



Legacy of Tiananmen: China should look to Taiwan

by Joseph Bosco

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The 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre reminds us of what remains unchanged in China's authoritarian government. The 'China dream' espoused by President Xi Jinping is not the same as what the Chinese people dream of for their country.

On June 4, 1989, millions of Chinese students, workers, peasants, and professionals converged on Beijing and other cities calling for political reform to match Deng Xiaoping's economic opening.

Deng's economic policy triumph over entrenched Communist Party hardliners inspired the Chinese population to believe a new day was dawning in China, as it had in Eastern Europe. Deng was the paramount leader, in name and in fact, and the entire nation was poised to take the next historic step with him.

But when it came to accepting the idea of an alternative to Communist one-party rule, Deng grievously flinched. At Tiananmen Square, and in other cities, he ordered the People's Liberation Army to attack the Chinese people, killing thousands, and depriving subsequent generations the chance for equal citizenship in the world community.

At a recent United States Institute of Peace conference, it was noted that there have been at least nine Chinese-born recipients of Nobel Prizes in physics and the sciences — but they are all US citizens. However, two Chinese citizens have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize — for their work on human rights in China: the Dalai Lama, in exile from Tibet, and Liu Xiabo, who languishes in a Chinese prison.

The ruling Communist Party has long promised the Chinese people and the international community that it would eventually provide the human rights and democratic reform enshrined in China's constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that Beijing signed, and the commitments China made as a condition to being awarded the 2008 Olympics.

No matter how successful China's economy or how powerful its military, the Chinese people know they will never earn genuine international respect as long as their government remains in the unsavory company of the world's dictatorships and pariah nations.

South Korea has made such a transition and has subsequently joined the ranks of democratic nations. China's protégé, Myanmar, has now embarked on a similar course of reforms. But Chinese leaders need only look across the Taiwan Strait for the solution to the dilemma they have created for themselves.

The Kuomintang (KMT) dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek, which fled to Taiwan after losing China's civil war, initially shared the communists' lust for power. They were quite willing to use brute force to crush those who sought greater freedom, including a Tiananmen-like massacre of protesting civilians on February 28, 1947.

But the Taiwanese people courageously persisted in demanding their political rights. They were supported by elements within the US government and media establishment, especially after Washington broke diplomatic and defense ties with Taipei in 1979.

Recognizing that Taiwan's future depended on the friendship of the American people and the support of the US Congress, the KMT authorities resolved to forge bonds of shared democratic values. In 1987, Chiang Ching-kuo, head of the government and son of Generalissimo Chiang, announced the end of martial law and lifted the ban on political opposition.

Over the next decade, Taiwan moved methodically to open the political system to multi-party competition at the local, then the provincial, levels, culminating in Taiwan's first democratic presidential election in 1996. In 2000 and 2004, the KMT finally lost its 60 years hold on political power through the decision of its voters, the risk that Chiang Ching-kuo willingly took in 1987.

But in true democratic fashion, Taiwan's voters returned his party to office in 2008 and 2012. No one died in any of those 'peaceful transfers of political power'— which did not flow from the barrel of a gun as Mao Zedong instructed.

With their penchant for five-year plans, surely China's rulers can manage the same phased peaceful progression to vigorous democratic competition to govern.

Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou appealed to Beijing, "Let democracy and human rights be the eternal common language of the people across the strait."

The Chinese people will have reason to rejoice if Xi Jinping can muster the courage to bring that vision to reality and reverse the legacy of the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

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