

Thirty Years after Tiananmen: The PRC as an Emerging Global Threat to Freedom

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Abstract

The article emphasizes the importance of memory, thirty years after Tiananmen, and truthful rendering of history, and discusses the sustaining of the struggle for freedom and democracy in the context of the inseparability of the Chinese Communist Party-state's, symbiotically and inextricably linked, domestic repression of political dissent and international projection of covert and corrupting influence.

Keywords: *Tiananmen, memory, Chinese Communist Party-state, authoritarianism, freedom, democracy, united front, sharp power*

1. The Historical Moment: Thirty Years after Tiananmen

I want to begin this article by making five preliminary points. The first is obviously the importance of memory and a full and truthful rendering of history. The memory of what happened in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989, and in numerous cities where millions of Chinese came out to protest, and the historical precedent these protests represent,

remains deeply threatening to the Chinese Communist Party, thirty years later. The Party is still as insecure as it is ruthless and controlling, and so it feels a total imperative to suppress the memory of these historic events. This is movingly attested to in the extremely important historical reflection contributed to the present volume by our colleague Jean-Philippe Béja that was presented at the Thirtieth Anniversary of Tiananmen meeting in Taipei, and in the articles we published in the April 2019 *Journal of Democracy*. Among these is the article by my Hoover Institution colleague, Glenn Tiffert, which documents the extraordinary lengths to which the Chinese Communist Party-state is going to systematically suppress not only historical memory but even any academic trace of analysis or prior historical academic record that does not accord with the hegemonic discourse of the Chinese Communist Party.

Second, I want to underscore how important it is to continue to honor those Chinese, living and deceased, including some of those who are here, who took great risks and make great sacrifices to rise up for and demand freedom and accountability in China. The fact that the Chinese Communist Party continues to regard them and the entire memory of Tiananmen as such a great threat indicates that the struggle is not over. This is the most important lesson that we can take away from the Thirtieth Anniversary of Tiananmen meeting: The CCP can try, but they cannot bury the truth about people's remarkable mobilization in 1989 for a freer, more open society, and the Party's brutal suppression of it. And to repeat, only a Party that feels deeply anxious and insecure about the legitimacy of its rule would go to such great lengths to try to wipe all this from historical memory.

My third preliminary point, therefore, is the importance of sustaining the struggle for democracy and freedom, while learning from past failures and adapting to current reality, for the Chinese Communist

Party-state has been relentlessly adapting in some ways that I will describe. The fact that the Thirtieth Anniversary of Tiananmen meeting is taking place in Taiwan and not Hong Kong underscores one element of adaptation: Recognizing the inseparability of the struggles for democracy in mainland China, in Hong Kong, in Taiwan and in the crucibles of the greatest current ongoing repression of identity in China, in Xinjiang Province and in Tibet. When we examine Chinese influence efforts around the world, as I will do momentarily, we see that the Chinese Communist Party-state is pursuing what it sees for itself as a global imperative to control the narrative about China, suppress historical memory about Tiananmen, and intimidate and censor any critical discussion of the past or present crimes and abuses of power of the Beijing leadership. We have to adapt in the face of that and I hope my presentation and this article will be useful in that regard.

Fourth, and following from these other points, I want to stress the importance of working at the level of values, ideas, and knowledge – including historical memory. We have to fight for the truth, and we have to fight to disseminate true understanding of the past and present around the world and among all Chinese people. Despite the heavy weight of repression and censorship, China's rapid development has afforded new and interesting opportunities to do this. One of the great vulnerabilities of the People's Republic of China is that it is sending well over half a million Chinese students abroad to study (indeed, the current estimate is approximately 600,000 overseas students). Most of these Chinese students abroad are studying in democracies. 350,000 of them are studying in the United States. We are not doing enough and we can do much more to ensure that these young Chinese who are outside China have the historical knowledge, the political understanding, and the analytical tools to question their regime, to think about what kind of society and political system they want for China in the future, and to

quietly begin conversations on how they might get there. The People's Republic of China is laboring intensively now to insulate them from any understanding, and to censor academic inquiry and discussion, even on university campuses in the U.S. and other democracies. We should not stand for this.

Finally if I can borrow a term from Marxist discourse and apply it for democratic purposes, we need to have a full and correct understanding of the moment we are at. It is not enough to understand the malign behavior of the Chinese Communist leaders and the party-state toward their own people. This malign authoritarian behavior increasingly propels beyond China's borders to attempt to control the behavior and information flows of Chinese diaspora populations, and the activities and statements of foreign think tanks, universities and political systems in liberal democracies such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. The Chinese Communist Party-state represents a threat not only to the freedom and individual dignity of 1.3 billion Chinese in China but also to the freedom, rights of privacy, and access to information of billions of other people around the world. And as China emerges on the world stage as the second superpower, as it engages in the most rapid expansion of military capacity of any country in the world, as it increasingly projects belligerent claims to sovereignty over the entire South China Sea (in defiance of international law), and as it uses sharp power to corrupt and intimidate other countries in Asia and beyond to yield to its new strategic vision, the PRC also poses a growing threat to Asian regional and ultimately international peace and security.

Analytically, we cannot separate – and politically, we *must* not separate – the repressive, deeply and increasingly authoritarian behavior of the Chinese Communist state toward its own people, and the increasing concentration of political power of its leader Xi Jinping, from what China is doing on the international stage. The two are

symbiotically and inextricably linked. If we do not recognize that and confront that, we will not do a service to the people of China and their legitimate aspiration for greater freedom and dignity. And we will not do a service to our own interest in international peace, freedom and security.

2. The PRC's Projection of Covert and Corrupting Influence

I want now to provide an overview of the report we released in November of last year on PRC influence activities around the world, particularly in the United States, and what we need to do to recognize, expose, and rebuff these efforts.¹ This was a report that brought together about 20 experts on China and American foreign policy in the United States with a number of China experts from other countries and resulted in it detailing the analysis of Chinese influence efforts in a number of individual sectors as well as their general approach.

We need to begin by recognizing that the People's Republic of China is a deeply and increasingly authoritarian regime. Everybody in the Thirtieth Anniversary of Tiananmen meeting in Taipei understands that this is not adequately appreciated around the world in the face of expanding efforts by the People's Republic of China global propaganda apparatus, recently consolidated into the Voice of China, to try to divert attention from its deepening authoritarianism. And while everybody in the Taipei meeting understands, it is not sufficiently globally understood that the PRC remains a Communist Party-state, which functions under Leninist principles of highly centralized control and seeks to extend influence through a vast united front architecture of influence and penetration activities as well as the broader influence apparatus that we have tried to map and describe in the report. As I have said, China is now the second superpower in the world, and it is increasingly seeking

to project its global power and influence through means that are, as neatly summarized by the recent former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull, “covert, coercive or corrupting” (and quite often, all three).

It is crucial to understand here how different this projection of “sharp power” is from the effort of democracies to extend their influence through what we call soft power. The difference between soft power and this new or renewed form of authoritarian power projection that we call *sharp power* (following a report of the National Endowment for Democracy)², is that soft power efforts proceed openly and cooperatively to try to persuade and influence people and build partnerships and solidarities through democratic means. Sharp power efforts work in the shadows to intimidate, coopt, and corrupt people, and to silence criticism and dissent, utilizing the massive financial power of the People’s Republic of China and its various satellite corporations and wealthy agents, as well as the long arm of its diplomatic missions and surreptitious intelligence activities

When one examines all these activities, and what the PRC has been doing to try to limit Western and American efforts to reach the Chinese people, compared with the open access that Chinese media, scholars, and diplomats have in the U.S., when you look at the role of the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations on college campuses in the U.S, when you compare the open access of Chinese scholars and academics with the controlled access and intimidation in the granting of visas for Western academics to function in China, when you examine the way their corporations and business entrepreneurs can function in the United States and compare that with the way that Western business sectors can function in China, you see a profound asymmetry in the relationship. And our argument is we need to restore greater reciprocity in the relationship. I do not favor the generalized trade war the Trump

administration is pursuing against China but I do think we need to insist on reciprocity in key dimensions of economic access and behavior particularly regarding technology transfer.

We need more transparency in the relationship. This is the major theme of our report, that we need systematic and radical transparency in the way that Western think tanks, universities, NGOs, local governments and other actors relate to the People's Republic of China and accept funds from both state and putatively private actors in China. And we need to do much more to strengthen the resilience and integrity of our own democratic institutions in Europe, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and not least – as many people in the Taipei meeting recognize – in Taiwan, because these institutions are under systematic, sophisticated, penetrating assault from the Chinese Communist Party-state apparatus of global influence projection.

Our focus is on the behavior of the Chinese Communist Party-state. But we issue in our report an emphatic caution against overreaction. We have interacted repeatedly, and we hope we will be doing so on an ongoing basis, with Chinese-American community organizations and actors, including one of the most important U.S. national organizations. We want to be sensitive to the danger that we always face in the United States and (and in other Western democracies) of ethnocentric and even racist ethnic stereotyping of the threat. The threat we face in the United States is not from individual Chinese-Americans or from Chinese-American organizations. And we need to recognize that anybody, of any ethnicity, can be bought off and compromised. In fact, I am increasingly astonished by the number of prominent former elected officials and appointed officials of Western democracies who have made themselves available for great financial gain to promote the interest of the Chinese Communist Party-state in their own countries. So, we need to distinguish legitimate influence, which is soft power – transparent efforts to

persuade and attract, cultural and educational exchanges, legal and open lobbying – from the illegitimate sharp power activities that China and Russia are increasingly engaging in.

We noted in our report a sad and worrying phenomenon, which I do not think I need to dwell on here but I repeat is not adequately understood by the world in general. Many of civil society leaders from emerging and even established democracies are brought to China, wined and dined, shown the great infrastructural achievements under Chinese Communist Party rule, the gleaming cities and high-speed trains. And they do not see the political repression. They do not see how Xi Jinping has eroded institutional constraints on his rule and personalized power. They do not see the concentration camp in Xinjiang Province, where human rights organizations now estimate that somewhere between one and three million Chinese Uyghur Muslims are now being detained against their will in what the PRC calls re-education camps but people of free societies have a more accurate term for, concentration camps. Any state that is capable of doing this on such a large and brutal scale – *today*, not 50 years ago in a dark period of Cultural Revolution, but today in 2019, to its own people – represents a threat to freedom and human dignity elsewhere.

And as you know, it is not stopping here. The technology that the Beijing leadership is deploying to try to control the people of Xinjiang and other restless elements of its own society is rapidly being developed on a larger level to try to create over time a generalized system of digital control that will be unprecedented in its scale and its threat to human freedom. Already now China leads the world in the number of surveillance cameras that it has deployed, in the sophistication of its digital and photographic surveillance technology, and in this specific digital technology of facial recognition. And this technology does not remain in the People's Republic of China. The PRC is sharing it

enthusiastically with other authoritarian regimes in the world in order to suppress popular movements for freedom in other countries as far away as Africa. Both the Chinese Communist Party leadership and the Kremlin leadership in Russia are so lacking in confidence about their legitimacy that they regard any new transition to democracy anywhere in the world, any successful popular movement for democratic change even as far away as Venezuela or Sudan, as a threat to their own authoritarian stability. Therefore they are happy to disperse this technology of repression as widely as possible. Ultimately, the Orwellian vision of China's cynical leadership is to create a social credit system that will vet for political loyalty the entire digital history and life of every Chinese citizen. But they are not stopping with China, this is one reason why they are trying to buy up data companies around the world so they can collect the digital imprint of literally every digital netizen in the world if they can get it. Within China, they intend to mash up all this data into a computational profile of every individual that will determine, as you know, whether people can get a train ticket, whether they can step on an airplane, whether they can get a passport, whether they can travel outside of China, whether their kids can get into school. It is a pretty powerful and pervasive, in some ways subtle, but in the end not very subtle system of control.

And of course there is the new dimension now of China's hard power and geo-political and geo-economic projection around the world through what can only be described as a new era of neocolonialism, the Belt and Road Initiative. Through this initiative, the Chinese Communist Party-state is cynically plunging many emerging market countries into oceans of debt by lending at commercial rates that they know can never be repaid. Then the PRC turns around and says, as it did to the Sri Lankan leadership, "Well, you know we can reduce that big debt you've cumulated to us. Why don't you just give us your strategic port of

Hambantota on a 99-year lease and we'll write off some of your debt." And this is going on in financially strapped or tempted countries around the world, in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. And of course, I have mentioned what the PRC is doing to militarize and claim (illegally under international law) territorial control over most of the South China Sea.

Then there is the issue of technology transfer, which is a crucial element in the unfortunately deepening trade war between China and the United States right now. The People's Republic of China has embarked on a 30-year if not more campaign to hack, steal, coerce the transfer of, or otherwise misappropriate the full range of the world's most advanced technologies, everything from supercomputing and the next generation of computer chips to robotics, drone technology, hypersonics, and a variety of other means of digital driving of next generation of transportation, consumer and other technologies. These technologies all have a common feature, even the biotechnology of gene editing and so on. They have the potential to greatly enrich and simplify or empower human life and of course human enjoyment and human consumption. But they are dual-use technologies, and they have the potential to be deployed, and they are being deployed, to accelerate the modernization of the People's Liberation Army, with the ultimate goal of making China the militarily, economically, and geo-politically dominant country in Asia, if not the world. The first phase of this is to push the United States out of the western Pacific, enabling China's Communist leaders to achieve their hegemonic goals by force if necessary, by intimidation by preference. High among these goals is the imposition on this society here in Taiwan of the same bankrupt, morally discredited, politically unsustainable system of "one country two systems" that has been shown to be a brazen deception in Hong Kong itself.

We see and have documented in our report and other work a growing deployment of this kind of sharp power in Western democracies, U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and much of Europe, but Australia has been a cutting edge of this. And this is why the election in Australia is so significant. The previous conservative government in Australia – whatever one may think of their other policies – has taken extremely important steps to strengthen Australia’s resilience in the face of Chinese penetration efforts, including banning foreign contributions to political campaigns and tightening foreign agent lobbying efforts in Australia. It is not a question of the U.S. and China competing for Australia’s heart or pocketbook. I do not think that is the way it should be framed. It is a question of whether Australia and similar societies will preserve the integrity and independence of their own democratic institutions in politics and civil society in the face of what is a documented extensive pervasive Chinese authoritarian assault on them.

China is seeking to control the narrative of China, not only in China, not only among the Chinese diaspora, but globally as well. And it is doing that by trying to use formal and informal institutions to eclipse and silence alternative points of view. And this is not just focused on trying to mitigate any separatist or formally anti-regime activity, or anything that would question what the People’s Republic of China is doing anywhere in Xinjiang, in Tibet, in Hong Kong, in the South China Sea, its posture toward Taiwan, its Belt and Road Initiative. Anything that contradicts the narrative of the Chinese Communist Party and its propaganda apparatus, they are trying to silence and pre-empt. They are doing this by targeting a number of institutions in Western democracies and I am sure here in Taiwan as well, universities, think tanks, mass media, corporations, and even in some cases politics and government. This is the influence bureaucracy that we have tried to unpack and describe in our report.

3. Policy Recommendations

I learned much in the process of co-chairing and co-organizing our Working Group with my distinguished colleague, the China expert Orville Schell. And one of the things I have learned that most shocked me is the extraordinary extent to which we have lost freedom and pluralism of the press, both print media and electronic media, in a significant segment of our media enterprises in Western democracies, particularly Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. And that segment is the Chinese language media. The People's Republic of China has embarked on a maybe 10- to 20-year campaign to buy up and pre-empt and shut down critical Chinese voices in the media of Chinese diaspora communities like the ones I described. This goes along with the PRC's dramatically expanding global effort at international propaganda. Through these methods of both buying up existing Chinese language print publications and radio stations and television stations and establishing new ones, the People's Republic of China has all but eliminated the plethora of independent Chinese language media outlets that once served Chinese-American communities. Only a few are left, most of them aligned with Falun Gong. So, we argue in our report that we need to strengthen oversight regarding foreign ownership and control of media. And we need to promote all over again and maybe to fund with public funding truly independent Chinese language media. I personally proposed that the United States Public Broadcasting Corporation, which is our independent public radio and TV, establish a Chinese language service, not for the world (as we have that in Radio Free Asia), but for the United States, because of what is happening in our own country that is diminishing freedom of the media. And I think we need to fight for free expression and the freedom to report of our journalists in China. And we could go further. I do not see why China

Global Television should be allowed to broadcast on cable television in the United States when CNN and other American cable television networks (which are private television networks, not even a state-controlled one) are denied access to Chinese citizens. If we do not start as democratic societies insisting on some degree of reciprocity, we are never going to succeed in opening up China's highly authoritarian society, which of course should be one of our primary goals.

For those who live in the United States and other Western democracies, we repeat the injunction, "First, do no harm." That is, we must remain vigilant as well against any efforts to stigmatize or discriminate against Chinese Americans (or Chinese visitors) on the basis of their nationality or ethnicity. But we also need to engage in educational efforts, solidarity efforts to make Chinese-American individuals and organizations much more aware of the danger of possibly being targeted and used by the PRC in its Leninist united front activities. I am a member of a university community, so I take very seriously the risk we face on university campuses of penetration, subversion, and censorship. We stress strongly the need for institutions to draw together, and not be played off against one another, to establish common codes of conduct, to share information about their relations with Chinese institutions. Although our report did not recommend a blanket termination of the Confucius Institutes in the United States, I have come to agree with the recommendation of Human Rights Watch in its recent report on Chinese penetration of the American universities, which I highly recommend to all of you, that we should just terminate the presence of Chinese government-funded Confucius Institutes in democratic societies. We should not have the Ministry of Education of the Chinese Communist Party-state writing the Chinese language instruction curriculum and training Chinese language teachers in American or other Western universities. We should not have the Chinese

government determining, even in language classes, what can and cannot be discussed in the classroom – or implicitly threatening universities with a cutoff of funding if taboo issues are discussed in other university forums. And I think here this is on us. If we in the United States do not want the Chinese government funding Chinese language instruction, we, the American people, through federal funding, should do it ourselves. We used to have a National Defense Education Act that subsidized American colleges and universities to teach critical languages. We need a new and resourceful version of that program.

4. Concluding Remarks

We are at a perilous moment in so many respects. We are facing a superpower that is outwardly super-confident and is increasingly super-belligerent and even super-aggressive in trying to defeat and pre-empt any historical memory of, or normative embrace of, democratic values or democratic mobilization. But I think we should draw hope from the fact that this is not a self-confident regime, and I have noted many respects in which this is the case. This is a regime that wakes up every morning in fear that what happened in April and May of 1989 in the People's Republic of China could happen again. And someday it will.

Notes

- * Larry Diamond (Ph.D., Stanford University, 1980) is Professor of Sociology and Political Science at Stanford University, and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. During 2002–03, Diamond served as a consultant to the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and was a contributing author of its report *Foreign aid in the national interest*. He has also advised and lectured to universities and think tanks around the world,

and to the World Bank, the United Nations, the State Department, and other governmental and nongovernmental agencies dealing with governance and development. During the first three months of 2004, Diamond served as a senior adviser on governance to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad. His 2005 book, *Squandered victory: The American occupation and the bungled effort to bring democracy to Iraq*, was one of the first books to critically analyze America's postwar engagement in Iraq. For more than six years, he directed FSI's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, where he now leads its Program on Arab Reform and Democracy and its Global Digital Policy Incubator. He is the founding coeditor of the *Journal of Democracy* and also serves as senior consultant at the International Forum for Democratic Studies of the National Endowment for Democracy. He writes a monthly column for *The American Interest* and frequently consults on policies and programs to promote democracy. He directed the Stanford Program on Democracy in Taiwan for more than ten years and has been a regular visitor to Taiwan since 1995. Diamond's research focuses on democratic trends and conditions around the world and on policies and reforms to defend and advance democracy, and he has edited or coedited more than forty books on democratic development around the world. His forthcoming book, *Ill winds: Saving democracy from Russian rage, Chinese ambition, and American complacency*, analyzes the challenges confronting liberal democracy in the U.S. and around the world at this potential "hinge in history", and offers an agenda for strengthening and defending democracy at home and abroad. He is now writing a textbook and preparing a massive open online course (MOOC) on democratic development. Diamond's other books include *In search of democracy* (2016), *The spirit of democracy* (2008), *Developing democracy: Toward consolidation* (1999), *Promoting democracy in the 1990s* (1995), and *Class, ethnicity, and democracy in Nigeria* (1989). Among his edited books are *Democracy in decline?*,

Democratization and authoritarianism in the Arab world, Will China democratize?, and *Liberation technology: Social media and the struggle for democracy*, all edited with Marc F. Plattner; and *Politics and culture in contemporary Iran*, with Abbas Milani. With Juan J. Linz and Seymour Martin Lipset, he edited the series, *Democracy in Developing Countries*, which helped to shape a new generation of comparative study of democratic development. <Email: ldiamond@stanford.edu>

1. Larry Diamond and Orville Schell (eds.), *China's influence and American interests: Promoting constructive vigilance*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press. The report was released in November 2018 and a somewhat revised version will be published by the Hoover Press in August 2019. <<https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-influence-american-interests-promoting-constructive-vigilance>>
2. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig (eds.), *Sharp power: Rising authoritarian influence*, Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, December 2017. <<https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>>