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**The Tragedy of  
U.S. China Policy**

*By Steven W. Mosher*



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**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20002  
U.S.A.  
202/546-4400

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By Steven W. Mosher

In the the early morning hours of June 4, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students and workers were gunned down near Tiananmen Square by troops of the ironically misnamed People's Liberation Army firing automatic weapons. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Beijing citizens who had been blocking the streets of the capital city were run down by tanks and armored personnel carriers. Similar incidents occurred in other cities.

The students had drawn up a set of demands: An end to the widespread corruption in the government, a streamlining of the massive bureaucracy, and a more open political system. They had held massive demonstrations, holding up placards quoting American statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Paine. In an open affront to the Beijing regime, they had even erected a Chinese Statue of Liberty. Their real crime was that they looked beyond the present one-party dictatorship, whose misrule China has suffered for decades, to a government that would be respectful of the wishes of its people. This was why the students were first anathematized by the orthodox Marxists in command of the party as "counterrevolutionaries and hooligans," and then shot by the army.

Deng Xiaoping, who has revealed himself as a ruthless dictator in the Stalinist mold, has ordered the students, workers, and others who led the movement for democracy to surrender or be tracked down. It is difficult to know how many have already been arrested, but estimates run from the thousands to the tens of thousands. The several dozen executions known to have occurred are surely just the tip of the iceberg. Professor Juergen Domes, West Germany's most renowned sinologist, estimates that as many as 200,000 students and workers will be caught up in the anti-democracy campaign about to begin, and that many thousands of lives will be forfeit to the forces of Marxist reaction.

**Double Failure.** The massacre and the ensuing purge represents a double failure for America's China policy. Not only were the students and others murdered for espousing our ideals, but they died at the hands of the same government to which the United States extended diplomatic recognition on January 1, 1979, and which we have been supporting as a friendly "nonaligned" nation throughout the eighties with arms sales, military technology, most-favored-nation status, textile import agreements, government-subsidized grain sales, low-interest-rate loans through the World Bank and other international agencies, and so on.

In China, we come face-to-face with the deadly contradiction at the heart of our efforts, in this post-communist era, to wean communist states away from their addiction to Marxist-Leninist extremes. The democratic movement which our example helped inspire has been suppressed by the orthodox Marxists whose economy we helped to strengthen and whose army we helped to modernize.

Our involvement in this tragic and unequal conflict between the forces of democracy and despotism compels us to re-examine the assumptions of our China policy. It is my thesis that the U.S. wields considerably more political and economic influence on the People's

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Steven W. Mosher is a Bradley Resident Scholar at The Heritage Foundation and Director of Asian Studies at the Claremont Institute of Southern California.

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Republic than is generally recognized. By taking appropriate and, above all, timely actions we may be able to limit the anti-democratic campaign of terror now in full swing.



**Wise First Steps.** The unfolding tragedy in China brought a quick response from the Bush Administration. President Bush during his June 5 press conference announced that upcoming official military visits were suspended, as well as several pending arms sales. All Chinese citizens in this county, including students participating in the official exchange program, would be eligible to have their visas extended for one year upon request. Humanitarian assistance would be offered to the Chinese Red Cross to help care for the wounded in Beijing. On June 6, just two days after the tragedy, Attorney General Dick Thornburgh directed that all Chinese citizens in the U.S. would be allowed, upon request, to remain here until June 5, 1990. These were all wise steps, which demonstrated America's compassion for the Chinese people at the same time that they indicted the leaders who ordered that peaceful demonstrations be answered with deadly force.

Later, after the first executions occurred, Mr. Bush imposed additional sanctions, such as a ban on exporting ammunition, and a suspension of exporting U.S.-manufactured satellites for launching by the Chinese. Mr. Bush ruled out further diplomatic or economic sanctions, however, expressing his view that they would be counterproductive. While noting the outrage felt by Americans at the events in China, he cautioned against emotional outbursts. He made it clear that, however much he might sympathize in the abstract with the tragic fate of the students and their demands for democracy, realpolitik argued for the preservation of the cooperative relationship between Washington and a stable Beijing regime.



The failure of President Bush to unequivocally condemn the actions of China's hardline leadership, and follow that with sanctions that have teeth, is hardly congruent with our usual treatment of repressive regimes. From Cuba to Nicaragua, South Korea to the Philippines, we have challenged governments disaffected from their people to hold free elections or otherwise pursue democratic reforms or face a cut-off of aid and sanctions. If a dictator, of whatever political stripe, turned his army loose on unarmed, peaceful protesters in his capital, massacring thousands, does anyone doubt that our ambassador would be called home, aid would be cut off, and at least a partial trade embargo imposed? And if the dictator in question further launched a ferocious nationwide campaign of repression against those who sympathized with his victims, might we not seriously consider even more serious actions?

**Treating China As An Exception.** Some have suggested that Mr. Bush's reaction may, in part, be a consequence of "clientitis," acquired during his years as America's de facto ambassador in China in the mid-seventies. Mr. Bush's first overseas destination after being sworn in as President was Beijing, where he renewed his longstanding relationship with China's aging communist leaders. But when those same leaders deliberately insulted him by detaining Fang Lizhi, whom Mr. Bush had invited to dinner, the President of the United States at first kept silent about this affront, complaining only a day later after embarrassing accounts of the incident had appeared in the press.

Of course, the Bush Administration is not the first to treat China as an exception when it comes to otherwise evenhandedly applied norms of human rights. Roberta Cohen, Deputy

Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights in the Carter Administration, has recently documented how even gross Chinese violations of basic rights were glossed over or ignored by all four of Mr. Bush's immediate predecessors. From Mr. Nixon on, all U.S. Presidents have largely exempted China from universally accepted norms because they had been led to place an extraordinarily high valuation on good relations with a stable Beijing regime.

No foreign policy expert has done more to promote the unique importance of the U.S.-Chinese political and strategic relationship than one of its original architects, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. "The stakes could not be higher," Mr. Kissinger wrote in the *Washington Post* several days after the massacre. "China's huge size, vast and diverse population and the talent of its people make it an indispensable component of global and particularly Asian stability. When it is removed from the scales they tip to extremes." (June 11, 1989, p. C7) Were U.S.-China relations to chill, or China to collapse in turmoil, he argued, U.S. interests in half a dozen countries would be threatened, from the Soviet Union in the north to Kampuchea in the south.

**Suspended Relations.** The problem with these predictions is that they are not borne out by recent history. During the Cultural Revolution, China simply disappeared from the international scene for several years. Relations with the United States were not merely cool, they were in suspended animation. Yet, contra Kissinger, Moscow did not grow more belligerent towards the West (although it did propose a preemptive strike on China's missile fields), Pyongyang did not launch an attack on South Korea, and Japan did not reconsider its relationship with the United States.

On the other hand, at the very time when Kissinger was industriously weaving his shuttle over the loom of U.S.-China relations, Beijing continued to vigorously support North Vietnam's war of conquest against the south. Indeed, the Chinese, who denied at the time to the world – and to Mr. Kissinger – that they had any troops in Vietnam, have recently admitted that over 300,000 men of the People's Liberation Army served alongside their fraternal socialist allies in the struggle against American imperialism.

Even Mr. Kissinger's concern about China's diminished clout in the current negotiations over the future of Kampuchea seems overstated. If the main foreign backer of the notorious Khmer Rouge is preoccupied with internal strife, this will surely facilitate, not impede, an agreement acceptable to all parties, helping to ensure that the Cambodian people will not again be brutalized by Pol Pot's thugs.

**Exaggerated Estimates.** Hyperbolic assessments of China's foreign influence originate in exaggerated estimates of its strength. The myth that has grown up around China, centered on its "huge size and vast and diverse population" disguises the scrawny reality of a poor, underdeveloped nation. China has a per capita income of under \$350, a gross national product only slightly larger than India's, a foreign trade less than Switzerland's, and fewer nuclear warheads than either Britain or France. Beijing governs a territory almost as large as the United States, but finds itself in possession of only limited arable land and less than abundant natural resources. It commands a population in excess of one billion, but most of these are unlettered villagers crammed into the eastern quarter of the country working hankerchief-sized plots of land. The government itself values its multitudes so little that it is cruelly trying to reduce them.

China's past glories and/or future prospects may also bedazzle and confuse foreign policy makers. The Middle Kingdom of the eighteenth century was strong enough to cow its immediate neighbors into becoming tributary states, but Mongolia, Korea, Taiwan,

Vietnam, and Thailand have for the better part of a century been able to safely ignore Beijing's edicts. In fifty years, China may once again become a world power to be reckoned with. At present, however, China is neither another Soviet Union, nor another Japan. It is a dragon of papier-mache and poster paints. It is India on the China Sea.



No one political party or group in the United States has a monopoly on the China myth. Liberals and conservatives alike subscribe to the idea that China is the third power in the world, almost (but not quite) a superpower. This consensus on China's importance goes a long way toward explaining why, since its crafting in the late 1970s, our China policy has been so remarkably stable. And it explains why the reaction of the foreign policy establishment of this country to the Beijing massacre is so subdued.

**Strategic Relationship.** Americans of all political persuasions accepted the necessity of cultivating good relations as the price of playing the China card. Though not anxious to actually enter into an alliance with a regime they recognized as repressive, they saw in the four (more recently three) million-man Chinese army a useful counterweight against the Soviet military machine. Even the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1980, when front-line units of the People's Liberation Army were badly mauled by the Vietnamese border militia, could not shake this belief. We also applauded China's willingness to allow the U.S. to set up three electronic monitoring stations near the Soviet border, which provide vital telemetry data on Soviet missile launches to U.S. (and Chinese) intelligence agencies, and seismographic stations throughout China, capable of pinpointing the location and size of any Soviet underground nuclear tests. Open criticism of Beijing's rule by conservatives has been muted for fear of jeopardizing this strategic relationship in general and our intelligence-gathering capabilities in particular. Mr. Bush and his advisors obviously concur, and have thus refrained from endorsing more rapid democratization in China.

Many in the foreign policy establishment have adopted a stance of respectful benevolence toward China. They have been convinced that by drawing China's leaders closer to the United States, encouraging the process of economic reform, and peacefully exchanging goods and people, China would bloodlessly evolve away from a one-party state toward a more open society. In this scenerio, the Chinese Communist Party would gradually reform itself, abandoning such practices as arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, mass political campaigns, and the persecution of intellectuals, until it came to resemble the socialist or liberal democratic parties of Europe. In the meantime, open criticism of Beijing was viewed as counterproductive because it would lead to a retreat from America's salubrious embrace. This was the theory that Mr. Bush was invoking when he stated at his June 5 press conference that, "The process of democratization of communist societies will not be a smooth one, and we must react to setbacks in a way which stimulates rather than stifles progress toward open and representative systems."

**Assumptions Shaken.** Many of these assumptions have been shaken by the events of the past few weeks. Who now, after the slaughter in Beijing, will argue that the People's Republic of China is rapidly evolving away from a one-party, Leninist state? The ten-year process of liberalization in China is real, a result of Voice of America broadcasts, returned students from America, the example of Taiwan, and the burgeoning Chinese private sector. But it remains an open question when competing centers of political influence will become institutionalized. The process may take decades, or generations, if it occurs at all. In the meantime, the secret police are even now terrorizing democratic activists and advocates of

reform in a campaign of mass repression, and the party is tightening, not relaxing, its grip on the Chinese people.

Who now, after Gorbachev's summit meeting with Deng last month and the reestablishment of party-to-party ties between the Chinese and Soviet Communist Parties, can convincingly predict China's response in the event of hostilities. As for our intelligence and seismographic monitoring stations, they operate under an agreement giving Beijing equal access to all information collected. The day that Beijing concludes that China's national security is no longer enhanced by such information is the day that the U.S. will be asked to dismantle the stations.

**No "Soviet Card."** What of the fear that the bear and the dragon might resume their clumsy two-step of the 1950s? The summit meeting last month signaled not so much a rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing as a recognition that neither country should pose a military threat to the other. Both leaders realize that the continued success of their "restructuring" efforts is critically dependent upon their ability to attract technology, credits, and investment from the West. Since neither has much to offer the other in this regard, too chummy a display of socialist solidarity would only raise apprehensions in the West and be counter to both their interests. China wants to modernize, not spent the next fifty years trading tea and textiles for Soviet concrete and timber. In short, China has no Soviet card to play.

Equally unlikely – and much less threatening to U.S. strategic interests – is a turn to Japan. Memories of the Japanese occupation of coastal China in World War II, which was replete with such atrocities as the Rape of Nanking, still outrage the Chinese. Many also fear a latter-day resurgence of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," and so deal only reluctantly with Japanese companies.



Given that China is an underdeveloped country, dependent on the West – and this means primarily the U.S. – for science and technology, markets, and capital, we have far more leverage vis-à-vis Beijing than is generally realized. Had the U.S. spoken out more forthrightly before the June 3rd crackdown came, the public blood bath that stunned the world might well have been averted. If we speak out strongly now, and back our words with deeds, the ongoing campaign of mass repression can be mitigated.

◆ ◆ President Bush should make it far clearer than he has to date that the U.S. identifies with, sympathizes with, and will, where possible, aid those in China who struggle against totalitarianism and for democratic values and human rights. Perhaps he could pick a university forum – Notre Dame, where former President Jimmy Carter foolishly decried "an inordinant fear of communism" in 1977, would do nicely in the opinion of Robert Caldwell, Editorial Page Editor of the *San Diego Union* – for a major address on the subject.

A speech with the rousing cadences of Mr. Bush's Polish effort of last week would be welcome. Or he might paraphrase the protagonist's parting soliloquy in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*:

Wherever men and women oppose tyranny and reach for freedom,  
America's heart and soul will be there. Wherever men and women risk  
everything for a chance to control their own destinies, America's  
prayers and passion will be there. And wherever men and women are  
shot down in the streets or run over by tanks for peacefully requesting

the freedom that should be their birthright, America's outrage will be manifest.

◆ ◆ Another way to honor the courage and idealism so magnificently displayed in Beijing would be for the President to participate in a wreath-laying ceremony for those who died. A good place for this would be the small park in Washington, D.C., across from the Chinese Embassy, which the Congress is in the process of naming the Tiananmen Heroes Park. A replica of the Chinese Statue of Liberty is currently on display there. It should be made permanent.

◆ ◆ Since President Bush has stated that we cannot have normal relations with China until the killing stops, we should bring Ambassador James Lilly home to underline this point. Only when the Beijing regime has declared an end to its current campaign of repression and lifted martial law should he return to China.

◆ ◆ The U.S. should also suspend its textile agreements with China, under which that country's mills have access to the U.S. market, the largest in the world. Cheap clothes (along with toys, cheap electronics goods, pig bristles) can be supplied by a dozen countries; there is no need to source them in China. A Chinese quota can be renegotiated by the Ambassador after he returns to Beijing.

◆ ◆ Those responsible for the order to fire on unarmed students, from Deng Xiaoping, Yang Shangkun, and Li Peng down to the commander of the 27th army and his officers, should be identified and publicly declared *persona non grata*, barred permanently from entering the U.S.

◆ ◆ Beijing's leadership should also be put on notice that continued repression will cost them the permanent loss of the services of tens of thousands of their most talented people, both those studying in the U.S. and those operating Hong Kong's dynamic economy. This can be accomplished by allowing those Chinese currently in the U.S. to apply for permanent residence status, by doubling or tripling Hong Kong's current yearly quota of 5,000, and by adjusting our asylum policy with regard to Chinese nationals to reflect the renewed pervasiveness of political persecution in China.



With the first estimates of the economic damage caused by the unrest coming in, and with its international reputation irreparably tarnished, Beijing is nervously watching the United States to see if further sanctions will be forthcoming. In marked contrast to Beijing's usual bluff and bluster about meddling in China's "internal affairs," the official newspaper, the *People's Daily*, sounded an almost plaintive note in its June 13 editorial: "We hope the U.S. side will emphasize the overall situation of Chinese-American relations... stop interfering in China's internal affairs and not do anything to hurt bilateral relations." The U.S. is, in effect, being asked to avert its eyes while the remains of the pro-democracy movement is crushed and its leaders put on trial.

As in America two centuries ago, the tree of liberty in China is being nourished by the blood of patriots. If, at no risk to our own security, we can limit the number of human beings that the Chinese Communist Party turns into fertilizer, however, we are surely obligated to do so.

