

From the Archives Crackdown Leaves China Isolated on World Scene

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WASHINGTON -- In the decade after Chinese leader Deng Xiao-ping came to power in 1979, he broke down the isolation in which China found itself under Mao Tse-tung and set the world's most populous nation on a steady course of ever-growing involvement in world affairs.

Now, this 10-year phenomenon has come to a halt. During the six months since the Chinese regime called in the People's Liberation Army to suppress pro-democracy demonstrations in Tian An Men Square, foreign governments and leaders have put distance between themselves and China, leaving China largely out in the cold.

One of the casualties of last spring's political turmoil, it now seems, was Deng's long-planned and carefully nurtured plan to develop close interconnections between China and the outside world.

"The Chinese find themselves more and more isolated," says Harry Harding, a China specialist at the [Brookings Institution](#). "They're left with Romania, North Korea and Cuba, which is an alignment that only illustrates China's isolation. For any thinking Chinese, it's an embarrassment. This is what China's reduced to, welcoming Fidel Castro?"

It is unclear whether the visit to Beijing over the weekend by U.S. National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence S. Eagleburger will succeed in reversing China's slide into isolation, or whether it will turn out to have been a failed attempt to turn things around.

Consider what has happened to China since the political upheavals last June:

-- The leading industrialized democracies of the world--including the United States, Western European nations and [Japan](#)--joined together to impose a package of economic sanctions, including an extremely costly suspension of international lending to China.

-- The [Soviet Union](#) has become at least as threatening ideologically as the West, because President [Mikhail S. Gorbachev](#) is willing to tolerate dissent and political change to a degree unacceptable to the Chinese leadership. "To the Chinese, if we in the West are the wolf at the front door, Gorbo's the tiger at the back door," observes one senior U.S. official.

-- As recently as October, China had hoped that a bloc of seemingly entrenched East European Communist regimes--East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania--would join with it in resisting the changes that

have swept the socialist world. Instead, the hard-line leaders of all but Romania have themselves been forced to give up power.

-- When China was at odds with both the United States and the Soviet Union in times past, China took solace in its close ties with the nations of the Third World. But since June, Third World governments, too, have avoided rushing to China's support.

This fall, in another surprising reversal of the past decade's trends, three Third World countries--Liberia, Grenada and Belize--broke off relations with China and established diplomatic ties with Taiwan, which through the 1980s had been losing international recognition. All three countries are believed to have received substantial economic aid from Taiwan.

"Taiwan's obviously got enough money now to go out and virtually buy diplomatic relations with some Third World countries," observes Bonnie Glaser, who, with her partner, Banning Garrett, is a Washington-based consultant on Chinese foreign policy.

In foreign capitals, even those officials who seek to reverse China's drift toward international isolation acknowledge that the Chinese leadership has become difficult to work with.

"It's like dealing with a small, beleaguered country," says one Bush Administration official who believes that isolation abroad could lead to further political repression inside China. "Except that this one happens to be large, well-equipped and centrally located."

Declares another U.S. official: "We're dealing with a deeply wounded country, led by a rump Old Guard with very little underneath them."

From the perspective of China's current leaders, there was no choice. In their view, China is not purposely withdrawing from the rest of the world; rather, the rest of the world is pulling away from China.

The different viewpoints stem directly from the events at Tian An Men. To many foreign leaders and governments, China's resort to violence to suppress the pro-democracy demonstrations was a flagrant and offensive violation of human rights.

But Chinese officials--who have, in the past, condemned government violence in other countries such as South Africa--insist that what happened at Tian An Men was not the business of any foreign country. Rather, it was "entirely China's internal affair," Communist Party Secretary Jiang Zemin told former President Richard M. Nixon this fall.

Since June, Chinese leaders have gradually developed a broad ideological theory to explain both the turmoil at Tian An Men last summer and the changes now taking place in Eastern Europe.

Chinese officials contend that both series of events stem from an ideological conspiracy--a decades-old plot by the Western capitalist powers to undermine the absolute control of Communist regimes.

The Chinese regime has a name for this conspiracy: "peaceful evolution." According to the Chinese theory, John Foster Dulles, [President Dwight D. Eisenhower's](#) secretary of state, devised a strategy aimed at combatting communism not through warfare but through economics, culture and ideas.

"They (Western leaders) changed their tactics and resorted to the 'soft sell' of 'peaceful evolution,' placing their hopes on the third and fourth generations of Chinese," the Liberation Army Daily, the newspaper for the People's Liberation Army, explained last month.

"Once we opened our doors and implemented a policy of opening up . . . they used decadent capitalist ideologies and thinking on politics, economics, social ethics and individual values to subvert and pollute the minds of our people, particularly the young ones."

Far-fetched as this conspiracy theory may sound, it is embraced at the highest levels of the Chinese regime.

"Our struggle with foreign enemies attempting 'peaceful evolution' will be (with us) for a long time," Premier [Li Peng](#) told Chinese law enforcement officials two weeks ago. "We must use the weapon of law to do battle with them."

Chinese officials have now seized on [President Bush's](#) call for an American foreign policy that goes "beyond containment"--beyond military confrontation with the Soviet Union--as further evidence of the supposed American conspiracy.

"I'm struck that even in their official pronouncements, there is an edge, an anti-Western slant, that I find troubling," says Jonathan Pollack, a political scientist at the RAND Corp.

Wherever possible, the Bush Administration has sought to preserve the existing ties between the United States and China.

The weekend visit by Scowcroft and Eagleburger was a dramatic demonstration of this effort. "By working together, within the values of our different social systems, we should seek to solve common problems and remove irritants," Scowcroft told Foreign Minister Qian Qichen.

The Administration's policies reflect both Bush's own strong personal ties to top Chinese leaders and the more general belief among Administration strategists that the United States should avoid doing anything that would permanently rupture the ties built up over the last two decades.

"I see a lot of value in preserving what's been gained over the years," says one Administration official who asked not to be named. "The overall benefit to the United States is much greater than if we poke them in the eye, tell them to go to hell and come back on our terms."

Consequently, since the June 3-4 massacre in Beijing, the Administration has had to defend itself against criticism that it has been too soft on the Chinese regime.

Critics charge that U.S. policy toward China--the special relationship forged by the Nixon Administration--has been carried out too much on China's terms. They also argue that the American policy ignores human rights and that the current Chinese leadership should be required to pay a penalty for its decision to use force last spring.

"If the United States and its democratic allies did little or nothing, it would be easier for hard-liners (in the Chinese leadership) to argue that economic modernization and political repression can, indeed, go hand in hand," asserted Rep. Stephen J. Solarz (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Asia, in a speech this fall.

Last June, the President announced a package of economic sanctions against China, including a suspension of military contacts and high-level visits and U.S. support for a freeze on World Bank loans. But he took this action only when it seemed that Congress might adopt a package of sanctions on its own, and since then, the Administration has taken steps to ease the impact of the sanctions.

Similarly, Bush vetoed a bill to permit Chinese students to stay in this country rather than face persecution at home, although he then acted on his own to grant some protection to the students.

Bush's policies run parallel to those of the Japanese government, which has argued that China should not be pushed into isolation. "The Bush Administration and the Japanese seem to be in a damage-limitation mode," observes the RAND Corp.'s Pollack.

Some Western European countries, particularly France, have taken a much stronger stand in condemning human rights violations by the Chinese regime. A number of Chinese students and exile leaders settled in Paris this summer and fall after finding it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain visas to the United States.

"The fact is, the French have been very provocative in their actions concerning the Chinese students," says one senior U.S. official.

Despite these differences, the United States, Western Europe and Japan have managed to stick together in preserving a series of economic sanctions against China, such as the suspension of more than \$700 million in World Bank loans.

"What's surprising is the unity and not the disagreements," says Harding of the Brookings Institution. ". . . The Chinese are really surprised by the unity of the First World on this. And I don't blame them. I'm surprised, too, pleasantly surprised."

The changes in Eastern Europe this fall have hurt the Chinese leadership even more than the Western sanctions.

The collapse of the Communist governments in Poland and Hungary and the popular protests that forced the resignations of Communist leaders in East Germany and Czechoslovakia all run contrary to the official ideology of the Chinese Communist Party.

The Chinese regime has long insisted upon obedience to what it calls the "four cardinal principles": socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party and the principles of Marxism-Leninism.

"Privately, they (Chinese leaders) are more concerned about what is happening in the East than in the West," says Garrett, the Washington consultant, who spoke with Chinese foreign policy specialists in Beijing this fall. "And they probably see Gorbachev as instigating these changes."

"The Soviet Union is going off in directions that the Chinese regard as heretical," observes Pollack. Gorbachev sent only a low-level delegation to China last Oct. 1, when the Chinese regime staged an elaborate celebration of dancing and fireworks in Tian An Men Square on the 40th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

The Chinese regime, eager to demonstrate its international support, countered by giving top billing to two officials from East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the East European countries that seemed to be resisting the changes sweeping the socialist world. One of the two was Egon Krenz, the top aide to then-East German President [Erich Honecker](#).

In the two months since, Honecker lost his job to Krenz and then Krenz himself resigned. Both the East German and the Czechoslovak Communist parties have begun to share power with non-Communists, and China has suffered the embarrassment of losing two more international friends.

"What a humiliation for them," said one Bush Administration official.

Some specialists believe that China's growing isolation could lead to changes in what has been, for a decade, a largely peaceful foreign policy.

"The probabilities are that the Chinese are going to start pushing around externally," says Thomas Robinson, an Asia scholar at the [American Enterprise Institute](#). "There's a kind of macho there."

"They can sell more arms," Robinson added. "They're already selling more arms in the Middle East. . . . And I wouldn't be surprised if the Chinese got directly involved in some direct maneuver abroad, perhaps even military."

Other analysts discount that possibility, at least for now. They say that given the apparent divisions within the Chinese regime, including the military, no leader would take the political risk of pushing ahead with foreign ventures such as Deng's 1979 military campaign against Vietnam.

So far, the most immediate practical change in China's policy has been its approach to Hong Kong, the British colony that will return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. "One of the great tragedies has been the toughening of China's position on Hong Kong," says Harding.

Since June, China has ousted two Hong Kong legislators, both proponents of democratic reforms, from the panel that will draft the law under which Hong Kong will be governed after 1997. And China threw a scare into Hong Kong by refusing for a week to take back illegal immigrants, thus raising the prospect that Hong Kong could be overwhelmed with refugees from China.

Another area where China's policy might harden is Cambodia. China has long provided arms and support to the Khmer Rouge, which was blamed for the deaths of more than 1 million Cambodians when it ruled the country from 1975 to 1978.

Bush Administration officials maintain that since June, China has displayed a willingness to cooperate in bringing about a political settlement on Cambodia and to prevent the Khmer Rouge from returning to power. It is not clear, however, whether such moderate policies will continue.

Neighboring countries in East Asia seem especially wary of offending China, which remains a huge and powerful nation equipped with its own nuclear arsenal. Countries such as South Korea and Thailand have refrained from criticizing the Chinese regime and have continued to carry on business with China in the six months since the upheavals in Beijing.

As the Chinese regime drifts further into isolation and as Soviet-American relations continue to improve, China is becoming less and less important to American foreign policy.

"The Chinese have virtually no leverage in U.S.-China relations today, for a variety of reasons," says Robert Ross, a foreign policy specialist at Boston College. "One, the Soviets are simply a basket case. Second, we have such better relations with the Soviet Union that the threat of better Sino-Soviet relations is simply not significant to American policy-makers."

Indeed, some U.S. specialists are now suggesting something that would have been unthinkable a few years ago--that the United States can and should simply disregard China for the next few years.

"I have a new policy toward China," says Robinson of the American Enterprise Institute. "Let them alone. We have bigger fish to fry, in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Rim, India. If the Chinese want to screw themselves up, let them. . . . We have our own policies. We have our own principles. If the Chinese don't like it, that's tough."

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