

The Legacy of Tiananmen for Chinese Politics

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Ever since 1989, Chinese leaders have been haunted by the fear that their days in power are numbered. The massive prodemocracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and 132 other cities nearly ended communist rule in China. The regime was shaken to its roots by six weeks of student protests and the divisions within the Communist Party leadership over how to handle them. The regime remained standing only because the military followed Deng Xiaoping's order to use lethal force to crack down on the demonstrators.¹

Just months after the crackdown, the Berlin Wall was torn down, a popular uprising overthrew the Romanian communist dictatorship, and communist regimes in Eastern Europe were toppled in rapid succession. The Soviet Union itself, the strongest communist power the world had ever seen, collapsed two years later. China's leaders watched with horror and had every reason to believe they could be next.

Today, two decades after the "life-and-death turning point" of Tiananmen, Chinese Communist rule has survived, but its leaders remain anxious about the possibility of another revolutionary moment. To foreigners, China appears like an emerging superpower, strong economically and influential internationally; but its communist leaders feel much weaker as they struggle to stay on top of a society roiled by thirty years of market reform and opening to the world. They have a deep sense of domestic insecurity and perceive latent political threats all around them.

Since 1989, everything China's leaders do is aimed at preventing another Tiananmen. They are fixated on what they call "social stability." They use that euphemism to convince the Chinese public that Communist Party rule is essential for maintaining order and prosperity, and that without it, a country as large as China would descend into civil war and chaos.

Although never publicly articulating it, the Chinese Communist Party has devised a formula for survival based on the lessons they drew from the Tiananmen experience. First, prevent large-scale protests. Second, avoid public leadership splits. And third, keep the military loyal to the Party.

The three rules are interconnected. If the leadership group remains cohesive despite the competition that inevitably arises in it, then the Party and the security police can stop the protests from spreading and challenging the regime. Unless people receive some signal of "permission" from the top, protests are likely to fizzle out or be extinguished before they grow politically threatening. But if the divisions among the top leaders come into the open as they did in 1989, people will take to the streets with little fear of punishment. Then, if the military splits too, or refuses to use armed force to defend the Party leaders,

¹ This essay draws on the author's book, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the entire regime could collapse. For the past twenty years, with the spectre of another Tiananmen crisis haunting them, China's leaders have worked hard to shore up all three fronts – social quiescence, elite unity, and military loyalty.

Social Quiescence

The fear of large-scale protests that could topple the Communist Party has made economic growth a political imperative for China's leaders. They calculate that the economy must grow at a certain annual rate (7 or 8 percent) to create enough jobs to prevent widespread unemployment and labor unrest. Today, when they acknowledge an unemployment rate approaching double digits (9.4%), you know that for them, a stimulus that effectively restores jobs is their highest political priority.

As protests have increased in number over the past two decades, the jittery leaders have sought to protect themselves by demonstrating their responsiveness to public concerns. Premier Wen Jiabao, accompanied by television crews, rushes to disasters like the 2008 massive snowstorms and Sichuan earthquake, to dramatize the government's compassion and competence; on camera, he apologizes for mistakes, tearfully expresses sympathy for victims, and directs rescue efforts. Individual officials are promptly fired for government failures or corruption once they become publicized by the media.

Government responsiveness is more than just a show. Anxieties about unrest have spurred the central government to address problems that anger the public, such as taxes on farmers, environmental pollution, tainted food and medicine, and inadequate health care. But local officials do not have the same interests as the central leaders in Beijing. Local officials care more about rapid growth and big construction projects that enable them to build political machines and line their pockets by doling out patronage. Getting the local bosses to implement central policies is a persistent dilemma for central leaders. Rent-seeking behavior by local leaders that outrages citizens could endanger the survival of Communist Party rule.

The possibility of gradually introducing direct elections from the bottom-up as Taiwan successfully did has been on the table for decades, but remains stalled at the village level. Since 1989, the CCP leadership has felt that its hold over society was too tenuous to risk losing control over the selection of officials, which is the linchpin of Party rule. Political reform efforts have instead focused on creating non-institutionalized substitutes for elections like petitioning or public hearings.

In the absence of elections, national officials increasingly rely on the media and Internet to serve as watchdogs over local officials. They have learned that when they suppress news of epidemics like SARS, tainted food and medicine like the melamine in baby formula, environmental disasters like the poisoning of rivers by chemical plants, it aggravates crises. The trend is to allow the media to report problems -- official mouthpieces like the Xinhua News Agency are beginning to publish exposes and reporting protests -- but to spin the coverage so the public is persuaded that the government is competently solving problems.

Worries about political unrest also cause China's leaders to do everything they can to impede organized collective action against the regime. They view any independent social organization, no matter how innocuous and non-political it may be, as a potential threat. Every organization must be licensed and its leadership approved by the political authorities. Many organizations, such as the Falun Gong, unregistered churches, and labor organizations, are declared illegal and suppressed. Even in the environment and

public health space which is relatively more open, NGOs operate under tight political constraints. Collective petitioning is discouraged. And many petitioners who find their way to Beijing are detained and then shipped home as trouble-makers.

To co-opt the groups who are most likely to oppose Party rule, and the individuals most likely to become the leaders of an opposition, the Communist Party has made a big push to recruit college students and private businesspeople as members. College students are the most rapidly growing group within the Party. In 1990 only 1.2 percent of college students were CCP members, but as of 2003, 8 percent of them were members, and the percentage has continued to rise. For political activists who are not susceptible to co-optation, including the urban lawyers who are helping rural people assert their rights in court, the CCP contains their influence by harassing them, putting them under house arrest, or sending them to prison.

The Internet has become an arena for virtual collective action particularly among young people. Netizens organize petitions online and form Internet mobs called “human flesh search engines” that gang up on individuals accused of corruption or other crimes. Party leaders, who feel too insecure to simply allow Netizens to vent, go all-out to prevent online activism from spilling over into the streets. Using ingenious filtering technologies, site managers who screen and censor postings, paid stooges who post pro-government views, and career incentives to encourage self-censorship, the Party maintains a surprising degree of control, but not air-tight control, over Internet content.

At the same time, China’s leaders are hyper-responsive to media and online public opinion and try to deflect it from targeting them. For example, when newspaper and Internet opinion strongly attacked as too lenient a sentence of life imprisonment for an organized crime figure convicted of several crimes, Party leaders pressed the Supreme Court to review the case, and the crime boss was executed the same morning. In a more positive example, the media outrage over the beating to death of a young college-trained migrant in Shenzhen who been picked up by the police for not carrying a temporary residence permit led the central government to abolish the detention system for migrant workers.

CCP leaders are particularly sensitive to nationalist criticism focused on the hot-button issues of Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. Nationalism is intensifying in China, in part as a spontaneous expression of China’s revival as a powerful nation and in part as a result of the Communist Party’s efforts to enhance its legitimacy and build popular support for itself. China’s leaders are well aware that the previous two dynasties, the Qing and the Republican government, both fell to revolutions in which the various discontents of different rural and urban groups were fused together by the powerful emotional force of nationalism. They want to make sure that the same fate doesn’t befall them. For example, when Chinese Netizens reacted with outrage against the March 2008 violent attacks by Tibetan protestors against Chinese shopkeepers in Lhasa and the feebleness of the government’s response, the leaders defended themselves by vilifying the Dalai Lama and intensifying their diplomatic campaign to isolate him internationally. Foreign policy related to Tibet and other issues that arouse popular nationalism is motivated in large part by political self-defense.

Whenever protests over domestic issues do break out, Beijing has a standard approach to containing them: The central leaders deflect blame away from themselves to local officials; buy off the demonstrators by satisfying their economic demands, and punish the

organizers. Local police sometimes enlist local citizens as a kind of police auxiliary to keep order by beating up demonstrators.

CCP strategies for averting another Tiananmen constitute a mixture of responsiveness, cooptation, and coercion. So far these strategies have succeeded in keeping protests small scale, localized, and not targeted on the central government or Communist Party. But China's Communist Party leaders continue to worry that a crisis, or a politically significant anniversary of a historical event like Tiananmen, might be the spark that ignites a firestorm of opposition to CCP rule.

Elite Unity

The CCP leaders appear to have learned the lesson of Tiananmen. If they don't hang together, they could hang separately, as the Western saying goes. Still, each individual politician has moments of temptation, when an interest in gaining more power for himself might cause him to exploit a crisis situation and reach out beyond the inner circle to mobilize a mass following, as many Chinese officials believe that Zhao Ziyang attempted to do during the Tiananmen crisis (Zhao denies this charge in his recently published memoirs.) Large protests increase the risk of a split by showing leaders that a following is already in place and forcing them to take a stand on the protests. Social unrest actually can create schisms at the top. The danger is not a matter of the particular personalities in the Party leadership at any one time, but is built into the structure of communist systems. Changes in the mass media heighten the risk of the public being drawn into elite disagreements. Leadership splits telegraphed to the public through the media or over the Internet have triggered revolutionary upheavals in other authoritarian regimes. To reduce this risk, the CCP bans all reporting of leadership competition or decision-making at the top, even though the Hong Kong media has provided lively and sometimes accurate analyses of Beijing politics for many years. It was big news recently when the Chinese media were permitted to report that the CCP Politburo held a meeting and some of the topics it discussed. No Mainland newspaper or website dares publish leaks about what was actually said at the meetings, however. The handful of journalists who have dared violate this taboo were accused of leaking state secrets and imprisoned.

Beginning with Deng Xiaoping, CCP leaders have sought to reduce the risk of destabilizing splits by introducing institutional rules and practices that bring greater regularity and predictability to elite politics. Fixed terms of office, term limits, and mandatory retirement age regularize leadership competition. When Jiang Zemin, having reached the age of seventy-seven, retired as CCP general secretary (2002) and president (2003), it was the first time that a leader of a large communist country had ever handed down power to a successor without putting up a fight of dying. As the price of retirement, Jiang managed to hang on to his job as head of the Central Military Commission. But without the institutional authority of the top Party post, Jiang's influence began to evaporate, and two years later in September 2004, he retired completely. During the two years when Jiang and Hu shared power, subordinate officials were uneasy. The last time China had had two different voices coming from the leadership they caused the near disaster of the Tiananmen crisis. Anxious to prevent a repetition, senior and retired leaders reportedly convinced Jiang that the best way to preserve his legacy was to retire completely.

Today's top leaders – President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, and the seven other members of the Politburo Standing Committee – constitute an oligarchy that strives to

prevent divisions among themselves, or at least to hide them from the public. The current leaders lack the personal charisma or popular following of their predecessors Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. They are comparatively colorless organization men who came up through the Party ranks and are more or less interchangeable and equal in stature. So far, at least, they have shown themselves willing to subordinate themselves to the group to maintain the Party's hold.

The authority of Hu Jintao, and Jiang Zemin before him, as the number one leader who fills the three top positions -- CCP General Secretary, President, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission -- is sharply circumscribed. The top leader is only first among equals in the senior leadership, reversing the decades of domination by the top leader as the "core" of the leadership. Judicious balancing of major institutional constituencies -- the party apparatus, government agencies, and representatives of the provinces -- in the Politburo and its Standing Committee is aimed at inhibiting any one group from dominating the others.

On the surface, relations within the CCP's inner circle appear impressively smooth. There is no daylight between the public positions of the top leaders even in the face of the tension created by China's current economic downturn and this year's important political anniversaries. In 2007, the oligarchy managed to get agreement on the next leadership succession which should occur in 2012-13. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang were selected to succeed President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao respectively when their terms expire; if not challenged, these two men will be leading China until 2022-23. (In what other country could we identify the individuals who will be in charge so many years into the future?)

Despite all that Chinese leaders have accomplished in institutionalizing and stabilizing politics at the top, they know that maintaining the unity of oligarchic rule remains a difficult challenge. That is why they strive to keep elite politics inside a black box, well hidden from public view. But in a society undergoing explosive change, political outcomes are unpredictable because the political game is evolving too. Every day new opportunities present themselves to ambitious politicians in China. Keeping leadership competition under wraps is becoming increasingly difficult as the media and Internet compete for audiences by testing the limits on what they can report. Nationalism is a natural platform for an ambitious politician who wants to build a public reputation. We should anticipate the very real possibility that an international or domestic crisis in the next few years could tempt a challenger to reach out to a public following and challenge the status quo.

Military Loyalty

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been a key player in Chinese politics since before the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. During the Revolution, the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese Communist Party were practically merged. Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and other CCP leaders served as commanders, and the top generals were members of the CCP Politburo.

When Deng Xiaoping led China, he was so confident of the loyalty of the PLA that he squeezed it financially in order to concentrate on the civilian economy. Deng encouraged the PLA to become a more professional force, but he didn't provide the resources to accomplish it. Official defense spending stayed almost flat during the 1980s at a time when investments in the domestic economy were dramatically increasing. If we factor in

inflation, defense spending actually declined in real terms to the point by the late 1980s that PLA budget chiefs confessed that the official budget could only meet around 70 percent of the military's actual spending requirements. The number of soldiers was cut almost in half, from 4.5 million in 1981 to 2.31 million in 2001. By cutting the size of the bloated military, China's capabilities got stronger. But at the same time, military units were told to earn money by running businesses to ease the financial burden on the state. In 1989, when CCP rule was threatened by widespread protests and divisions within the leadership, Deng turned to the military to save the Party and end the crisis. And with only one exception, the PLA units obeyed Deng's orders and turned their tanks and guns against the students.

Today's leaders have not served in the military, and cannot count on its automatic allegiance. Hu Jintao, like Jiang Zemin before him, lavishes resources on the PLA to make sure that he can count on it to defend him. Defense spending has risen in real terms and as a percentage of GNP since 1999. Official military spending has increased at double-digit rates up to the present.

The PLA is enjoying bigger budgets in large part because today's leaders are less politically secure and have a greater need to win the military's allegiance. The strategic justification for increasing the military budget in the late 1990s was that China was preparing to solve the Taiwan problem militarily if need be. The emergence of democratically elected presidents in Taiwan who appeared to be moving the island toward formal independence provided the main impetus. At present, trends across the Taiwan Strait are moving in the direction of reconciliation, but new missions related to protecting Chinese imports of oil, gas, and other resources over the sealanes of communication give the PLA a new rationale for acquiring advanced naval and air capabilities. Yet reinforcing these international justifications is the logic of domestic politics that Mao Zedong identified many years ago and that was dramatized in Tiananmen, i.e. "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Since 1989, China's insecure leaders have placed a high priority on keeping the military well-funded, satisfied, and loyal.

The Political Significance of Tiananmen

Today, twenty years after the Tiananmen crisis, most Chinese citizens probably have forgotten all about it, or been kept ignorant of it because of the official silence imposed by the Chinese Communist Party. Only a small minority of politically aware citizens are focused on the significance of the event.

The memory of Tiananmen is felt most intensely by China's leaders who still worry that it could happen again. As the twentieth anniversary approached, the leaders revealed how insecure they are by tightening press and Internet censorship and blocking former protest leaders now living abroad from visiting the Mainland or Hong Kong. But the leaders' efforts to avert another Tiananmen go much beyond these recent actions. They are reflected in the larger patterns of Chinese politics that have extended the lifespan of Party rule for two decades: namely, the mixture of responsiveness, cooptation, and coercion the leaders employ to avert large scale protests and maintain social quiescence; the institutionalization of elite politics designed to prevent elite competition from breaking out into the open and mobilizing a mass opposition; and the generous military budgets intended to guarantee that should all else fail, the army will loyally defend the Party.

