



Tiananmen Expands into the Future

by X. Drew Liu

In spite of the regime's claim of no change in the Tiananmen verdict, the tragedy in 1989 has been revisited often over the last ten years by Chinese people in private and informal deliberations. People have not forgotten, though their perception of the event and its implication has changed over time. Today, the Chinese public has more or less converged on some basics, making a reversal of the official verdict increasingly a mere symbolic matter. Indeed, the substantive Tiananmen, unboxable into a verdict, is defining China's political evolution into the next century.

First, Tiananmen made communism as a system of belief and governance thoroughly bankrupt, and the post-Tiananmen leadership must derive a new basis of legitimacy in order to rule China. In a sense, the bloodshed in 1989 redeemed the nation from an evil 30 years in the making, and thereby ushered in an era of political "repentance and reformation." Even though the official line is still "no regret," the entire governance system, as a result, was thawed to the point that human rights and corruption march on side by side. Ironically, they are two sides of the same "humanizing" process, in which the rigid system "loosens up" in order to avoid "blowing up." Then, as in physics, the fission leads to the release of large amounts of social energy.

Thus, the post-Tiananmen decade witnessed unprecedented economic progress and expanded civil liberties. It has also seen increased citizens' democratic aspirations for self-government, greater transparency, and accountability of the officials who also got a break (corruption) along the way. In adding these together, Tiananmen set China firmly on a course of evolution that probably will end in constitutional democracy. The reason is perhaps simple enough: no other alternatives, besides democracy, promise China a future of sustained order and development.

But Tiananmen also cast a pall over the radical wing that favors a quick fix or liberalization of the political system. In retrospect, most Chinese (including many who participated or supported the student movement a decade ago) think the country was not quite ready for a democratic revolution back in 1989. The fear of social chaos and disintegration (not at all groundless) has gotten stronger in the public mind, and what has happened in Russia reinforced such fears. Indeed, eventual democratization is no longer an issue of debate in China, but still no one knows for sure how to get there, and at what cost. But one thing is beyond doubt: Chinese democracy cannot be imposed from abroad like an imported good. It has to be nurtured internally through tinkering with the existing system. Thus, many view the Tiananmen episode as closing one avenue in the short run while opening up thousands more for innovating democracy in long run.

But rising public expectations coupled with dwindling patience are at odds with a peaceful and smooth transition. Transition pains, if not chaos, are likely to be severe. With the slow death of communism, China's future is being fought between nationalism and liberalism. But they are not like water and fire as viewed by many westerners. A compromise or mutual accommodation is almost certain to occur. The nationalist wing will insist that China should never be dominated by external powers as in its recent history (i.e., more military buildup and hardball on Taiwan). The liberals will continue to push for greater compatibility with international norms including more respect for human rights, more elections, open press, rule of law, and other democratic institutions. Will such parallel developments make China a friend or a foe to the United States? There is no easy answer. It could be either, or neither.

Reminder:

In the [June 4 issue](#) of PacNet we presented a Readers' Survey, asking each of you to list what you believe to be the five greatest challenges to Asia-Pacific security. Please remember to fax or [email](#) your response by June 18th. Thank you to the many of you who have already responded, and to those of you who will be doing so. We will share the results in a subsequent PacNet.

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