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## Tiananmen Twenty Years On

The tragic events surrounding June 4, 1989 had an enormous impact at the time on the perception of China in the West. Until the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the demonstrations of 1989 were probably the most intensively covered event in China in the Western media. The events have symbolic importance, both inside and outside China, although the interpretation of the real meaning is highly contentious. China has changed beyond recognition in 20 years, and how far what happened in 1989 made any real difference to the subsequent development of China remains an open question. As Zhou Enlai is reputed to have said when asked for his judgment on the French Revolution, it may be too early to tell.

### 1. The legacy of 1989

By the late 1970s Deng Xiaoping had gained the political ascendancy in China and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in December 1978 is now considered to be the formal beginning of the process of “reform and opening” that has continued ever since. The commencement of reform and opening can now be seen to have marked China’s emergence from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution launched in 1966 and the debilitating period of factional infighting that preceded Chairman Mao’s death in 1976 and continued until the decisive rise of power of Deng. During the 1980s the first results of the economic reform and opening were apparent. The introduction of reforms in the countryside had produced a leap in farm incomes and industrial output was growing strongly, unlike in previous period of stagnation. China was moving out of the economic isolation that Mao had pursued, the first pioneering wave of foreign investors had arrived and trade grew rapidly. Reform had brought successes, but in the late 1980s problems had become apparent as the economy became overheated and inflation climbed rapidly.

The chaos of the Cultural Revolution was replaced by a measure of political stability as the leftist policies of Mao were rejected. The radical Gang of Four including Mao’s wife Jiang Qing were arrested after Mao’s death, and by the early 1980s senior positions were occupied by allies of Deng who joined in his rejection of the failures of the past. But even if the radical leftism of the Cultural Revolution was rejected by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, political divisions remained. Deng’s drive for reform was far from receiving the full support of many CCP members, including senior leaders who saw it as a betrayal of the Chinese revolution and a threat to the Party’s future. Policies such as the encouragement of foreign investment were highly controversial, and were often seen as little more than the revival of capitalist exploitation of Chinese labour.

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The period following the commencement of reform was punctuated by several student movements that culminated in the events focused on Tiananmen Square in 1989. The Democracy Wall movement of 1978-79, the student movements of December 1986 and other smaller protests had risen to the surface briefly, only to be firmly suppressed. The 1980s were punctuated by campaigns launched by the CCP against Western influences in the form of “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalisation”, as the Party, especially the conservatives, sought to counter any development that would undermine the authority of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought and the system which it upheld. Although the programme of reform had advanced, the 1980s were marked by almost constant internal struggle within the CCP. The factional struggle claimed a significant casualty when the Hu Yaobang, the Party General Secretary chosen by Deng and considered to a “liberal” was removed from office following the protests of 1986.

Among students and intellectuals, the 1980s were a period of rising expectations and also frustrations. Much as the more conservative elements might seek to resist them, Western political ideas became influential in intellectual circles. Debates over the future of economic and political reform flourished in more liberal periods, only to be silenced when conservatives gained the upper hand. The events which began with the first demonstrations following the death of Hu Yaobang in April 1989, spread throughout China and ended with the violence that killed an unknown number of people on June 4 appeared to represent the culmination of demands for political reform by students and intellectuals.

At the time, almost all foreign observers believed that June 4 represented a rupture that would change the course of China’s development. Their views included those who believed that China would revert to a form of Stalinism, or that it would fall under military control, or that popular revulsion would lead to the overthrow of the CCP. By complete contrast, the Chinese leadership insisted that the events would not make any difference to the course of reform and opening which had been set by Deng Xiaoping. In the aftermath to June 4, the leadership emphasised that the policy of reform and opening would continue. Even the famous People’s Daily editorial published on April 26, which branded the student demonstrations a disorder and a conspiracy to overthrow the CCP, and which did much to inflame the movement and helped to set in motion the tragic outcome, insisted that safeguarding reform and opening was the aim of the government.

Most of the demonstrators in China were not seeking a rupture. The students of 1989 advocated democracy, a more open government, and strongly attacked corruption, but there was no coherent programme or agreed set of principles that united the protestors. While democracy was a demand, there was never a programme adopted by the movement stating what exactly it meant or how it could be achieved. The student demonstrators were in general careful not to call for the overthrow of the Party, and adopted a rhetoric of supporting and advancing reform. More frequently, the movement attacked specifics, like corruption, or simply demanded dialogue with the government. Implicit in the movement was a demand for a more open government and a greater role for the intellectuals in governance. The demands of the movement, especially in its later stages,

focused increasingly on the events themselves: the revocation of the April 26 People's Daily editorial, the withdrawal of troops from Beijing and the lifting of martial law.

In a general way, the students, and those who showed support for them, believed that they could advance the process of reform. Students and intellectuals sought to determine the outcome of the internal struggle within the Party leadership by supporting one faction, those who espoused reform. But they were also tools in the factional struggle. Arguably, the really important events of 1989, as well as before and after, occurred within the walls of Zhongnanhai in the Forbidden City and the other secluded locations where China's leaders live and work, not on Tiananmen Square or elsewhere. Student demands for democracy and the disorder that the movement appeared to threaten, undermined the reform project by presenting the real possibility that what its opponents predicted would happen was coming to pass – a return to chaos.

China's leadership, no matter where they stood on the question of reform, agreed on one thing, that there could be no return to the disorder of the Cultural Revolution. The reappearance of the chaos unleashed by Chairman Mao in 1966 in which most of the Party leadership had personally suffered could not be tolerated. Among senior Party leaders, the debate was not about whether to accede to the vague demands of the demonstrators for democracy, but about the most effective way to handle the protests. Some, like Premier Zhao Ziyang believed that dialogue and symbolic gestures to mollify the students were the answer, but the majority who believed that a hardline response was necessary were backed by Deng and won the day.

The most ardent reformists in the Party leadership and the students were defeated in 1989 and the conservatives appeared vindicated. Their factional victory was crowned by the removal of Zhao Ziyang, who had been one of the stronger advocates of reform in the leadership, and had sought to defuse the student protests and avoid violent confrontation. The apparent impasse after 1989 did not last long, however. Despite efforts by conservatives to hold back reform the process continued. Even in 1990 the decision was made to establish stock markets in Shanghai and Shenzhen. In 1992 Deng Xiaoping made his famous "southern tour" which symbolically relaunched reform. The rest of the decade was marked by further reforms across the economy.

For Europeans 1989 was a year of dramatic transformation. The collapse of the Iron Curtain and of communism remade the European continent. Viewed from the perspective of these events in Europe, what happened in China appears as a blocked development. The narrative of successful liberation in Europe is opposed to that of failure and repression in China. But the real narrative in China is more complex. Far from being blocked, development and reform have continued.

The defeat of the conservative faction in the early 1990s in China opened the route to reform which has continued to today. This has not just encompassed economic reform as is often thought in the West. Although it was discussed at the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1987, political reform in the sense of democracy was removed from the agenda for a number of years. However, political reform was not totally abandoned. During the 1990s, reforms of

the government system continued, and experiments in democracy at the village level were advanced and even reinforced.

Contrary to many expectations in 1989, the Chinese government has recovered much of the support and legitimacy it may have lost in the violent suppression of the demonstrations. The rupture with intellectuals that occurred in 1989 has not lasted. The intellectual elite is now integrated into the policy making process, in the person of Party and government leaders, and through think tanks and private advisors to leaders and public debate. China has a more open policy system where the educated play a far greater role than 20 years ago.

For critics of China failure to bring about fundamental democratic reform, the government's legitimacy depends entirely on its economic success, aided by successful nurturing of nationalism to replace the communism it has in effect abandoned. China, in this view, has traded democracy for economic growth. In China, the dichotomy of democracy and economic growth is often accepted, but is seen differently. Put simply, it is seen as opposing the Gorbachev model of reform to that adopted by Deng and his successors. The political reforms of Gorbachev led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and brought economic disaster that ended only with the energy-export driven growth enjoyed under President Putin. The Deng model of gradual, pragmatic reform has delivered economic growth and greatly increased welfare for the Chinese people. National survival and stability are values that have great importance in China's political culture. For many Chinese, and not just the government, the judgment on June 4, 1989 is coloured by considerations that take into account factors often given little importance in the West. Even if there is a widespread belief in China that democracy is a good thing, there is little support for the idea the country needs democracy today. Chinese generally see stability as an essential precondition for future development, and a rush to democracy, rather than a guarantee of development, may endanger it.

## 2. What remains?

The Chinese government designated the 1989 movement a counter revolutionary plot organised by "black hands" to overthrow the Party. In fact, such organisation as there was tended to be ad hoc, and even during the demonstrations was far from coherent in its strategy. In the period after June 4 any organized movement that may have existed within China was suppressed as many participants and key leaders were arrested and jailed. In the weeks and months that followed June 4, a significant number of leading figures escaped to the West, but in exile the movement quickly fragmented. Many who escaped from China soon abandoned any political involvement, preferring to further their education or careers. Only a small number have persisted in challenging the Chinese government through political activity. Despite the fact some have a high profile in Western media, their impact on developments in China and even among the Chinese community overseas is limited.

In China a handful of leading figures in 1989 continue their activities, but their influence has also been marginal. Public policy debate in China today covers a broad range of issues, including political reform and democracy and is conducted within and outside the Party and government. There are, however, limits to the parameters of debate which are normally not spelled out but which are generally recognised. The utterances of individuals who were directly involved as leading figures in the student demonstrations in 1989 are subject to strict controls, and transgressions outside the accepted limits can be dealt with severely. No organised opposition to Party rule has been allowed to exist.

The views on democracy from dissidents that attract attention in the West are only a small part of the debates that go on in China. The movement of 1989 has never returned to China, but democracy has not been removed from the agenda. Despite the efforts of the conservatives, the question of political reform and democracy was raised in the Party in the 1980s. One of the strongest impulses for the ferment in the late 1980s came from the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1987, when democratic reform was on the agenda, even if only in a very circumscribed form. At the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2007, the question of democracy was once again raised. Democracy has returned to the policy discussion in China. At the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress the focus was on the question of inner party democracy, but the implication was that this would be one step that would be the basis for further developments. Nevertheless, the public discussion and even proposals from within the Party have ranged much more widely.

The Charter 08 manifesto published in December 2008, which attracted considerable attention in the West, is a significant effort to advocate the ideals of Western democracy. Among its signatories were some veteran democracy activists, as well as a broad range of academics and people from other sectors and has provoked a tough reaction from the government. The Charter provides a statement of the principles of liberal democracy that the movement in 1989 never had, but no programme that says how they would be achieved in China's context. At least some of its authors argue that it will be many years before they can be realised. Just how much influence the Charter will have remains unclear and not just because the Chinese government seeks to suppress it. Intellectual currents in China have moved on since the 1980s when there was great enthusiasm for Western ideas. Today the debate has changed, and critical or less idealistic views of Western democratic principles are as common as those that support them.

### 3 Democracy and crisis

In the late 1980s China suffered a period of severe economic dislocation. Booming growth and high inflation was followed by harsh retrenchment as the government sought to bring the economy under control. On the surface there are parallels between 2009 and 1989 as China faces dislocation caused by the global economic crisis. Much is made of the possibility for social and political instability in China. The Chinese government itself recognizes this possibility and states explicitly that economic growth must be maintained at 8%. If growth falls below this figure, there will not be enough jobs created to absorb labour coming on to the market at a time when tens of millions of workers are losing their jobs.

Already in China there are thousands of protests across the country for many reasons. They include demonstrations by workers who have lost their jobs and are owed money by bosses who have disappeared or by peasants seeking to stop illegal seizures of land by local officials. These protests may seem to presage the possibility of a movement on the scale of 1989, but almost all of them have focused on specific local issues rather than the system itself and there is no wider coordination or organisation. Indeed, it is usually local officials who are blamed for problems rather than the central government or its policies. There is often an implicit assumption in the West that instability and protests will somehow lead to democratisation in China. But there are few signs that the protests that do occur in China represent a nascent democracy movement. They certainly create pressure on the government to react. In the case of workers who have recently lost their jobs, the government has often sought to ensure that those who are unpaid receive some kind of compensation.

In contrast to 1989, even if there are some dissenting voices and many students face the possibility of difficulties in finding a job, China's educated elite seems unlikely to see itself as being unified in opposition to the Party or its leadership. And unlike in 1989, there are no fundamental divisions within the leadership on policy. There may be policy differences on policy questions in the leadership and groups with differing personal loyalties, but there is little sign of the type of ideological battles that existed in the 1980s over basic policy. The leadership around President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao is collegial in nature and is united over the policy direction the country will take.

In many ways, the economic challenges China faces today are more complex than they were 20 years ago. The economic problems of the late 1980s were largely domestic in origin, but today the catalyst of the crisis has been external. Nevertheless, the government has acted with speed and vigour to tackle the problems, partly because it recognizes that they do represent a fundamental challenge that must be overcome. At the core of the economic response is a clear concern over the social and political question.

The economic crisis has certainly pushed forward Chinese policy in a number of areas. Reform and expansion of the health and social security systems has risen to the very top of the agenda. Discussion of political reform continues and in March the government issued a Human Rights Action Plan that seeks to address a number of issues. The plan indicates a desire to increase transparency and accountability, and protect rights, without bring into question the fundamental role of the Party. Such a plan fits in with the idea of a harmonious society, and people-centred development espoused by Hu and Wen.

The Party leadership has learned lessons. During the 1990s the Party successfully staked the future of its rule on economic growth. The current leadership has sought to broaden the agenda to include many issues left untouched in the 1990s. The rhetoric of a harmonious society embraces issues such as the environment. The greater attention to welfare issues is based on a recognition that economic growth alone cannot be the basis of its legitimacy. Expanding democracy will be part of the effort to create a harmonious society. But development of democratic institutions is likely to be slow and will follow

the well-tried principles of gradualism that have been successfully applied in economic reform. The development of democracy will depend on the interaction of Party policy and the dynamics of Chinese society. It is unclear how much pressure there really is for more democratic government in the near term.

When Chinese leaders insist that China will not adopt the Western models of democracy, but will develop a system that suits its own circumstances they are saying something that is either self-evident but not very interesting, or something that may be substantive, but is difficult to interpret. Obviously no two democratic systems are exactly the same, and even if they have recognisable common features, they often operate very differently. Thus, a democratic system in China may be no more than a variation, in the same way that the US, the UK and Japan are variations. The Chinese leadership seems to be saying something more, that China will have a system of democracy that will not have many of the features considered essential in the West, but how that might actually work remains unclear.

The Hu and Wen leadership has changed the focus of policy in many ways. In part this represents a rejection of policies adopted by their predecessors across a wide range of areas. Their adjustment of China's development model to the aim of achieving a harmonious society and focusing on "people-centred" development appears to include the recognition that government must continue to improve its responsiveness to the demands of its citizens. Part of this includes the idea that democracy must be improved, but it will not involve radical change, rather it will be a slow process of reform. This political reform, as in the case of economics, appears to lead to an unknown destination.

#### 4. Can Europe make a difference?

Following June 4, 1989, the EU joined the US and other countries in imposing sanctions on China. Like the US, most of the EU sanctions on China were withdrawn soon after their imposition. One remnant of the sanctions, the arms embargo, remains in place. Over the years this has on occasion been a source of significant diplomatic tension between the EU and China. Following the difficulties that occurred when the EU announced that it would lift the embargo in 2005 but then changed its mind under US pressure, there has been a stalemate on the issue.

Despite the symbolic existence of the embargo, the EU and its member states have for many years centred their China policy around engagement in the belief that it is the best means to effect change within the country. In theory, the EU seeks to make human rights a key element of its external relations, but struggles to realise this in practice. Critics in Europe argue that the policy has failed in the case of China, and produces little result. Criticism especially focuses around the human rights dialogues held with China by the EU and member states, which many human rights advocates consider a failure, because they appear not to produce any measurable results. Many critics of the existing policy argue that the EU should take a much tougher line on human rights in China. How this would be achieved is often not clear. Sanctions in the period after 1989 had little effect, nor has the continuation of the embargo had any discernable impact.

The view that a tougher policy would have any effect in improving human rights or advancing democratisation seems to rest on an understanding of China as a weak, isolated and rigid state, while it is none of these. The EU will need to take into consideration the fact that China is complex, dynamic and far from being weak. One of the most important factors to be taken into account is public opinion in China. Europeans need to consider carefully the consequences of their actions. A confrontational strategy can have serious consequences as 2008 showed, when actions intended to advance the cause of human rights notably in Tibet not only succeeded in discrediting in Chinese public opinion the EU and individual member states, but also the values that they seek to uphold. Chinese now have much greater familiarity with democracy as it actually exists than they had 20 years ago, and the closer acquaintance has not necessarily increased respect

A policy of engagement over the long term is likely to be more successful. As is already the case, the engagement must be broader than mere formal dialogues. A policy broadly conceived including educational initiatives, capacity building and exchanges will need to be sustained over many years. The recent Human Rights Action Plan issued by the government does not address broad principles, and certainly does not discuss elections with universal suffrage, or the separation of powers. Much of the plan discusses economic rights. It does raise a number of specific questions that address problems of human rights as more narrowly defined.