
PRESIDENT TRUMP, PROVE TO CHINA THAT YOU'LL STAND UP FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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By Editorial Board

PRESIDENT TRUMP displayed a noticeable weakness in the knees Friday when speaking about legislation that Congress has overwhelmingly passed to impose sanctions on China for the crackdown against pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong. Although the House passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act by a vote of 417 to 1 and the Senate by unanimous consent, Mr. Trump seemed to waver and hinted he might veto it. On Thursday, a veto is exactly what China requested.

A veto would be a gift to Chinas President Xi Jinping and have lasting deleterious consequences. Congress hopefully would override. But a veto would show China that Mr. Trump lacked the spine to stand up for freedom and human rights, just as Hong Kong citizens were again showing their commitment to democracy with a record turnout for local elections Sunday. No future protests about silencing dissent, muffling the Internet, mass incarceration or intrusive surveillance will have the same punch if Mr. Trump goes limp on Hong Kong.

Mr. Trumps comments Friday were a porridge of muddled thinking. Well Ill tell you, we have to stand with Hong Kong but Im also standing with President Xi, he said. He is a friend of mine. He is an incredible guy. Mr. Xi is not a friend. Just take a minute to read the Trump administrations own National Security Strategy document, which describes this as an era of great-power rivalry. China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests, it says. With China, the competition is not only over the South China Sea or trade. It is also a competition of profound consequence between Chinas illiberal, authoritarian system and the values of democracy and a rules-based international order for which the United States must be the leading exponent and guardian.

Mr. Trumps hesitancy may stem from his desire to reach a trade deal with China. Negotiations appear to have reached a standstill despite his earlier claims of a first-phase agreement. Perhaps Mr. Trump thinks vetoing the Hong Kong democracy bill would lure Mr. Xi to a compromise. This is hardly logical. In the end, Mr. Xi will make decisions about trade based on Chinas economic interests. Trade and democracy are not a zero-sum game in this complex relationship.

A U.S. president should defend the right of people to live in dignity and choose their rulers

because these are universal values inscribed in Americas history and role in the world. They are not bargaining chips. Likewise, a trade deal thats worth anything must be sturdy enough to survive amid all the other pressures and crosscurrents in the relationship with China. No one should want trade terms that are won by sacrificing freedoms and rights in Hong Kong or anywhere else.

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