China's Political Development after Tiananmen: Tranquility by Default

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CHINA'S POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT AFTER TIANANMEN

Tranquility by Default

Hong Shi

Chinese politics continuously generates surprise in the Western world. First, the official tolerance of the student demonstrations in the spring of 1989 stretched the imagination of many as to the extent the Chinese government would go on this path. Then Beijing's bloody suppression of the demonstrations in June stunned the world by the degree of its insensitiveness and brutality. Now, for those people who have managed to keep an eye on China's post-Tiananmen political development, it is the measure of political tranquility persisting in China so far that appears to be rather incomprehensible.

Such political tranquility is all the more remarkable in the context of the worldwide condemnation of the Tiananmen suppression, the drastic political developments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the serious economic problems in China, as well as the widely held view that Beijing leaders had completely destroyed their political legitimacy to rule the country when they ordered soldiers to shoot at the demonstrators. Despite all this, the government managed to survive, and moreover, China's political situation appears tranquil if not stable; with the exception of sporadic political outbursts, there has been no fresh massive political protest and no sign of immediate political collapse. As one Western diplomat put it: "All the ingredients for an explosion are here. But that doesn't mean there will be an explosion. The scene could be quiet for a few years more."[1] While one may dispute the length of time he allowed for political tranquility, one has to admit that there is something paradoxical in the nature of the course of development.

Hong Shi is a pseudonym for a professor from Beijing.

1. *New York Times*, April 15, 1990, p. A1. The anniversary of the June 4 suppression went by with relatively small-scale protests.

How has this state of affairs come about? Is it a result of Beijing's able leadership and effective political control and management? What implications does it have for China's future political development?

Two Contrasting Views

The official explanation in China for the current political tranquility is relatively simple and straightforward. It claims that the Chinese people support their government and still believe that Marxism and the present leadership provide the only correct ideology and leadership for China. This, according to the official explanation, is the fundamental cause of the "stability" in China since June 1989. The handiest and most morally appealing explanation in the West is that sheer force has prevailed in China. People with this view do not hesitate to point to the facts that Beijing has arrested thousands of dissidents, cracked down on underground opposition organizations, beefed up its police force, and instituted a reign of terror throughout the country.

A closer analysis of post-Tiananmen developments in China, however, appears to suggest that neither view is satisfactory. If the first view were true, there would not have been so many demonstrators on Beijing streets in the first place, and Beijing probably would not have had to rely so heavily on military force to solve the political crisis in June 1989 and to maintain its power since then, a politically costly, if not suicidal approach to the resolution of political problems. With regard to the second explanation, although it is true that force has played a significant role in putting down the demonstrations and injecting fear into many people's minds by making them think twice before attempting to march on the streets again, it is doubtful that under normal circumstances force alone is sufficient for any government to maintain political tranquility for an extended period of time without an appealing ideology, or a popular leadership, or a viable economy, or strong international support. Usually, a government simply cannot survive on mere force, let alone maintain political stability, however transient this may be. Given the fact that many Chinese were deeply involved in the 1989 demonstrations, an effective application of force against them would logically result in widespread instability if not a revolution. This, however, has not happened.

A closer analysis of political developments in China since June 1989 suggests that the clue may well lie in the manner with which force was applied. Among other things, the ineffectiveness of the Chinese Communist Party to implement its punishment policy following the Tiananmen suppression and its subsequent alteration of the policy itself has significantly shaped the payoff structure of political actions in China, under-

lining the evolution of the present state of affairs, which I call tranquility by default.

The Policy of Punishment

Following the Tiananmen crackdown, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted a policy of punishment aimed at rooting out all the political dissidents and solving the problem of political unrest once and for all. Soon after Tiananmen, Premier Li Peng announced: "At present, our task is to restore order and strike relentless blows at the counter-revolutionary rebels."[2] The party took this policy so seriously that it was listed as the party's most important and urgent task in the Fourth Plenary Session of the Thirteenth Party Congress held in June 1989. The conference resolution stressed that the party should do a thorough job in this regard so as to "xiaochu yinhuan, chanchu huogen" (eliminate hidden threat and eradicate the cause of peril). Specifying the targets of the policy, Li Peng said: "We shall strike and punish those who engineered and commanded the turmoil and rebellion both in front and behind the scenes; those who collaborated with anti-China forces abroad in an attempt to subvert China's socialist system; those who committed beating, smashing, looting, burning, and killing; and particularly those ex-convicts who committed evil."[3]

To carry out this policy, the party adopted a series of measures. First, it launched a widely publicized propaganda campaign to discredit the demonstrations and their organizers and participants. The official version of the story painted the demonstrators as ex-criminals, hooligans, naive and misguided college students, plus ignorant bystanders. The organizers of the movement, according to the official press, were counterrevolutionaries or foreign agents. What they wanted to achieve in China, it argued, was to create political turmoil and overthrow the CCP in order to satisfy their selfish power ambitions. If these people got their way, the party warned, thousands of heads would roll and China would return to the pre-1949 days of foreign domination and civil war. Therefore, their vicious aims must be exposed and people should support the party in its effort to identify and prosecute the counterrevolutionaries.

Second, the party carried out massive arrests and prosecutions of political dissidents.[4] Arrest warrants for leaders and organizers of the demon-

2. *Beijing Review*, 32:26 (June 26–July 2, 1989), p. 9.

3. "Communique of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 13th CCP Central Committee," ibid., 32:27 (July 3–9), p. 14; *Studies in Chinese Communism*, no. 275 (November 15, 1989), p. 17; *China Daily*, July 3, 1989, p. 1.

4. No one knows how many people were arrested. According to the official announcement, the figure for Beijing alone within days of the Tiananmen suppression was about 400 (*China Daily*, June 13, 1989, p. 1).

strations were announced on television and radio and pasted on walls all over the country. Police published telephone numbers for people to report on the whereabouts of the wanted people and those who hid weapons seized on the eve of the suppression. The military searched the city for "counterrevolutionaries" and arrested thousands of suspects. Heavily armed soldiers guarded important crossroads and patrolled the streets in army vehicles with hands on the triggers of machine guns and automatic rifles pointing in all directions. They also checked people's identification papers and searched their luggage for weapons and counterrevolutionary pamphlets at railway stations and airports. Swift trials of some of the arrested were conducted, dozens of people were sentenced to death, and their executions were swiftly carried out.

Third, the party resorted to traditional mass political movement methods to identify political dissidents. In every unit, meetings were held to mobilize people to confess their misconduct during the demonstrations and to report on colleagues. People were classified into 19 categories for criticism as well as prosecution.[5] Everyone was required to write a summary documenting his or her activities for that period. One had to be honest in order to gain pardon or reduced punishment from the party and government. If one tried to hide anything from the party and later it was found out through other channels, things could get really nasty.

Fourth, to facilitate the campaign, the party asked unit-level cadres to watch videotapes and pictures of the demonstrations obtained from a variety of sources, including the foreign press and the intelligence system, to identify those in their units who were active in the demonstrations. For several reasons, the 1989 spring demonstrations in Beijing were probably the most filmed demonstrations in China's history.

Fifth, the party initiated a purification campaign to remove dissident members. That so many party members had joined the demonstrations had caused considerable alarm among the party leaders, which led to this housecleaning campaign. Among other things, all members were asked to account for their behavior during the demonstration period in writing and to repledge their loyalty to the party before being allowed to reregister as a party member. Finally, if party leaders did not feel that a cell in a certain unit was doing a good job, they would send in a work team consisting of cadres from other party organizations to supervise and sometimes take over the leadership in executing the local political campaigns. In previous political campaigns, work teams were quite effective in bringing local people down to their knees before the party through manipulating their ex-

5. *Jiushi Niandai* (The nineties), Hong Kong monthly (September 1989), p. 6.

isting conflicts of interests, if not in identifying and prosecuting the real enemies of the party.

Failure of the Policy

Despite the apparent comprehensive and elaborate measures adopted, the party has to a large extent failed to achieve its original goal of punishment. To begin with, the propaganda campaign has brought little change in people's views of the demonstrations. Although people may have various criticisms of the way the demonstrations were organized and the ability of the organizers, they have generally persisted in their sympathy and support for the demonstrators. Very few people really doubt the motivations of the students in striving for democracy and freedom for China, and most people continue to distrust the ability and sincerity of the party to serve the interests of the nation.[6] In fact many of the political discussion sessions became occasions for people to criticize the party for its inept leadership and clumsy handling of the demonstrations. Furthermore, despite the massive arrests and intensive campaigns to hunt political dissidents, the party has failed to capture many people on its wanted list or even to identify most of those who organized and were deeply involved in the 1989 demonstrations, many of whom managed to escape to the West to the frustration of the party. Some of the wanted political dissidents managed to hide out in China for months before they turned up in the West even though their names and pictures were on the widely circulated official wanted lists.

The traditional method of political movement at the grass-roots level did not work either. Local party cadres read official documents with little enthusiasm. Most of them did not try very hard to identify those involved in the political demonstrations in their units, and many even tried to protect them. The general membership was even less inclined to report on colleagues. As Robert Delfs of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* observed: "There is a conspiracy . . . perhaps strongest in Peking but extending throughout China. . . . It is a conspiracy of silence, the sum of thousands of individual decisions not to inform on friends, neighbours or colleagues. This spontaneous mass refusal has stymied attempts to mount a full-scale investigation and purge of participants in last year's disturbances."[7] In their personal summaries, people in general mimicked the official lines while disclaiming any involvement in the demonstrations and refusing to report on their colleagues. Almost everyone who had participated in demonstrations claimed that he or she only went out of curiosity,

6. Ibid., p. 18, October 1989, p. 7, and November 1989, p. 6.
7. *Far Eastern Economic Review* (*FEER*), May 31, 1990, p. 17.

if admitting to participation at all. According to one story, more than 1,800 people in the Ministry of Broadcasting and Television joined the demonstrations but only 190 admitted their participation. The rest denied any involvement and their colleagues maintained silence on the matter.[8] One allegedly internal party document of the Beijing municipality reports that in all of Beijing only 50,000 to 60,000 acknowledged that they had joined the demonstrations! Even videotapes and pictures did not help. Most cadres who were asked to see tapes and pictures of the demonstrations found the images too "blurred" for them to identify anyone, another revelation of the healthy side of the lingering traditional Chinese distrust of modern technology.

As for the party purification campaign, it has not got anywhere either. Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times* correspondent in Beijing, reported that "the effort to expel dissident party members has been subverted so that the vast majority of party members are being 're-registered' even if they were involved in the democracy movement."[9] While work teams from the outside tended to make things somewhat harder for people in some units, they usually could not get much information from an uncooperative mass. In general, people tried to avoid the teams. To make things worse for the party, even some members of these teams sympathized with the demonstrators. The punishment policy has been so ineffective that the party so far has not been able to produce an impressive progress report to underscore its success.

Consequence of the Failure

The failure of the punishment policy has produced at least two unanticipated consequences. One is that most of the people involved in the student demonstrations were able to avoid prosecution. In most cases, all one needed to do was to show up in political study meetings of one's unit and write a personal account of activities during those days of political turmoil for the sole purpose of disclaiming involvement. This is what most people did and, in this way, "liberated" themselves from punishment. Since most unit leaders and members refused to turn their subordinates and colleagues in, the party was frustrated by futile efforts to find out who had done what. This situation was reinforced by people's experience in previous political movements, which argued against telling the truth to the party.

The fact that most people could avoid prosecution had a significant impact on the cost and benefit calculus with regard to political action in the minds of those involved in the demonstrations, and thus their behavior.

8. *Jiushi Niandai*, November 1989, p. 24.
9. *New York Times*, June 3, 1990, p. A20.

On the one hand, fresh political actions would invite immediate harsh reprisal; on the other, with the exception of those prominent on the official wanted list, it has become relatively safe to remain politically passive even though one was deeply involved in the demonstrations and belongs to the category of people whom the party wishes to punish. In addition, given the fact that most of the Chinese leaders with real power are in their 80s and would "visit Marx" (a Chinese euphemism for death) very soon, the waiting is perceivably not going to be very long. Such a situation has strongly discouraged people from taking fresh political actions against the establishment for the time being, at least not openly, while encouraging them to wait for a better time to stick their necks out. As an intellectual explained the prevailing political stasis in China: "We are waiting for the 'gang of elders' to die." Another middle-aged intellectual said: "We are watching, waiting, and preparing our strength. No one can do anything to change the situation right now, nor is there any point in suicidal actions. It will not take so long to outlive the old men. The decisive moment will come in at most one or two more years."[10]

Another consequence is the Party's gradual alteration of its policy from one of single-minded punishment to a more sophisticated one emphasizing stability and economic development. By the end of September and early October 1989, this change became quite obvious. In the press conference held by the Politburo Standing Committee members on September 26 and the National Day speeches by Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, the previous number one task of the party—i.e., to "eliminate hidden threat and eradicate the cause of peril"—was not even emphasized. Instead, the party leadership stressed the necessity of making a fine distinction between class enemies and those who merely committed mistakes and of following legal procedures in prosecuting the former.[11] The most important task, as outlined by Jiang Zemin, became

> Lead and unite the people of all nationalities of the country, take economic construction as the core of our work, uphold the four cardinal principles, persist in the reform and opening; and, through self-reliance and hard work, struggle to build our country into a prosperous, democratic and culturally advanced modern socialist country.[12]

Here the concept of punishment is missing. In its place, political stability became the dominating theme of party policy. In Deng Xiaoping's words,

10. Ibid., June 3, 1990, p. A20; *FEER*, May 31, 1990, p. 17.

11. *Guang Jiao Jing* (Hong Kong), October 1989, pp. 60–64; Jiang Zemin, "Speech at the Meeting in Celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China," *Beijing Review*, October 9–15, 1989, p. 20; "Li Peng on Current Domestic and International Politics," ibid., October 16–22, 1989, p. 19.

12. Jiang Zemin, "Speech in Celebration of the 40th Anniversary," in ibid., p. 15.

stability is an overwhelmingly important task in China. "Without a political situation marked by stability and unity, and without a stable social order we can accomplish nothing in a country with such a huge population and poor foundation."[13]

Since then, in order to ensure political stability, the party has devoted its attention to reconciliation with various strata of the society and to economic development, including expansion of foreign trade and investment, though with limited success. In the wake of the downfall of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, the CCP Central Committee issued a resolution reiterating its intention to "persist in and perfect the system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party."[14] In March 1990, the Sixth Plenary Session of the Thirteenth Congress called for strengthening the relationship between the party and the people. In his speech on May 4, Jiang Zemin reemphasized the role of intellectuals in China's striving for modernization, and Yang Shangkun is reported to have said that the Chinese government is not going to hold college students responsible for the so-called counterrevolutionary rebellion in 1989.[15] On two separate occasions, Deng Xiaoping and Li Ruihuan are reported to have admitted that the party should also bear a certain share of responsibility for last year's demonstrations.[16] Partially in response to U.S. pressures, the party lifted martial law in Beijing on November 1, 1989, and in Tibet on May 1, 1990, and successively released more than 800 people under investigation for their involvement in the 1989 demonstrations in January, May, and June of 1990.

The official alteration of its punishment policy has since enhanced the payoff structure of political action resulting from the failure of the punishment policy. This course of development is significant because it has made political passivity not only possible but also preferable for the political activists of the 1989 demonstrations, at least for the time being. Because the people targeted by the punishment policy were numerous and politically active, had the policy been effectively executed, they would probably have felt cornered and had no alternative but to put up a fight. This in turn would have resulted in significant political instability if not a political revolt. Ironically, this logical sequel of the party's punishment policy has been avoided precisely because of the policy's ineffective implementation. Thus, the development of the present political tranquility in China.

13. *Beijing Review*, November 13–19, 1989, p. 9.
14. *Remin Ribao*, February 8, 1990, p. 1.
15. *Ming Bao* (Hong Kong), May 16, 1990, p. 12, and May 22, 1990, p. 12.
16. Ibid., May 24, 30, 1990. *Renmin Ribao*, May 11, 1990, p. 1; June 7, 1990, p. 1.

Implications for the Future

The way this kind of political stability has evolved is suggestive of China's future political development. It is a stability based not on ideological belief, nor on the popularity of the political leadership, nor on satisfaction with the economic well-being of the nation, nor on international support. Rather, it is based on a commonsensical calculation of the cost and benefit of political action on the part of political activists at any point in time. Therefore, it is a stability without an enduring foundation.

The stark reality is that most of the fundamental problems that underlay the 1989 political demonstrations have not been resolved and they have been further complicated by new problems. Politically, the party is facing widespread popular disaffection, particularly among intellectuals and students. The Tiananmen crackdown succeeded in temporarily suppressing public outrage over the official abuse of power, rampant corruption, official speculation, the octogenarian leaders' hold on power, bureaucratic tyranny, and the unfair distribution system. However, while failing to resolve the problems, the suppression seriously undermined the legitimacy of the party's rule. Never before in the history of the People's Republic has the party received so little support from the people, including its own cadres, as it does now. The persisting demand of students and intellectuals for freedom and democracy threatens to spark another round of political protests at any time.

In addition, the party is facing a succession crisis. On the one hand, the all-powerful party elders led by Deng Xiaoping are in their eighties and are "seen in public only very rarely, and can barely walk."[17] On the other hand, the younger generation of leaders suffers from the usual weaknesses of the successors of strong, charismatic leaders. Although Deng Xiaoping has put Jiang Zemin in the most important official posts as CCP boss and chairman of the Central Military Commission, Jiang's ability to hold these positions in the days to come is doubted. According to Nicholas Kristof, "many Chinese think Mr. Jiang will be lucky to retain power on the second anniversary of Mr. Deng's death."[18] Li Peng probably has even less chance to stay in power for long. Rumors that he would be replaced very soon abound and are probably not just hearsay.

Economically, although the party has managed to reduce the rate of inflation through a tight fiscal policy in the past year, it has ended up with a largely stagnated economy. The industrial growth rate during the first three months of 1990 was zero, a stark contrast to the impressive growth rate over the previous decade. Recent economic performance shows some

17. *New York Times*, June 3, 1990, p. A20.
18. Ibid., April 15, 1990.

moderate improvement but still leaves little room for optimism. Productivity remains low, waste high, and the deficit big. The structural problems such as those with the pricing, the personnel, and the ownership systems are in urgent need of reform. Unless drastic reform measures are taken to link the people's interests with those of the state, the people simply will not have the motivation to work and care for public interests and China's economy is unlikely to improve significantly. To make things worse, China is facing a growing debt problem. In the past decade, China has borrowed over $40 billion and it is entering the debt service period. The problem is particularly acute in light of the continuing economic sanctions by Western governments in reaction to the Tiananmen suppression and, perhaps more important, the reluctance of private foreign companies to make new investments in China.

Ideologically, the party has tried to reindoctrinate people with the virtues of communism, but from their past experience and the reality of the communist world, most Chinese have developed an instinctive resistance if not hostility to such indoctrination. Among other things, the present official campaign to learn from Lei Feng, a communist model soldier of the 1950s, has received only lukewarm reaction from the populace. Many people take this as another sign of the lack of imagination of the octogenarian leaders in running this country.

On top of these internal problems, the international situation since June 1989 has been adverse for the Chinese government. Economic sanctions aside, an externally sponsored dissident movement continues to challenge the legitimacy of the CCP's rule in China. Among other things, it has been a factor in restraining China's relations with the West, undercutting the CCP's leadership, and threatening China's economic development.

These problems constitute the background for power struggles in the days to come. With this in mind, one can identify three broad scenarios of China's future political development. The first is predominance of the conservatives characterized by an unimaginative and self-contradictory leadership. The second scenario resembles what has occurred in Romania, with a mass rebellion overthrowing the existing Beijing government and subsequent degeneration into political chaos and economic stagnation, if not decline. And the third scenario projects the successful emergence of another group of reformers from the succession struggle within the present establishment, leading to another wave of drastic political and economic reforms in China. While all these three scenarios are possible, the likelihood of their occurring is in reverse order.

Given the political, economic, ideological, and international difficulties Beijing is facing, the present tie between the conservatives and the reformers will probably not last very long. In that case, the passage of the aging

leaders and the order of their passage would tip the balance one way or another. The conservatives may win, at least temporarily, but even if they do, the likelihood of them imposing more severe ideological and political control when confronted with the uncooperative masses and lower and middle rank cadres is very small. The present policies would probably continue but not for long because, more likely than not, their self-contradictory and problematic nature would aggravate the current structural problems and lead to political collapse.

Meanwhile, another popular uprising is still a real possibility. Given the widespread popular dissatisfaction and dismal future for economic development, unless the party is going to address the real issue—a reversal of the verdict on the Tiananmen suppression and introduction of meaningful political and economic reforms—with boldness and imagination, popular uprisings assisted by certain army factions during the forthcoming succession crisis are likely. This scenario, while favored by many Chinese political dissidents abroad, is not a sanguine one. The resulting political chaos would probably cripple the country both economically and politically, and if this happens, more likely than not one would see dictatorship and economic retrogression in the long run, to the detriment of the development of the country.

While it is easy to identify signs of the collapse of the Communist Party's rule in China in the not too distant future, it may not happen after all. Little historical knowledge is required to recall cases of the incredible survivability of the party: in 1927 when Chiang Kai-shek turned on the communists and massacred them; in 1935 when Chiang's troops forced the communists out of their mountainous sanctuaries and almost eliminated them; between 1959 and 1962 when the Great Leap Forward policy starved the nation, taking the toll of millions of lives while China was confronting extensive global hostility; in 1976 when the Cultural Revolution almost destroyed the soul of the Chinese nation, to name just a few. With this in mind, one doubts that the party will not be able to live through the present difficulties.

In addition, the party institution with its ideology ambiguously and pragmatically defined is a mammoth that contains both elements of decay and ingredients of rejuvenation. In this regard, one should bear in mind that all previous reformist leaders and a significant proportion of China's "best and brightest" are party members themselves. While they may not believe in the ideology, they certainly have an established interest in making use of the political institution. Under these circumstances, the

prospect of 1976 repeating itself is not merely wishful thinking.[19] Furthermore, a brief analysis of the present situation also appears to confirm this possibility. Domestic dissatisfaction with the current leadership, the unimproved economic situation, and various pressures from Western countries have made it difficult, if not impossible, for current Chinese leaders to reverse drastically the policy of reform and openness. At the same time, the tremendous economic and political difficulties that East European countries and the Soviet Union have encountered so far in the process of democratization have significantly reduced the appeal of a drastic democratic revolution in China as advocated by Chinese political dissidents. Under the circumstances, the reformers may find a chance to gain access to power and introduce a new round of reforms. However, they probably will do this incrementally in the name of building socialism with Chinese characteristics, rather than attempting a democratic revolution.

Finally, despite the apparent comeback of the conservatives since June 1989, many of the reformist leaders are still in powerful positions. Though without formal posts now, Deng Xiaoping had staked his prestige and political legacy on the policy of reform and opening in the past decade and is still the most influential figure in Chinese politics, as are other reformist leaders in the establishment. "Virtually everyone at the level of Government minister, or at the Central Committee level in the Communist Party, has been retained, even though many of them were obviously loyal to the policies of liberalization that prevailed until a year ago."[20] Either out of personal conviction or private interest, the reformist leaders will probably try to keep the policies alive.

In conclusion, the ineffectiveness of Beijing's punishment policy has shaped the payoff structure in the minds of Chinese political activists and subsequently Beijing's strategy for political control. This in turn has led to the present state of political tranquility, which is shaky and temporary at best. While it is still too early to be certain about what is going to happen in China, the party may still have a chance of rejuvenation—despite the signs of political collapse—if the reform force again prevails. What is more or less certain is that the modernization process will be long and painful as China searches for its own path of development under the historical constraints of our times.

19. The year 1976 is remembered in China as one during which, first, mass demonstrations against radical leaders ended up in a bloody suppression on Tiananmen Square on April 5, and then the popular will prevailed with the downfall of the radical leaders in October.

20. *New York Times*, June 3, 1990, p. A20.