



THE MILK TEA ALLIANCE

EVENTS: In April 2020, popular Thai actor Vachirawat Cheeva-aree reposted an image on Twitter which implied Hong Kong was an independent country. Chinese nationalists swamped Cheeva-aree's Twitter feed with angry responses, which were redoubled when an older post of his girlfriend's was discovered that suggested Taiwan was not part of China. After a fierce online war between Thai and Chinese netizens, activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan began to reach out the Thai online community, and an alliance of interest began to emerge, named for milk tea (as in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Thailand tea is generally drunk with milk, whilst in China it is not). Despite vastly different political situations faced across the region, the Milk Tea Alliance has begun to emerge as a broad ideological coalition, promoting democracy and liberal values against authoritarian regimes.

SIGNIFICANCE: As the heart of the alliance is a commitment to liberalism – democracy, freedom, and self-determination. It comes as opposition to an ideological battle faced with the regional hegemon, China, whose tremendous economic growth and international rise has come with its attempt to project its ideology of nationalist state socialism across the region. China has rejected democratic and separatist protests as the product of Western influences, often stressing a traditionalist line that liberal democracy is incompatible with Asian ideology. Instead, China has stressed a fundamentally conservative, nationalist and paternalist narrative across the

region that order and stability are necessary for economic development and the peaceful unity of the states and cultures.

Milk Tea Alliance activists have stressed their values are not 'Western' incursions into Asian culture but universal human ideals, arguing against the particularism that has often divided the region historically, culturally, and ideologically. Activists like Joshua Wong have indeed argued that the fight for democracy in Hong Kong is a global one, and broad international coalitions of opposition are increasingly needed to combat authoritarian regimes in a globalized world. Yet increasingly the Alliance is also about the liberal ideal of equality of opportunity as well. In all three societies, youth feel increasingly isolated and frustrated that their governments and economies are inherently elitist, with connections a far greater determinant of opportunities than talent or merit. The social contract, they argue, has not been upheld – despite promising growth and opportunity in exchange for civic rights, authoritarian regimes have not delivered their promises.

The Milk Tea Alliance is a loose confederation of likeminded activists. It has no central organs or official doctrine. Yet a coherent and consistent ideology uniting millions of young people across a wide area has emerged relatively quickly and suggests that ideological movements need not be the intellectual product of an articulate leader or well-organized party, but may emerge collectively from many voices, and inspire mass action just as easily.