

## **Remembering the Great Leap Backwards: China and human rights twenty years after Tian'anmen**

During her recent visit to China, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton noted that while human rights mattered to their China policy, they could not be allowed to 'interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis.' Her statement received high praise from official media outlets who described it as a realistic attitude that other Western leaders ought to emulate.

Human rights groups in China were less impressed. This was not 'stating the obvious' as the Secretary of State had suggested: it was appeasement. Shortly after Clinton's visit, a former student leader of the pro-democracy movement, Zhou Yongjun, was arrested on his return to China following his exile in the US. He joins around thirty other dissidents who remain imprisoned twenty years after the massacres.

Earlier that year the pro-democracy movement in China was become a powerful political force. The student-led protests had been underway for weeks and had begun to embarrass the ruling Communist Party. Although demonstrations were taking place across China, Tian'anmen Square had become the focal point. On the night of 3 June, the People's Liberation Army was ordered to use tanks and armed personal vehicles to crush the movement. By the early hours of 4 June the square had been cleared by the brutal military offensive. Even conservative estimates from official Chinese sources put the death total at over 200 and the numbers injured over 7000.

What have we learned about the diplomacy of human rights in relation to China, twenty years on? Two issues in particular require careful reflection by governments committed to encouraging reform in China. First there is perennial difficulty of balancing human rights concerns with other goals in relation to security and trade. Second there is the dilemma of whether it is appropriate to take a strong stance in relation to on-going human rights problems knowing this is likely to offend key sectors of Chinese society.

The aftermath of the Tian'anmen Square crack-down shows that western governments have utilized a variety of techniques to support democratic forces in China. At the outset, leaders of western governments were shocked that such backward-looking tactics had been deployed, in marked contrast to the manner in which Mikhail Gorbachev was managing the process of domestic reform in the Soviet bloc. Sanctions, across a range of issue-areas, were imposed with immediate effect by the United States and the European Community.

Once the shock of the events of June 1989 had receded, relations between China and the west normalized fairly quickly. The lifting of martial law in January 1990 helped, as did China's tacit support for the US-led coalition against Iraq in 1990-1. By 1993, China was appearing in Vienna for the World Conference on Human Rights, and two years later it hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women.

It would be a mistake to see this process of normalization as anything other than reluctant acquiescence on the part of China to the various commitments embodied in the human rights covenants. China would not be alone in thinking that rhetorical support for human rights was relatively 'cheap talk'. After all, the United States often threatened to remove China from its list of most favoured nations in relation to trade deals: when it came to the crunch economic interests were accorded a higher priority than human rights.

The statement by Hilary Clinton suggests that in addition to trade there are now three other significant strategic priorities in US-China relations: recovering from the great recession; combating climate change; developing a security partnership. Human rights matter for the Obama presidency. But they do not matter enough to endanger these superordinate goals.

Today the United States could not afford to antagonize China. Jitters have already been created in Washington's hearts and minds by statements about China's concerns about its one trillion dollars worth of US treasury bonds. In March of this year, the Chinese Premier Wen Jinbao noted that they had lent 'a huge amount of money to the US' and that China was 'concerned about the safety of our assets'.

The rise of China as an economic power means that it is increasingly risky for western governments to beat the drum of human rights. At the same time, since the early 1990s the Chinese leadership has recognized that it cannot ignore all demands – internal and external – to improve its human rights record.

Indeed, on certain indicators, China is moving rapidly up the human development league table. In 2006 one of the United Nations Development Programme singled out China as an exemplar for improving the standard of living of its people. According to the UNDP, since 1981 the estimated share of the population living on less than \$1 per day has been reduced from 64% to 16%. Or in more meaningful terms, this improvement is the equivalent of lifting over 400 million people out of absolute poverty.

The twenty years that have past since the tanks rumbled into Tian'anmen Square have seen dramatic changes within China and in its relations with key western governments. It has become too risky for the west to publicly cajole and condemn China for traducing the civil and political rights of its citizens. And it has become too costly for China to act as though it was morally indifferent to the rights of its citizens. By signing human rights covenants and including rights-talk in its rhetoric, China has found itself entrapped by the moral universalism it had previously shunned.

Such a stalemate is no cause for complacency. We now know that the decision in 1989 to send in the tanks was as much about a power struggle in the Communist Party as it was a collective decision to put down the violent uprising. Who knows how long the Party can hold together an economic system based on capitalism and a political system anchored in authoritarianism.

As for the Square itself, the giant Monument to the People's Heroes includes an inscription by Chairman Mao that captures the courage of Tank Man – the student who brought the column of Liberation Army tanks to a halt - and the millions of other protestors: 'The People's Heroes are Immortal'.

*Tim Dunne is Professor of International Relations at the University of Exeter. This is an edited version of a guest lecture delivered at the Danish Institute of International Studies, 29 May 2009.*