

A hand held out to Beijing: US policy after Tiananmen Square

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Censored US State Department documents from 1985-1989, obtained under Freedom of Information legislation and now published on the Internet, provide a damning indictment of the conduct of the Republican administration of President George Bush in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

The documents prove that the US government was not concerned with the suppression of the Chinese working class, but the possibility that it may cause disruptions to the political, military and economic relations developed with the Beijing regime since 1971.

In the days immediately following the military assault on the capital, with virtually every urban centre of China convulsed with protests and demonstrations, US officials were preoccupied with trying to assess whether Deng Xiaoping would get away with the military crackdown or whether it had aggravated the social and political tensions in China to the point of civil war.

Cables and summaries on June 6 itself are dominated by reports, later to be downplayed, that fighting was breaking out between the 27th Army deployed by Deng Xiaoping into Beijing and other military units sympathetic to the students and workers. A summary prepared for the US Secretary of State refers to the Chinese government and military heads as feeling like “they are fighting for their lives” and surrounding their residences with armoured vehicles and troops.

From June 9, following the first public appearance and a speech by Deng Xiaoping, the US officials became convinced that the regime would survive and Washington responded accordingly.

On June 30, Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and national security advisor Brent Scowcroft made a secret visit to Beijing for discussions with Deng Xiaoping. The day before, the State

Department prepared a document entitled “Themes”, to provide the Chinese government with an outline of the US attitude toward what it described only as “the recent developments”.

It makes little mention, and no condemnation, of the murder of thousands of Chinese workers and students. The document openly states that “how the GPRC (Government of the Peoples Republic of China) decides to deal with those of its citizens involved in recent events in China, is, of course, an internal affair” and refers to the personal friendship that president Bush had with “so many of China's leaders”.

It details the mutual foreign policy interests shared by the US and China, such as blocking Soviet influence in North Korea and Asia generally, assisting China in dealing with what are described as “Vietnamese threats to China's interests” and facilitating better relations with Japan.

In reference to the limited diplomatic sanctions imposed by the US following the massacre, it states that president Bush “wants to manage the short-term events in a way that will ensure a healthy relationship over time”. It warns China, however, of the pressure on the president by both public opinion and elements in the US Congress, and the “demands for legislation to end many aspects of our economic, military and political relationship”.

It assures Beijing that president Bush will “resist these pressures” and concludes by stating that the “degree to which the President is able to maintain his current prudent course will depend, in large measure, on how events develop over the coming weeks in the PRC. Further arrests and executions will inevitably lead to greater demands in the US to respond. Efforts at national reconciliation, on the other hand, will find a cooperative US response.”

The cooperative US response was forthcoming regardless of the fact that arrests and executions did not halt in the slightest. By 1990 investment was entering China at an unprecedented rate to exploit a subdued working class, facilitated by the open US market.

This is the actual historical record that should be considered whenever official concerns are expressed in Washington regarding human rights in China.



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