and possibly create lasting historical grievances and furthering the divide between Hong Kong and mainland China making integration of Hong Kong into China more difficult. Additionally, a major incident in Hong Kong could cause other countries to put forth more pressure to other human rights violations such as Beijing's major oppression of the Uyghurs. Additionally, a harsh offense by Beijing will almost certainly stain Xi's legacy and undermine his position as the most powerful general secretary since Mao, similar to how Deng Xiaoping retired in 1989 after the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Possible Economic Repercussions: Xi also likely worries that harsh action in Hong Kong would damage China's economy. Conflict in a strategic economic center such as Hong Kong will likely make trade and business conditions unfavorable due to increased market anxiety and instability damaging China's economy. Xi likely fears an economic disaster in Hong Kong, given China's slowing economic growth rate and contention with the West, which is already creating major economic anxieties in China. Xi's power lies in his ability to provide the Chinese people a strong, stable economy, and economic decline could significantly jeopardize Xi's power. Historically, large protests against the government coincide with periods of economic decline, directly challenging the authority of the Communist Party of China (CPC), such as happened with the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Traditionally, events such as Tiananmen Square or even the overthrow of an emperor have occurred when the people of China no longer believe that the leader possess the "Mandate of Heaven"—an idea rooted in Chinese psyche that the leader should create stability and prosperity.

Pressure from Mainland China Likely Pushes Xi to Stop the Protests in Hong Kong: Xi likely feels pressured by his nationalist core base and hardliners who likely desire firm action against the protestors. Consequently, these groups may view Xi's hesitance to stop the protests as weakness and counterproductive to his message to the National Congress Party, where he threatened harsh consequences for dissenters, alluding to pro-democratic movements in Hong Kong. Failing to stop the protests will probably cause Xi to lose some of the nationalist base and

work to achieve the strategic objectives that he outlines. With less support from this base, Xi will likely face increasing difficulty achieving his own ambitious policy objectives in China and possibly maintaining his position.

Outlook and Implications: Potential damage to China's image, fear of economic repercussion, and pressure from Xi's core nationalist base leaves Xi most self-preserving course of action is inaction. Xi's dilemma leaves China in a weakened global position with limited political maneuverability in dealing with the protests. Although the protests in Hong Kong show explicit desire for reform, the protests themselves will not likely make a significant change to Hong Kong's status with China.

Xi may be trying to deal with the protests subtly to avoid any major consequences and is taking a long-term strategy. If Xi uses more diplomatic methods to end the protests rather than authoritarian rule, China and other global entities could leverage more support for democracy. Such support for democracy would likely continue to weaken China's position as a global superpower and could encourage a more pro-democracy protests such as the ones in Moscow and Hong Kong. Xi's inaction could also indicate that dissenters will likely influence Chinese policy more than ever. Additionally, Taipei may feel encouraged to leverage their interests more aggressively.

[Parker Labine, Cade Seely, Ethan Theobald]

ALGERIA: Mass Protests Likely to Disrupt December Elections

Summary: Algeria has scheduled elections in December, but protests and corruption allegations may prevent them from occurring.

Development: On 15 September, Algerian Interim President Abdelkader Bensalah announced that an election will take place on 12 December. Starting in February, Algerians protested weekly against unemployment and corruption, which forced the then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign. Bensalah attempted to run elections in July, but failed due to a lack of participation, as protesters cited incidents of corruption and demanded that more of the previous administration step down before the election occurs.

Analysis: If the government does not meet protesters' demands, the election process will likely fail again. Protesters have demonstrated a willingness to ignore the process once before, and as the circumstances have not significantly changed, the elections will likely face the same fate as those in July. These elections may serve as Bensalah's attempt to calm citizens and meet their demands, but without the government acknowledging protesters' claims of government corruption, protestors will most likely not view Bensalah's elections favorably. Until more officials vacate their posts, protests will most likely persist and disrupt election efforts.

[Kaylee Coffman]

HUNGARY: Officials Reject EU Criticism at Disciplinary Hearing

Summary: Hungarian officials refuted claims from EU officials at a disciplinary hearing as a result of concerns of political bias which will likely increase anti-EU sentiment in the country.

Development: On 16 September, Hungarian Justice Minister Judit Varga rejected claims from the EU that Hungary violated EU policies during a disciplinary hearing. Citing concerns of weakening democracy after Budapest placed restrictions on free media, the judicial system, and more, the EU initiated proceedings against Hungary in 2018. Varga and other officials responded, calling the EU's accusations politically motivated and unjustified. Before the hearing, Varga tweeted his expectations of the EU to prove the procedure is not a "political witch-hunt" and to avoid creating a double standard. He also accused the EU of conducting these investigations because of Hungary's stance on immigration. The EU bases their investigation on Article seven of the Lisbon Treaty, which works to maintain and uphold common democratic values within the EU. If it finds Hungary violation, the EU could suspend Hungary's EU voting rights.

Analysis: The accusations against Hungary and the immediate defense from officials will likely promote further anti-EU sentiment within the country. Prime Minister Viktor Orban will probably take advantage of the purported "witch-hunt" and attacks against the country to further anti-EU policies and propaganda. Varga's statements will likely only heighten these tensions as the investigation continues. As some Hungarian officials claim the EU has based its investigation on politics and bias, Hungarian leadership will probably reject any unfavorable result from this EU investigation and would likely view such a result as another attack. Should the EU strip Hungary of its voting powers as a result of these hearings, Hungary's political scales may shift in favor of Orban's anti-EU stance and serious exit proceedings could start. With the message of "protecting Hungary," some of Orban's nationalist policies will likely gain popularity, potentially furthering legislation that prompted the EU's investigation.

[Alli McIntyre]

[SAUDI ARABIA: Drone Strike on Aramco Sites Will Likely Exacerbate Regional Conflict](#)

Summary: Saudi Arabia may conduct air strikes on Iranian military border outposts and shipping assets in retaliation for crude oil facility attacks.

Development: On 14 September, a drone attack hit Aramco's Khurais and Abqaiq petroleum and gas processing plants, halting a large portion of Saudi Arabia's oil output and inflating the global price of oil by 10%. The attack heightened tensions in the Persian Gulf as Iranian-backed Ansar Allah, known as the Houthis, claimed responsibility. Ansar Allah has targeted southern-Saudi Arabian infrastructure previously, predominately through launching imprecise ballistic missiles and rockets out of territories in northern Yemen. A recent UN report stated that Ansar Allah controls advanced drone systems that may range up to 1,000 miles, illustrating the possibility of an attack from Yemen, but statements from Saudi and Western intelligence agencies indicate that the attacks likely came from the northeast. Saudi Arabia's Council of Ministers encouraged the international community to confront such attacks against the world oil market. On 18 September, Riyadh blamed Tehran for the attacks, with intelligence identifying an Iranian drone at one of the damaged Aramco facilities and indicating the UAVs' flight paths began in Iran. Iran denies any involvement and warned it would retaliate if Saudi Arabia targeted it in response to the attacks.

Analysis: Riyadh may retaliate against Iranian military outposts or Gulf shipping assets for facilitating the Aramco attacks. Saudi Arabia will probably cite the damage to the world petrol market and Iran's deteriorating status in the international community as justification for retaliatory airstrikes. The drone attack against Aramco's petroleum plants exposes the progression of conflicts amongst Gulf states and displays a strategic vulnerability of Saudi Arabia's military defense, which it will likely aim to remedy expeditiously. Although Ansar Allah claimed responsibility for the attack, Iran likely funded the operations, trained the perpetrators, and supplied intelligence and logistical support, a trend demonstrated by Iran's involvement in Lebanon, Gaza, and Iraq through proxies. Iran's likely involvement in the attacks could instigate unambiguous involvement of Western powers to suppress the possibility of an Iranian regional hegemony. Damages to the global supply of crude will likely remain a short-term issue as Aramco ramps up restoration processes and foreign companies fill the void in the energy market during a time of surplus oil. Saudi Arabia's prompt strikes against Houthi rebels upon suspecting Houthi involvement has demonstrated Riyadh's resolve in retaliation, so Saudi Arabia will more likely than not also conduct an airstrike response to Iranian involvement. Likely targets of such retaliatory strikes may include Iranian shipping assets in the Gulf and Iranian military border outposts

[Riley Coder & Max Olson]

SLOVAKIA: Prime Minister Survives No-Confidence Vote

Summary: Slovak Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini withstood the vote of no-confidence levelled against him due to a scandal from the 2018 murder of an investigative journalist. Although Pellegrini remains as Prime Minister, Slovakia's ruling party, Smer, faces shrinking support.

Development: On 17 September, Pellegrini withstood a vote of no-confidence brought against him based on alleged connections between senior Slovak officials and politically-aligned businessmen linked to a journalist murdered in 2018. Pellegrini refused to remove his deputy justice minister linked to the alleged murderers without formal charges, which resulted in opposition parties calling the no-confidence vote in protest against him and his government. Slovaks have organized another protest for 20 September, with the aim to support prosecutors and demand more anti-corruption measures. The Opposition Progressive Slovakia party has already managed to secure wins in local elections over the past 18 months, and a new pro-EU coalition currently polls around 15%. Meanwhile, Smer suffered a drop in the polls and now faces losing seats in the upcoming elections as a result of corruption claims.

Analysis: Although Pellegrini remains as Prime Minister after the vote, his government will face more pressure through the 20 September protests. Slovakia's opposition parties will also likely seek to capitalize on the unrest to unseat the ruling Smer party and potentially return a higher ethical standard to Slovakian government. As polls have indicated, Opposition Progressive Slovakia support is growing and may continue to do so in light of frustration with Pellegrini. Opposition Progressive Slovakia may even gain the seats that Smer may lose in the upcoming elections. Slovaks will likely continue to seek action against corruption in the upper levels of government and continue turning away from Smer.

[Gianna Geiger]

This is a global intelligence briefing prepared by the students of the Global Security and Intelligence Studies program at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona. The views expressed in this briefing are those of the students, not the university.

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