



VIOLENCE IN HONG KONG: CRIMINAL, POLITICAL OR THE WORK OF A VTSM?

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SUMMARY

This briefing note explores the argument that the alleged July 22nd, 2019, attacks on protesters in Hong Kong were perpetrated by a group that can be classified as a Violent Transnational Social Movement (VTSM). When scrutinized, the alleged acts of violence and observed motivations of the United Bamboo triad, plus their transnational and identity-based nature of operation, suggest that the United Bamboo triad may be a VTSM.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide evidence that a VTSM action occurred in Hong Kong and has been facilitated by a sovereign nation; moreover, the alleged violence committed demonstrates that the group is not working chiefly on political or criminal motives, meeting the criteria of a VTSM, and forecasting the actions this group may take moving forward.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The potential weaponization of private interest and identity groups by a sovereign nation, effectively employing them as a tool to suppress dissenting opinions may have serious implications for emerging democracies and potentially to Canadian democratic institutions.

SUMMARY OF KEY EVENTS

In December 2018, it was reported that Hong Kong resident Chan Tong Kai had killed his girlfriend during a February 2018 trip to Taiwan and became a fugitive of Taiwan after he returned to Hong Kong (Deaeth, 2018). This incident has been cited as the motivation for the controversial legislation currently being protested

(Chan, 2019). Despite Chan's reported confession, Hong Kong could not legally extradite Chan to Taiwan to be tried for murder (Deaeth, 2018).

In February 2019, the Hong Kong Government proposed amendments to the *Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019*, which would allow Hong Kong to extradite fugitives to Taiwan, Macau, and China for trial (Mayberry, 2019). It was reported that on June 9th, over a million Hong Kong residents amassed on the streets for a peaceful protest against the extradition bill (DW.com, 2019). It has been reported that some of the initially peaceful protests escalated to violence against the police and government buildings (Associated Press, 2019).

On July 22nd, 2019, a group of men wearing white t-shirts, suspected of being Hong Kong Triad members, armed themselves with clubs and pipes and reportedly attacked protesters at the Yuen Long train station in Hong Kong (Thomson Reuters, 2019). The Hong Kong police allegedly ignored calls for intervention to stop the violence (Thomson Reuters, 2019). Over 45 people are estimated to have been injured in the event, including passengers on the train who were not a part of the protests (Lam et al., 2019).

BACKGROUND

There is evidence to suggest that the alleged violence against the protesters is tolerated by the government, if not officially sanctioned. Video evidence has surfaced allegedly showing Legislative Council Member, Junius Ho, shaking hands with Triad members on the night of the attacks (Frontline Police Support League, 2019).

Furthermore, questions have been raised regarding police responsiveness during and after the immediate attacks. Some reports suggest that police did not arrive until after the mob had fled, an hour and a half after initial calls to police (Mahtani, 2019). This reaction is in contrast to the reportedly harsh criticism and active measures, such as the use of tear gas, in response to the earlier alleged acts of vandalism by protestors (Bloomberg, 2019).

The United Bamboo gang is a Taiwan-based Triad formed in 1956 by Chinese mainlanders who settled in Taiwan after the Chinese civil war. The United Bamboo is allegedly involved in illicit activities such as prostitution, human trafficking, and arms dealing (SCMP journalist, 2015). The Triad is suspected to operate around the world, including countries and areas such as the Philippines,

North Korea, and Latin America (SCMP journalist, 2015). More importantly, it was reported that United Bamboo has a history of working with state leaders (SCMP journalist, 2015). For example, it has been suggested that United Bamboo assisted the Taiwan Government in the assassination of a dissident journalist (SCMP journalist, 2015).

United Bamboo is also reportedly affiliated with the pro-Beijing China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP). CUPP was founded in 2005 as a registered political party in Taiwan by former United Bamboo leader Chang An-le (Busch, 2019). In support of the Chinese Government, CUPP allegedly assisted in the removal of anti-Beijing protesters from the Taiwan Parliament in 2014. It is further reported that CUPP has been “known to regularly contribute manpower to violent protests organized by other groups” (Busch, 2019, para. 84).

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

According to the definition provided by Kelshall (2018) in *Accidental Power*, violent transnational social movements appear to transcend the boundaries of single states, uniting many subjective perspectives into one social and social media driven movement, with the aim of addressing culturally specific issues. With this consideration, the United Bamboo Triad appear to fit the description of a VTSM, as they have operations in multiple countries such as the Philippines and North Korea and have been alleged to use violence in the July 2019 Hong Kong protests in order to further their goals. They demonstrate an established group culture characterized by a set of gang-style norms and practices, to which members are expected to adhere. Furthermore, the enthusiasm of United Bamboo to become involved in the Hong Kong protests, in which identity seemingly takes on an influential role, would qualify them as being a social movement, as opposed to exclusively existing as a criminal organization, driven by economic motivations.

United Bamboo’s cooperation with the goals of the PRC is not an isolated example of alleged private interest groups being used as a state-sponsored lever to further a political agenda. Another observance of this has been the relationship of the alleged activities of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club to the beliefs and goals of the Russian Federation within the region of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. In both cases, the private groups appear to aggressively promote an identity agenda. As these two groups do not appear to be personally affiliated with one another, one may infer that a tactic of utilizing private-interest groups to espouse and enforce state objectives within the People’s Republic of China and the

Russian Federation is being implemented, and likely to spread beyond their respective state borders.

ALTERNATIVE AND WEST COAST PERSPECTIVES

Triad members and affiliates have previously been reported to have been operating in Canada, specifically in the Metro Vancouver area (Cooper, 2018; Moore, 2013). Furthermore, the demonstrations have highlighted the ideological rifts within the Greater Vancouver community of 400,000+ ethnic Chinese residents, where constituents of the diaspora — especially those with deep nationalist sentiments — hold opposing views regarding their ancestral homeland.

With the large-scale street protests now spilling across borders, tensions have run high on at least one Canadian university campus. At Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, recent altercations between pro-Hong Kong and pro-China students over three “Lennon Walls” — where sticky notes expressing solidarity with protesters were posted in support of people fighting the suspended extradition bill — shows how these flare-ups related to the increasingly violent protests in Hong Kong may get harder to manage on Canadian campuses (Luk, 2019).

Could these violent clashes abroad have other domestic implications in Canada or lead to political and civil unrest incidents in British Columbia?

WHAT IS NOT KNOWN

It is not known how many smaller-scale acts of violence, driven by similar motivations and intentions may have gone unreported or have been potentially miscategorized. It is possible that previous acts of violence have been carried out by non-state actors such as the Triads in Hong Kong, to further a political agenda, but may have either been misidentified or had gone unreported.

Furthermore, it is not fully known as to what the full extent of the alleged involvement of the Triads in the violent clashes with protesters is. In that, it is not known whether a proportion of non-Triad affiliated participants (if any) have contributed to carrying out violent acts against protesters.

Moreover, it is not entirely clear if there were multiple Triad groups present, or only members of a single Triad group.

NEXT STEPS

- Monitor for any indicators of the presence of criminal organizations at politically motivated protests in Canada. This may have relevance for a particular cultural or ethnic group, both in terms of symbology and messaging, as well as the presence of any individuals who have established association with criminal elements.
- Further examine the use of shared culture and identity as part of recruiting efforts by criminal organizations, and potentially utilizing any findings to assist in countering their influence.

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