

The Tiananmen Military Coup d'État of 1989: A Neglected Aspect of History from a Comparative-Politics Perspective

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Abstract

Through research on official and semi-official Chinese documents, this article has found evidence to support the argument that there was a military coup d'état taking place during the 1989 Tiananmen crisis. This invalidates a long-held assumption that a coup has been absent in the history of the People's Republic of China. As the military leader, Deng Xiaoping played a central role in the coup, and the coup served as a political prelude to the later military crackdown on Tiananmen pro-democracy demonstrators. The coup was prepared during the days following April 26 when Deng announced his hardline stance against Tiananmen pro-democracy demonstrations through the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), took place at the meeting illegitimately summoned by Deng at his residence on May 17, which enacted martial law and dismissed Zhao Ziyang, the top civilian leader, and was completed at the another meeting also held at Deng's residence on May 19 by Deng's anointment of the new party chief Jiang Zemin. In

a comparative context of the Global South, the article further analyzes the case of a coup for highlighting its three “Chinese characteristics”, which are: the structural inherency of the military power in PRC politics; the operational furtivity for political considerations; and the interweaving between the military mobilization for the purpose of illegitimate leadership and that for the purpose of suppressing social movements. These features may obscure relevant observations, but are not in conflict with a common definition of the coup. Instead, they can enrich the understanding of the coup. In essence, the Tiananmen Chinese coup is a response with the employment of state violence against the Chinese momentum of democratic transition.

Keywords: *Tiananmen Crackdown, military coup d'état, leadership politics, Chinese politics*

1. Introduction

As open, large-scale state violence against citizens, the military crackdown of the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy movements in Beijing, China, shocked the world and profoundly changed China (Béja, 2010; Brook, 1998; Hutchings, 2000: 422-27). The role the military played in the tragedy is obviously significant, but at least one aspect of it has been little explored in both historical research and political-science analyses of the event, and this concerns the role of the military in elite politics and leadership change. Attention has been fairly paid to how the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was mobilized against students and citizens who were engaged in peaceful demonstrations calling for democracy and rule of law, which is surely among the most vital aspects for recording and understanding the history and politics of Tiananmen 1989. The Chinese leadership during the Tiananmen crisis, however,

split concerning how to respond to mass protests, when Zhao Ziyang, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a reform-minded leader, was paying great sympathy for the demonstrators. With martial law imposed in Beijing in late May of that year, the Chinese leadership was reorganized with the dismissal of Zhao from power (who then spent the remainder of his life under house arrest until his passing in 2005), and the new party chief was anointed by a small group of aged people, a group virtually consisting of three men with Deng Xiaoping taking the lead, whose only leadership position of the time was Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). It is an unconstitutional, illegitimate action even according to the CCP's own rules, since no constitutional documents of the CCP provide grounds for such a leadership change that ousted the party chief without due procedure; it is this leadership change that cleared the way for the June Fourth crackdown of demonstrators.

Military involvement in such an unconstitutional action to topple the incumbent leadership is usually referred to as a military coup d'état. Studies of coups were once flourishing and have recently been revitalized to some extent in comparative political research, yet they are virtually absent in the fields of contemporary Chinese history and politics. In fact, it is usually agreed in the relevant literature that there has not been, or, at least, rarely, a coup taking place in the history of the People's Republic of China (Luttwak, 1979: 192). By reconsidering this assumption and reexamining the politics of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989 from a historically informed comparative-political perspective, this article raises and explores the following questions: What role did the Chinese military play in the leadership reorganization in Tiananmen 1989? Can the pertinent event be viewed a military coup d'état? What are the connections in the historical circumstances between the employment of military forces in leadership politics and in dealing with

social movements? How was a seemingly coup necessary for the later exercise of state violence? What does a military involvement in leadership politics in its specific way reveal for our understanding of both Chinese politics and studies of authoritarian military coups?

Below the article will first present an empirical investigation from three angles. The first angle focuses on Deng Xiaoping's dominant role in the 1989 leadership change and, emphatically, how his position as the military leader was vital for him to accomplish this change. The second concerns the mobilization of the PLA during the Tiananmen crisis from mid-April to early June, 1989, for political purposes, especially regarding their involvement in the party-state leadership change. Thirdly, the process of the leadership change per se will be considered from the angle of military dominance versus constitutional and conventional norms. A comparative discussion of the findings will follow, bringing the role of the military in Tiananmen 1989 into the Global South context of military-civilian relations, and arguing that the institutional features of the Chinese party-state in this regard show military involvement in the state leadership change to be distinct in form from those conventionally observed military coup d'états under a nondemocracy; and, the nature of contemporary Chinese politics regarding the weight of the military in particular and state coercion in general can be revealed from the empirical findings about Tiananmen 1989. The article, therefore, challenges the assumption that coups have been absent in PRC politics by suggesting that a Tiananmen military coup d'état took place in 1989, and, based on an analysis of a coup with CCP characteristics, attempts to enrich the understandings of military coups with a case under a reformed communist regime and its close connections to state violence in a transitional authoritarian politics.

2. Deng Xiaoping in Tiananmen 1989: The Paramount Leader and the Military Leader

Deng Xiaoping's decisive role in Tiananmen 1989 is undeniable, especially in decision-making on martial law and the crackdown of demonstrators. As Ezra Vogel (2011: 595; the emphases are added) states in his highly-acclaimed biography of Deng, "*behind the scenes*, he remained focused on the unfolding drama [of Tiananmen] and was *the ultimate decision-maker*." In which capacity he did so, however, has for decades remained unexplored. This avoidance might have reason, as Deng's position in China at the time was clear in both political and institutional terms. In the case of the former, he was termed the "paramount leader". But this is a journalistic term without a constitutional base, nor a notion with any scholastic definition.¹ It is informal in any sense. Yet Deng had a formal position during the Tiananmen crisis of 1989, for highlighting of which let me again quote Vogel (2011: 588):

At the 13th Party Congress, held October 25 to November 1, 1987, Deng gave up all his party and government positions, resigning from the Central Committee, the Politburo, and its Standing Committee. He retained his positions as chairman of the CMC and as chairman of the State Military Commission.

In the constitutional sense, Deng was the military leader of China. This formal, military position, as we will see below, was vital for Deng to exercise power and carry out his determination during the Tiananmen crisis.

Deng's identity as a military soldier in politics was nothing new, as an expert sees him "a product of Mao's fiscal-military state" (Lai, 2014: 141), needless to mention his long experience as a military leader during

the war eras. As Deng repeatedly and proudly declared, “I am a soldier; my true profession is war” (Liu and Xu, 2009: 4-5). This became a vital source of his power in post-Mao China. He resumed the position of PLA Chief of Staff when returning to power in 1977, in charge of the daily operation of the PLA. His strong powerbase within the PLA helped him to topple Hua Guofeng, Mao’s heir as Party chairman, in 1982. After Hua, however, Deng did not take the seat of the party chief; he chose to become chairman of the CMC and had since then established his status of so-called paramount leader. His political seniority and performance in governance were of course vital for this achievement, while his military profile was equally decisive in empowering him to predominate post-Hua CCP politics. Deng’s role in post-Mao China, therefore, fits the concept of praetorianism more than such journalist or political terms as “the paramount leader” or “the core of the leadership”. Eric Nordlinger (1977: 2) decades ago defined that “praetorianism refers to a situation in which military officers are major or predominant political actors by virtue of their actual or threatened use of force.” According to Nordlinger (1977: 3):

The Praetorian Guards of the Roman Empire were established as a special military unit for the protection of the emperor. They ended up using their military power to overthrow emperors and to control the Roman senate’s ‘election’ of successive emperors.

In post-Mao China, Deng used his military as well as political power to overthrow three nominally Number-One leaders, namely, Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, and, as this article will show, Zhao Ziyang.

The Chinese party-state leadership had since Hua’s step-down until September 1989 developed an unusual structure featuring a special pattern of civilian-military relations, in which the CCP party chief was

not able to concurrently take the position of CMC chairman. As Hu, Zhao, and, following Tiananmen, Jiang Zemin took the title of the party chief in a row and, for the first two cases, were forced to step down, Deng firmly occupied the position of CMC chairman before he formally resigned by handing on the position to Jiang in September 1989. Analytically speaking, Deng combined the formal office as the top military leader and the informal position of the paramount leader for exercising his supreme power and authority in China through the 1980s. In other words, it is impossible to separate Deng's military identity from his paramount leadership in analyzing Chinese politics of the period.

It was his control of the Chinese military that enabled Deng to dismiss the party chief Zhao Ziyang in 1989 when he found Zhao's attitude toward student protests to be fundamentally different from his own, and that empowered him to anoint the new party chief Jiang Zemin in a total disregard of the Party Charter's relevant stipulations. It was Deng himself who unilaterally initiated martial law without a deliberation of the CCP Politburo and its Standing Committee, and it is the exercise of martial law that politically (though, not constitutionally and legally) justified and tactically actualized Deng's removal of Zhao from office with his replacement by Jiang. This process of the involvement of the military in leadership politics is of course complicated, lengthy, and often secretive; it can be analyzed, however, as three stages of development toward the success of a military coup, namely, the mobilization of the military forces; the overthrow of the incumbent, legitimate, top leader; and the choosing of the new civilian leader. Through all of these crucial steps, Deng always stood at the center as the military leader and, in Vogel's words (2011: 595), "the ultimate decision-maker".

The first stage is Deng's bringing of the military into Tiananmen politics, leading to martial law. Due to the absolute secrecy that such a

plot requires, the relevant information is not available to the public, but there are some hints disclosed in official or semi-official documents. One of the hints regarding Deng's personal moves and involvement in this secret military mobilization is the mysterious disappearance of Deng from significant state diplomatic and political activities during the period of about two weeks from April 26 to May 10. According to the personal diary of the time by Li Peng (Li, 2010),² PRC Premier who was a hardliner during the Tiananmen crisis, Li encountered a diplomatic scandal that had never happened in PRC history, and it was Deng's secret disappearance that caused it. On May 9, starting from four o'clock on, Li spent anxious hours of the afternoon at the People's Great Hall, outside of where there were hundreds of thousands of students protesting against his government. Li's anxiousness during these hours, however, was not caused by the protests; he was waiting for Ali Khamenei, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who was paying China a state visit. A formal meeting between the two leaders had been scheduled to begin at four o'clock, but Khamenei did not show. The mass demonstrations might have been the cause for his delayed arrival at the meeting venue, but a phone call by the Chinese protocol staffers came in to tell the Chinese Premier that President Khamenei was boycotting the meeting. Li and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen had to come to the Diaoyutai Guest House, where the Iranian visitor was staying, for an informal meeting. Why the boycott? "Because comrade Xiaoping does not meet him," Li wrote in his diary (Li, 2010: 111-112). In the paragraphs that Li later added to his original diary, it is stated that "Iranian President was very upset at learning that comrade Xiaoping has no plan to meet him" (Li, 2010: 111).

Li's explanation to Khamenei first emphasized that Deng's health conditions did not allow the meeting; the Iranian guest compromised by requesting a brief visit to Deng for a handshaking without any

conversation. Li indicated in the added paragraphs to his original diary that “health conditions” were simply a lie, as, “at the time, comrade Xiaoping was preparing for the Sino-Soviet talks, and closely watching the development of the riot, thus reluctant to meet foreign guests” (Li, 2010: 112). The Sino-Soviet talks are a reference to Deng’s plan to meet the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev who would visit Beijing in mid-May.

During the same period, there was another political leader who was denied a meeting with Deng. This was not a foreign guest, but China’s party chief Zhao Ziyang. Upon his return on the morning of April 30 from a visit to North Korea, Zhao was eager to meet Deng in person in order to discuss how to respond to the mass protests, but he was repeatedly denied such an opportunity. According to Zhao’s memoir (Zhao Ziyang, 2009: 37; Bao, Chiang and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 18):

I was eager to have a talk with Deng and to gain his support. I phoned [Deng’s secretary] Wang Ruilin asking for a meeting with Deng, but Wang said Deng had not been feeling well lately and he worried that his health problems might make him unable to receive Gorbachev, which would be a serious matter indeed. So he asked that I not report anything to him at that time.

Deng reemerged to public view on May 11, when in the morning he officially met the Iranian president,³ while Zhao had to wait for his turn on May 13 (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi [ZZWY] (ed.), 2004: 1274, 1275). What happened to Deng during these crucial two weeks from April 26 to May 10? From Li and Zhao, we have learnt three different, perhaps overlapping, explanations: Deng’s bad health; he was preparing for his meeting with Gorbachev; he was “closely watching” the situations in Tiananmen. No report from Deng’s later meetings

indicates his health being too bad to allow him a brief, courtesy meeting such as that with Khamenei; and, Li already hints at it being an excuse. Is this simply the excuse given to allow for Deng's entire concentration to be focused on his forthcoming meeting with Gorbachev, excluding any other state activities? The Deng-Gorbachev meeting was later held on May 16; it is difficult to understand why Deng needed 20 days to do nothing else but prepare for this meeting in total isolation. It is convincing to suggest that Deng was occupied during the time by watching Tiananmen, but two questions still stand out: first, how could a courtesy meeting with Khamenei interrupt him much in doing so? Second, and more importantly: the purpose of Zhao's request for a meeting with Deng was exactly regarding Tiananmen, therefore if he was thus preoccupied, why did Deng refuse to meet Zhao?

It is impossible to know the truth before the Chinese authorities honestly disclose it, but there is still room for an exploration with very limited information. A great possibility is that Deng was physically away from Beijing starting from sometime between April 26 to 30 (when Zhao visited North Korea) until May 10, and that he came back earlier than had been planned only under pressure from Khamenei. The purpose of the trip would have been extremely important to Deng, much more important than China's diplomatic dignity, and even much more important than the immediate problem of the Tiananmen protests. Could Gorbachev's visit really be that much more important than both? One may assume so, but Deng's own activities then do away with this assumption: he eventually met Khamenei and Zhao, respectively, before his meeting with Gorbachev, indicating that such meetings could take place without interrupting him much. So, what was Deng doing during the two weeks?⁴

There were rumors during mid-May 1989 that Deng was away from Beijing to mobilize the military for dealing with the Tiananmen crisis.

Zhang Sizhi, a well-respected Chinese lawyer, records this in his memoir saying that probably on May 14, in Wuhan where Zhang was attending a conference, a local high-ranking leader warned him not be involved in the Tiananmen movements, as “the problem is complicated”, and told him that Deng Xiaoping was at the time summoning a supreme military meeting in Wuhan to solve the problem (Zhang, 2014: 286). This statement can easily be proved false, as, according to the above-cited sources, Deng was already in Beijing on May 14. It is unreasonable, however, to expect an outsider, including those high-ranking leaders who were not involved in the process, to know exactly the details of the meeting even if there was indeed such a meeting being held.⁵ The point, therefore, is not about the misinformation concerning the concrete date of the said “supreme military meeting”, but, rather, about why there was such a rumor.

Li Peng at that time might have known where Deng was and what he was doing, but Zhao Ziyang did not know anything in that regard. This is a crucial question: when Deng, according to Li, was very much concerned about Tiananmen protests during this period, why did he hide such a legitimate concern of his from Zhao and instead, through his secretary and Yang Shangkun, only told Zhao that he was troubled by bad health while preparing for Gorbachev’s visit?

What increases the curiosity of this situation is the role of Yang Shangkun in particular during this highly sensitive period – at the time Yang was Executive Vice-Chairman of the CMC, ranked third only after Deng and Zhao, the First Vice-Chairman, in this military leadership body and was in charge of the daily operation of the PLA. On May 11, after his morning meeting with Khamenei, Deng received Yang at home in the afternoon, then, on May 13, Yang also joined the Deng-Zhao meeting (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 140; ZZWY, 2004 (ed.): 1275). The time gap between the Deng-Yang meeting and the Deng-Zhao

meeting could be meaningful in such a crisis period. Considering Yang's prominent position in the military, it can be speculated that Deng instructed Yang to do something concerning the military, and Yang needed the day of May 12 to implement Deng's instructions; perhaps, before these steps were taken, Deng was not ready to meet Zhao. The disclosed contents of Deng's conversation with Yang on May 11 help to support this speculation: Deng, for the first time in 1989, addressed a point, by citing Li Xiannian, a senior, conservative leader, that "the Central Committee is speaking with two voices" (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 142). This signaled Deng's implicit declaration of his political confrontation with Zhao, as the "two voices" referred to Deng's hardline tone in the April 26 editorial of the *People's Daily* and Zhao's Asian Development Bank speech discording with Deng's, respectively. Deng also mentioned a number of senior leaders, including Li Xiannian, Chen Yun, and Wang Zhen, who had implied their support for himself (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 142). After indicating a showdown between the "two voices", Deng turned the conversation to his concern over the morale of the military (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 144), which strongly suggests that Deng had already pondered the role of the military in the leadership politics of the "two voices".

Two days later when they met, Deng displayed nonchalance towards what Zhao told him about how to cool down the protests. It is strange as, according to above-cited sources of information as well as common sense, Deng during the time had great concern over the Tiananmen crisis. Having had no state activity for more than two weeks, Deng's health seemed to have grown worse; at least, he told Zhao so by saying "I am greatly exhausted" (Li, 2010: 120).⁶ But, when Deng met Yang two days ago, he showed no sign of such exhaustion. These further indicated Deng's unwillingness to discuss with Zhao how to respond to the protests, which helps to confirm that, by then, Deng had already had

his own determination in the regard but he wanted to hide it from Zhao.

It is Deng himself who initiated martial law. At the meeting of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) he illegitimately summoned at his residence on the afternoon of May 17, the day after the Deng-Gorbachev meeting (Li, 2010: 136),⁷ Deng said: “After thinking long and hard about this [worsening situation], I’ve concluded that we should bring in the People’s Liberation Army and declare martial law in Beijing” (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 189). Zhao Ziyang voiced his unwillingness to agree to the proposal, but Deng ignored it (Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 27-28; Li, 2010: 140). Despite his own nonmember status, and without a deliberation and a vote by PSC members,⁸ Deng announced that his proposal had been adopted by the PSC with a majority in agreement (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 189-190). Zhao’s memoir states, “in the end, Deng Xiaoping made the final decision”; “the decision is to move troops into Beijing to impose martial law” (Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 28).

Li Peng (2010: 135, 136, 137) called this meeting “a meeting that determined the fate of China”. He does not explain why he says so, but the next section of this article will help to disclose his reasons. An anecdote might be of interest for revealing, so to speak, Deng’s bosom secret of the time: during his meeting with Gorbachev on May 16, Deng “seemed uncharacteristically tense” (Vogel, 2011: 614), and “hands shaking, let a piece of dumpling drop from his chopsticks” (Tsou, 1991: 306). Vogel’s explanation is that “Deng could not easily forget the worsening situation” in Tiananmen Square, as some two hundred hunger strikers had been rushed to hospitals for emergency care (Vogel, 2011: 614). But we know, also from Vogel’s same book, that from the very beginning of these protests Deng “had little sympathy with the demonstrators” (Vogel, 2011: 595). Why, therefore, was Deng so nervous? Did it have any connection to what he was determined to do

the next day? Why was Deng's action on May 17 so vital for this much-experienced politician-soldier?

3. The Mobilization of the Military and the Reorganization of the Civilian Leadership: The Party or the Gun-Barrel in Command?

At the moment Deng told the PSC to enact martial law, the mass of troops had already come to Beijing from various military districts. In other words, the military was not mobilized following the PSC's nominal decision on martial law, but *prior to* it. The military leaders, primarily Deng, and with Yang Shangkun, maneuvered the large-scale dispatch of the PLA without authorization from the party-state civilian leadership. This is a typical sign of a military coup d'état.

The publicly available information shows that the CCP regime for the first time during Tiananmen 1989 mobilized the PLA on April 20, when 9,000 soldiers were dispatched to reinforce the police in maintaining order during Hu Yaobang's funeral. This was due to Deng Xiaoping's instruction, and the relevant document was signed by Yang Shangkun and approved by Zhao Ziyang (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 47).⁹ According to the CCP procedure of that time for troop dispatch, it would have been subject to the approval by Zhao as the First Vice-Chairman of the CMC (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 47). Regarding the later military moves, however, there is no such record indicating that Zhao was informed in any possible way. In fact, substantial measures for PLA mobilization took place starting from April 26 when Deng's hardline attitude toward the student movements was publicized through a *People's Daily* editorial, and when Zhao was visiting Pyongyang. According to *The Tiananmen Papers*, after the April 26 editorial was published, the General Political Department of the PLA distributed an urgent notice requiring all officers and soldiers to study the editorial

carefully, and instructing that “all units in the military must be prepared in their thinking, organization, and readiness *for action*”; the notice also stipulated that “any unit’s deployment of military personnel, however minor, must be reported to and approved by the CMC” (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 77-78; emphases added). Meanwhile, with Deng’s permission, Yang Shangkun ordered to move about 500 troops into Beijing to protect the People’s Great Hall and to serve as a reserve force in case of need (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 81). This is the second dispatch of troops that we now know of during Tiananmen 1989; a difference from the first is that it did not seek Zhao’s approval.

The urgent notice from the PLA General Political Department, seemingly also without Zhao’s approval, was truly unusual, especially its call for the readiness for action and its strict requirement concerning any minor military personnel deployment. Responding to the urgent notice, it is reported that the Shenyang Military District, among other military districts, on April 28 declared its determination in support of Deng’s stance on how to deal with the chaos facing the nation, including “through the concrete actions of a steady military” “to halt the current turmoil”, and made it clear that the Military District leadership and units stationed in cities “must be prepared in thought and organization and must be ready for action so that we will not be mobilized by lack of preparation should the problem grow larger and should use of the military become necessary” (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 80). The wording of both the urgent notice and the corresponding responses from military districts obviously signaled Deng’s and his loyal generals’ strong intention to take military action for political purposes.

It is during this period that, as the last section has analyzed, Deng Xiaoping mysteriously disappeared from Beijing and the rumors on military mobilization spread. Other sources of information help to confirm that Deng took decisive actions for military mobilization in late

April. Vogel (2011: 616) states that “on April 25, the same day he decided to publish the editorial warning the demonstrators, Deng put the People’s Liberation Army on alert.” Brook (1998: 34) discloses that by the beginning of May, all military leaves had been cancelled. These facts, together with what has been presented earlier in this section, indirectly support the speculation this article earlier made on why Deng disappeared during the period from April 27 to May 10. It helps to explain how, immediately after the diplomatic events with Gorbachev’s visit to Beijing, Deng “was ready to bring in the troops” (Vogel, 2011: 615).

In Zhao’s advisor Bao Tong’s analysis, Hu Yaobang’s funeral was a critical point from which Deng was determined to take action for kicking Zhao out of office (Bao, interviewed 2014). Vogel’s (2011: 595-596; emphases added) observation resonates with Bao’s in the sense of highlighting this turning point, as he finds that “from the beginning he [Deng] believed that firmness was required, and *after Hu Yaobang’s funeral* he became more directly involved in supervising the party’s response to the demonstrators.” Vogel emphasizes that, “as soon as the period of mourning ended, Deng was ready to issue a warning to the students” (Vogel, 2011: 603); after Zhao left Beijing for Pyongyang on April 23, “from then on, Deng became deeply involved in decision-making about how to respond to the demonstrators” (Vogel, 2011: 595-596). The subtle difference between Bao and Vogel lies in what they perceive Deng’s major target to have been: for Vogel, it was student demonstrators; for Bao, it was Zhao Ziyang. But these are not necessarily exclusive to each other; to this article, Deng’s martial law targeted both the protesters (explicitly) and Zhao Ziyang (secretly). For dealing with protesters, Deng, as Vogel (2011: 596) says, “was prepared to ensure that officials carried out whatever steps he considered necessary to restore order.” Zhao, however, was obviously the first

among the officials who disagreed with Deng doing so, thus must be removed from power before restoring the Dengist order. It is a matter of historical fact that by resorting to the exercise of martial law, Deng first toppled Zhao, then cracked down on the demonstrators. Apparently, this sequence could not be altered or reversed.

At the same time he declared the decision on martial law adopted, Deng assigned Li Peng, Qiao Shi, and Yang Shangkun to be in charge of the implementation of martial law (Li, 2010: 140; Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 29). Li and Qiao were among the five members of the PSC, but Yang was not. This move illegitimately deprived the existing PSC in general (which will be further discussed later) and incumbent party chief Zhao Ziyang in particular of power. Though no decision over a personnel change was made regarding the PSC, Li Peng started to call and chair the PSC without even consulting with Zhao as General Secretary (Li, 2010: 141), a position that chairs the Politburo and PSC according to the party charter. Immediately after this meeting on May 17, Zhao sent out a letter of resignation, but Yang Shangkun persuaded Zhao to “halt the distribution of the letter” (Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 29). What is curious enough is that Yang told Zhao at the time that “No changes in leadership should be made”, which Zhao understood as “my position as General Secretary should not be changed” (Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 29). According to Zhao’s memoir, Deng at the meeting, after having assigned Li and others the task of imposing martial law, noted “Zhao is still the General Secretary” (Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 32). In fact, Zhao was entirely pushed aside in the days following the May 17 meeting, and was “excluded from decision making” (Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 32), far prior to his official positions, including that of General Secretary, formally being dismissed at the Fourth Plenary of the 13th Central Committee held on June 23-24, 1989 (Jiang, Zhang, and

Xiao (eds.), 2006: 527-528). Zhao even lost his personal freedom since visiting student demonstrators at Tiananmen Square on the early morning of May 19, until his death on January 17, 2005.

Deng's and Yang's remarks on not changing the leadership, when compared with the reality that Zhao had lost power since May 17, might mean a political tactic to fool Zhao and, more importantly, to strategically camouflage the May 17 meeting's essence as a military coup d'état they successfully carried out, at which the incumbent civilian leader was in fact removed from office with the military leader's decision to exercise martial law. In retrospect, the May 17 meeting at Deng's residence was a most critical point of the events during Tiananmen 1989, at which the second stage of the coup d'état was accomplished, that is, the overthrow of the incumbent leadership.

The coup d'état cannot be completed without a new civilian leadership being appointed by the military; this did take place during Tiananmen 1989, also during the time that martial law was imposed. "Deng was busy considering the new leadership structure", according to Vogel (2011: 622), even before martial law was declared. Li Peng discloses that at 10 o'clock morning time on May 19, Deng called for another decision-making meeting at his residence, but two of the total five PSC members were not allowed to attend – beside Zhao, Hu Qili was also excluded (Li, 2010: 152-153). This confirms that the May 17 meeting already illegitimately disbanded the highest CCP leadership body without any due procedure. At the May 19 meeting, Deng nominated Jiang Zemin as General Secretary, and appointed some other new members to the PSC (Li, 2010: 155; Vogel, 2011: 623). Meanwhile, Deng urged to "immediately" dispatch troops to control radio and TV stations (Li, 2010: 155) – a typical measure of a military coup d'état. In addition, "Deng personally decided on a seven-year sentence for Bao Tong", Zhao's top aid, and "other subordinates" of Zhao were jailed

(Vogel, 2011: 632), which is also a typical move for a coup's leader to deal with the overthrown leader.

The leadership change, however, had to be “legitimized” in some way through a meeting beyond the small circle of aged leaders plus selected PSC members.¹⁰ Deng on May 19 proposed to call for an enlarged Politburo meeting with no more than 40 participants (Li, 2010: 154). However, when Li Peng on May 21 phoned Deng's office to suggest having the meeting three days later, Deng refused as he preferred to wait for the arrival of major troops in Beijing,¹¹ because “it would be more controllable” at that time to have such a meeting for “solving the Zhao problem” (Li, 2010: 163). Furthermore, Deng worried about the military's loyalty (Li, 2010: 165), which helps to explain why massive troops from diverse districts were mobilized for martial law, as this would increase cross-division deterrence within the military. Deng's camouflage on May 17 of noting Zhao's continuation of his position, moreover, also reveals his extreme caution in illegitimately manipulating the leadership change.

Challenges also came from the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee. Initiated by some members, the CCP Party Group of this parliament-like organization on May 19 unanimously adopted a decision to, according to the PRC constitution, call for an urgent meeting to discuss the current situation. All NPC leaders also agreed on the request that NPC Chairman Wan Li, a reform-minded leader who was expected to support Zhao Ziyang, cut short his visit to the United States and immediately return to Beijing to take constitutional action (Li, 2010: 173). The proposed urgent meeting was at the time expected to invalidate martial law, which would be a reversion of the entire episode. The Party Group of the NPC Standing Committee, however, had to report its decision to the CCP's PSC, now illegitimately consisting of only three members and chaired by Li Peng, and they gave their

disapproval (Li, 2010: 173). Wan Li still shortened his US tour, but, at 3 o'clock morning time of May 26, his airplane landed in Shanghai instead of Beijing, where he was met by Jiang Zemin (still party secretary of Shanghai) and Ding Guangen (Li, 2010: 196), who "knows comrade Xiaoping's ideas pretty well" (Li, 2010: 212) and, like Wan Li, was Deng Xiaoping's playmate in Deng's favorite card game bridge. Ding forwarded Deng's message to Wan, then Wan, without appearing in public, publicized a written speech to support martial law. This speech, Li Peng discloses, was drafted by the Central Propaganda Group organized following the May 19 meeting (Li, 2010: 155, 161, 180, 196). Although failed, the NPC's attempt to block martial law, as well as the counter-block by Deng Xiaoping of Wan Li's autonomous expression of his political preference, further reveals the unconstitutional nature of martial law as a coup d'état to not only topple the CCP incumbent leadership but also infringe the parliamentary authority of the PRC.

Even the designated new party chief Jiang Zemin was fully aware at the time of the illegitimacy of the leadership change. It was Deng who in person notified Jiang of his new appointment (Vogel, 2011: 625); Li Peng, despite now being in charge of PSC operations, felt himself to be unqualified to convey the message to Jiang (Li, 2010: 220). Jiang raised the issue of procedures, and suggested that, to follow the party charter's stipulation, he be "elected" by the Central Committee (Li, 2010: 221). The leadership change was officially announced at the Fourth Plenary of the 13th Central Committee on June 24 with Jiang's replacement of Zhao and the reshuffle of the PSC (Jiang, Zhang, and Xiao (eds.), 2006: 528). Jiang Zemin, however, had already joined the CCP leadership on May 31 after he came to Beijing, and, at the latest, started to chair the new PSC from June 15 on (Li, 2010: 278), ten days before Jiang himself and the new PSC were "elected". Beijing was still under martial law during this period, and, according to American

journalist Harrison Salisbury's (1989: 7) record of a message from a Beijing citizen at the time, "an army takeover was imminent".

4. A Coup d'État with CCP Characteristics: Structural Immanency of Military Power in Politics and State Violence in Transitional Politics

The historical episodes have become clear by this point to support the argument that there was a military coup d'état during Tiananmen 1989, which unfolded through three stages: first, approximately around April 25-27, the CMC chairman Deng Xiaoping secretly started the mobilization of the PLA for political purposes, which led to Deng's imposition of the martial-law decision on the PSC on May 17; second, by means of this imposition, Deng mutely overthrew the legitimate party chief Zhao Ziyang and took action to reshuffle the PSC, though an official declaration was postponed until mid-June; third, Deng, in consultation with Chen Yun and Li Xiannian, both, like Deng, being nonmembers of the PSC, decided on the new general secretary and new members of the PSC. Throughout the process, Deng relied on his power in the military and on the mobilized troops in action to achieve the political goals of, first, reorganizing the CCP leadership at his will and, then, suppressing social demonstrations. As Chen Yun commented in January 1990: "The military is very, very, very important. Without the military that would not have worked the last year to solve the problem of Tiananmen in Beijing" (ZZWY, 1995 (ed.): 373; ZZWY, 2005: 1815).

It is usually agreed in the relevant literature that there has not been, or, at least, rarely, a coup taking place in the history of the People's Republic of China (Luttwak, 1979: 192). The empirical finding of this article challenges this assumption. Although there are various definitions of a coup, most experts agree on three key points: illegality, referring to

its unconstitutional procedures; military involvement, emphasizing the means; and leadership change as the goal and/or outcome. For example, *Wikipedia* (2019) defines a coup as “the overthrow of an existing government; typically, this refers to an illegal, unconstitutional seizure of power by a dictator, the military, or a political faction.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’s (2019) definition is more elaborative, stating:

Coup d’état, also called Coup, the sudden, violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group. The chief prerequisite for a coup is control of all or part of the armed forces, the police, and other military elements. Unlike a revolution, which is usually achieved by large numbers of people working for basic social, economic, and political change, a coup is a change in power from the top that merely results in the abrupt replacement of leading government personnel.

After systematically comparing the definitions employed by previous studies, two experts in their relatively recent research define coups as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive” (Powell and Thyne, 2011: 252). The leadership change in China during Tiananmen 1989 apparently fits all those defining features above clarified.

In the conceptual sense, however, this article likes to emphasize the possible fresh understanding that such an empirical finding may bring to the weighty role of the military within CCP/PRC politics and its unique institutional operations. In the context of comparative politics, here this article suggests analyzing the role of the military in the leadership change during Tiananmen 1989 from three angles: structural, operational, and state-society relational, all of which concern either institutional characteristics of CCP/PRC politics or democratic transition

of an authoritarian regime. State violence stands at the center of these angles and concerns of analyses.

The power structure of the CCP/PRC is designed to integrate the military into political power, thus features a unique institutional, mutual embeddedness between the Number-One political leader's firm and almost exclusive control of the military and, with the military's loyalty and support, this leader's control of political apparatuses, primarily the party. This institutional context can handicap an unconditional application of the terms, concepts, and understandings of civilian-military relations developed in either democracies or the Global South in the China case. The historical period from June 1981 to November 1989, however, is an exception to some extent, as the Sixth Plenary of the 11th Central Committee held in June 1981 replaced Hua Guofeng with Hu Yaobang as party chief but with Deng Xiaoping as CMC chairman, for the first time separating the two positions from each other since the de facto military leader Mao Zedong became party chief in the 1940s. Deng firmly occupied the position despite three different party chiefs coming into power during this period, namely, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Zemin, before he resigned months later after the Tiananmen crackdown. Especially unusual, for the relatively short time following the CCP's 13th National Congress of October 1987, Deng took the CMC chairmanship position without any seat in the Central Committee, creating a dual power structure in which the military leader was above the party chief. Even in this case, the power to control the military is so deeply inherent to the power to dominate the party that it makes it difficult to distinguish between the military leader and the so-called paramount leader. This structural characteristic of CCP/PRC leadership intentionally blurs the normal distinction between civilian and military leaders. For general Global South authoritarianism, however, the political party and the modern state are often weak, especially in a

comparison with the military; a coup signifies how military power can shamelessly take over state power in such a context (Decalo, 1976; Janowitz, 1977; Migdal, 1988; Stepan, 1971; Svobik, 2012). The China case is different, in which the soldier-politician overwhelms the professional soldier, but also, not less important though often being neglected, overwhelms civilian politicians – in the unusual circumstances like Tiananmen 1989, such overwhelming unfolds as a military coup.

The leadership change that takes place within this structure inevitably has its own operational features that differ from the military coups that can be observed in the Global South in the 20th and 21st centuries. In those cases, a scene often occurs in which soldiers burst into the state leader's office or residence, and a leadership change is imposed with literally physical violence. In our case, however, due to the unique power structure, the leader who combines the paramount authority with the military commandship, Deng Xiaoping, has the convenience, though illegitimately, to summon the nominal top leadership to his own residence; the targeted leader Zhao Ziyang was then pushed into a corner by Deng's unilateral decision on martial law and, accordingly, lost power as Deng personally assigned the responsibility of carrying out his decision to those leaders who stood with Deng together. One may say that CCP/PRC politics, especially during the post-Mao era, are conducted in such a subtle way that no physical violence is needed to directly apply against an enemy within the leadership; this author would, however, highlight the internalization of violence into CCP/PRC politics as demonstrated in Tiananmen 1989 in both leadership operations and state-society relations. In a comparative perspective with the Global South, it seems that in CCP politics an informal, small meeting is a most feasible, and dangerous, venue via which a coup operates to actualize its goal of leadership change.

Despite how significant the military involvement in the leadership change might have been, it is definitely not the entire repertoire of Tiananmen 1989. Viewing Tiananmen as the military coup d'état is not in conflict with the views of Tiananmen as a failed democratic revolution, nor in conflict with the records of state violence of the Tiananmen crackdown on citizens. This article would argue that the military coup above analyzed in fact took place for the purposes of both overthrowing Zhao Ziyang and cracking down on Tiananmen social movements, especially for dealing with the potential coalition between street protesters and Zhao-led pro-democracy intra-party elites.¹² In other words, the Tiananmen coup of 1989 was conducted to block China's democratic transition, and it did so successfully as securing a political precondition for and providing a prelude of violence to the military crackdown of Tiananmen pro-democracy demonstrations.

Martial law in Beijing 1989 mobilized a huge number of soldiers; one researcher estimated it as 350,000 (Chen, 1996: 329). It is the state-society interactions as a momentum for democratic transition that helps to explain why in a non-war background there was such an unusual huge scale and high intensity of the mobilization of the military forces in a domestic political event that resulted in a leadership change. Apparently, such a huge dispatch of troops is rarely seen in the developing countries even in the 1960s and the 1970s when military seizures of state power took place quite frequently, where the number of the soldiers in action was often small and the scale of their action was limited. Military coups, however, are often a response to a democratic transition in the Global South; in particular, the military is usually supportive of liberalization but comes to take strong resistance to the call for democratization (Stepan, 1988: xiii). Deng Xiaoping is obviously a leader who promotes liberalization while opposing democratization; when the massive

demand for democratization arose in China, he and the forces behind him turned to state coercion for the last resort in defending their power.

These three “Chinese characteristics” of the military coup, namely, the structural inherence of military power in political power, the military deterrence impact on political operations, and the entanglement of leadership politics with state-society interactions, can help shed light on some significant issues of CCP/PRC politics, especially regarding state-military relations, state-society relations, and transitional politics. They do not, however, invalidate the very essence of the relevant action as a military coup. Furthermore, the comparative discussion can also be extended to post-coup politics in the Global South. Decades ago, Edward Luttwak stated in the assumed tone of coup leaders: “Once we have carried out our coup and established control over the bureaucracy and the armed forces, our long-term political survival will largely depend on our management of the problem of economic development.” Moreover, such management of economic development must obey “our main goal: political stability” (Luttwak, 1979: 175). “Propaganda and repression, or, more efficiently, a mixture of both,” will be critical for the regime coming into power through a coup (Luttwak, 1979: 176) – “efficient repression, extensive propaganda and enough economic development to create new elites committed to the regime” (Luttwak, 1979: 181). For those who are familiar with the post-Tiananmen development of China, it should not be difficult to recognize the similarities between China and what Luttwak has highlighted in terms of the post-coup regime’s reliance on economic performance, its emphasis on political stability, and its combination of propaganda and repression for maintaining itself.

Some consequences of coup politics, also according to Luttwak (1979: 15-16), can be commonly observed, prominent among which is “overt corruption”, with “bribery [being] now a quite normal part in any transaction between citizen and state”, and through which “the logic

whereby public power may easily generate private wealth is universal.” Such a consequence of the Tiananmen coup in China is now fully evident, as many researchers have already documented (e.g., Pei, 2016). In this sense, the logic of Chinese politics is, obviously, not so unique that it is fundamentally incomparable to some general features of politics in the Global South. Some significant characteristics do exist, but, this article maintains, the understanding of such characteristics can only enrich and deepen relevant comparative politics studies.

5. Concluding Remarks

The Tiananmen military coup d'état toppling the reform-minded leadership cleared the way for the Tiananmen military crackdown on mass demonstrators. “Immediately after May 20,” Deng Xiaoping’s biographer Vogel (2011: 621) states, “Deng directed Yang Shangkun to prepare tanks, armored vehicles, trucks, and armed men in sufficient numbers to overcome all resistance.” When the troops’ moves into the city center had for days been blocked by citizens, Deng, Yang, and Li Peng during the week following May 23 were busy to amend schisms among the elites that had since April emerged regarding how to respond to pro-democracy movements. Intensive meetings and conversations were held with PLA generals, provincial party secretaries, NPC leaders, ministers of the national government, communist veterans, and satellite party leaders for convincing them to stand behind Deng (Li, 2010: 175-215). After NPC Chairman Wan Li’s surrender on May 27 and new party chief Jiang Zemin’s arrival in Beijing on May 31, the aftershock of the coup d'état had largely settled down. Now Deng was able to make the next move: “At 2:50 p.m. on June 3, he gave the order to Chi Haotian to do whatever was necessary (*yong yiqie de shouduan*) to restore order” (Vogel, 2011: 625). The Tiananmen massacre took place

during the night of June 3 extending to the early hours of June 4; the sun rose in Beijing on June 4 to see blood, corpses, countless destroyed bikes, and thousands of soldiers with their tanks and guns on the streets as if on battlefields.

The humanitarian tragedy of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown shocked China and the world; it has been since then, however, a top political taboo in China. Meanwhile, Zhao Ziyang had since May 19 been banned from appearing at any public occasion, and his earlier state activities have also been omitted from the PRC's official historical records. The obstacles for exploring Tiananmen 1989 are tremendous, but various efforts have been made in historical, sociological, and political-science scholarships to increase our knowledge and understandings of the significant event. This article has joined these efforts by bringing a neglected aspect of the event out of the shadows, namely, how a military coup d'état took place during spring 1989 as a political prelude to the Tiananmen crackdown. It has found that Deng Xiaoping, who took the major responsibility for the Tiananmen crackdown, also was the major figure plotting the Tiananmen coup. His mobilization of the military in 1989, in fact, targeted simultaneously both the Tiananmen protesters and the legitimate leadership.

Tiananmen 1989 is a set of complicated events and a process of various interactions between multiple factors; state-society relations and elite politics, to this author, both are extremely vital dimensions for historical and political studies of Tiananmen. This article has focused on elite politics, but never attempted to do so with ignorance of state-society relations in concept and social protests during the time in practice. It, however, especially attempts to position elite politics in general and the Tiananmen coup in particular in the given institutional and social contexts, and, furthermore, to connect the analysis to understandings of the essence of Chinese politics in a comparative-

politics perspective, especially how state violence and transitional politics in China can actually be understood in the sense informed by political studies of the Global South. It has, therefore, empirically found that military coup is not absent in PRC politics, and argued that it is the inherence of military power in PRC politics that has often obscured relevant observations.

Notes

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1. Here the term “constitutional” refers mostly to the CCP/PRC constitutional arrangements, not exactly in the sense that is understood in a constitutionalist context in general terms.
2. The authenticity of the diary (Li, 2010) has so far not been questioned since it was disclosed for the first time in 2010, including no challenge from the claimed author Li Peng, his family and staff, or the Chinese authorities. The style is the same as that of a series of diaries Li has published, which range from the first (Li, 2003) to Li (2008), the latest before Li (2010).
3. Li Peng in another collection of diaries (Li, 2008: 364) emphasized that the meeting was a courtesy.
4. There is an unusual blank of records of any activities in Deng’s official chronology for the period between April 25 to May 11, 1989 (ZZWY (ed.), 2004: 1272-1274).
5. Zhang Sizhi (2014: 286) emphasizes that the provincial cadre who disclosed the information “absolutely does not do lying or fabricating.”
6. How could Li get to know the content of the Deng-Zhao conversation on the same day? It was Yang Shangkun who told him, according to Li’s record. According to the norms of CCP leadership politics, Yang should not disclose the conversation to anybody else without Deng’s approval.
7. *The Tiananmen Papers* states that “The Standing Committee brought its disagreements to Deng’s home on May 17” (Nathan and Link (eds.), 2001: 175), but both Li Peng (2010: 136) and Zhao Ziyang (Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 27), as well as Vogel (2011: 617), recorded that it was Deng who summoned the meeting. Gorbachev was still in Beijing as this meeting was held; he finished his visit to China on May 18.
8. Zhao in memoir clarified that “the Standing Committee held no formal vote” on the matter (Bao, Chiang, and Ignatius (tr., eds.), 2009: 30).
9. Li Peng (2010: 57-58) confirms this, though Li records this dispatch of the army with two divisions on April 21. A possible explanation is that the

document was signed on April 20 and the dispatch of the military took place the next day. Also, Vogel (2011: 602) states that on April 21 “a regiment of troops was sent into Zhongnanhai” (Zhongnanhai is the location of the CCP headquarters and the PRC national government).

10. Though such legitimization takes place with “institutional manipulation” within the CCP “constitutional” framework for making a political hypocrisy, it is still necessary for turning naked power to representative-endorsed legitimacy. See Wu (2015), esp. ch. 2.
11. Due to Beijing residents’ massive actions to block, the troops were not able to arrive at Beijing’s city center for at least a week (Lu, 2006: 106; Gargan, 1990: 299). In 1989, Lu was a leading editor of the *People’s Daily*, the CCP central organ, and Gargan was the *Time*’s Beijing correspondent.
12. For Tiananmen protests as democratic social movements, see, for example, Calhoun (1994); Des Forges, Luo, and Wu (eds.) (1993); Han (ed.) (1990); Dingxin Zhao (2001). For Zhao Ziyang’s pro-democracy program of political reform, see, for instance, Goldman (1994); Wu and Lansdowne (eds.) (2008).

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China Post-Tiananmen

