

# SANCTIONS OR SUBDUED RELATIONS: THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE 1989 MASSACRE

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What is the international community to do when a government's domestic behavior is utterly offensive and in violation of established international norms? To respond by committing an act of war is clearly out of the question. Are there any suitable lesser punishments? The question is particularly vexing when, as in the case of China and the United States, the nations of the antagonistic governments have strong emotional attachments to each other.

Relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) divide easily and sharply into two periods, and are defined largely by American conservatives' attitudes toward China. (Liberals have been consistently ambivalent toward the PRC, and have had little impact on American policies toward the country.) The two eras are demarcated by Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China in 1971. Before that year, there was little in the way of a political relationship between the two countries, and virtually no economic relationship. The United States did make occasional propagandistic reference to the undemocratic nature of the Chinese system, but both subjective and short-term strategic considerations always have been much more weighty considerations. Thus, Secretary of State James Baker was making something of an understatement when he said that although he deeply regretted the executions of protesters, human rights "is not the only principle which determines our foreign policy."<sup>1</sup> Lacking here is a sense that long-run American interests depend on the friendship of the Chinese *people*. The example of South Korea suggests that if America is seen as backing a repressive regime, the anti-Americanism that is engendered could last much longer than the repressive regime itself. China once exemplified this anti-Americanism.

The 1950s and 1960s were what can be called a period of total sanctions against China. American conservatives felt betrayed by a China that did not appreciate the many years of support for Chiang Kai-shek's Republic, and they had equally irrational fears of the Sino-Soviet and then Sino-Vietnamese alliance. Whatever the intended effect of the sanctions, they were not only ineffective, they were counterproductive and helped drive the country into the arms of the Soviet Union.

In terms of human rights, the late 1960s and early 1970s comprised the worst period in Chinese history. Although political violence did seem on the decline in 1971, for the people who had been brutalized and imprisoned,

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1. *Wall Street Journal*, 30 June 1989, 15.

there was still no hint of restoration of rights. The fact that the shift in US policy toward China came in 1971 when extreme human rights abuses continued, demonstrates how little Washington cared about the question of democracy.

The promise that a more open China would be a more humane and free one seemed to be borne out — until 1989. Then came the slaughters, first in Lhasa, and then in Beijing, Chengdu, Xian, Lanzhou, and elsewhere. The reaction of the Bush administration was measured: the United States “cannot ignore the consequences for our relationship with China.”<sup>2</sup> The president, who fancies himself a China expert, tried to display enough anger to appease the Congress, which was being prodded by human rights organizations and Chinese exiles to impose heavy sanctions.<sup>3</sup> However, he was reserved enough not to produce unnecessary headlines.

Bush cancelled the sales of weapons to China, and suspended direct contact between senior US and Chinese officials.<sup>4</sup> However, the decision to allow the sale of dual-use items such as satellites and airliners (which are often used to shuttle troops to martial-law areas) reduced the significance of these steps.<sup>5</sup>

The American response was no more tepid than that of some other countries. Japan was slow to criticize the massacre and only briefly cut off economic assistance to China.<sup>6</sup> Other countries (albeit those with less clout), such as Australia, Canada, France, Great Britain, and Sweden, were willing to make greater sacrifices.<sup>7</sup> For example, France, which had been one of the first Western countries to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC, now became

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2. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 June 1989, 10.

3. A broad range of congressmen and senators, from the conservative Jesse Helms to the liberal Stephen Solarz, have advocated tougher sanctions. Perhaps typical is Senator Paul Simon (D-Ill.), who would consider suspending sales on just about everything except food and medicine (Associated Press, 31 July 1989). See Susumu Awanoara, “Congress Gets Tough: US Senate Backs House in Stronger Sanctions Call,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 July 1989, 12; Thomas L. Friedman, “[House Speaker Thomas] Foley Says US Should Consider Further Sanctions Against China,” *New York Times*, 19 June 1989, and “Congress, Angry at China, Moves to Impose Sanctions,” *New York Times*, 23 June 1989. For a discussion of how proposed congressional sanctions went beyond the administration’s, see Don Oberdorfer, “House China Vote Shows Power of Domestic Politics,” *Washington Post*, 1 July 1989. Especially active on the sanctions issue was the New York-based Asia Watch. For the group’s position on the sanctions issue see *Human Rights Watch*, September 1989, 4. For a view of the exiles’ stance see James M. Markham, “Exiles Urge Trade Sanctions Against Beijing,” *New York Times*, 13 July 1989. However, exiles are by no means united on the issues of whether sanctions should be invoked.

4. The cancelled sale of weapons amounted to about \$640 million worth of such items as torpedoes, avionics systems for jet fighters, ground radar systems, and equipment to reproduce artillery shells. For full details, see Richard E. Gillespie and Kelly Ho Shea, “The Military Sales Ban,” *The China Business Review*, September 1989, 32-35.

5. On July 7, the delivery of four Boeing 757-200 commercial jets was permitted. Their delivery had been held up because their navigational systems had been covered by a ban on military sales. According to the State Department, the shift was “in keeping with Bush’s intent not to disrupt non-military commercial trade.” See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 July 1989, 14. See also, Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Grants Boeing Waiver to Deliver Jetliners to China,” *New York Times*, 8 July 1989, 1.

6. The resumption of Japan’s economic assistance did not include Beijing Municipality, where martial law was still in effect (Kyodo, 17 August 1989, US Foreign Broadcast Information Service [FBIS], 17 August 1989, 3). For discussion of Japan’s response to developments in China see *New York Times*, 18 August 1989, 9.

7. For a more complete list of foreign responses to the crackdown see *China Update: An Occasional Bulletin of the China Scholars Coordinating Committee*, August 1989, 9.

a particularly hospitable haven for dissident exiles. Only time will tell whether the attitude of Paris or Washington is more farsighted.

Certainly, in the short run, Bush's caution has gained nothing. The Chinese authorities, who claim not to care at all about sanctions, seem upset with the United States for three general reasons.<sup>8</sup> First, Americans are held at least partially responsible for the anti-government movement. Second, the United States and other countries have been assailed for extending the visas of students from China. Finally, Beijing does not like the way the media portrayed the turmoil. The Voice of America (VOA) reporting has come under particularly heavy criticism.<sup>9</sup> As a result concrete measures were taken, such as jamming VOA, postponing the start of the Peace Corps program in China and cancelling plans for Fulbright scholars to teach there.<sup>10</sup> The cancellation of the Fulbright scholars' stay is a rare example of China failing to encourage the continuation of cultural exchanges which, in general, are going forward.

Should more in the way of economic sanctions have been imposed? First it must be said that no great claim can be made for sanctions against foreign governments. About half the time they do not work at all, and the other half the results are difficult to measure. Still, sanctions enable one to do *something* when no good alternatives are available. This at least satisfies the home demand for a political response. And in the case of China, where modernizers place great stress on economic relations with the United States, economic sanctions would touch a particularly sensitive nerve.<sup>11</sup>

Sanctions will probably be less damaging to China's economy than will the purely risk versus reward decisions of Westerners not to increase activities there. International and Japanese banks have cut lending in the belief that, because of the unrest and stalled economic reforms, the PRC is a poor credit risk.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, China's grain imports and textile exports seem in jeopardy.<sup>13</sup> Tourists and investors are shying away from China.<sup>14</sup> The resulting decline in

8. According to Deng Xiaoping, "China is not afraid of sanctions, which in the long run will rebound on those imposing them" (*New York Times*, 20 September 1989). See also "In His Internal Speech, Deng Stressed That China Is Not Afraid of Sanctions," *Zheng ming*, 1 August 1989, 11, FBIS, 2 August 1989, 12.

9. On the campaign against Voice of America, see "Rumours and the Truth," *Beijing Review*, 11 September 1989, 20-26; and Hua Ding, "What Does the 'Exhibition of the Voice of America's Rumors' Tell People?," *Liaowang (Outlook Weekly)*, 4 September 1989, 10f, and FBIS, 15 September 1989, 2f.

10. *Washington Post*, 3 August 1989, 18, 21.

11. See Li Guoyou, "US Role in Asian Economy," *American Studies* No. 3 (1988), translated in *Beijing Review* (North American Section), 3 August 1989, 32-34. It is probably significant that this article was republished well after the crackdown. An introductory note, however, warns readers of the piece's drawbacks, such as its "failure to discuss economic conflicts between the United States and the Asian nations."

12. See "Foreign Banks Unwilling to Lend Since Crackdown," *Hong Kong Standard* (Business Standard section), 21 July 1989, 1; FBIS, 21 July 1989, 27; and Sheryl WuDunn, "China's Ability to Pay Debts: Damaged But Under Control," *New York Times*, 14 August 1989, C1.

13. See Guy Halverson, "Marketwatch: Asia's Impact on Wall Street," *Christian Science Monitor*, 31 July 1989, 9.

14. Between 2 and 3 percent of China's 1988 foreign exchange came from tourism. The current decline of tourism is expected to cost a billion dollars. See Ann F. Thurston, "Back to Square One?: China's Tourism Industry May Take Years to Recover from a Disastrous Summer," *The China Business Review*, September 1989, 36-41. For information on investors see "Crackdown 'Derailed' Economic Opening to West," *Hongkong Standard* (Business Standard section), 19 July 1989, 2; and FBIS, 20 July 1989, 26.

the country's hard currency reserves makes it difficult to buy foreign products.<sup>15</sup>

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After the 1989 China massacre, many governments rose to the occasion, though the United States and Japan were not among them. But it must be borne in mind that the problem is not primarily one of relations among states. Rather, the fundamental issue is between tyranny and humanity.

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Still, the sanctions may be suitable in the face of serious human rights violations. The type and timing of sanctions against China can be judged according to the following criteria:

- (1) *The importance of trade in specific areas to Chinese leaders.* Yang Shangkun, author of the massacre, sorely needs military equipment and technology. At this moment, gun sales to the United States are doing well.<sup>16</sup> Sanctions against the gun trade would be effective, especially since they primarily would hurt China's offending military-industrial complex. As for commerce in general, Mao Zedong proved that China can survive without international trade. However, such commerce now accounts for almost 20 percent of China's gross national product.
- (2) *The hardship inflicted on the public.* In the case of China, a grain embargo would be inappropriate since the general population would be adversely affected. But a halt in the sale of airplanes to China would target the military without harming the Chinese people as a whole.
- (3) *The political implications of non-economic relations.* In the cases of athletic and cultural exchanges, the value of the exchanges in keeping China open must be weighed against the luster they add to the regime.
- (4) *The strength of the statement about unacceptable government behavior.* There is little point in imposing sanctions if they are accompanied by an apologetic chorus from prominent members of the ruling party.
- (5) *Multilateral support.* There must be participation by nearly all of China's trading partners for economic sanctions to be effective. So far sanctions against arms sales and military or high-level contacts have received international support. Broad-spectrum commercial sanctions, however, would not receive

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15. See James L. Tyson, "China's Foreign Funds Drying Up," *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 July 1989, 6.

16. The importation of AK-47 assault rifles had been banned before the political crackdown, but a brisk trade still goes on in other firearms and munitions. These are usually manufactured by firms associated with the People's Liberation Army, which keeps 85 percent of what it earns in foreign sales. See Jay Matthews, "Chinese Keep Up Gun Exports to US," *Washington Post*, 5 July 1989, A13.

international approval, thereby hurting China less than the country imposing such sanctions.

(6) *Support in the sanctioning country to sustain the sanctions until the human rights situation improves.* Sanctions accomplish nothing if they are backed away from before there is any improvement. Furthermore, ineffective sanctions hand the offending government a propaganda victory.

In measuring the value of sanctions one must take a long-range view. Their imposition stands primarily as a warning that the international community will extract a price from future irresponsible rulers who engage in serious human rights violations. The price is as much symbolic as monetary. As we have noted, the real economic impact comes not from sanctions but from the chilling effect that the overall situation has on business. Thus, in the final analysis, the value of sanctions lies in the moral stance taken and the signal sent. Furthermore, it would probably be a mistake to declare that sanctions have produced a victory when improvements do occur. Most of the credit for improved conditions should go to the reformers within the country.

Just as important as the sanctions themselves is the rhetoric that accompanies them. If the Bush administration is to be faulted for its handling of the Chinese situation, it should not be criticized primarily because of the specific sanctions it imposed, since people are bound to differ on precisely what sanctions are appropriate. Rather, the problem lies in pulling punches. Not only were the sanctions diluted through over-interpretation, but the month after it was declared that there would be no high-level diplomatic contacts, Secretary of State James Baker, at his request, met with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen.<sup>17</sup> The signals suggested that priority was being given not to opposing butchery but to maintaining "the relationship." The implication is that it is most important to maintain ties with the ruling Chinese group, even at the expense of the relationship with the Chinese people, who, May events made clear, do not support their leaders. The US government committed the same error in the 1940s and 1950s when it backed the discredited Chiang Kai-shek regime — a mistake for which the West paid a price for decades.

To be sure, the signals seem to have been strong enough to outrage conservatives in Beijing. Readers of China's press are asked to believe that the United States has been trying to subvert and overthrow China's economic and political order. On July 9, 1989, *People's Daily* accused the United States of "wanton interference in China's internal affairs" and attempting "subversion through peaceful evolution." Conservatives would like to continue the economic relationship, but they want little cultural and no political impact from the "bourgeois liberal" West.

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17. It may be argued that the apparently stormy meeting, held July 31 during the Paris talks on Cambodia, was a reasonable exception to the no-contact rule. However, Baker also met with Qian on September 28, 1989 at the United Nations, when harsh words were exchanged again. See the *Washington Post*, 1 August 1989 and 3 October 1989.

The regime's attitude may seem odd in view of Washington's actual hands-off attitude. It can be accounted for by the Chinese leaders' frustrations in dealing with their own people and need to blame their problems on someone else. Ironically, the diatribes in China's press may reduce the likelihood of long-term anti-Americanism among the Chinese public. At any rate, it is clear that the present leaders have chosen not to be our friends, and the US public figures who have thought to the contrary engage in wishful thinking.

Few wars ever settle matters of principle, but World War II was an exception. Primarily as a result of international revulsion over the Holocaust, the principle was established that governments do not have absolute sovereignty, and there are international limits to the abuses which they are permitted to commit against their own citizens.<sup>18</sup> Nothing is more important than upholding that principle, which was established after such a terrible sacrifice. After the 1989 China massacre, many governments rose to the occasion, though the United States and Japan were not among them. But it must be borne in mind that the problem is not primarily one of relations among states. Rather, the fundamental issue is between tyranny and humanity.

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In a more immediate sense, the problem is between the Chinese authorities and the Chinese people. The Chinese Communist Party has lost much of its legitimacy; knowledgeable people overwhelmingly support the goals and means of the Tiananmen workers and students. According to one poll of Beijing residents, only 1 percent found the protesting students' demands unreasonable.<sup>19</sup> In this situation, Washington must choose sides wisely, if at all. Although some argue that geostrategic interests require our maintaining good relations with China's rulers, this view springs from the needs of a bipolarity which no longer exists. Indeed, given China's close relations with the Khmer Rouge, they hardly make an attractive ally, whereas the Soviet

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18. There is, of course, the countervailing principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This is stressed by the Chinese government. See Yi Ding, "International Relations and the Principle of Non-Interference in Another Country's Internal Affairs," *Renmin ribao (People's Daily)*, 25 August 1989, 7; FBIS, 12 September 1989; and Huang Hong, "The Hypocrisy of the 'Human Rights Diplomacy' of the United States," *Jiefangjun bao (People's Liberation Army Daily)*, 4 July 1989, 4; and FBIS, 12 July 1989.

19. Poll taken May 8. Results published in *China Information (Leiden)*, Summer 1989: 97-99. Ninety-five percent of the respondents were sympathetic to the student movement.

Union is becoming increasingly easier for us to get along with. The thinking of American opinion makers does not seem to be changing with the times. Spokesmen for business interests, including such organizations as the US-China Business Council and the more broadly-focused National Committee on US-China Relations, seem reluctant to take a strong and consistent stand in favor of political liberalization and human rights.<sup>20</sup> Even more damaging to long-term Sino-American relations are such individuals as Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig, who have steadfastly stood by the most repressive elements in the Chinese government.<sup>21</sup>

It surely would be helpful if American liberals reclaimed a voice in the matter. Sino-American relations are too important to be subject to erratic swings at the hands of American conservatives. The latter have made their belated contribution; the Sino-American economic relationship has grown phenomenally. However, the political relationship has been awkward. The conservatives in Washington and the conservatives in Beijing have had an odd symbiotic relationship, but public opinion, especially the opinion of intellectuals in both countries, increasingly has been operating on a different wavelength from that of the leaderships. For the first time, the American public views the Soviet Union more favorably than China.<sup>22</sup> If Washington would place itself more clearly on the side of political reforms, that would render the present Beijing leadership "odd man out," which is the way it should be.

Sanctions and moral posturing may not be as effective as we and the Chinese people might like. Still, it would be foolish for Western countries, through unrestricted trade and business-as-usual diplomacy, to slow down the process of dynastic decline. This would only delay the return to China of the politics of decency.

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20. The US-China Business Council issued a statement deploring the "violent suppression and wanton killing . . . and apparent turning away from . . . economic liberalization," but Chairman Roger Sullivan opposed sanctions. See *The China Business Review*, July 1989, 9. See also, David M. Lampton and Roger Sullivan, "The Price China Has Paid," *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 July 1989, in which the authors argue that China has paid enough of a price for the mistakes of its leaders, and that the West's response should be minimal. The National Committee did issue a statement highly critical of the crackdown, but appeared to soften its message in statements aimed at China. See interview with Chairman David M. Lampton in the pro-Communist *Wenhui Bao* (Hong Kong), 4 September 1989, 2; and FBIS, 5 September 1989, 4-6. Lampton told the author that *Wenhui Bao* highly distorted the interview in its published version.

21. See Kissinger's "The Caricature of Deng as a Tyrant is Unfair," *Washington Post*, 1 August 1989. This prompted numerous effective rebuttals, including Richard Cohen's "Kissinger: Pragmatism or Profit," *Washington Post*, 29 August 1989, A21.

Haig, the former secretary of state, now a private business consultant, was in China for the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the PRC, an occasion boycotted by most foreign governments. He attended a luncheon on October 2 as an honored guest, walking in with Chinese leaders (Associated Press, 1 October 1989).

22. Gallop poll reported in *Washington Post*, 17 August 1989