



Tiananmen at 35: The Ongoing Struggle for Human Rights and Democracy in China
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U.S. Representative Christopher Smith (R-NJ)
Chair, Congressional-Executive Commission on China

Thirty-five years ago today the world watched as millions of Chinese gathered to peacefully demand political reform and democratic openness. The hopes and dreams of those heady days ended with needless violence--tears, bloodshed, arrest, and exile. Mothers lost sons, fathers lost daughters, and China lost an idealistic generation to the tanks that rolled down Tiananmen Square on June 4th, 1989.

On this solemn occasion, we reflect on the bravery and sacrifice of those who stood for democracy and freedom on that fateful day.

We grieve with those who still don't know what happened to their lost loved ones.

And we demand that the Chinese Communist government make a full, public accounting of those killed or missing and end its Orwellian efforts to censor what is a dark chapter of Chinese history.

It is also important to reflect on the events that led up to that fateful day in 1989 and consider why they still matter for the Cold War competition that now shapes U.S.-China relations.

The students who initially gathering in the center of Beijing in April 1989 did so to mourn the death of Communist Party leader Hu Yaobang—someone they viewed as a political reformer.

In the days to follow, thousands would gather in Tiananmen Square and in over 400 other cities, their numbers grew as the days passed until more than a million people—including journalists, workers, government employees and police—joined the Tiananmen students in demanding a future built on justice, freedom, and dignity.

During the evening of June 3rd and into June 4th, 1989, the Chinese Communist Party leadership unleashed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) upon the protestors. The PLA used brute and lethal force against peaceful protest. Guns and tanks crushed innocent civilians, young and old alike.

The precise number of casualties is unknown. There has been no public accounting of the events of that week and no justice for the victims. Rather, those seeking to commemorate the event or seek information about those killed, like the Tiananmen Mothers, are harassed, detained, and arrested.

One of the most iconic images from the Tiananmen Massacre is that of the “Tank Man”—the solitary figure, with shopping bags in hand, who stood in front of the advancing line of tanks.

That act of brave defiance inspired the world and should remind us that Tiananmen is not simply a past event to study and ponder, but a present reminder that when the Chinese people are free to assemble and to speak, they demand liberty and political reform.

What happened on Tiananmen Square in 1989 should also remind us that the principles of freedom and democracy represent a fundamental human yearning for dignity and human rights that is not limited to any culture or country. They are universal aspirations that neither tanks nor torture can ever destroy.”

Sadly, as we look at the China of today, the prospects for greater civil and political rights seems as remote as the day after the tanks rolled through Tiananmen Square.

An increasingly aggressive Chinese Communist government is more repressive in domestic politics, more mercantilist in trade and economic policy, increasingly dismissive of international norms, and more assertive in exporting the authoritarian model globally.

While repression looks much different today than it did 35 years ago, the goal remains the same: to preserve the Communist Party's monopoly on political power through any means possible--state-sponsored indoctrination, a pervasive surveillance state, arbitrary detention, torture, and transnational repression.

The U.S. and all freedom-loving people cannot be neutral when the Chinese Communist Party tramples human rights with impunity or while genocide and crimes against humanity are being committed as we speak.

A choice has to be made, you either stand with the 'Tank Man' or you stand with the tank. There is no middle ground.

That choice is even starker now than it was 35 years ago. The U.S. and its allies face a systemic challenge from the Chinese Communist Party and its allies in Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

It is a challenge we cannot avoid and one where promotion of human rights and freedom must be recognized as a strategic advantage against the dark forces of authoritarianism.

The United States must do a better job leading the free world's democracies in shining a light on the atrocities being committed by the Chinese Communist Party and holding those responsible accountable—whether through more robust use of existing sanctions authorities or better leveraging American influence at the United Nations.

We must take all steps to stop the Communist Chinese Party's efforts to export their authoritarian model around the world.

We must find more efficient ways to stop American companies from subsidizing Communist tyranny and forced labor.

We must better protect Chinese students and the Chinese diaspora from intimidation and even violence while they live in the United States.

And, we must treat the “Great Firewall” of China like the 21st century Berlin Wall—tearing it down must be a critical U.S. priority that will allow the dissemination of news and information within China and allow the Chinese people to communicate without fear.

At the same time, we must resolutely stand with those in China and Hong Kong who are imprisoned, censored, and disappeared.

The Christian pastor, the Tibetan Buddhist monk, the Uyghur Muslim, the labor organizer, the human rights lawyer, the Hong Kong democracy activist and countless others living under the repressive policies of the Chinese Communist Party.

They are the ones who will ultimately bring political change in China.

We must communicate to them and the Chinese people directly that their struggle and pain has not and will not be forgotten.

And that we believe that the Chinese Communist Party will eventually be consigned to the ash-heap of history.

To do anything less dishonors the spirit of Tiananmen and those who continue to stand so bravely and resolutely for freedom.