

Decay, Conflict Resolution, and Institutions at Tiananmen Square

by
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INTRODUCTION

What factors facilitate or undermine peaceful resolution of conflicts? Scholars have for centuries offered chronicles and explanations of individual conflicts, but a comprehensive, integrated theory of why some conflicts are resolved peacefully while others break out in violence remains elusive.¹ Samuel Huntington pointed in the direction of a partial theory when he suggested that “political decay” results when social mobilization increases faster than political institutions, particularly political parties and party systems.² Political institutions provide the procedural and temporal space in which (presumably) rational political actors can discover their shared interests in peaceful conflict resolution and establish enduring trust and alliances to reach these goals. Institutions help reconcile the gap between individual and collective interests.³

This article offers a concrete example of this institutional approach by examining China’s Tiananmen Square tragedy in 1989.⁴ This event received unique global publicity but in fact was not unusual. There have been dozens of similar instances of protest and repression in recent decades, including those in Thailand (1992), Madagascar and Mali (1991), Algeria and Burma (1988), Philippines (1986), Tunisia and Morocco (1984), and Korea (1980). A case study of this event in China can contribute to the building of theory with broad utility.

The Tiananmen explosion had its roots in the rapid social mobilization of the 1980s as China’s leaders undertook significant economic, social, and cultural reforms and increased China’s international, cultural and economic linkages. Students were exposed to Western values and demanded personal freedoms and democracy. Market reforms brought inflation, unemployment, wealth, poverty, and new opportunities for corruption. A volatile mixture of fear, jealousy, and frustrations resulted. Within the communist elite, factions sharpened as China faced new policy options and an impending generational change in leadership. Some leaders wanted to reform the communist system and others took advantage of the situation to carve up the economy into gigantic family fiefs.⁵ Some leaders disagreed with these changes and wanted to revive classic Stalinist forms. The existing communist institutions of political and economic control seemed inadequate and anachronistic in the face of all these changes. When massive demonstrations broke out, many Chinese participants and foreign observers thought that violence would be so costly to both sides that some peaceful resolution would be found. However, the rigid, autocratic political institutions of Chinese communism were unable to adapt to these new challenges. Successful negotiations were not possible between

the divided and frightened elite and the semi-chaotic demonstrators. Ultimately the elite could agree only on violent repression to re-assert its power.

ORIGINS, ESCALATION, AND RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT

Before looking at the Chinese case, it is appropriate to review theoretical perspectives concerning the origin of political conflict and the factors which influence peaceful or violent outcomes. Political conflicts are inherent in all differentiated and dynamic (that is to say in all) societies. People and groups have different interests and values. When they try to change (or stabilize) the distribution of political, economic, and social values to their own advantage, conflict is likely. Modernization changes the distribution of social resources and the notions of fairness, leading to constantly renewed tensions. Economic development may offer new wealth to ameliorate conflicts but it also brings further differentiation and tensions. Political development often brings an expansion of state power; different people, groups, and regions often are drawn into conflict to utilize state power for their own benefit and to protect themselves from others using state power in a manner contrary to their interests.⁶ Changes at the international level affect the resources and values of various domestic groups.⁷

Once an atmosphere of conflict exists, the initiation of violence is very simple. The process may start accidentally by a minor random incident, such as a cow trampling a neighboring village's crops, a thoughtless act of vandalism, or an overly energetic police response to a minor problem. Spectators can join an incipient conflict, enlarging it.⁸ Alternatively, violence may be deliberate. One party to a dispute may gauge that the benefits of threatening or actually using violence exceed the costs. A side may try to bully the other side into retreating in the face of its dominant power and willingness to attack. As children playing "chicken" and secretaries of state practising "brinkmanship," a side may commit itself to violence, hoping the other side will be sensible enough to back down.⁹

Whether violence started by accident or choice, it can escalate easily. Conflict often undermines moderate leaders and strengthens contentious leaders, leading to a mutually reinforcing process of further escalation. Tensions are further sharpened as parties to a dispute make more commitments to justify investments already made to the struggle. They all think that one more threat or one more attack will cause their opponents to collapse.¹⁰ Through such strategies and iterative processes, minor incidents can generate extravagant investments and become more difficult to resolve peacefully.

Given such tendencies towards violence, how is peaceful cooperation possible? Parties to a dispute normally have many objectives, some of which are at least partially compatible. Thomas Hobbes sensed this when he argued that people would accept the power of the leviathan to avoid the horrors of a state of nature. One classic model of conflict that highlights the shared interests in cooperation is the "prisoner's dilemma," in which two prisoners are offered leniency if they confess and give evidence against each other but are threatened with

severe punishment if they refuse to cooperate with the police. They can minimize their joint punishment if they can agree to remain silent. Another model, the tragedy of the commons, shows how cooperation is needed to provide long-term benefits for all.¹¹

The key question, then, is under what circumstances the mutual benefits of a peaceful solution can be reached. Sometimes after a protracted period of struggle, two sides may recognize they are "relatively equal in power" and they may fall into a stalemate, after which inaction and delay, yielding, withdrawing, and problem-solving provides various possible paths for de-escalation and peaceful resolution. An agreement generally requires an opportunity to interact and an environment of mutual trust arising from previous interactions so that promises about future behavior are meaningful.

However, several factors can lead away from peace. If one party to a dispute thinks it has enough power to force the other side to yield but the other side feels it has sufficient power to establish a stalemate, a violent showdown is likely. Such a situation is not uncommon because political actors often overestimate their ability to control others and underestimate the costs of the inability to do so.¹² In an era of rapid change, when the actual power of the various groups is changing and when political actors are eager to change (or maintain) the balance of power, hope and fantasy can lead to misperception, miscalculation, and violence.¹³

A situation is particularly precarious if one or both sides see a conflict as affecting the relative power of the sides for future conflicts. A powerful side may use excessive force to weaken an opponent in the future; conversely, an opposition movement may judge that expanded conflict will weaken the long-term viability of a regime. When parties to a dispute are more interested in changing the relative distribution of power than in the absolute benefits and costs of a conflict, cooperation is more difficult.¹⁴ A closely related, tragic situation occurs when one side has a martyr complex and believes that its demise will weaken the legitimacy of the victors and will inspire others to enter the struggle in the future. In this logic, the more horrible the loss, the greater the victory.

Potentially avoidable violence can also break out when a party to a dispute is involved in several conflicts simultaneously and a sensible policy in one conflict brings an unfortunate outcome in another. For example, wise domestic policy can result in apparently foolish foreign policies or vice versa.¹⁵

Even when peaceful conflict resolution is mutually beneficial and therefore possible in principle, it is frequently elusive. Third party mediation sometimes plays a critical role in facilitating discussions, improving perceptions, and helping two sides to reach a mutually beneficial compromise. Experts in conflict resolution observe, "In general, one cannot expect the participants to give a full and fair picture of the situation, for they are more likely to emphasize their own concerns and views. Thus a third party is necessary."¹⁶

This review of theory of conflict resolution has emphasized a "two actor" model which presumes two unitary, rational actors. Such a model is both simple and

illuminating but also obscures a very important dimension of conflict, namely the fact that each “actor” is a coalition or amalgamation of people, interests, and social forces. In conflict situations, centrifugal forces within the coalitions can both undermine the ability of each coalition to act in a unitary, rational manner and can also create opportunities for coalitions to change and adopt new negotiating positions to reach some agreement.

If one of the actors is a crowd, the dynamics of crowd behavior must be considered. Generally speaking, most people will avoid political demonstrations because the personal risk is too great compared to the potential benefits.¹⁷ However, if a regime fails to mobilize coercive forces (because of elite conflict or indecision) and people feel it is relatively safe to come out on the streets, crowds can grow rapidly and reach a point where they present a profound challenge to a regime. A leader may have to choose between surrender, flight, or bloody suppression.

Huntington’s hypothesis is that a critical element in the outcome of conflict is the nature of political institutions. The challenge of identifying the areas of shared interests; of bargaining creatively; of establishing trust to make and keep agreements; of forming, maintaining, and/or changing coalitions that are parties to negotiations — these are precisely the challenges of establishing political institutions to which Huntington referred. However, establishing institutions is itself a highly political process. Political actors fight to influence the structure and rules of emergent institutions to their own benefit.

China in the spring of 1989 illustrates the enormous difficulty of developing institutions that can prevent a tragic escalation to violence. Even though many participants and observers thought a peaceful settlement was possible, political institutions were unable to bridge the clash of interests between the demonstrators and the state; nor could they facilitate a transformation of the coalitions into some new political environment.

CLASH OF INTERESTS BETWEEN TWO ACTORS

At its most simplistic level, the Tiananmen Square crisis was a two-actor conflict, a challenge by student demonstrators directed at the communist elite. The initial demands of student leaders were simply to participate in the funeral of Hu Yaobang, the former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, who died on 15 April 1989. However, this trivial request was packaged with a wide range of political, procedural, and symbolic demands that China’s communist leaders refused to accept. Students wanted to organize student associations that were independent from the communist party or the government. (This demand had been raised during student demonstrations in December 1986.¹⁸) Student leaders also wanted recognition of status equal to members of the standing committee of the political bureau of the Chinese Communist Party. Indeed they hinted that they had a higher degree of legitimacy than communist leaders because they had been elected.¹⁹ China’s communist leaders could not imagine students as their equals and could not tolerate a student organization autonomous from the Communist Party’s

leadership because factory workers would demand the same right. Such a prospect undoubtedly reminded them of how an autonomous organization of factory workers in Poland eventually rose to challenge the communist system. Students presented a wide range of demands for broad political and educational reform, and for far reaching controls against corruption. Finally, students demanded that the communist leadership retract its editorial of 26 April that had characterized student demonstrations as chaos, sabotage, and conspiracy. The communist leaders refused to admit error or to legitimate student protest activities. Facing this multifaceted barrage of demands, the communist leadership could not move quickly to defuse the situation. Tensions escalated instead.

Neither side felt that the time was ripe for negotiating these difficult issues. With demonstrations growing to vast proportions over a few weeks,²⁰ student leaders wanted to maintain the momentum of the demonstrations and expand them further before negotiating. They moved boldly with a hunger strike on 13 May. Given students' negligible nutritional reserves, this threatened martyrdom. Two days later rumors spread that eleven students threatened self-immolation.²¹ The threat of student death hung over the crisis, adding tension and urgency. Public support for students swelled.

Party and government officials were also wary of negotiations. They supposed that slow paced negotiations with the demonstrators would legitimate opposition and enable the protest movement to increase its relative power. They wanted to move quickly to break the momentum of the protest movement before it created broader social and economic dislocation and before it could be converted into a disciplined, effective organization. They especially wanted to clear Tiananmen Square before the scheduled visit of Mikhail Gorbachev on 15-18 May which would symbolize a new relationship with the Soviet Union and fill China's capital with the international press. During these weeks, the leadership instinctively fell back on its traditional techniques: cooptation and political repression. As demonstrations intensified, the leadership began preparations for their harsher methods: police and "goon squads" (workers armed with sticks and pipes). The leadership also considered martial law, a new tactic of political control utilized just two months earlier in Lhasa Tibet to suppress nationalistic riots and demonstrations.

The senior communist leadership treated Gorbachev's visit to China as a deadline. After over a million people demonstrated peacefully in Tiananmen Square and on the adjacent Avenue of Perpetual Peace in full view of international journalists, a majority vote of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau ordered martial law. Military forces began to converge on Beijing. This created a new time factor in the situation. Troops could not be kept assembled indefinitely. If they were not used, they had to be demobilized in a manner than would imply the original mobilization was a hollow threat. If discipline in troops faltered, the power base of the ruling elite could erode. Moreover, once troops were brought in, any incident created by anger or misunderstanding by students, hoodlums, undisciplined troops, or provocateurs on either side could ignite a conflagration. In short, the

commitment of troops added a new and urgent but unspecified deadline to the circumstances.

Demonstrators, however, ignored the new threats and instead commenced a remarkable campaign of civil disobedience to immobilize military forces brought to Beijing. Grandmothers sat down in front of military trucks, bus drivers parked their buses to create barricades, and workers found bricks, sewer pipes, and concrete to block streets. Citizens sabotaged military vehicles by deflating tires, cutting wires, and draining fuel tanks. These actions began to erode military discipline and unity. Rumors spread of a general strike.²² Demonstrations erupted in cities throughout the country.

These events further intensified the pressure of time. The political bureau held an enlarged meeting on 22-24 May to consolidate support for the hard-line approach.²³ Yang Shangkun, President of China and Executive Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, warned that Beijing was "out of control" and that communist rule was on the verge of collapse.²⁴ At the same time, student demonstrators, further emboldened by popular support and the apparent split in the military, were undeterred by threats. They continued efforts to mobilize more support. They erected the Goddess of Democracy statue, established links with the Autonomous Workers Union, and hinted at extremist actions such as blocking railroad stations.²⁵ Four intellectuals started a new hunger strike on 2 June to keep up the momentum.²⁶

The students were no longer the hard-liners' main problem. The entire population of Beijing was seemingly united in effective resistance against the hard-liners' refusal to negotiate with students, and broad sectors of party and government were in open defiance. Outside the capital, demonstrations had occurred in more than 80 cities.²⁷

There were wild and conflicting rumors: some military leaders were planning a mutiny to force Li Peng to resign.²⁸ Deng was hospitalized with prostate cancer and perhaps dead; power was placed in the hands of President Yang Shangkun to handle the student unrest.²⁹

Under these conditions, the time was still not ripe for either side to bargain. Both sides thought they would be in a stronger relative position in the future. Demonstrators thought they could expand further their strength. Communist leaders urgently had to reestablish control over Beijing, reverse the dissipation of governmental authority throughout the country, and reestablish unity in the elite and military before they could "negotiate."

Certain cultural values also hampered a peaceful agreement.³⁰ Chinese culture fully understands negotiations and the value of "saving face" in reaching agreements. At the same time, Chinese political culture also recognizes that political violence plays an important role in defining the end of political struggle and the beginning of enforced stability.³¹ From this perspective, the Tiananmen mas-

sacre was analogous to the repression of Chinese reformers at the turn of the century and the Shanghai massacre of communist activists in 1927 by Chiang Kai-shek.

Another dimension of the conflict in spring 1989 was that it took the form of a family argument that was not amenable to normal political negotiations. The political leaders were struggling to maintain patriarchal power and treated the demonstrators as disobedient children. In discussions with his elderly friends, Deng referred to them as "little babies," and Li Peng said in a meeting with students, "We look at you as if you were our own children."³² This paternalism inflamed students who wanted to be treated as adults. "We are not only juniors [sons and younger brothers] but also citizens. The government must be the government of citizens, not the government of children. When it is conducting a dialogue with students, it must not take a patriarchal attitude."³³ Psychological tensions deeply rooted in family relationships were writ large on the national political scene. Under these conditions, government attempts at "dialogue" were perceived by students as paternal orders to cease demonstrations without a political quid pro quo. Both sides used the dialogues for political and emotional posturing. Students were intent on "dividing the household" and setting up their own households.

Only a very vigorous, skilled intervention by a third party mediator might have headed off a violent confrontation. China had no such party because the communists had been so successful in eliminating independent domestic organizations. Nor was any foreign or international intermediary organization able to help. China's fears of foreign involvement in domestic affairs were too great to allow this.

The most successful third party efforts at mediation were done by the Chinese Red Cross and medical personnel, but their accomplishments were modest. When the hunger strike began on 13 May the Beijing Branch of the Chinese Red Cross began work to assure the medical safety of the students. Student leaders were wary, but after three days of discussion they signed an agreement allowing the Beijing Branch to conduct rescue work and to examine and treat weak students. As the hunger strike proceeded, the Red Cross took 3,504 students to the hospital for treatment.³⁴ In the final denouement in the pre-dawn hours of 4 June two doctors from the Chinese Red Cross helped negotiate the peaceful withdrawal of suicide-ready students from massacre-ready troops.³⁵

Analyzing the conflict as a two actor model underscores the inherent distance of positions between the elite and the demonstrators and the difficulty in reaching resolution. There were no political institutions that bridged the gap between communist leaders and demonstrators. Ad-hoc efforts to arrange meetings and consultations inflamed the situation and could not solve it.

DIVISIONS IN THE ELITE

This summary of events raises certain questions. Why were the political coalitions that constituted the two sides unable to move towards each other? Why

did hard-liners dominate on both sides and prevent more flexible people from finding a settlement? To some extent this dynamic is common during the escalation of conflict. In China the lack of political institutions both in the elite and among the demonstrators further inhibited such a development.

A critical aspect of the crisis was the fact that China's leadership was deeply factionalized by an internal power struggle. To a large extent, the violent repression of the demonstrators was an outgrowth of the intra-party struggle between reform-minded leader Zhao Ziyang, who sought support from extra-party social forces, and party conservatives, who feared that communist rule was being destabilized.

China's elite could be considered to have three major groupings, but each grouping to some extent reflected alliances of subgroups. A reform faction had urged deep structural changes in China's highly centralized political economy. Some reformers stressed market reforms, but others wanted more powers shifted to provincial and local officials. They argued that some political reforms were necessary to enable market reforms to work, to improve governmental efficiency, and to strengthen political legitimacy. The conservative faction resisted such reforms; some stressed maintaining the highly centralized command economy while others emphasized cultural issues. Centrists wanted gradual economic reforms but felt that authoritarian political controls were necessary to stabilize the political and social order.

Struggle between reformers and conservatives in the elite sharpened in the late 1980s along policy and personnel issues. In agriculture and industry, reformers experimented with market mechanisms, but conservatives resisted.³⁶ This debate intertwined with succession politics. In the early 1980s, paramount leader Deng Xiaoping installed as apparent successors Hu Yaobang as General Secretary of the party and Zhao Ziyang as Premier of the government. Both supported vigorous reform. Some elderly conservatives grew more restive and forced Hu to resign in January 1987 after nationwide student demonstrations.³⁷ Li Peng became the Premier and represented conservative interests in both policy debate and succession politics.

Zhao Ziyang and the reformers again got control of the party in fall 1987 and began to implement deeper economic reforms; side effects included inflation, fear of unemployment and instability, and jealousies about new private wealth and corruption. Political reforms started to separate the party from the government and to professionalize the civil service in ways that undermined party power.³⁸ The confluence of economic and political reforms was very destabilizing. Student demonstrations broke out in Beijing in summer 1988 and Zhao reportedly proposed that a special military unit be established directly under his office to maintain domestic order.³⁹ The script for the 1989 Tiananmen Square tragedy was written a year earlier.

Reacting to the disorder of the summer of 1988, conservatives took the offensive on both policy and personnel matters, slowed down economic reforms, stopped political reforms,⁴⁰ and tried to reduce the political power of the reformers.⁴¹

When students resumed demonstrations in spring 1989, both conservatives and reformers tried to take advantage of the situation. On 24 April Li Ximing, conservative secretary of the Beijing party committee, put together a report citing (or fabricating) the most radical, anti-party student posters and arguing that China faced an anti-socialist conspiracy. The political bureau met and endorsed the report while Zhao Ziyang was absent visiting North Korea. The next day Deng accepted this interpretation and secretly gave instructions for a major editorial in *People's Daily* on 26 April to label student demonstrations as "turmoil," outside the range of negotiable behavior. Illegal demonstrations and parades as well as other student political activities were forbidden. Deng ordered troops closer to Beijing and decided to use military force against demonstrators after Gorbachev's scheduled visit in May.

Despite Deng's decisions, the leadership remained divided. When students threatened to demonstrate on 27 April, Deng's long-time friend Yan Mingfu, head of the United Front Department, urged restraint. A compromise was worked out at the highest level that troops would be present but would not use force.⁴² This ambiguous response sent signals of a deeply divided elite; it gave students the impression that they had a green (or at least yellow) light to continue demonstrating and that demonstrations might strengthen the reform faction in the leadership.

Polarization among the top leaders sharpened and became more public as demonstrations continued. Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang took a conciliatory approach to students in his speech on 4 May calling for a solution "according to the rule of democracy and law and in an atmosphere of reason and order."⁴³ The next day Li Peng said Zhao's speech was a personal opinion, not the official party position. For the next week, Zhao and Li projected different perspectives. Finally, on 17 May Zhao told Gorbachev that Deng was still China's paramount leader, implying openly that China's leadership was divided and that China's crisis could not be solved until Deng stepped down. These political divisions were mirrored in the army. Some officers announced that they would refuse to suppress students, that they supported Zhao, and that they endorsed reforms in the military.⁴⁴ Incipient divisions in the military certainly heightened fears of instability. The Standing Committee of the Party's Political Bureau met the next day and voted three to two for a hard line. Zhao was ousted. He visited students in the square, tears in his eyes, implicitly acknowledging in public that he had lost the inner party struggle and then disappeared from view.

The overturn of the party's general secretary sparked more high level intra-party conflict. At a critical meeting of the enlarged political bureau on 22-24 May Zhao's supporters made a strong bid for power. Conservatives charged that the conciliatory approach of reformers was in fact spurring students to demonstrate more vigorously. Conservatives implied that factionalism and reaching outside the party to society were violations of party discipline.⁴⁵ Fearing that continued expansion of demonstrations would undermine party rule, a majority of party leaders agreed with Deng and conservatives and endorsed military action to clear the streets of demonstrators.

In planning the military operation, great care was taken to avoid a lapse of military discipline or a battle between troops supporting different factions. The Beijing troops, sympathetic to demonstrations by the Beijing residents, were pulled back and the Minister of Defense (who historically was close to these troops) was put under house arrest. Troops from the provinces, under the command of the half-brother of President Yang Shang-kun, were ordered to evict the demonstrators. Rumors circulated of tense standoffs and armed incidents between troops, but ultimately party leadership and military discipline were maintained. The conservative group of the party consolidated control over both the military and the party.

For party leaders the intra-party struggle became linked to the demonstrators in a complex “nested game.” Party reformers sought allies with demonstrators while conservatives used demonstrations to justify their bid for expanded power. China’s weak institutions were not able to convert this complex political situation with multiple conflicts and incipient alliances into a new political status quo.

DISORGANIZED OPPOSITION

Just as the intra-party struggle made it difficult for the elite to negotiate as a unitary rational actor, so too the lack of organization among the demonstrators contributed to the failure to find a peaceful solution. The demonstrators were comprised of a movement of four amorphous groups — students, reform intellectuals, workers, and general citizens. These groups could not form a unified, disciplined organization that could act in a coherent fashion. This was inevitable, given the fact that under China’s communist dictatorship independent political organizing had been virtually illegal for decades.

Students

Chinese students have a long history of demonstrating for political change. Seventy years earlier student demonstrations on 4 May 1919 triggered China’s revolutionary process. In recent years, as they absorbed Western ideas of democracy and observed vigorous student demonstrations in other countries, they maintained their traditional political activism. They demonstrated in fall 1985 against Japanese influence. A nationwide wave of demonstrations for democracy and human rights swept China in December 1986.⁴⁶ Beijing students also marched and sat-in at Tiananmen Square during April and June 1988, triggering a conservative response. Demonstrating had become part of student culture, so as conservative power waxed in early 1989, and as economic problems and corruption continued, students instinctively began to meet, organize, and wait for the spark that would justify demonstrations. The seventieth anniversary of the 4 May movement, was the original target date, but the death of Hu Yaobang on 15 April provided an unexpected earlier catalyst. They demanded a role in his funeral and dialogue with state and party leaders about democratic reforms.

Students rapidly organized the logistics for the demonstrations and provided marshals to ensure non-violent behavior.⁴⁷ They got thousands of students to come

from other cities to join the Beijing events. These students stayed a few days and nights in Tiananmen Square and took news and ideas of student organization back home, where local demonstrations followed. Telephone and fax facilitated national and international coordination. When sanitary conditions deteriorated in the square, supporters in Hong Kong sent tents and Chinese students in the United States airlifted plastic garbage bags. The Beijing student organization developed quickly the capability to manage the logistical problems of huge demonstrations continuing for weeks.

The students were less successful in developing the capacity to reach clear political decisions, negotiate effectively, and discipline participants. As the Tiananmen Square crisis evolved, student organizations proliferated. They included the "Dialogue Committee," the "Hunger Strike Committee," and the "Committee to Defend Tiananmen Square." Each committee had its own leaders and procedural rules, some of which were so democratic that decisions could be vetoed easily by a few dissenters. No student leader could control events. When student leaders tried to lower tensions, they were accused of yielding to government pressure.⁴⁸ Leaders of student groups changed as the process unfolded. On 15 May some students demonstrating in the Tiananmen Square agreed to move to the eastern side of the square so that ceremonies for Gorbachev could take place without incident. However, a small group of students refused to move, and other students drifted back.⁴⁹ Even when the Beijing students responded to the suggestions of their leaders, out-of-town demonstrators kept coming and stayed until they were fatigued and out of money. As they left, more arrived.

In a critical meeting with Li Peng and other top officials on 18 May these factors weighed heavily. Student leader Wu'er Kaixi pointed out that hunger strikers had adopted the principle of unanimous decision-making. "If one student refuses to leave and continues the hunger strike, it will be extremely difficult for us to guarantee that the others will go." Yan Mingfu reacted, "...the three independent student organizations have less and less ability to control the situation..."⁵⁰

The leadership disarray was symbolized by the final departure of about 3,000 students from the southern part of the Tiananmen Square early on 4 June after extensive bloodshed on the Avenue of Heavenly Peace and the northern side of the square. Not until speeches, debates, and voting took place did the group evacuate safely.⁵¹

Reform Intellectuals

Some intellectuals with important party or official academic positions mobilized against conservative party leaders in early 1989 and a few eventually became closely associated with the opposition movement.⁵² The public involvement of intellectuals started when the charismatic astrophysicist Fang Lizhi sent a public letter to Deng Xiaoping on 6 January 1989, appealing for the release of political prisoners to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the communist revolution and the seventieth anniversary of the 4 May 1919 movement. During the spring

dozens of Chinese intellectuals petitioned the National People's Congress along the same lines. Over 500 Chinese living in the United States also joined.⁵³

Links developed between student leaders and reform intellectuals. Just a day after Hu Yaobang's death, a staff member of the State Structural Reform Research Office reportedly contacted Wang Dan, a student leader at Beijing University, to urge student demonstrations. Li Shuxian (Fang Lizhi's wife) reportedly continued such discussions two days later. A petition issued by Yan Jiaqi, former Director of the Institute of Political Science, on 21 April supported student demands concerning Hu's funeral.⁵⁴ Discussions continued and on 4 May a group of intellectuals expressed public support for the student movement in Beijing. A few days after students began their hunger strike, Yan and other intellectuals issued declarations of support.⁵⁵ On 18 May some of these intellectuals offered to hold their own hunger strike in sympathy with the students, or to give students a chance to break their strike. Eventually intellectuals in Beijing and Shanghai formed loose organizations to support students.⁵⁶

Young Workers

Young workers, including employed, self-employed, and unemployed, were another important element in the opposition. In the late 1970s, the previous system of assigned permanent jobs for high school graduates was replaced by a fairly open labor market for young people. In addition, large numbers of rural residents came to the cities to work as construction laborers, peddlers, maids, etc., especially in the late winter, after the Chinese new year festival and before spring planting. By the late 1980s, China's cities had a "floating population" estimated at 50 million. In the major cities of Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou the floating population exceeded a million and constituted 20-33 percent of the population.⁵⁷ These young and migrant workers were not dependent on, and therefore not controlled by, the party-dominated work units and neighborhood committees that regulated the lives of other urban residents. The volatility of this population was revealed the previous year in a riot sparked by a disputed call in a soccer game in Sichuan. Fans rioted for 12 hours, looted, and tried to burn a police station. At least five were sent off to labor camp for "reeducation."⁵⁸ Similarly, there had been a riot in Beijing in 1985 following a soccer game with a team from Hong Kong.

As student demonstrations began in spring 1989, a number of young workers joined. Some served as body guards to student leaders and stayed at student dormitories. Non-student organizations proliferated during the demonstrations, such as the "Beijing Citizens Dare-to-Die Corps" and the "Special Picket at Tiananmen Square."⁵⁹ Peddlers gave food and beverages to the students. Motorcyclists, sporting names such as "Flying Tiger Team" or "Iron Riding Guard Team" carried messages and reported troop movements around the city.⁶⁰ In the aftermath of the violence of 4 June many workers and unemployed workers were arrested and some were executed.⁶¹

General Population

The final group in the demonstration included older factory workers with permanent positions, civil servants, and members of the general population of Beijing, including home makers and grandmothers. They were motivated by inflation and corruption. Inflation was a gnawing problem throughout the 1980s as the government printed money for wage increases and construction projects. Standards of living deteriorated for many. When Chinese leaders decided to raise non-staple food prices by 25-50 percent in May 1988 to reduce government budget subsidies, there was widespread suffering and resentment among the urban population. This situation continued into spring 1989.⁶²

The sense of pervasive government corruption made things worse. As market prices rose, officials kept some goods to allocate at low prices to friends and relatives, who could resell goods at huge profits. Rumors were widespread that children of high officials were given jobs with vast opportunities for graft. Some entrepreneurs were also making large profits. Profiteering while many were suffering from inflation created widespread anger. These frustrations inflamed the decades of pent up anger stemming from control and manipulation of life by party autocrats.⁶³ The students responded to these concerns and demanded that officials publish lists of income and bank holdings.

Reform of the industrial structure also sparked serious tension. Restructuring industrial enterprises created fears of unemployment among workers who took job stability for granted. The policy of letting enterprise managers determine work rules, rewards, and punishments often led to sharp conflicts in the workplace as workers tried to protect their established rights. In addition, controversial plans were afoot to convert urban housing from very low rents to higher mortgage payments.

For these reasons, the general population joined demonstrations to some extent on 27 April and to a greater extent on 17-18 May after the student hunger strike had been in effect for a week. After martial law was declared housewives and workers peacefully blocked and immobilized military forces to prevent attacks on students. The Beijing Autonomous Federation of Trade Unions and an Independent Workers Association were created in the final phase of the demonstrations, inspired by Poland's *Solidarity* union movement and by the Chinese students. When three union organizers were arrested, hundreds of students and workers demonstrated.⁶⁴ However, this mass discontent, mobilization, and collective action did not constitute mass organization. In contrast to the situation in Eastern Europe, these Chinese organizations "were more a result of the upheaval than a cause."⁶⁵

WEAK INSTITUTIONS

Faced with this crisis, China's political institutions were unable to provide an effective framework for conflict resolution. The most critical institutional gap was a mechanism for linking popular political participation with state decision-

making. In theory, the National People's Congress provided these links and had the constitutional right to decide the issue of martial law; but party leaders prevented it from meeting during the crisis. Indeed, those who petitioned for a meeting were criticized and the chairman of its standing committee, Wan Li, was informally detained for a few days.

The key decisions throughout the crisis were made at closed meetings by a handful of party leaders under the influence of senior leader Deng Xiaoping. The party's political bureau made the first major decision on 25 April; it issued the 26 April editorial criticizing student demonstrations and began moving troops to Beijing. Deng himself played a major role in this decision that sparked massive demonstrations and escalated the whole situation. The determination that the Gorbachev visit constituted a deadline for termination of demonstrations or use of military force, apparently was made by Deng but was never publicized. The decision to adopt martial law was taken by the five-member standing committee of the political bureau. This decision was explained to an expanded political bureau meeting, involving perhaps a few hundred participants. These meetings were held secretly and their deliberations were not reported publicly.

This style of decision-making was not conducive to effective negotiation between the regime and the demonstrators. It provided no institutionalized methods for interest articulation and aggregation. It gave students no opportunity to share in decision-making and to assume responsibility for implementing agreements. It failed to provide an environment in which each side could gradually modify its position to reach an agreement. It was unable to convert a zero-sum struggle for relative power between party leaders and the demonstrators into a new system with stronger political institutions which could provide absolute gains to both party leaders and students.

Huntington points out that historically, "The principal institutional means for organizing the expansion of political participation are political parties and the party system."⁶⁶ The Chinese communist political system not only failed to provide this; it deliberately prevented it. Dominated by a single political party, it was an elaborate structure set up to rule, to change society, and to prevent effective, institutionalized political participation and an organized opposition. It specifically rejected the notion of a system based on competitive political parties which could peacefully translate social and political consciousness and demands into institutionalized political action. Students, workers, and other citizens had no alternative mechanisms to organize effectively, negotiate rationally, and seek objectives peacefully.

CONCLUSIONS

China's spring of 1989 was a tragic example of failure to resolve a conflict peacefully. The costs to all concerned were very high. Hundreds and thousands were killed and maimed. The "successful" leaders and the state system lost legitimacy by using violence on unarmed, peaceful citizens. The outcome was especially tragic because it seemed avoidable. The demonstrations were triggered

by an effort to honor the memory of the deceased former leader of the Chinese Communist Party. The General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party when the protests began was sympathetic to the students, supported economic and political reforms, and endorsed student complaints against corruption. Soon after the first demonstrations there were informal meetings between student leaders and high officials as well as high level party meetings in an effort to avoid violence. Many Chinese analysts were optimistic that a peaceful resolution was possible. Under such favorable conditions, the inability to reach a peaceful solution underscores the complexity of such situations.

In a broad sense the violence reflected the stress of communist reform and socio-economic change. At a less abstract level of analysis, three factors complicated the search for a peaceful resolution. First, the actual issues concerning the autonomy of students from party control were difficult to resolve and the time was never ripe for serious negotiations. Second, the elite was involved simultaneously in an intra-party struggle and in dealing with the demonstrators. Divided between efforts to co-opt and repress demonstrators, it was unable to send out clear signals about its intent. One faction was more than willing to use violence to consolidate its alliances with military forces and to eradicate its opposition. Finally, the demonstrators were divided and unable to act in a disciplined manner.

It should be noted that these three factors reinforced each other. Demonstrators surged with hopes of influencing the elite power struggle. Conversely, the elite divided to some extent when it saw the mass demonstrations. Citizens kept demonstrating because students adopted sympathetic positions. As more citizens kept demonstrating, students felt it was premature to negotiate. When some military leaders and units sympathized with the students, the sceptre of civil war emerged and conservative leaders panicked.

Chinese political institutions provided no effective environment in which to resolve these issues peacefully. Governmental decisions were made secretly by a handful of people. People had no chance to express their concerns by voting for a competing political party. There was no opportunity for institutionalized bargaining. Violence was used instead. This pattern has characterized Chinese history for the past century. Chinese leaders who tried to reform the old imperial system in 1898 were executed. During the 1920s to the 1940s both the Nationalist and the Communist Parties used violence. After the communists came to power in 1949, violence was used many times, including during the period of land reform (1949-51), the anti-rightist movement (1957), and the cultural revolution (1966-76). Protest demonstrations were suppressed at Tiananmen Square and at Democracy Wall in 1976, 1979, and 1987.

The inability to find a peaceful solution is not unique to China. One scholar concluded on the basis of 434 conflict episodes: "One of the most striking aspects of the findings is the tendency of regimes to employ interventions that exacerbate political conflict rather than regulate it effectively."⁶⁷ Peaceful settlements may be more unusual than the violent ones.

From this point of view the peaceful overthrow of communist governments in Eastern Europe in the months after the Tiananmen events is exceptional. In Eastern Europe the elite was more dependent on external military support (from the Soviet Union) and lacked its own legitimacy; when Soviet support was withdrawn, it dissolved. Second, the Eastern European opposition movements developed broader, more disciplined organizations. They had deeper historical roots and in some countries had support from the Catholic church. An additional factor was that the Chinese crisis came first, so all parties, both in the elite and among the demonstrators, were more aware of the risks and costs of violence.

Many factors affect whether the outcome of a conflict will be peaceful or violent. It is premature to suggest that the identical configuration of factors that led to violence in China is fully applicable to many other violent conflagrations in the Third World. Given the myriad idiosyncratic personal and institutional factors, the range of choices, the path dependency of the process, and the uncertainty of knowledge about all the variables, precise prediction of the outcome of conflict is subject to the same constraints as for other "chaotic" systems. Just as a meteorologist cannot predict that a thunderstorm will strike at a particular time and place but can recognize the preconditions and dynamics of storms and forecast probabilities, political scientists can outline the social and environmental factors that make violence likely. This article argues that violence can be forecast when there are inadequate institutions to manage the stresses of development and to provide a setting for rational, peaceful conflict resolution. From a prescriptive perspective, this suggests that efforts to resolve incipient violent conflict should emphasize the process and institutional environment of conflict resolution as well as the substance.

TABLE 1
THE PROCESS OF MUTUAL ESCALATION

Date	Elite Action	Demonstrator Action
Stage I		
	Mobilization	
Apr 15	Hu Yaobang dies	
Apr 18		Students petition NPC
Apr 22		Hu Yaobang's funeral
Stage II		
	Escalation	
Apr 24-25	Standing comm. meetings Deng plans repression	
Apr 26	Strong Editorial	
Apr 27		Huge demonstrations
Apr 29	Dialogue	
May 4	Zhao speech	Hugh demonstrations
May 5	Li Peng disputes Zhao	
May 13		Hunger strikes begin
May 14	Leaders shout orders	
May 13-15	Dialogues	Large demonstrations
May 17-18	Gorbachev in Beijing	Huge demonstrations
Stage III		
	Martial Law	
May 18	Standing comm. reaffirms Deng	
May 18	Leaders visit hospital Zhao resigns Televised meeting	
May 19	Zhao visits students Standing comm. calls for Martial Law Troops enter Beijing	End hunger strike
May 20	Deng to Wuhan (?)	Mass opposition to troops
May 21-23	Division in elite and military	
May 22-24	Expanding Political Bureau meeting	
May 23-24	Change troops	
May 29		Goddess of Democracy
May 30		New Hunger Strike More workers demonstrate
June 3	Deploy troops	Resist troops
June 4	Massive repression	

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