

# THE CHINESE STUDENT UPRISING: WHAT IS NEXT?

by Harold C. Hinton

**Y**ou all have been reading about the student demonstrations in Beijing and throughout China demanding greater democracy from the Deng Xiaoping regime. I am going to try to stress what I think is coming next, the reaction to the student action.

I will approach it very largely from the viewpoint of the Deng regime and discuss four particular topics. First, why the crackdown that seems to be getting under way?

Second, why has the regime been so ineffective to date in instituting or launching this crackdown?

Third, what is coming next?

And, fourth, what is the implication of all this for the United States and for U.S. policy?

As for the reasons behind the crackdown, one would do well to begin, I think, with the age of Deng Xiaoping himself, and his colleagues.

It appears that there are seven gerontocrats, not a man among them under 80, who got together on or about May 8th in the Western Hills outside Beijing, and began to make plans at the highest level for a crackdown.

What we are seeing, in effect, is a kind of generation gap between an older, Soviet-influenced generation — even if not actually Soviet-trained in all cases — and a younger, more or less American-influenced generation. It is almost grandfathers and sons, rather than fathers and sons.

**Horror of Disorder.** Almost any authoritarian regime, particularly a communist one, tends to see economic decontrol — freeing up prices, and so forth — as bringing inflation, and political decontrol as bringing disorder. And disorder, in China, has been a particular sort of horror among most Chinese for many, many centuries.

And that is exactly what they have been getting.

The economic liberalization, or reform, program is very largely on hold since last September because it has tended to generate very serious inflation. And we now see even the much more limited political reform program that Deng Xiaoping has conducted up until now beginning to bring exactly the kind of disorder that people like him fear, and to which they inevitably tend to react.

And, if you look in the whole history of the tumultuous last few weeks for an indication of the real feelings of Deng and his colleagues, you will find nothing but negative indications. No welcoming of it. No willingness really to compromise with it. All negative. We have

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overlooked these things to a large extent in the euphoria that has been generated, understandably, by the events of the last few weeks.

But, analytically speaking, we were wrong to do this.

I felt it myself until about mid-May, when I began to be impressed by the negative indications I was getting.

**Lesson from Poland.** One of the things that Deng and company have been hoping very much not to see in China has been what they probably think of as the “Polish horror” — in other words, the emergence of a genuine, autonomous labor union movement, such as Solidarity, combined with similar manifestations among other sectors of society. And you recall that the Polish regime instituted martial law for a time in the early 1980s when confronted with this horror, as they, too, saw it.

The term “the new authoritarianism” has come into fashion in China in the last year or so — I have not been able to trace it exactly to its origins. I think it may have been originated by Deng himself. But it has become a fairly accepted label for the prevailing official attitude.

Certainly there is a general lack of enthusiasm at the top for political reform, unlike Gorbachev, who clearly has tended to stress political more than economic reform. I think, though, that even Gorbachev would have very serious problems, to his way of thinking, if there were a quarter of a million people demonstrating in Red Square at any given time.

We have not seen that yet. We may, eventually.

**Bitter Memories.** Then Deng and company clearly have very bitter memories of the Cultural Revolution, which, at its height, involved something like ten or eleven million students, mostly high school, some of them college-level students, cavorting around China, exhorted by Mao to do various things that did not really make any sense.

And virtually everybody in the current leadership suffered during the course of the Cultural Revolution and sometimes very severely. Deng Xiaoping himself, for example, has a son who is a permanent cripple as a result of being harassed by Red Guards and falling from a window to the sidewalk below. This has a sort of silver lining, in the sense that the son, Deng Bufang, has become the leader, or patron, of a movement to help China’s handicapped population — a very large number of people, of course, in absolute terms, and people who received very little concerted attention until recently.

**Threat to Deng.** I think Deng has clearly been afraid that General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, who has been far more sympathetic to the students than Deng himself, has been trying to use the atmosphere created by the student demonstrations to push Deng into retirement — a genuine retirement, not just nominal retirement, as he has been in for the last few years — and take over effective leadership of the movement. This was really the problem that Hu Yaobang got himself into two and a half years ago. And the student demonstrations of that period, at the end of 1986, although considerably less massive than the ones we have just been seeing, served as an effective pretext, or an occasion, for getting rid of Hu Yaobang.

Another thing that Deng and company clearly dislike very much about the student demonstrations is that they very nearly spoiled the Gorbachev visit. Deng regarded the Gorbachev visit as the capstone of his diplomatic career. He had negotiated with the Americans and achieved normalization at the beginning of 1979. He had then come to Washington. Now he was to match or parallel this by means of a summit with Gorbachev, signalling, hopefully, the beginning of a very real improvement in Sino-Soviet relations.

The whole thing was vastly complicated — although not totally spoiled — by the students.

In any case, quite apart from all this, China is in a very serious state of crisis, embracing virtually every aspect of public life from the ecology to the economy to the labor situation — you name it, they have got it. And this, of course, does not create a propitious atmosphere for constructive permanent advances toward democracy.

That, in a nutshell, is the view from the head of Deng Xiaoping and company, at least as I have tried to reconstruct it.

**Leadership Split.** Now, why have they not been more effective, given this attitude? Why have they simply not cracked down and had done with it? It has not been that simple, obviously. In the first place, the political leadership has been split. The most obvious case of such a split is the clear difference of attitude, on many subjects, between General Secretary — or he may be in the process of becoming former General Secretary — Zhao Ziyang and Premier Li Peng. This cuts right across a whole spectrum of issues, including the right way to develop the economy, and clearly also, the best way in which to cope with the students.

There is also a split within the military leadership. That has become very clear from the ambivalent way in which the military have reacted to the students and the fact that units from quite far afield outside Beijing have had to be deployed into the vicinity of Beijing to insure that if necessary there will be enough reliable force there to cope with the students — or, indeed, to cope with the dissident military.

**Old Loyalty.** To some extent it is a conflict between the old Second Field Army and the others. The Field Armies are not really now operational units, but the traditions linger on, and people who came up within the hierarchy of a given Field Army still feel a certain loyalty to others who did the same, and a sense of difference with others who came up through different Field Armies.

Deng's Field Army is the Second Field Army, which ended up in Southwest China at the end of the civil war. Deng himself did not command it, because he has no real background as a professional military man. But he was the senior political officer of the Second Field Army. And in recent years, when he has been much more equal than anyone else in China, he has tended to see to it that people from the Second Field Army have been appointed to key positions. This, in turn, has aroused resentment from people who came up through other Field Army hierarchies. To some extent, that is at the root of the rather obvious splits within the military leadership that have more or less manifested themselves in the last couple of weeks.

**Accomplishing Nothing Constructive.** Clearly the signals and measures that the regime has chosen to adopt until now, have been inadequate. They tried limited talks with the students, first of all taking a rather low-level official from the State Council and having him talk with students — most of whom represented the official party-sponsored organizations. This obviously was not what the students in Tienanmen Square wanted to happen.

Even when Li Peng talked to the students, it was in a highly structured, antagonistic environment. He was clearly not happy with it. Nothing constructive was accomplished. Nor was any convincing signal or threat conveyed to the students. It fell neatly between two stools.

The same with the use of force to date. The declaration of martial law — not really enforced, at least down to the present — tended to make the regime an object of ridicule, rather than of fear.

They have tried a little bit of talking and a little bit of force. Neither one has been good enough. They will have to go farther, one way or the other.

It is becoming clearer and clearer that what they want to do is go in the direction of force, but they are uncertain how far to do it. I will get to that more in a minute.

**Limited by Foreign Media.** Clearly they have been limited and hampered by international constraints. A lot of foreign media, notably American, were in China anyhow for the Gorbachev visit and, of course, they rapidly turned their attention to the student movement, stayed on after the end of the Gorbachev visit, and continued to cover the student movement. That has certainly had a considerable impact on the leadership.

It is interesting, also, I think, that martial law was not declared until a little more than 24 hours after Gorbachev left China. It is as though they did not want to overlap those two things, and make it clear to Gorbachev that they could, in effect, only run the country under those conditions if they proclaimed martial law.

What next? What about some scenarios for the future?

Well, this, of course, gets much more difficult. I agree thoroughly with Leo Durocher, that it is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future.

Of the scenarios one can envisage, I think the extreme ones are not likely — or not very likely — although possible. And they are, in the first place, the massive use of force, against the demonstrators — lethal force. In other words, the Lhasa model. In early March of this year, not to mention some earlier occasions, Tibetans, who do not count as much in the eyes of the China leadership as Han Chinese, of course, were shot down in considerable numbers in Lhasa.

That, of course, everybody hopes will not occur, and the regime does not want to go to that length, if it can avoid it — and I hope and pray that will be avoided.

Civil War, to use the most dramatic term for it — in other words, some sort of conflict within the military leadership, or at least drawing in elements of the military leadership on opposite sides, resulting in hostilities — this is a possibility, but not a very likely one.

**Case of Overkill.** One is a little bit puzzled by some of the armament that has been brought into the Beijing area, like surface-to-air missiles. The students realize very well these are not intended for them, since they do not have any aircraft. One wonders what this is all about. It is a case of overkill. But it does look to me as though any tendency in that direction will be headed off by common sense.

A general strike? That is not terribly likely. The regime has, on the whole, been fairly effective in the last week or so in intimidating workers — threatening them with various penalties, including outright loss of jobs if they take part in demonstrations. The workers have families in many cases and understandably are tending to stay away from the demonstrations.

Finally, the fall of Deng Xiaoping. Again, not impossible. There clearly are a good many of his colleagues, including some of the most senior ones, who feel that he has made a mess of things — as, indeed, he has, I think we would agree. But just the same, to dump him at this stage would be a rather extreme measure. At least I would not rate it as very probable.

The more probable scenarios are the less extreme ones, the fuzzier ones, as it were.

**Preparing for a Purge.** In the first place, clearly some kind of leadership purge is in the offing, probably a fairly limited one. It looks as though Zhao Ziyang will go, at least for the time being. Comebacks are not very common in Chinese communist political history, although Deng Xiaoping himself is primary example of somebody who has made comebacks.

The Defense Minister, Qin Jiwei, looks as though he is also on the way out because he objected to martial law and to the idea of using force against the students. But once they can get a clear majority in the Central Committee and present it with a clear program for reshuffling the leadership, there will be some kind of purge.

That has not been achieved yet, and there is no clear sign when it will be. My guess is sometime in the next month or so.

Clearing Tienanmen Square, and removing, and/or destroying the Statue of Liberty, or whatever it is — at least by June the 20th, when the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress is scheduled to meet, I presume in the Great Hall of the People on the edge of Tienanmen Square, looks like a very likely scenario. It remains to be seen how many students are in the Square at the time this process begins, and how much resistance they offer, and how much force will be used against them. But I would imagine that June 20th is a kind of deadline for both sides.

**Official Hints.** It is rather clear that selected arrests are beginning to get under way. It is surprising to me they have not come sooner. The official media have been using, in the last week to ten days, terms like "a very few people," seemingly to belittle the strength and support of the demonstrators.

But also, a little more subtly, to indicate that there is no serious intent to punish more than a very small number of people. And therefore if the great majority of supporters back away from the handful of exposed leaders, or leaders who would then be exposed, including the most important student leaders, and people like Zhao Ziyang in the political leadership, then the others are apparently being promised that they will not be harmed or molested.

Whether that promise is kept remains to be seen.

There probably will be some things that the regime will consider as political concessions. We would regard them as tokenism. And the students will certainly regard them as tokenism.

The most obvious candidate for a political concession would be a stern announced crackdown on official corruption. After all, official corruption is not defensible or respectable by the standards of the regime, any more than it is by the standards of the students. There have been crackdowns on corruption before. It is an obvious thing to do.

But beyond that, I have been racking my brains to think of any other concession that the regime can offer, and I have not really thought of one. The problem is that they see the student demonstrations as a challenge to the legitimacy of the entire system — not really to the hold on power of a particular group of aging or aged leaders — but a repudiation in effect of the whole thing, in spite of the fact that the students have not been claiming to want to destroy the political system as a whole, but merely to democratize it.

**Back to Marx and Lenin.** So the leadership is talking, as you have undoubtedly seen, about the need for indoctrination in Marxism and Leninism. Well that is one thing that, thank God, has lapsed pretty much in China in the last ten years or so. And if there is one

thing that the students do not want to see reinstituted, it is indoctrination in Marxism and Leninism. But that may well be what they get a lot of in their colleges and schools in the future.

Another likely scenario is, of course, a continuation of demonstrations, not necessarily only in Beijing, in fact very probably in other cities as well. Perhaps also some strikes.

Shanghai looks like a very likely candidate for a city where there might be a considerable upsurge of strikes and demonstrations in the near future, even while they are declining in Beijing. You had the opposite pattern two and a half years ago. The demonstrations then got started in a big way in Shanghai, before they got started in Beijing. Beijing came in relatively late. This time the pattern seems to be reversing itself.

I think the positive effects of the entire movement of demonstrations will be felt primarily in the post-Deng era. When that will be, how can we know?

Now what about the implications of all this for the United States?

**Bush's Low-Key Response.** In the first place, let me comment on President Bush's comments. Clearly the man has a cautious style. And he certainly has commented in the lowest possible key on the events in China.

I see a certain merit in this. He at least has not made things worse. And just as the first obligation of a physician is not to kill his patient, I think in this case the first thing for the President of the United States to do is not to say something to make the situation worse.

He was criticized for having implied that the students might not be committed to non-violence, by urging them to remain non-violent. I did not read it that way. I think, going one stage beyond that, he was really trying to point out that by means of non-violent resistance, such as that of Martin Luther King, one can accomplish great political things in the teeth of a repressive government.

So, all in all, I think it has been not too bad a performance.

**Geopolitics vs. Human Politics.** But, going beyond that to what I think, in some ways there is a certain parallel with the Philippines in 1986: both in the Philippines in 1986, and in China in 1989, there is a tension, from the U.S. point of view, between geopolitics and human politics — between the U.S. desire to retain its bases and, on the human politics side, as I call it, a desire to see a liberalization of the political system.

In the case of China, there is a keen appreciation of China's importance on the geopolitical scales, not only as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union, but in many other respects as well, counterpoised against our obvious interest in human rights and the evolution of a more democratic order in China.

In March 1986, roughly at the time President Aquino came to power in the Philippines, then-Secretary of State Shultz said that democracy in the Philippines was more important than the U.S. bases, clearly putting the priority on human politics, not geopolitics.

I think in the case of China today, the same priority should apply.

**Unambiguous Stand.** China will still be there as a counterweight on the scales, no matter what we say and do about it. I think we are far better off to take an unambivalent, unambiguous stand on behalf of human rights and democratization.

I think there is no chance of the Chinese playing the Soviet card against the United States. We need not worry about that, really — although they did play an American card against the Soviet Union a decade or so ago. But that was at a time when U.S.-Soviet relations were far worse than they are now. Now that the relations between the superpowers have warmed so, the Chinese will find their freedom of action greatly restricted.

I do not think we need to worry about, as it were, antagonizing Deng Xiaoping and driving him into the arms of Gorbachev, to give it its most extreme formulation.

This is simply, I think, not going to be a problem from the American point of view.

