

U.S. Policy Toward China A Year After Tiananmen Square

By Andrew B. Brick

1989 started out with enormous promise in Beijing.

Having emerged in the early 1970s as America's counterweight to Russia, China's seat of government two decades later assumed an independent regional authority in East Asia, respected by the world's great military and financial powers. Evidence of this was the stream of distinguished visitors that came to Beijing to put their seal of approval on your nation. The May 1989 summit here between Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev ended thirty years of estrangement between communism's superpowers, and did so largely on China's terms. Rajiv Gandhi arrived in Beijing for the first visit by an Indian leader in 34 years. Newly inaugurated American President George Bush, returning to Washington after the funeral of Japan's Emperor Showa, made a point of stopping by for a few days. Taipei even dispatched Finance Minister Shirley Kuo to Beijing for the annual Asian Development Bank conference.

On the domestic front, 1989 began to provide a glimpse of the modernity that Beijing's past decade of economic reform had so vigorously pursued. To be sure, China faced important challenges: an overheated economy, mounting corruption and nepotism, a pervasive sense that the country's leadership lacked direction.

Yet despite these problems, significant parts of Chinese society appeared to revel in the joys of progress. For one thing, the nation began to realize some of the trappings of a better life. From televisions to computers to cameras to washing machines to motor bikes, there seemed a mania in China for modern goods.

New Self-Expression. For another thing, there was an inquiring spirit in the nation, a newly quizzical mood for viewing the passing of current events. This was especially evident in cultural circles. Avant-garde art shows periodically popped up here and in Shanghai, featuring Dadaism and nude portraiture. Chinese films, like *Red Sorghum*, employed stunning cinematography to surrealistically portray their subject matter. The term "self-expression," it seemed, was a glib cliché adorning the lips of every Chinese art student, hopeful amateur, and scheming con-artist.

When this new-found penchant for self-expression spilled into Beijing's streets last spring, however, 1989's promise gave way to 1989's horror. After the largest insurrection in socialist China's history — a spontaneous, largely unorganized public demonstration led by students and intellectuals — your government ordered a military crackdown that ended it.

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That China's 1989 spring-planting of a hundred flowers could wilt so quickly in the June heat shocked many Americans. But, in retrospect, it is equally shocking that so many Americans were privy to the events.

Center of the World. Linked by television to the drama in and around Tiananmen Square, everyone, everywhere, it seems was touched by what happened in China. America's major networks aired more stories on China in the month from May 14 to June 14 than they had in the entire decade from 1972 to 1981.

I have friends who watched the events in a hotel bar in Chengdu, Sichuan, 1,200 miles from Beijing on the other side of China. My brother and sister followed the events while on a trip in Europe. I watched the tanks roll down Chang An Jie on a TV set in my office on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. For seven weeks in 1989, Tiananmen Square was not only the center of Beijing, it was the center of the world.

Today, partly as a result of that television coverage, China is no longer the "Middle Kingdom" to which the world treks. The enthusiasm and hope that characterized the beginning of last year sadly is diminished.

For many Americans, the events in Tiananmen Square shattered time-honored illusions. Having witnessed last June's events in their living rooms, Americans realized that their latest love affair with China, this one arguably begun with Richard Nixon's visit in 1972, may have been an infatuation. What once had been viewed as exotic and intriguing was now considered frightening and intimidating. And the romance that initially drew America to China has transformed into the reality that turns it away.

Thus, much as your government would like us to, we Americans cannot pretend that last spring's demonstrations and their subsequent repression have not occurred. We cannot agree with your leaders on why the events in Tiananmen Square happened or how those events should have been dealt with.

Like it or not, America truly believes that human rights knows no borders. The popular American desire to express sorrow for the Chinese people — students and soldiers — who lost their lives on June 3 and somehow punish those responsible for the so-called "massacre" is a reflection of America's national spirit.

Profound Impact. In this regard, Tiananmen Square interestingly might have been as important an event in the American consciousness as it was in the Chinese consciousness. Granted, what transpired here in those late spring days of 1989 may translate differently in America than in China. But the impact was no less profound.

This was to prove especially true in the American political arena. Of the events in Tiananmen Square, one popular Washington political commentator, Charles Krauthammer, wrote: "It is the first time that [my] generation — too young to remember Budapest 1956, too distracted to notice Prague 1968, too far removed to fully absorb the Vietnamese gulag and the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s — has been directly exposed to the meaning of Marxism-Leninism."

In no small way, the events in Tiananmen Square gave many Americans a demonstration of the potential for barbarism that seems to reside near the core of the Chinese political sys-

tem. And it dramatically exposed precisely those forces against which America has fought during the forty years of the Cold War.



The negative light in which the American people currently see China has shattered the national consensus on China policy and colors Washington's current policy toward Beijing. Over the last year, there has emerged in my country a serious and often bitter debate over how to best pursue long-term U.S. interests while making clear American repugnance at and condemnation of the Chinese leaders that are responsible.

The dilemma is painfully clear in the differences between the Bush Administration and many in the American Congress.

As elected custodians of the national interest, the Bush Administration thinks China, despite the events last June, is important and worthy of continued dialogue. Constructive U.S.-China ties over the past several decades, the Bush White House would argue, have reduced tensions in Asia, contributed greatly to regional stability, and helped defuse conflicts in critical areas, principally the peace across the Taiwan Strait. Though it may sound like a cliché, it remains true that by virtue of its size, geographic position, historic role, and dimensions of its military, China's centrality in Asia must be an overriding factor as Washington formulates Asia policy.

The opinion of many American Congressmen, by contrast, is that China can be benignly neglected. China simply is not as important as it once was to U.S. national interests, say these critics of George Bush's policy, who cite the past year's events in Eastern Europe and the consequent reduction in East-West tensions. Moreover, congressional critics feel the Administration's China policy fails to "punish" Beijing for its continuing human rights violations. The President, they argue, encourages democratic and peaceful change in Eastern Europe but closes his eyes to the explicitly undemocratic regime in Beijing. In such light, high-level trips to Beijing as those taken in July and December by National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft are very inappropriate.

Intransigent Leaders. The current state of Sino-American relations only bolsters the Bush Administration's critics. George Bush's honey was supposed to attract some concessions from China. They have attracted almost none. Five months after the President dispatched General Scowcroft, China's elderly leaders remain as unrepentant and intransigent as ever and appear only to search for innovative ways to further blast the U.S.

Indeed, while much of the world embraces democracy, China marches in the opposite direction. Amnesty for last June's demonstrators is forgotten; dissident Fang Lizhi, still taking refuge in the American Embassy here in Beijing, remains the constant target of your government's abuse; Hong Kong's fate is as uncertain as ever; and critics of Beijing's policies — particularly American Congressman, who for decades China has thought inclined against its overall interests — are denounced as "foreign hostile forces."

In short, the honey is not working.

Does this mean that it is time for a new assessment of America's approach to China? In substance, probably not. But in style, it is all but certain.

Force To Be Reckoned With. The weight of various U.S. national interests probably is too heavy for a substantive reversal of American policy. China can still sap Soviet ambitions in eastern Asia and the Pacific, which makes it of continuing importance to American geopolitical thinking. No one knows how Japan would react to an isolated and unstable China. The looming contest between China and India for influence in Southeast Asia will not be altered by anybody's feeling that China has been naughty. And the ancient enmity between China and Vietnam will have more bearing on any Cambodian settlement than China's new isolation ever will.

Indeed, China's neighbors all recognize it remains a political and economic force to be reckoned with. Take Sino-Soviet relations, for instance. Moscow-Beijing relations have cooled greatly in recent months. Your leaders are said to be critical of the rapid changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe — an event largely attributed to Soviet "revisionism" — and are rumored to loathe and fear Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's February move to give up the Soviet Communist party's constitutionally enshrined leading role in politics.

Beijing also is said to be concerned about the increasing commercial ties between Moscow and Taipei and a sympathetic interview with the Dalai Lama, the self-exiled spiritual leader of Tibet, that recently ran in Moscow's influential *Literaturnaya Gazeta*.

Moscow, on the other hand, likewise is politically unable to draw too close to Beijing. The events in Tiananmen Square not only make it difficult for the publicity-conscious Gorbachev to be seen snuggling too closely to your leaders — after all, what would the West think? — but also press the Soviet President on the domestic front. When Premier Li Peng visited Moscow late last month — the first Chinese leader to do so in 26 years — he was greeted by several hundred protestors waving banners at the Soviet Foreign Ministry denouncing him as a hangman responsible for the deaths of hundreds of students. The Moscow city council, in fact, adopted a resolution accusing Li of having "blood on his hands."

Sino-Soviet Talks. Still, the two sides talk. During Li Peng's April visit, Moscow and Beijing signed an agreement for a ten-year program for economic, scientific, and technical cooperation. The two sides agreed to cooperate in space exploration and hold regular consultations between foreign ministers. And the official press statement blurred Sino-Soviet ideological differences, saying: "Each country has its own history, own specifics, and own starting level of development...there are no cut-and-dried ways to implement socialist ideas and principles."

Why such goodwill in the face of so many fundamental differences? Perhaps the agreement reached on troop reductions along the Sino-Soviet border sheds light on the thinking at last month's summit in Moscow. The half-million Soviet soldiers and 1,700 Russian aircraft that permanently face about 25 Chinese divisions, or nearly 250,000 men, are a reminder of the long history of friction between Moscow and Beijing. And each nation's domestic considerations make the current bilateral relationship simply too important to ignore, much less to allow it to deteriorate.

Similar domestic and bilateral concerns drive China's other neighbors to recognize its centrality to their interests in Asia.

Last November, Indonesia received a Chinese delegation to discuss resuming relations that were severed 25 years ago. Anti-communist South Korea has not stunted in the least on its unofficial trading relations with the People's Republic. Like government leaders in Taipei and Tokyo, South Korean officials are pressed by their nation's businessmen to further open avenues to trade. Taipei, in fact, currently speaks of opening direct trading links with Beijing.

Washington's relationship with Beijing also is too important to ignore. But just like the policies of China's closer neighbors, America's foreign policy understandably is driven — and limited — by domestic considerations. Of Sino-American relations after June 4, 1989, the scholar Robert Scalapino put it best in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article:

Once again, and in dramatic form, a classic American dilemma unfolded. More than any other people, American citizens demand that their country's foreign policy rest on moral foundations. It may be claimed that certain U.S. policies are immoral, or that contradictions in the application of American principles abound. But the underlying sentiment of Americans for "moral policies" remains....

That this underlying sentiment informs present U.S. policy to China is undeniable. It also defines a large portion of the present American political debate. The words "Tiananmen Square" are now linked in the American lexicon to the word "massacre." By association, they imply a democratic revolution gone seriously awry, violently suppressed by a legion of totalitarians. In the last week of April alone, I saw the phrase "Tiananmen Square" used to describe a possible Soviet reaction to Lithuanian declarations of independence; the killings at an American University during the Vietnam War; and a baseball pitcher's poor performance. Said a radio announcer of the baseball player's demise: "It was his own personal Tiananmen Square."

In such light, it is not surprising that the American Congress — what one veteran Senate staffer accurately refers to as "535 Secretaries of State" — should turn to sanctions to express its abhorrence at the events in China. Indeed, if Congress doesn't make some response, China could very well become Congress's "political Tiananmen Square."

Sanctions make us Americans feel that we have expressed our moral outrage in a way more than merely rhetorical. They are a means of national self-expression. It is entirely correct for a nation dedicated to such a proposition to express itself on issues of international morality.

Sanctions vs. Diplomacy. But such actions are not to be confused with diplomacy. For one thing, most of these Senators and Congressman realize that the U.S. has limited leverage over the events in Beijing. It is highly unlikely that American suspension of Export-Import Bank financing, for example, is going to bring about a desired political outcome. Said one American businessman of this decision: "Ex-Im Bank could fall off the side of the earth and China would not notice."

For another thing, American sanctions will not materially help those people America hopes to help. This particularly is true with Washington's upcoming decision to renew China's Most-Favored-Nation status. If the U.S. decides not to continue MFN trading status to Beijing this summer, American consumers and importers will pay more for

popular Chinese-made products. American exporters likely will lose Chinese markets as Beijing implements a dollar-for-dollar trade retaliation. And the economic vitality of Southeast China, including Hong Kong, largely will be sapped.

Hard-Headed Dealing. So what is the best course for Washington to pursue now that virtually every unilateral American effort to prevent U.S.-China relations from getting worse has been answered by Beijing with recalcitrance and contempt?

I think our government should approach your government as hard-headed as a good Shanghai businessman. Meaning: It is time to implement some old-fashioned cost-benefit analysis to this relationship. If Beijing continues to raise the costs of trying to do business with China, then Washington should refuse to pay the price to get abused. There has to be a stylistic change in the American approach to your nation.

This does not mean that George Bush should stop following his instincts on America's China policy. I believe the broad thrust of his China policy is correct. I also think the criticism that he "kowtows" to your nation's leaders by dispatching top-level diplomats to discuss Sino-American relations ignores the fact that ambassadorial contact between the U.S. and China often has extreme limits. When two colleagues from The Heritage Foundation visited China in late 1988, U.S. Embassy officials here in Beijing complained of their lack of access to Chinese officials and requested information on my colleagues' meetings.

Even with these problems, however, high-level diplomatic contacts do not necessarily condone the events in Tiananmen Square. Indeed, I rather like the image of Secretary of State James Baker making clear American dismay of China's present behavior to your top leaders.

A colder American gaze should now be the gist of U.S.-China policy. George Bush correctly displayed extraordinary patience with your nation's leaders but repeatedly has been met with intransigence. There is no reason this good man — who has tried to show his friendship to your nation through a multitude of goodwill gestures — should be expected to continue to take a such a beating.

Brutally Honest Business. Thus, the U.S. should continue to do business with your nation but in a brutally honest way. In areas where we share interests, we should talk. High-level contacts are necessary to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula, resolve the conflict in Cambodia, and maintain the peace in the South Asian sub-continent. Parallel with the Sino-American strategic relationship is the need for an assessment of what kind of relationship our nations will have over the long term. These are things that should not merely be left to the offices of ambassadors. American businessmen, moreover, should decide for themselves whether they want to do business with China or not.

But the days when the United States treated your nation as something special — as the so-called "good communist" — are gone. There will be no more free American hand-outs, no more special U.S. trading concessions. If China wants membership in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), for example, it must implement meaningful economic reforms to make itself a market-oriented economy. Washington should make it clear that it will not allow GATT rules about opening up domestic markets to be blurred in order to help China qualify. The time has come to look at the fine print.

The same cold, fair treatment should be accorded China in World Bank and Asian Development Bank lending. The days of the open wallet have ended.



At a recent reception at the Chinese Embassy in Washington, a Soviet diplomat leaned into me to speak over the din. Referring to the environment in which China's diplomatic corps work in Washington, he said: "It is rather ironic that they should suddenly find themselves in this position. For years we were the bad boys on the block and they caught the free ride. Lately, however, the roles have been reversed and we are popular and they are not." He then added: "America certainly has a powerful preoccupation with images."

Looking to America's Interests. Those images are important and largely inform Washington's current policy to Beijing. Vivid and enduring, ever more so against Beijing's contempt of recent months, these images insist to many Americans that this China is not a friend. It is, in the former French leader de Gaulle's phrase about great powers, "a cold monster." De Gaulle's term should be instructive. As China's foreign policy veers, as of old, between introversion and small-mindedness, America would do best to look to its own interests and allow China to simmer in its meanness.

