

# The Initial Soviet Reaction to the Events in China in 1989 and the Prospects for Sino-Soviet Relations

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The tragic events in China of June 1989 have had a considerable influence on the development of the international situation and have triggered a stormy reaction from public opinion in many countries. The stand on the Tiananmen tragedy has become a litmus test of the political position of governments, parties and groupings in a number of states. China's prime minister Li Peng declared in the wake of the events that they had demonstrated who was a true friend of China. A closer study of the issue would reveal that these events in fact led to a situation whereby "friends" and "enemies" (if we agree to identify China's "friends" and "enemies" with those of her premier) reversed roles. Whereas all governments and public and political groups in the west, including some orthodox communist parties, were united in their condemnation of Beijing, China's former opponents whom she used to label as "regional hegemonists," such as Cuba and Vietnam, as well as East Germany and North Korea who have similar regimes, assured Beijing of their support for its actions.

This work attempts to analyse the reaction in the Soviet Union to the events in China. This reaction was by no means unambiguous. There were differences of opinion, or at least official rhetoric and public reaction diverged; nor were the media united in their coverage. In fact, the reaction of different social factors were determined by their general socio-political stance, by their attitude to the reforms in the USSR, and to the possibility of establishing the predominance of democratic humanitarian values in societies which call themselves "socialist." Therefore it would seem logical to analyse in turn the positions of (a) official circles, (b) the media and (c) public opinion and academic circles.

## *The Evolution of the Official Soviet Approach Towards the Events in China*

The events in China obviously caught the Soviet leadership unawares. This was due largely to the prejudices which had become entrenched in the Soviet Union by the mid-1980s in relation to China. From the late 1960s till the early 1980s official propaganda imposed on Soviet society an image of a vastly populated militant China ready at any moment to strike at the Soviet Union's eastern regions. However, by the end of Brezhnev's rule the Soviet Union had

softened its stand and begun to make conciliatory noises. In 1982, not long before his death, Brezhnev visited Baku, where he reaffirmed China's right to call herself socialist, and spoke of the desire to restore normal relations. The initial concerns for the USSR were strategic considerations, the desire to find a common language with a "socialist" neighbour and to use this mutual understanding to strengthen its positions with respect to the United States. Such an approach fitted nicely into the framework of the then dominant strategic concept of a tri-polar world.

With the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev and the proclamation of new thinking in foreign policy, the hackneyed strategic concepts of tripolarity started to recede. They were replaced by the idea of the supremacy of common human values and broad international co-operation. In line with these new political ideas, the strategic considerations in Soviet policy towards China were underpinned to a significant degree by the need for reforms. This determined Gorbachev's greater decisiveness. The anti-China lobby, whose advocates had made their careers in the period of escalating tensions and the myth of the Chinese threat, although not totally destroyed, had by the mid-1980s lost their posts in the government and party apparatus, while the new Soviet leadership was set on establishing normal and even friendly relations with its eastern neighbour.<sup>1</sup>

In a bid to create favourable external conditions conducive to domestic reform, the new Soviet government depended greatly on reconciliation with Beijing. An improvement in relations with China was indispensable to the success of Gorbachev's policy. Drastic cuts in the armed forces leading to a reduction in government expenditure in this area, a rapid development of Siberia and the Far East linked to expanding cross-border trade, a settlement in Afghanistan and Cambodia, the involvement of the USSR in regional economic co-operation in Asia and the Pacific—all these and a number of other essential goals in Soviet domestic and foreign policies are directly linked to the state of relations with China. The struggle to gain control over the various groups within the government and Party to determine a course towards reconciliation with Beijing, which he considered to be one of the fundamentals of his foreign policy, has been hard work for Gorbachev.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the cautious nature of the Soviet reaction one has also to appreciate the significance of improved relations with China for Gorbachev's standing at home. As a matter of fact, foreign policy is one of the few, if not the only, area where the present leadership can claim to have achieved a breakthrough; a fact acknowledged by many.

1. 1985 saw the resignation of Konstantin Rusakov, Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee and head of the department dealing with socialist countries. He was soon followed by the leader of the anti-China groupings, Rusakov's deputy Oleg Rakhmanin, and deputy foreign minister Mikhail Kapitsa.

2. Such groups were active in the Central Committee, the KGB, the army, and the Foreign Ministry, i.e. in organizations reaping dividends from confrontation and therefore having a stake in it.

Within the framework of foreign policy the transition from confrontation to active collaboration with China, the achievement of full normalization of bilateral relations which was announced during the extensively covered visit by President Gorbachev to Beijing, became arguably his greatest success, and enjoyed wide support from a broad section of the population. For if the policy of expanding contacts with the west, though generally supported, was treated with suspicion by certain groups, with some conservatives speaking of "revisionism," a "surrender of class positions" and "corrupting western influence," even these groups greeted a rapprochement with China with approval.

In his domestic policy Gorbachev still has nothing to boast of. The economic reform has yet to show any major results, living standards are falling, and ever fewer items can be bought over the counter, which only exacerbates public dissatisfaction. In such conditions it would be naive to expect a politician to give up one of his trump-cards. It is from this viewpoint that one should observe the first official Soviet reaction to the events in China: a Declaration by the Congress of People's Deputies adopted on 7 June.

The Declaration of 7 June was adopted in great haste and was intended to prevent individual MPs from making speeches on the issue, rather than to clarify an official position. Everything was done to avoid debate. Immediately after the Declaration was adopted, a break was announced, and procedure was so rapid that many of the deputies simply had no time to grasp the essence of the document. Hence two days later a group of deputies made their own declaration which was radically different from the original one, when, during voting on 7 June only one person voted against. Gorbachev was obviously afraid of dissenting opinions and did not know how to react to them.

The persistent wish not to offend the Chinese government resulted in the Declaration describing what was in effect a massacre of demonstrators as "clashes," with the "participants in mass youth protests" and troops put on one level. It was unclear from the Declaration who had used firearms and precipitated the heavy casualties. It stressed that it was not the time for hasty conclusions or statements (clearly a reminder to deputies and other public figures), noted that everything that had happened was an "internal affair" in China and warned against inopportune attempts at "pressure from outside." "Such attempts," says the Declaration, "only fuel passions, and do not lead to a stabilization of the situation."

The final part expressed the hope that "wisdom, common sense and a balanced approach would gain the upper hand, and a solution to the situation worthy of the great Chinese people would be found," and also the wish for the "friendly Chinese people to turn this tragic page in their history as quickly as possible and surge ahead along the road of the construction of a strong, peaceful and free socialist China, a great country enjoying the respect and sympathy of its neighbours and

of all humanity.”<sup>3</sup> The last phrase contains the essence of the Declaration: the USSR is interested in a continuation of the Chinese reforms, for only under these circumstances is it possible to expand co-operation, and this co-operation suits Soviet interests very well.

The inconsistency of the document and its confused character can be attributed to the general bewilderment of the leadership who could not have anticipated such a turn of events. The reason for this was that by the second half of the 1980s the USSR and the Soviet leadership had formed a one-sided positive idea about the Chinese reforms. A contributing factor was the biased information which came from several sources. Many Soviet observers visiting China, including non-sinologists, were genuinely impressed by the supply of consumer goods, while in addition those who wanted to speed up perestroika often sought to exaggerate the achievements of the Chinese reforms, special economic zones, etc., in order to give the Soviet government that extra push needed for the adoption of similar measures. Finally, many journalists, scholars and diplomats who had learnt to write only what would please their superiors, having caught the public mood, quickly embarked on a campaign out of purely careerist considerations, aimed at glorifying the Chinese reforms. A number of scholars, of course, reacted rather sceptically to these reforms, but these were mostly principled opponents of any reforms, zealots of “pure socialism,” whose criticism was not scholarly but ideologized and was not taken seriously by the new leadership which wanted to de-ideologize international relations.

In the first half of the 1980s strong independent views and often personal courage on the part of a commentator or diplomat were required to voice a positive assessment of the reforms in China, for these clashed with the interests of the dominant anti-China lobby. At the time, these reforms, especially in the areas of agriculture and consumer goods production, produced impressive results. By the second half of the 1980s the reforms started to malfunction and their inconsistency and the use of bureaucratic methods caused widespread public indignation. Ironically, though, at the time praise of the reforms in the Soviet press became more lavish, even by former “critics of Maoism.” As for unbiased materials, the censors of the Foreign Ministry and the Communist Party Central Committee were constantly on their guard against any articles which could cause the least offence for the “Chinese comrades.”

To some extent this torrent of biased information deluded the leadership. They did not, of course, get their information from the press, but classified recommendations were in much the same vein. Gorbachev set off to visit a China of reforms, general prosperity and enthusiasm, only to find a country where passions were raging, where he saw the bitterness and disenchantment of ordinary people. His statements during and after the visit testify to the fact that he had

3. *Izvestia*, 8 June 1989.

failed to appreciate the full complexity of the conflict. He had some good words to say about the enthusiasm of the students for the Soviet reforms, and noted that their demands coincided with the slogans put forward by the Chinese Communist Party. He also spoke about the necessity of finding a political solution through dialogue, but at the time this did not confront the official position of the Chinese government.<sup>4</sup>

To understand Gorbachev's subsequent actions, one has to bear in mind that the coincidence of his visit with an escalation of protests placed him in a rather difficult situation. It was as if he had unintentionally fuelled the conflict. The students had, naively, expected that Gorbachev would somehow succeed in persuading the Chinese leadership to enter into a dialogue with them. They also used the example of Gorbachev to shame Deng Xiaoping, welcomed Soviet reforms and chanted slogans, such as "Let's change Deng for Gorbachev!"<sup>5</sup>

Gorbachev understood clearly that the blow to Chinese political reform was a blow to himself and Soviet interests and he tried to overcome it, at least in the field of economical co-operation. However, in this context the appeal to "turn the page" is rather ominous: it seems to be saying, never mind what happened, the main thing is that you should continue with your reforms.

The only potentially offensive word in the Declaration is "tragic" in reference to the events. However, its writers can hardly be blamed, for at that time no one could imagine that Beijing could fail to qualify the massacre as at least a "tragedy." A careful study of the document, though, reveals a slight hint at the wish for China to be in future a "free" state and to act in a way which might "draw respect." However, a substantial part of the Declaration is meant for home consumption and warns that any criticism of the Beijing leadership will harm Soviet interests and will do nothing to promote normalization in China itself. The document is coloured by a reluctance to recommend anything to the Chinese side or to censure it in any way. The pronouncement that the events should be viewed as solely China's internal affair is clearly inconsistent. The USSR never felt embarrassed to speak its mind about the actions of governments in other countries, such as South Africa, Chile or Israel. However, relations with China are of much greater importance to the Soviet Union. Nor should one forget about the historical "guilt for diktat" complex, which the new Soviet leadership feels towards the People's Republic of China. Too often in the past the Soviet Union preached to "teach" China, telling her leaders what they ought to do and conducting negotiations from the position of "Elder Brother." China later labelled this policy "hegemonist." Thus it is hardly suprising that Gorbachev was over-scrupulous on such a delicate issue as relations

4. *Pravda*, 20 May 1989.

5. *Ekho Planeti (The Echo of the Planet)*, No. 22 (61) (1989) p. 22.

with China. This, apparently, is the chief reason for the tone of his statements in Paris in answer to a question put to him by French intellectuals at the Sorbonne. He said, "We are not adopting a position that would imply disrespect for China, her history, her present day and her future," and then spoke at length of the need for mutual trust.<sup>6</sup>

Earlier, in mid-June during his visit to West Germany, Gorbachev made his first statement about the events in China. Trying not to depart from the content of the Congress Declaration, he nonetheless modified the style somewhat. Reiterating that a continuation of the processes of reforms was in the interests of the Soviet Union, President Gorbachev said that he "deplored" the fact that "events have taken such a turn." However, in an attempt to iron out the situation, Gorbachev also said that someone might have decided to take advantage of the situation for their own purposes, thus indirectly supporting similar claims by Beijing.<sup>7</sup>

Gorbachev made an even more definite statement at the first session of the new USSR Supreme Soviet. This time he made no references to lack of information. His stand was defined once and for all. "The process of change in such a country as China is a phenomenon on a global scale. We, naturally, wish the Chinese people success in their movement along the road of reforms, along a road that they themselves had chosen," said Gorbachev, stressing yet again the vital role played by the reforms in China for the Soviet Union and the world at large. "We have made clear our attitude to the tragedy in Beijing. We deplore the turn of events. We are in favour of the most acute problems being solved through political dialogue between the authorities and the people. That is our belief. Such is the method we have chosen for ourselves. But a people solves its problem on its own. This is our principled and, I believe, irreversible position."<sup>8</sup>

These words are already a significant departure from the Declaration adopted by the Congress of People's Deputies two months before. Although the speech contains no direct denunciation of the actions of the Beijing government, it makes it quite clear that in a similar situation Gorbachev himself would have acted differently, and would have embarked on dialogue. Such a stand appears to be the most sensible the Soviet leader could assume in the present circumstances. Any direct official criticism would have provoked a very sharp reaction in Beijing, even sharper than could be provoked by western criticism. It would serve no practical purpose, but would have dealt a blow to the present structure of Sino-Soviet co-operation which had been so painstakingly constructed, while the unavoidably hostile reaction from Beijing would have damaged Gorbachev's position at home.

Nor would economic sanctions have had any effect. The structure

6. *Pravda*, 6 July 1989.

7. *Pravda*, 16 June 1989.

8. *Pravda*, 2 August 1989.



of Soviet–Chinese relations is based on mutual benefit, or, in some cases, the Soviet Union stands to gain more. There is hardly another country in the world that would be willing, like China, to buy up in such quantities the output of the backward Soviet industry and pay for it in hard currency or in food and other consumer goods. Therefore economic sanctions would have simply rebounded against the Soviet consumer whose mood was already close to revolutionary. The hardest hit would have been the residents of Siberia and the extreme east, who having lost hope of getting anything from the centre have established cross-border trade with neighbouring Chinese provinces.

Political acts proposed by some People's Deputies, such as recalling the Soviet ambassador, would hardly have had the desired effect, and besides would run counter to the cause proclaimed by Gorbachev towards de-ideologizing international relations, within the framework of which he is able to expand contracts with such countries as South Korea and Israel.

It could be said that Gorbachev arrived at this sensible position on the events in China too late. A whole range of factors made him modify his attitude. First, during his visits to West Germany and France he became aware that the initial Soviet reaction was far from the reaction of the rest of the world. The Soviet leader realized that he had clashed with world public opinion. An important role was also played by a number of non-governmental groups inside the country, who expressed disapproval of the Chinese government on behalf of the Soviet public, many People's Deputies, cultural workers and intellectuals. This is discussed in more detail below. Finally, Gorbachev apparently realized that good relations between a perestroika-oriented USSR and China are only possible if both countries move in one direction, that is, towards greater democracy and reforms. Otherwise, there will not be a sufficiently strong basis for economic co-operation.

The position determined by Gorbachev at the Supreme Soviet session will apparently remain unchanged at least as long as the existing balance of forces within the country's leadership remains. The fact that since 1 August 1989 Gorbachev has not revived the subject leads one to believe this.

### *The Coverage of Events in China in the Soviet Media*

The Soviet media provided rather scanty coverage of the events in China. However, one can gain some information from these sources. Let us now consider how the events were covered by the two most important daily papers: *Pravda* (the organ of the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee) and *Izvestia* (the organ of the USSR Supreme Soviet).

Traditionally both papers express the official stand, and in a sense this function persists. Yet it has to be borne in mind that the very

notion of “official stand” in the USSR today is very blurred. From mouthpieces of the Politburo they have effectively turned into advocates of different groups within the leadership, expressing differing and often opposing points of view. Hence the view sometimes heard in the west that these newspapers are used by the Soviet leadership for expressing the official point of view is no longer true. In fact some groups often manipulate them in order to exert pressure on the country’s leadership. Their influence remains very strong: only the trade union daily *Trud* has a higher circulation and in foreign affairs *Pravda* and *Izvestia* are the undisputed leaders.

Not having its own correspondent in Beijing, in April, May and June 1989, *Pravda* as usual published TASS reports. The first time the student demonstrations were mentioned in the paper was on 22 April, i.e. five days after they had started. The next day the paper wrote about the funeral of Hu Yaobang, without mentioning any demonstrations. Not a word was said about the students throughout the rest of April, though China was mentioned in the paper. On 5 May *Pravda* reported large-scale demonstrations again, held to mark the anniversary of the May Fourth Movement. The TASS report said that more than 10,000 people took part and that they were of an “organized and peaceful character.” After that only a small dispatch was placed in the paper on 11 May which was followed by a virtual silence until the start of Gorbachev’s visit, although extensive articles in China dealing with neutral topics appeared regularly. During the visit *Pravda*’s Special Correspondent, Vsevolod Ovchinnikov, mentioned the demonstrations in one of his dispatches, but chiefly in connection with the decision to change the place of the official welcoming ceremony, and generally, about their impact on the visit. He mentioned also that dialogue between the students and the authorities was yet to yield results. Only after the Soviet leader’s departure did the paper start publishing, almost daily, brief reports on the situation in Beijing.

On 5 June *Pravda* carried a short TASS report with the title “In Tiananmen and around it. Situation in Beijing worsens” which described the suppression of the movement as follows: “Chinese television today announced that the operation to free Tiananmen Square of people engaged in a sit-down strike there, is over. The operation was conducted by units of the People’s Liberation Army and armed police with support from tanks, infantry and armoured personnel carriers. The troops used firearms and tear-gas.” The dispatch also speaks of “soldiers opening fire without warning” and says that “a seven-year-old girl was shot dead in front of foreign newsmen.”

The report carried the following day was still of an independent character, yet after that the paper based all its dispatches exclusively on information provided by the official Xinhua Agency, articles from the Chinese press, and speeches of Chinese leaders. All those sources spoke of a normalization of the situation, while the demonstrations were referred to as “disturbances.”



Surprisingly, *Izvestia*, which has its own correspondent in Beijing, provided even less information. In April the paper only reported the funeral of Hu Yaobang, failing to mention the demonstrations. Only a dispatch dated 8 May spoke directly of the unrest and the negotiations between the students and the authorities. At the same time the paper carried lengthy articles about China, along them one by its Beijing correspondent, Yuri Savenkov, entitled "Deng Xiaoping. A political portrait," in which not a word is said about the demonstrations. The paper also carried accounts of speeches by Li Peng.

*Izvestia*, like *Pravda*, began to publish articles on the demonstrations and upheavals in Beijing only after President Gorbachev's departure. In reporting the Tiananmen massacre Savenkov carefully adhered to the Xinhua Agency account, although he himself was in the capital that night:

At 4.30 a.m. an appeal from the military command was read out over the radio: all the students were to clear the square – the symbol of China – where a handful of people were fuelling disturbances, rumours and slander. Those who did not obey the order would have to face the most decisive measures. The square was coming under strict military control. Those who did not want disturbances must help the troops. At five o'clock the students began to leave the square which was occupied by troops.<sup>9</sup>

This report does not even mention the use of firearms, although TASS had reported it. It does not explain how there could be 200 or even 600 wounded, as mentioned later in the article, nor why the article itself is entitled "Beijing's tragic Sunday." The next day *Izvestia* carried its last unbiased report on the events in Beijing, after which, like *Pravda*, it switched to quoting Chinese sources.

Information in other papers was even harder to find. Television showed film shot by foreign correspondents, though not much of it, and it ceased to do so altogether only days after the unrest had been suppressed. Nevertheless, Soviet viewers could see the peaceful nature of the demonstrations and their slogans, as well as the tactics employed by the Chinese army.

An analysis of reports in the Soviet press leads to the conclusion that the coverage of events in China was strictly censored by the leadership, especially before Gorbachev's visit to China. The Soviet leaders attached too great a significance to the visit to let the press indulge in detailed coverage of the demonstrations and thus risk offending the Chinese side, which could have had an adverse effect on the outcome of the visit. Reports of demonstrations appeared very rarely, and when they did they were tucked away in the inside pages, in the international sections, while in most countries around the world they were front page news. Some papers, like *Izvestia* for instance, while publishing lengthy articles on neutral topics from their Beijing correspondents (the number of such articles, as is always the

9. *Izvestia*, 5 June 1989.

case, rose dramatically on the eve of the Soviet leader's visit), in describing the demonstrations preferred to rely on reports by the more official TASS.

After the visit the control was eased slightly but was by no means withdrawn, just brought down to the usual level. Official circles continued to fear that some harm could be done to the just-normalized Soviet–Chinese relations and insisted that journalists take their line from the Chinese press. However in late May the press in China was granted unprecedented freedom, and Soviet reports subsequently assumed a more unbiased character. During the first two or three days after the suppression, while the Soviet leadership had still to take stock of the situation, some papers succeeded in publishing reports contradicting the official Chinese version. After that, from about 10 June, a strict ban on material from unofficial sources covering the events in Beijing was introduced.

Nevertheless one should not think that the Soviet public was poorly informed about the events in China. Some magazines which specialize in the coverage of international affairs and which are not so strictly controlled as the national dailies, published more extensive information on the subject. Y. Starostenko, a news analyst for the weekly *New Times*, in an article which appeared on 2 June (i.e. after martial law had been introduced) on the whole spoke positively about the demonstrations, describing the young people as “the barometer of social tensions” and said that many of the students’ demands were quite reasonable. After the quelling of the unrest, in the 16 June issue, the same author wrote of the events in Beijing using material taken from the western and the Chinese press. The article “Troubled days in June” spoke of troops using firearms and quoted Red Cross reports about the number of casualties reaching 2,500, and gave the western reaction. Even so, official Chinese information took up most of the article.

Still further and more unbiased coverage was provided by the weekly *Ekho Planeti*. In the dispatches by A. Kirillov and V. Tomilin which appeared in the May and June issues, events were presented as they unfolded day by day, official reports were mingled with personal impressions, and there were a lot of pictures. Yet arguably the most remarkable article appeared in a later issue (No. 33, 12–18 August). For the first time it gave the whole history of events, spoke of the start of the reforms, the initial movement for democracy, the activity of Wei Jingsheng, Fang Lizhi, Liu Binyan and the Amnesty 89 group. It had details of the campaign against “bourgeois liberalization” and of the student movement of 1986. Yet still in assessing the events in Beijing in June 1989, the authors quoted Chinese sources and used the phrase “counter-revolutionary rebellion” (in inverted commas), thus making no commitments.

Finally it has to be said that many Soviet people, discontented with the way their media had been covering the events in Beijing, resorted to listening to foreign radio stations (including the Russian Service of

the BBC, VOA, and Radio Freedom), a usual method of gaining more information.

### *Public Reaction to the Events in China*

Soviet public opinion reacted promptly to the massacre perpetrated against the peaceful demonstrators in China. This massacre was directly linked in the mind of the public to the brutal clamp-down in Tbilisi which happened only weeks before, and similar events in Armenia and Kazakhstan, and was seen as an indicator of the possibility that perestroika in the USSR could be discontinued. Reforms in China are invariably compared in the USSR to the reforms of perestroika, and therefore the stand taken by various social groups on the events in China was actually determined by their attitude to the changes inside the Soviet Union.

The suppression of the mass movement in China took place at a time when the whole of the USSR was avidly watching live television coverage of the First Congress of People's Deputies. Reformist deputies attended daily rallies at which Moscovites urged them, among other things, to be more decisive in their reaction to the events in China, for many were dissatisfied with the official Declaration. This resulted in a speech at the Congress by Andrei Sakharov. Speaking of the need to assess the events from the point of view of human morality, he urged the Congress to instruct the government to recall the Soviet ambassador from Beijing. Dr Sakharov also announced that a group of deputies, which became known as the Inter-regional Group, had undertaken an appeal on the issue. That Gorbachev took Sakharov's words exceptionally close to heart is seen by the fact that as soon as the scientist started to speak about China he had his microphone switched off. This provided a reason for not including Sakharov's words in the official minutes, which explains why they were not published in *Izvestia* the following day. The chairman also refused permission for the appeal to be read out at the Congress, and it was at a mass rally outside Moscow's Lenin stadium that the document was made public. The appeal deserves to be quoted here in full.

Keen interest and sympathy for the destinies of democratic movements abroad marked the spirit of the Congresses of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies of this country. When our Congress was in session in the Kremlin alarming news came from China. By a majority of votes the Congress adopted an appeal to the Chinese people. However, its text had not been discussed with the deputies and it fails to reflect the whole seriousness of the political situation in our neighbouring socialist country, as well as the degree of alarm it has caused among us. Peaceful popular actions in Beijing, Shanghai, Harbin, Nanjing, Chengdu and other cities in the country took place under slogans calling for deepening reforms, combating corruption, greater democratization, freedom of speech and assembly. We, citizens of the country which has launched perestroika, fully appreciate these slogans.

However, the authorities in the People's Republic of China did not enter into dialogue with the popular masses. Regular troops were dispatched to quell the demonstrations. According to preliminary figures the number of casualties runs into thousands. Street battles between troops and the population continue. The hand of frightened reactionary forces is the same everywhere: be it in Minsk, Vilnius, Yerevan, Tbilisi, or in Chinese cities. We, USSR People's Deputies, offer our condolences to the injured and the relatives of those Chinese comrades who died. We denounce the use of punitive measures and the use of the army against its own people. We call on the authorities in the People's Republic of China to enter into dialogue with the people and refrain from making indictments in the spirit of the Cultural Revolution. We call on the Chinese government to stop the bloodshed.<sup>10</sup>

The appeal by the Inter-regional Group differs greatly from the official Congress Declaration. The actions of the Chinese government are denounced outright and are compared to those of the Soviet army when it dispersed peaceful demonstrations.

The Chinese issue was repeatedly raised at rallies that were held in Moscow during the Congress of People's Deputies. Ten thousand people were at a rally organized by the Memorial Society which aims to eliminate the remnants of Stalinism. The rally made a resolution denouncing the Chinese government and supporting the youth of Shanghai and other Chinese cities where the movement had not yet been quelled at that time. The main speaker on the Chinese issue was Yakov Etinger, a Memorial activist, head of a department at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the USSR Academy of Sciences.

Soviet independent groups took part in rallies and demonstrations of Chinese youth outside the Chinese embassy in Moscow. These were addressed by representatives of Memorial, the Moscow Popular Front, the Democratic Union and the group Next Stop. A report from one such rally was carried in the *Moscow News* weekly.<sup>11</sup>

The Memorial Society organized an independent debate of the events in China which was attended by some of the country's leading sinologists and other representatives of the public. The debate was chaired by Dr Lev Elyusin, head of the China department at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences. The issue was also discussed during the sessions of Moscow Tribune, a independent club uniting Moscow's academic circles.

The recently-formed independent "Union of Scientists of the USSR" expressed its opinions on the issue. In the statement made by delegates of the constituent conference, "On the events in China," the word "criminal" is used to describe the deployment of armed forces against the peaceful demonstrations. They also expressed their support for the evaluation of these events which the academician Dr

10. Moscow, Congress, 6 June 1989. Quoted from *Tartuski Kuryer*, No. 2, 1–15 July 1989.

11. *Moscow News*, No. 25, 18 June 1989.

Andrei Sakharov gave at the Congress of People's Deputies and the Inter-regional Group appeal:

We protest against the inhuman cruelty of the Chinese authorities and express our solidarity with those who were the first to suffer the weight of repression: the Chinese intellectuals and students. We appeal to the Chinese government to show political wisdom, to put a stop, immediately, to executions and the persecution of dissidents, and to release all political prisoners and adhere to democratic forms of government; a necessity vital both to the Chinese people and to the rest of the world.

The well known politician Boris Yeltsin has on more than one occasion publicly condemned the actions of the Chinese government.

Gradually, unofficial opinions began to penetrate the press. The first articles which gave an independent view on the events in China appeared in the pages of the Baltic press, which is to all intents and purposes uncensored. But central censorship began to give way gradually, as it became increasingly difficult to defy the opinions of many prominent social figures, including some People's Deputies. The attack on the official position was directed, at first with extreme caution, by the most independent papers and journals. On 11 June, in the pages of *Moscow News*, the chairman of the board of Novosty Press Agency, A. Vlasov, expressed his wholehearted support for the Congress's official declaration, finding in it something which was never actually in the original:

The statement by the Congress at the same time emanates from a moral imperative: jointly with other nations to seek out a way to establish the predominance of a universal idea. This path must not be a bloody one. The tragic events in Tbilisi have convinced us of that. They happened at the time when the conflict in China which culminated in the massacre on the morning of 4 June was only just beginning. We rooted out the courage in ourselves to give an honest account of the events in Georgia in order that no such thing should ever happen again. So why should we pretend to be indifferent, considering that we are in a similar plight, only in some ways on a greater scale, "to move in" to our good neighbour's house?

A hidden note of criticism of the official position might be detected in these last words, although the author, a bureaucrat in office, took the initial precaution of covering himself by expressing his wholehearted agreement with it.

In the same newspaper, on 2 July, the USSR People's Deputy and chairman of the Public Commission for humanitarian co-operation and human rights, Fedor Burlatsky, denounced the use of armed forces for the suppression of domestic strife, and the executions in China and elsewhere. On 9 July in *Moscow News*, while carefully avoiding the essential issue of the events in China, the head of the department for the study and forecasting of Sino-Soviet relations at the Institute of the Far East, Dr Sergei Goncharov, nevertheless admitted that they had made a "grave impression" on people throughout the world, including those in the USSR.

By the end of July, the authors of material appearing in newspapers and journals were expressing themselves more openly. This was an example of a common Soviet phenomenon: a campaign flares up, in this case a campaign to control the flow of information about the events in China, and then dwindles as time passes until, finally, it disappears completely. In the Soviet weekly *Ogonyok* an interview with Andrei Sakharov was published in which he reiterates his opinion about the suppression of the demonstrators, criticizes the official declaration, and observes that "it is impossible to present those who demanded democracy, freedom of the press, a fight against corruption, by means of peaceful demonstrations, on the same platform as those who carried out the bloody massacre."<sup>12</sup>

In an article devoted to the problems of relating morals and politics in Soviet foreign policy strategies, A. Kortunov and A. Izyumov severely criticized the rigid censorship of press information concerning international relations. Using the Soviet reaction to the events in China as an example, they wrote:

Early this June the entire world discussed the tragic events in Beijing. Hundreds of people were killed. The reaction to these events in the majority of countries was the same – condemnation of violence against unarmed people. The state leaders and parliaments of the world's leading countries, including Great Britain, France, the United States and Japan, made relevant statements, a number of diplomatic visits to China were cancelled, and other sanctions were taken. The USSR again, as in the case of Rushdie, limited itself to a neutral statement, with not a word denouncing the brutality of the Chinese army. The statement on China adopted by the Congress of People's Deputies, as we see it, does not produce any honour for them. But the most noticeable aspect of the Soviet reaction was that practically no publication or television or radio broadcast expressed an alternative opinion! Could it be that all our commentators were so unanimous in supporting the activities of the Chinese authorities? OK – the government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and parliament – they may have some "higher" interests (although theoretically we now do not have any other interests higher than the common human ones), but why not let those Soviet people who wish to protest against the behaviour of the Chinese authorities express their feelings? Or does the expression of opinions on common human questions remain in our country a monopoly of the state? And it is easy to imagine the wave of "nationwide anger" which would have swept the Soviet press if events like those in China had happened somewhere in South Korea or Japan.<sup>13</sup>

In the magazine *The Twentieth Century and Peace* the author of the following lines managed to address them directly to the Soviet government:

For anyone who upholds the ideas of humanitarian, democratic socialism, there can only be one way to assess the actions of the Chinese government: that chosen by the majority of European communist parties. The situation is a delicate one, because in a great victory for the Soviet Union, relations with

12. *Ogonyok*, No. 31, 29 July–5 August 1989, p. 27.

13. *Moscow News*, No. 32 (1989).



China had only just been fully normalized. However, in supporting the shooting of peaceful demonstrators, which was carried out “in the name of socialism,” we find ourselves once more isolated in the face of a general consensus of opinion throughout the civilized world. On the other hand, the situation in China is such that the shooting in Tiananmen Square cannot sustain official approval for long. In the PRC, within living memory, there have been massacres of mass movements which were subsequently condemned by the government itself. One only has to recall the events of 1976 in the same Tiananmen Square. In the light of the circumstances, an insufficiently severe criticism of the tragedy of June 1989 might result in us finding ourselves at odds with the whole of Chinese society, including the liberals in the government of the PRC.<sup>14</sup>

It would be wrong to assume that everyone in the USSR sympathized with the people’s movement for democracy in China, or that they disapproved of the official position taken by the Soviet government. Some newspapers and journals received letters which condoned the actions of the Chinese government, saying that it was the only way to deal with “loud-mouthed,” “ranting revisionists,” “western agents,” and they called upon the Soviet authorities to adopt similar methods on a broader scale in the USSR. One such letter was read out on television on the programme *International Panorama* by the political columnist of *Izvestia* Alexander Bovin, who only a short while after the event had appeared criticizing the official Soviet reaction. Similar letters were written by representatives of the social groups which disapprove of changes in political life inside the USSR and the movement of the government and mass media away from “orthodox” Marxism. Several public opinion polls have shown that about six or seven per cent of the general population support these views, but they have a strong position in the government infrastructure. Open declarations such as these were not published in newspaper articles but support for the actions of the Chinese government was sometimes expressed indirectly by some journalists in the form of support for the initial Soviet reaction. (Soviet political culture is such that by expressing support for the official reaction by using different words it is possible to show both one’s support for the actions of the Chinese government and one’s dissatisfaction with them.)

In the article “Should the ambassador be recalled from Beijing?” which appeared in *Moscow News* on 25 June 1989, APN’s political correspondent V. Simonov basically agreed with the official Chinese interpretation of events, stating that a “strange transformation” of the student movement took place (using the language of the Chinese press), into a “counter-revolutionary mutiny of extremely few reactionary members of society who detest the Party and socialist regime.” He did not advise the Soviet government to put pressure on China, but openly misled readers, assuring them that “not one of the

14. *The Twentieth Century and Peace*, No. 8 (1989), p. 4.

western capitals had actually taken any dramatic measure to sanction relations with Beijing.” Later, the author, referring to Andrei Sakharov and his supporters, expressed the conviction that those who were campaigning for a “tough position in Moscow” were “constantly harking back to the past.” “In the given situation this would take the form of putting the screws on China which would be a contradiction of the ‘new thinking.’ It may be that the earnest but naive councillors are, in fact, missing the arsenals of power politics. High-level foreign intervention is certainly not what the Chinese people need today. Avoiding it is the only way to find out what happened and why, and to make sure that the tragedy does not bring the movement towards modernization to a standstill,” he wrote. One might agree with the first part of this argument, but the explanation that a policy of non-intervention should be maintained out of a desire to give the Chinese the opportunity to “interpret events” looks like an unconvincing attempt at an excuse for not wishing to express a personal opinion.

N. Anin in *New Times* expresses a similar opinion. “There is no point in criticizing the military action in Tiananmen Square yet, because we still have very few of the facts about the tragedy that took place in far-off Beijing. One should not doubt that in the PRC there are those who go against socialism and those who wish to see the country forced back into the abyss of the Cultural Revolution; these are, simply, criminals. . . .”<sup>15</sup> A wish not only to support the official Soviet position but also to play up to the Chinese government manages to wriggle its way into these commentaries. Soviet sinologists have always shown a strong tendency to “move with the times.”

During the sunny period of the Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s the Chinese government’s policies enjoyed the full support of most Soviet academics and journalists who as a result were rewarded with promotion and other blessings. When relations with the Chinese deteriorated dramatically, most went in for wholesale criticism of anything connected with China in any way. Now, since Sino-Soviet relations have normalized again, some writers are hastening to make their careers on the overblown euphoria of relations with China, going so far as to adopt uncritically official concepts of the Chinese and to excuse repression. Fortunately a new era has begun in the USSR and any opinion, even the official one, may be challenged. If the general tendency towards democratization continues and deepens in the USSR, one can imagine that an acutely negative approach to the actions of the Chinese government will become steadily more widespread among the Soviet people through pressure from the popular movement, and will prove more significantly influential in the reconsideration of the path for relations with the PRC.

### *The Events in China and Sino-Soviet Relations*

The future of Sino-Soviet relations will be determined largely by the internal politics of both countries. The political situation of each is

15. *New Times*, No. 25, 16 June 1989, p. 35.

presently unstable. One can say that, on the whole, the improvement of bilateral relations will push the development of both countries in one direction; either both to reform, or both to orthodox communism.

At present their paths of development are diverging. Since the events in Tiananmen Square China has been experiencing repression of dissidents and a tightening up of the economy, while in the USSR the process of democratization continues to forge ahead. Much in the development of Sino-Soviet relations will depend on the perspectives of the Chinese hard-line leadership. If Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union prove successful, the new ideological division between the two powers will become more pronounced. In a sense Gorbachev's perestroika is more dangerous to Beijing than Bush's bourgeois liberalism, since it shows a realistic way in which a totalitarian "socialist" society like China can be transformed.

In this sense, as Soviet sinologists point out, the dramatic changes in eastern Europe and perestroika in the USSR are undoubtedly the major factors influencing policy toward China. "Perhaps, were it not for the June crisis, Beijing would have reacted quite differently to such news. For it was only 12 months ago that the Chinese leadership applauded the reforms taking place in the eastern part of the European continent, though hardly anyone expected at the time that they would lead to the downfall of the ruling regimes there. However, changes inside China itself have also been a major factor. The current Chinese leaders fear lest the snowball of the political upheavals shaking eastern Europe and the USSR should reach their country. In other words, the ideological threat has begun to loom for Beijing from the east as well."<sup>16</sup>

In the aftermath of the suppression of demonstrations one had the impression that several groups in the Soviet leadership—those who occupy the firm "class position" who recently criticized the Chinese reforms and dislike the present thaw in relations between the USSR and western countries, approving of the decisiveness of the Chinese leaders in their struggle against "traitors"—are trying to take advantage of China's isolation to draw her back on to the Soviet side to damage American interests. However, these groups do not have a casting vote in the USSR today, so one can agree with Sergei Goncharov in his supposition that "the USSR and China will proceed further from the argument that the revival in some form or another of the military-political alliance of the 1950s does not correspond with the current interests of either of them, nor with hopes for peace and stability all over the planet."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, where China would formerly have trodden with extreme caution, wary of the reaction of the west, it will now, probably, be more interested in the formal, public relations side of the relationship, in raising talks to a higher level and giving them wide press coverage, in the development of

16. Dr E. Bazhanov, in *New Times*, No. 16 (1990).

17. *Moscow News*, 7 September 1989.

inter-party links. Prior to the events in Tiananmen Square, the Soviet Union insisted on all these things, but now, compelled to pay attention to global and domestic public opinion, it will obviously be trying to further relations without particular pomp and ceremony. In this sense, Chinese isolation has effectively reversed the positions of the PRC and the USSR.

The economic links, which are profitable for both sides, will continue to be extended. The only thing which is likely to prove a barrier here is the inefficiency and the sluggishness of the Soviet economy. However, China may now be prepared at times to sacrifice some share of the profits in order to achieve its political aims. In the long term there are many factors which might influence the state of bilateral relations. If the death of Deng Xiaoping were to bring a more liberal government to power, Chinese relations would improve with all countries, which would create conditions for further development of normal Sino-Soviet contacts in the fields both of politics and culture. The collapse of perestroika in the USSR could have quite unforeseen consequences in Soviet foreign policy, particularly in Sino-Soviet relations.