“Breaking the Bamboo Curtain” or “Appeasing Deng Xiaoping”?

Anglo-American Public Opinion and Diplomacy during the Tiananmen Crackdown of 1989

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Thirty years after the events, this essay aims at reconstructing the Anglo-American perception of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis both in its political-diplomatic component and in public opinion, analysing Western response in the ambit of international relations. To a large extent, this study is based on recently declassified material, but other important sources were periodicals of the time. Anglo-American perceptions and diplomatic positions with respect to the Tiananmen crisis constitute a subject of undoubted interest because they allow us to know, from a unique perspective, a 1989 that is different from the one we commonly think of in the West.

1. Introduction

On June 6th, 1989, the *Daily Mirror* published a front page story that went down in history. Tagged “Tank Man”, it was about an unarmed civilian standing on Changan Avenue facing a row of tanks from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Above the iconic photograph, taken by Jeff Widener the previous day, the tabloid’s headline shouted, “Our Freedom Cannot Die”. At that time virtually all the major international media outlets were broadcasting news about the events taking place in Beijing and other cities of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which resulted in the Tiananmen Square clashes on June 4th.

As is known, the protest began with the funeral of Hu Yaobang in the capital. On April 22nd it went from being a commemoration of a leader considered one of the most ‘open-minded’ of the communist establishment, to being a mass event that resembled a more or less defined political protest. Hu, from the start of the new direction taken by Deng Xiaoping, had supported the economic reforms and had become an icon for those sectors that, from 1986, had been asking for a more incisive change. His resignation as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on January 15th, 1987, as well as that of Deng the following November, had been perceived as a defeat for the reformists, despite Zhao Ziyang, another personality considered to be close to the protesters’ demands, having succeeded him.

Bearing in mind the complex internal Chinese events, rendered difficult to decrypt due to the internal movements of Zhongnanhai (the headquarters of the highest organs of the CCP), this essay aims at being a first step in the reconstruction of the Anglo-American perception of the Tiananmen crisis, both in its political-diplomatic component and in terms of public opinion, analysing US and British response in the context of the international relations of the time. For the most part, this study is based on recently declassified political-diplomatic material, but other important sources were periodicals. This choice derives both from the fact that the media “played the outside agitator role”, and because it helped shape the ideas of Western public opinion according to a whole series of stereotypes that influenced the choices made by Anglo-Saxon politicians.

The Anglo-American perceptions and positions with respect to Tiananmen constitute a topic of undoubted interest, both because of the current political repercussions, and because they allow us to know aspects of a 1989 that is different from the one we commonly think of both in Europe and in the United States.

2. ‘Atlantic diplomacy’ and June 4th, 1989

“The situation in the centre of the city is very confused […]. There has reportedly been indiscriminate gunfire by the troops on the square. We can hear gunfire from the Embassy”. These words, with which the US Ambassador James Lilley informed the State Department about the situation in Tiananmen on June 4th, 1989, were echoed in the media by Jasper Baker of *The* *Guardian*, who went so far as to say that: “no one, not even the Japanese or the Kuomintang or the warlords, had ever done this”.

Western European and US reaction to the news from Beijing was immediate, especially that of London and Washington. British Ambassador to the PRC, Sir Alan Donald, demanded means to protect and evacuate British citizens in the Chinese capital, while Whitehall decided to suspend arms sales and contacts between politicians. The visit of Cai Cheng, Chinese Minister of Justice, scheduled for June 7th, was cancelled, as were those of Lord Nicholas Ridley, British Minister of Agriculture, and the Princes of Wales, scheduled for the following November. Margaret Thatcher, in a public speech that same day, denounced the “indiscriminate shooting of unarmed people”. For the British Prime Minister (PM) the evidence was that “a very great gulf remains between the democratic and the communist societies”. She guaranteed that the UK would “continue to stand by its commitments to secure the future of Hong Kong”.

This was certainly not a casual reference. Since May 21st, an estimated one million people had gathered in Hong Kong to protest against the Chinese Communist Government’s treatment of the Beijing protesters. Under the slogan “Today Beijing, Tomorrow Hong Kong!”, the people of Hong Kong demanded that London denounce the Joint Declaration of December 19th, 1984, which charted the path of transition from British to PRC sovereignty in 1997. Doing so would mean freezing the Hong Kong handover, something that had also been put forward by some politicians in the colony, who had long feared that the transition to the PRC would lead to a loss of democratic freedoms.

On June 5th, the day after the clashes in the PRC, Sir Geoffrey Howe, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, summoned Chinese diplomatic representatives and told them of the British government’s grievances. Speaking before the House of Commons, the UK diplomatic line was clarified:

Consultations about the second draft of the Basic Law for Hong Kong have been suspended. It is also difficult to see how our own contacts with the Chinese Government about the future of Hong Kong can continue in present circumstances.

Important, but not drastic, measures, because, while Labour Party’s Shadow Foreign Secretary Gerald Kaufman called from the opposition benches for a tightening of the measures against Beijing, Howe replied:

Our basic principle is to subscribe to the position as outlined by President Bush, that it is important to maintain diplomatic, commercial and other human contacts, so far as is safe and possible, with the people and Government of China in order to try and retain the opportunity for recreating their previous open disposition.

In fact, on June 5th a phone call took place that focused on the presence of US and British citizens in the PRC. Nevertheless, the PM and President George H. W. Bush agreed on a common line: to avoid a degeneration in relations with Beijing, while Washington guaranteed support in London on the Hong Kong issue. Indeed, beyond the declarations of intent, Anglo-American policies – apparently unanimous – were distant, to the point that Charles David Powell, the PM’s Private Secretary, commented that the President was probably looking for “reassurance that, like him, the Prime Minister did not want to go too far in castigating the Chinese”.

On the other side of the Atlantic the formulation of a precise policy became more difficult. Bush personally expressed himself only a day after the events, announcing a vague “careful action that takes into account both our long-term interests and recognition of the complex internal situation in China”. Speaking of the “process of democratization of communist societies”, of the “forces of democracy” that would “overcome these unfortunate events in Tiananmen square”, President Bush stated that US action had to “react to setbacks in way which stimulates rather than stifles progress toward open and representative systems”. The decision to take was the suspension of the sale of arms, State visits and support for expatriates or those who seeking political asylum, a position that aroused positive reactions from the major US press and politicians. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* supported Bush’s decisions. While prominent figures in the Republican entourage such as former President Richard Nixon and the influential former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called for caution, another game was the one that took place in Congress, where the Democrats had an overwhelming majority. There Bush was caught up in the convergence of personalities like Congressman Steve Solarz, President of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, “on the left”, who suggested “to move much more radically”, and Senator Jesse Helms, of the Foreign Affairs Committee, “on the right”, who urged to recall the Ambassador. Both Chambers supported the President’s measures, even if the Senate distinguished itself by indicating the possibility of a further tightening of the sanctions. In essence, the Republican administration could have found themselves in a cul-de-sac in the event of a further aggravation of the Chinese crisis or of a tightening of the positions of the Western European allies.

Tensions between the various personalities of the US political world had already emerged during the trip Bush had made to Beijing between the 25th and 27th of the previous February. On that occasion, some circles in the US Embassy had tried to ‘force’ the issue of human rights, unilaterally inviting a well-known dissident of the Communist regime, Fang Lizhi, to an official gala. The incident created embarrassment for the counterparts, causing frictions in the US Administration and highlighting the isolation of the President from Congress, which criticized him for having not been firm on human rights.

Bush’s visit to Beijing was, however, successful on the whole. Washington confirmed its strategic axis with the PRC, an indispensable praxis that was informally established in 1968 to find a shore for its relations with Moscow. The President, who had been the director of the US liaison office in Beijing between September 26th, 1974 and December 7th, 1975, and who had worked on Sino-American recognition, was fully aware of the importance of Beijing. It was of central importance, especially in that delicate moment in history when the Cold War seemed to be coming to an end, leaving open the uncertainties of a future US isolation in Europe, fears that Kissinger expressed in an eloquent article titled *Reversing Yalta* in April 1989.

Since 1979 the PRC had slowly become part of the international relations system, resigning its role as ‘bomber’ of the global order, played during the 50s and 60s. In fact, it was the very process of Chinese modernization that required a low international profile, regional stability and adherence to the multilateral structures of the existing global order, in particular the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and possibly the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. In those same years, with a record annual growth rate, the PRC jumped from 28th to 16th place in the ranking of world exporters, positioning itself to become a top-level economic actor.

Nevertheless, from at least 1982 onwards there were signs of a growing distance between Beijing and Washington. In January 1983 the *Beijing Review*, the regime’s unofficial voice to the outside world, had gone as far as to disavow the existence of a Chinese doctrine of equidistance between the US and the USSR. These denials did not fully convince, especially after Mikhail Gorbachev had talked about re-establishing relations with Beijing in 1986 and after Deng’s departure from the scene in 1987, leaving many doubts about the course of Chinese reform.

From this point of view, Bush’s 1989 visit made even greater political sense. In the previous two years the Soviets had gradually reduced their support for Vietnam in the Cambodian war, reduced military pressure along the border with the PRC and withdrawn from Afghanistan. Although the economic imperatives underlying the Sino-American relationship were still solid, those of a strategic nature seemed to be failing. Beijing seemed to become the pivot of the global geopolitical triangle, weakening the US position. It is no coincidence that, at the time of Bush’s trip, the US Ambassador to Beijing, Winston Lord, stated that the main objective of the mission was to obtain insurance “that the emerging Sino-Soviet dialogue will not undercut US interests”, suggesting the President “deepen personal relations with the older and younger generation of China’s leaders during the political succession phase in China” and “highlight bilateral and commercial achievements as concrete manifestation of our strengthening ties”.

3. Tiananmen: toward the crackdown

As anticipated, the demonstrations began on April 18th. Ambassador Lord described them as “among the largest unofficial gatherings at the square since hundreds of thousands of Beijingers flooded Tiananmen to commemorate the death of Zhou Enlai and protest the Gang of Four in April, 1976”, drawing a picture in which “this and past demonstrations suggest that student frustration with leadership political rigidity and with their own low prospects and standard of living runs deep”. Even the *New York Times* shared this interpretation. According to the prestigious newspaper, in fact, it seemed that “more and more Chinese” were saying, not only privately as in the previous months, but also in public, that “it’s past time for Deng to go”.

The demonstrations would turn into a protest; this is what the editorial of the *Renmin Ribao* dated April 26th seemed to say, which saw, behind the event, the guidance of “an extremely small number of people” who exploited the crowd “to create all kinds of rumours”. In the following days there were attempts to correct the course of events by some Communist politicians, but on May 4th the demonstration joined those held for the anniversary of the student movement that in 1919 had protested against the treatment of China at the Paris peace conference. The students went on mass hunger strike, while Zhongnanhai feared negative repercussions given the XXII summit of the Asian Development Bank, which was to be held for the first time in Beijing between May 4th and 6th, and given the imminence of Gorbachev’s visit to the PRC, scheduled for May 15th and 18th.

Some of the most important journalists of the major international media networks had come to Beijing for this gathering, such as Bernard Shaw of CNN, Peter Jennings of ABC, Tom Brokaw of the NBC, and Dan Rather of CBS. Moreover, the Western media tended to fuel the fears of the Chinese establishment. On May 15th, Bill Killer, an envoy of the *New York Times*, wrote that the demonstrations had forced the Communist leadership to move the “welcoming ceremony that had been planned for Tiananmen square”. Two days later he claimed that the students “have quickly spread the word that the Soviet Union is a centre of something vaguely known as political reform”, while Nicholas Kristof spelt out “China’s interest in following the Soviet example in some areas”, especially in the field of human rights. Even the British *The Guardian* echoed this view, writing that Tiananmen square was “part of the same semi-global process of transformation and transition”, which started with perestroika and glasnost and then continued throughout the communist world; it was an old order that was “suddenly crumbl[ing]”.

Meanwhile, newspapers such as the *South China Morning Post* reported the news of a square made up of brave students who did not fear rumours of military manoeuvres, as well as reporting rumours about the PLA authorities’ refusal to move their troops into the city and of a hundred high-profile officers who had sent a letter of criticism regarding the proposed institution of martial law.For the *Telegram & Gazette* what was happening in Tiananmen was the “dynamic of modernity”:

The small middle class created by a decade of market-oriented economic reforms joined the protest […] calling for democratic Government. […] The base of support for the demonstrations has broadened progressively as they have been featured by the State-controlled television and radio networks and newspapers.

Even more drastic was the *Wall Street Journal*, which reported a “Western diplomat in Beijing” on May 23rd coming to the conclusion that “‘at this stage, you would have to bet that Li Peng will not survive the crisis’”.

While the eyes of the media were focused on the square, those of the diplomats were also fixed on Zhongnanhai. On May 20th, the same day that Prime Minister Li Peng declared martial law, Donald sent a telegram in which he reported the impressions of Stuart Schram. Chinese contacts of the eminent sinologist of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London had confided to him that Deng had stated that “two hundred dead could bring 20 years of peace to China”. The Ambassador’s explanation was that “the sacrifice of a number of demonstrators lives now would stabilize the present situation and buy the time needed to complete the reform of China”.

The evaluations of two Situation reports (Sitrep) sent by Lilley the next day were very different, describing as they did a certainly unstable but not deterministically dramatic scenario. The Chinese Government had little control over the media, which as far as possible showed support for the protesters, while there were indications of strong disagreements about martial law within the CCP Central Committee. The Ambassador also denied Zhongnanhai’s decision to intervene by force on the night between the 21st and the 22nd. However, rumours that Li had ordered the PLA “to clear the square, ‘even if 200,000 students were killed’” were not confirmed. On the 22nd, the optimism was obvious, fuelled by Bush’s comments made on *Voice of America* and by the fact that the proposed repression had not actually occurred. Lilley spoke of a “sense of victory” among the demonstrators, who now claimed that “the proverbial ‘mandate’ — political legitimacy — of the current leadership has been lost. It remains to be seen, of course, whether the leadership agrees”.

However, within the narrow span of a week the tensions grew. While some military helicopters dropped a whole series of pro-government flyers onto the square, the clashes in the suburbs of Beijing between some students and peasants and workers, manipulated by the government to show support for Li’s repressive action, merged into a face-off with the communist leadership. Meanwhile, riots took place on June 3rd at the Zhongnanhai premises. The Ambassador pointed out that the not-too-tough attitude of the police forces demonstrated “that the orders not to use the force had still been in effect”; he also mentioned “provocations” in the square, such as the erection of the “Goddess of democracy”, through which the protesters “may hope an overreaction by authorities will breathe new life into their flagging movement”. Given the picture of misunderstandings and possible accidents “the force option [was] real”.

The real problem, however, was political. A memorandum prepared by US Intelligence for the Secretary of State James Baker on June 2nd pointed out that “two weeks after declaring martial law in Beijing, hard-liners remain unable to resolve the leadership crisis and to remove the students from Tiananmen square”.

From the US embassy there was talk of “leadership infighting”, emphasizing the

central role of several octogenarians […]. Having appealed to them, Deng must not give them a voice in choosing the new leadership team, and perhaps more important, a say in future policy direction.

The riots of June 4th marked a turning point in terms of the use of violence but confirmed the impasse of the Chinese leadership. Rumours in the media reinforced this view, speaking, as Jasper Becker and John Gittings of *The Guardian* did, about a “shrouded in mystery” leadership group, or, as Bernard Trainor of the *New York Times*, Michael Browning of *The* *Advertiser* and Jan Wong of the *Globe & Mail* claimed, about the poor control by politicians of the military machine, while the *Gazette* outlined a scenario on the brink of civil war.

In general, the press painted a picture where the blood of the protesters was to be taken as the direct legacy of a politically fragile Deng. In the aforementioned June 5th phone call with Thatcher, Bush spoke of the weakness of the Chinese leader due also to his precarious state of health. On the same day, a report sent to the PM reiterated the same concern; there was no further news about Deng. Two days later, however, Acland reported back to London the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assessment that the rumours circulated by the press of an imminent civil war were just conjecture: Deng was still the strong man and there was no evidence “of an alternative military leadership”.

The Communist leader finally removed any awkward uncertainty by reappearing on television on June 9th to talk about the students being a “very small number of people” who, aiming to build a “Bourgeoise State”, were operating on behalf of the “Counter-Revolution”. Deng’s speech was clearly expedient, but nevertheless contained the diplomatically important statement that “our basic direction, our basic strategy and policy will not change”.

This point in particular closely concerned the Western ‘chancelleries’. Commenting on these words in a letter sent to Robin Butler, the then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Percy Cradock, former British Ambassador to the PRC until 1983 and then close adviser to the PM, concluded that “China’s open door policy of reforms would continue”. From Beijing, however, Donald’s opinion was much less reassuring; according to the Ambassador, based on Deng’s words it seemed that “the slogan ‘Reform and Opening Up’ will remain, but its content […] will be decided by the new leaderships”.

4. Anglo-American diplomacy and the PRC: the search for ‘unilateral collaboration’

On July 30th, 1989, Henry Kissinger wrote an article entitled “China: Push for Reform, Not Rupture”, which was republished by the *Washington Post* with the even more biting title “The Caricature of Deng as a Tyrant is Unfair”. He argued that

China remains too important to US national security to risk the relationship on emotions of the moment. The United States needs China as a possible counterweight to Soviet aspirations in Asia, and […] China needs the United States as a counterweight to perceived ambitions from the Soviets and Japan. […] These realities have not been altered by events around Tiananmen.

In fact, after Tiananmen the various international players did not distance themselves from the realism indicated by the former Secretary of State. Certainly, on June 5th there had been a lot of criticisms from the global community, but concrete actions had been slow to be take shape. In general, the reactions were only at the level of a general complaint, or little more. On June 5th, David Dean, the director of the American Institute in Taiwan, the de facto US Embassy, informed Washington that the Taipei authorities, though in a state of shock, would try to maintain informal contact with Beijing. On June 6th, the FCO received information conveying Soviet dismay, but also the detachment with which Moscow looked at the events in Beijing, considering them “an internal affair of the country”.

On June 11th, Donald sent the FCO two telegrams of the greatest importance, one highlighting the patterns with which many politicians of the time interpreted and represented Tiananmen, the other highlighting the typical British diplomatic pragmatism. In telegram number 1103, the Ambassador inserted the tragic events of June 4th within the dynamics of the Chinese modernization process, the result of the “contradiction between economic radicalism and political conservatism”, which had already emerged in the protests of 1981, 1983, and 1987. At the same time, however, Donald invited London to consider that “it would be mistake to assume that the outcome will be the same as on the earlier occasions”. The reason was “simple”: “China is more than ever linked to the world economy”, and a return to the past would be impossible. Since the Chinese would have to wait at least a generation to resume the path of reforms, London had to very carefully formulate the future political line after the events of Tiananmen. The following telegram, number 1106, in fact, advised not to “interfere with the project already agreed”, but to delay it. It was also probably a mistake to stop the policy of investments and loans in the PRC, and instead evaluate them on the basis of financial solvency (a way *de facto* to indirectly control the course of Chinese reforms).

At this stage, the FCO was at the crucial juncture of the handover between Howe and Douglas Hurd, passing through the brief parenthesis of John Major, a parenthesis that coincided with the imminent post-Tiananmen scenario. In this context, the PM became the object of pressure from Westminster and the public, national and ‘colonial’ opinion. Parliament was pressing to take a harder line, apprehensive about the Hong Kong issue and human rights. On the other hand, on June 23rd Thatcher was asked to participate in a demonstration organized by Chinese and Hong Kong students at Westminster Central Hall. The PM did not attend, but this latter element highlighted the dilemma London was facing: avoid the breaking of relations with Beijing and manage the crisis of confidence among Hong Kong citizens who accused the British Government of betraying their democracy under construction. In contrast, throughout June and July 1989 there were harsh attacks by the Zhongnanhai leadership on Hong Kong’s political and economic world, which was accused of being the ‘sanctuary’ of counter-revolutionary protest.

Whitehall’s action plan was therefore driven by the internal pressures of British political dynamics and those resulting from the moving international framework. For this reason, too, Howe visited the British colony on July 2nd, where he was welcomed by 5,000 demonstrators, shouting “Shame on the Thatcher government”. His reassurances about “Britain’s determination to secure a democratic and prosperous future for Hong Kong” were worth little, because he had rejected the possibility of granting the citizens of the colony the chance to expatriate to the UK. It was a position strongly supported by the Home Office and the FCO, and widely debated in Westminster from the beginning of the unrest in Beijing. Thatcher herself had expressed the same ideas on June 6th, when she had told the Commons that “it would not be right to suggest that 3.5 million people should automatically have the right of abode in this country”. This political line was also confirmed by the report drawn up by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (HCFAC), approved on June 28th, which recommended vetoing the exercise of the right of expatriation. On July 1st, at a time of Howe’s imminent arrival in Hong Kong, the *South China Morning Post* published the entire HCFAC report, radicalizing the citizens’ critical positions. Rosanna Tam, an important political personality of the colony, referred to the document as “one of the most dishonourable statements ever made”.

Against this background, the visit, which ended on July 4th, did not have the success hoped for by London. What is certain is that for Whitehall the colony was an important piece in an informal imperial system, a chamber connecting the Western market economy with the Chinese socialist system. Since 1979, Hong Kong accounted for 70 percent of total foreign investment into the PRC. Many of the colony’s productive activities had been delocalized to the Special Economic Zones established by the communist government on the mainland, so that the total presence of Hong Kong (and therefore British) capital in these ‘market islands’ amounted to 82 percent. Similar percentages were estimated for exports to the PRC, just as 35 percent of the banks’ revenues derived from Beijing. For Zhongnanhai this connection was essential for the PRC’s development, while for London it was as essential for its own finances as for its colony’s economic strength, a colony already weakened by the 1987 crisis and broken by the collapse after Tiananmen of 22 percent of the value of the securities listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange. Whitehall therefore took two approaches, one apparently directed towards the PRC, the other towards the colony, though on closer inspection both converged on Beijing.

The first focused on lobbying the PRC to assume “early, tangible and sustained action to begin restoring confidence in China’s intentions towards Hong Kong”, as an essential prerequisite for any subsequent rapprochement. This was the position taken by the new leader of the FCO, Major, during his first official meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Qian Qichen, which took place in the context of the Paris conference on Cambodia in July 1989. Given Beijing’s lack of willingness, this approach was soon transformed into a unilateral search for collaboration, which raised strong criticisms of those who were accused of “appeas[ing] Deng Xiaoping”.

The second policy followed by the British government, suggested by some HCFAC and Howe reports, was oriented towards internationally guaranteeing the still fragile democracy of Honk Kong. Even this choice proved equally ambiguous. Alongside a decisive formal intervention in the process of implementing the colony’s constitutional reforms, London was very cautious in starting the process of transferring political autonomy to the local elites. In Whitehall there was a strong fear that the frictions between the institutions of the colony and London regarding the management of the events after Tiananmen would result in a headlong rush, potentially heralding serious repercussions with regard the PRC. Thus, also from this point of view, the interlocutor was once more Beijing, with whom the United Kingdom negotiated to include the new Bill of Rights in the Basic law that Beijing approved on April 4th 1990.

The ‘game’ played by Washington was quite different, where the developments of Chinese repression reopened the arduous tug-of-war between the ‘appeasers’ from the Republican establishment and the hardliners of Congress. On June 29th, the latter approved sanctions against Beijing that radically exacerbated the measures already approved by the White House. In particular, the clause of the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) was revoked, casting doubt on the commercial relations between Washington and Beijing. These positions reflected the widespread sense of despondency in US public opinion that for a decade had seen – using the words of the *New York Times* – a PRC “inexorably on the move toward the free market of ideas” while, “now, China [was] betraying that vision with its reversion to iron-handed totalitarianism”.

Bush’s initial response had been very weak, starting with a statement where the President expressed his hope that “China will rapidly return to the path of political and economic reform and conditions of stability”, so that the relationship with the United States could “continue its growth”. Equally unlucky, in the eyes of public opinion, was the June 4th speech by Baker on CNN where he declared that “to some extent that shooting appears to be aimed up in the air”. It was clear, therefore, that the press spoke about an administration resisting parliamentary pressure, while the perceived ill-concealed presidential obstructionism towards the hard-liner initiatives was widely criticized. *The Nation*, a well-known US left-wing newspaper, described the attitude of the President as “sympathetic to an old friend”, Deng Xiaoping, and talked of “unctuous words in defence of the Chinese ‘demon’”. The opinion of some sectors of the US productive world was different, as they feared a harmful downturn in commercial relations with Beijing, which have been “major anchors in our international trade program since 1984”. The position of the State Department was likewise different. On June 26th, at a meeting of the Asian society in New York, Baker warned that a “hasty dismantling of a constructive US-Chinese relationship built up so carefully over two decades would serve neither our interests nor those of the Chinese people”.

Numerous telegrams sent by the diplomats stationed in the PRC had clarified that the Chinese leadership would not change the course of previous policies; the real problem was Beijing ‘helping’ the President to avoid an overreaction by the United States itself. In this regard, the White House moved along two parallel tracks. The first consisted in trying to drive the sanctions by imposing the direction of the initiatives on the executive; the second was based on trying to ease tensions with the PRC, pushing it to make conciliatory gestures in order to placate the sliding of the Congress towards a punitive position. The decision about the embargo on military material taken on June 5th responded to the first logic: 600 million dollars in value was a sign in Beijing that there was a window of opportunity on other sectors. The second logic was pursued through the two letters of June 20th and July 21st written by Bush to Deng himself, requesting conciliatory gestures that the Chinese never subsequently made.

In the following weeks Bush, with the support of the Japanese Prime Minister Sōsuke Uno, tried to moderate the tone of the communiqué issued by the XV G7 summit, held in Paris between July 14th and 16th, which had made a critical reference to Chinese repression. In Paris the aforementioned meeting on Cambodia took place, during which, on July 31st, there was a formal meeting between Baker and Qian Qichen which confirmed Beijing’s unwillingness to meet the West’s “softening” demands. The Chinese Minister responded with harsh tones to US advances: “you know that China is not afraid of pressure. […] China will not yield to pressure”. This was not a challenge to Washington’s positions, but — as reported by a CIA document in October 1989 — was a reflection of Beijing’s awareness “that international aid will resume […], and that Western sanctions […] will ease”.

Beyond the veneer of this public diplomacy, the relationship was definitely more constructive. At the beginning of August, Zhang Yaochen, a personality from the Zhongnanhai, made it clear in meeting at the US Embassy that “economic openness must continue […] China would continue to develop its relations with the outside world” and in particular contacts with the United States would continue. Indeed, between November and December 1989, the missions of Nixon and Kissinger in Beijing began to trace the path for future rapprochement. It was influenced, however, by Beijing’s lack of willingness to meet US requests by using, after the Sino-Soviet summit, Moscow as a lever.

At this juncture, the top level of the PRC was still fluid. Between the IV plenary session (June 23th–24th) and the V (November 6th–9th) of the XIII Central Committee of the CCP, Zhao Ziyang was dismissed, Deng Xiaping was marginalized, and Jiang Zemin was progressively inserted as General Secretary, member of the Politburo Standing Committee, and finally as President of the Central Military Commission. It was certainly not the return of the old leadership, but it was — as outlined by a paper drafted by US intelligence in September 1989 — a greater presence of the “elders” on the “front rank”. In this memorandum, the same Zhao Ziyang was presented as part of the escalation process, which he had punctually pursued “to regain political advantage”, failing to win the support of Deng, and paradoxically pushing him in front of his historical competitors.

In essence, rather than a struggle for the affirmation of democracy, Tiananmen became the epiphenomenon of the classical dynamics of the Chinese system, where intra-party frictions were so radical they could not be accommodated within the inner circle, thus being transported ‘to the square’. This strategy was ushered in by Mao Zedong through the Cultural Revolution in 1966, with terrible results, and was continued after the disappearance of the leader, for the entire two-year period 1977-1978. All this, at least for the connoisseurs of the Chinese world, implicitly meant relativizing the extent of the repression in light of the negative outcomes that — in the past — similar processes had brought about. The use of the PLA, despite the drama, was part of an attempt to nip devastating scenarios like those of the Cultural Revolution in the bud. A *(Bloody) Heavenly Peace* was still better than *Chaos under Heaven*, that is, a new wave of revolutionary instability or a civil war.

5. Conclusions

In a famous episode entitled “Goo Goo Gai Pan”, broadcast March 13th, 2005, *The Simpsons* described — with the usual sarcasm that sets them apart — Tiananmen as the square where “on this site, in 1989, nothing happened”. It is a note of colour, even if, as is known, the Tiananmen protests remain not only a forbidden issue in the political and public discourse of the PRC, but are also, at least in part, a forgotten issue in the Chinese, and perhaps even global, collective memory. The Chinese events were obscured by the events of the ‘other 1989’, the one that found its epicentre in Berlin and Germany on the night between November 8th and 9th, and which supported the triumphalist narrative of the victory of the demo-capitalist West over the Soviet bloc. Thirty years later, however, June 1989 appears to be central, and perhaps even more significant than November 1989, not only because of the role played by Beijing today, but also because it forces both Europe and the United States to look themselves in the mirror of the new position of Asia and of the PRC itself.

Far from these considerations, the Anglo-American leaderships of the time found themselves having to face the narrow diplomatic contingencies by developing medium to long term action plans marred by the ‘limits’ of the cultural categories of a West that by then believed it had won the Cold War. However, Whitehall, rather than paying attention to the dynamics of East-West relations, included the crisis of June 1989 within the context of its own imperial policy. For the United Kingdom the result of Tiananmen revealed itself in a strong tension that had the effect of freezing the negotiations concerning the transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong. Temporary measures, therefore, exactly like those the United States had had to adopt and which, far more than London, were concentrated on the global effects of Sino-US relations. In the perspective of the Republican Administration, Tiananmen appears as the watershed within which the United States moved from the Cold War to the so-called ‘post-bipolar’ order.

Within a little less than a year after the repression, the PRC had *de facto* reconnected practically all the ties of international relations cut after Tiananmen. Deng Xiaoping, far from being ousted, promulgated the new doctrine of the Twenty-four characters. Facing the disintegration of the Soviet system and moving cautiously, Beijing progressively adopted a different international position. It became more ‘autonomous’ with respect to the United States, launching an extensive project of modernization of its security systems, fuelling a more marked nationalism, and recovering the cultural inheritance of its own imperial past.

In April 1991, the Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Nakayama, visited Beijing, thus launching the formal rapprochement of the entire “Group of Seven” (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy) which had imposed sanctions on the PRC. Even more relevant was the normalization advocated by Whitehall, and the announcement by the new PM John Major of a trip the following September. The opportunity for a trip was offered by the signing of an agreement on the new airport in Hong Kong, but the real reasons lay in the attempt to resume the negotiations on the passage of sovereignty in such a way as to guarantee the protection of certain London interests and, in the wake of US decisions, to re-establish the MFN status for the PRC. This was a way, as the Prime Minister explained in July in Westminster, to guarantee that the economy of the colony did not lose 43 thousand jobs, “a drop of up to half in Hong Kong’s current GDP growth and a loss of US $ 9 billion to 12 billion in trade”.

Little more could expected of the realignment between Washington and Beijing. The policy of a unilateral search for collaboration was criticized by many circles that, as the *New York Times* wrote, accused the Bush administration of identifying itself “more with China’s aging autocrats than with its brave young democrats”. However, the emergence of the war in the Gulf, and the substantial support given by the PRC to the US initiatives, became the means by which the frictions between the two shores of the Pacific were gradually overcome. US needs found in Qian Qichen’s pragmatism the right interlocutor to establish a new dialogue. In December 1990, the Minister went to Washington, a visit that set the stage for the invitation to visit Beijing’s new strongman, Jiang Zemin, and which took place at the same time as the United States lifted the blockade on the “‘non basic human needs’ loans” within the framework of the World Bank. On the other hand, there was strong pressure to review US economic policy, because — despite the sanctions — the trade deficit with the RPC had risen from 6 billion dollars in 1989 to over 10 billion in 1990, making Beijing the third largest creditor for Washington. In May 1991, even former Democratic President Jimmy Carter came to support the need to turn the page on the ostracism of the RPC.

Alongside these elements of realpolitik, however, one can see how the attitude of political leadership and the media was conditioned by the assumption that the incorporation of the PRC in the liberal order would slowly revive the aspirations of Tiananmen. This was the basic reason for a substantial ‘appeasement’ not so much with regard to the repression of the student movement, but rather with regard to the long-term Chinese diplomatic choices, which resulted in a unilateral policy of seeking collaboration with the RPC. Such a position was postulated *aperti verbis* by an article published on June 13th in *The Washington Post*, in which it was suggested that “in their life-time the young Chinese protestors of Tiananmen Square will see their ideal prevail”. An entirely understandable attitude given the parallel European context of 1989 that fed optimism. As has been observed, the disappearance of the historical Soviet adversary led some US circles to believe that the ‘special’ relationship with Beijing had been crushed, on the one hand opening the way to the identification of the PRC as a possible new threat in the future, on the other by making the United States elite and public opinion less willing to ‘endure’ Chinese manoeuvres. However, in that same summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama published the well-known article “The End of History?” in *The National Interest*, according to which “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy” had been reached. It was an insight that appeared to be coming true in central and eastern Europe, which — according to classical interpretations of the Cold War — had been the centre of the political tension between the blocs. That New World Order, which even the presidential rhetoric had helped to develop, also seemed to be coming true.

With regards to Tiananmen, a refined pen like that of Pulitzer Prize winner Harrison Salisbury traced these positions back to the distortions created by the Western media, which knew only one side of the crisis. But in hindsight we could venture further, and revive the insights of another great American journalist, Edgar Snow, who already in 1972 warned, with regard to the danger of a West that “may imagine that the Chinese are giving up communism […] to become nice agrarian democrats”, that these what he called in no uncertain terms “illusions” would only contribute to deepening the “abyss again when disillusionment strikes”.

It was not a problem of access to the sources, therefore, but a profound cultural bias that pertained to a unidirectional and progressive vision of the processes of modernization, a vision of the inexorable affirmation of democratic and liberal values that subsequent developments of history after Tiananmen have denied, and not only in the PRC. The New World Order had revealed itself to be not only a “false dream”, but also, and certainly, wishful thinking, if not a bad nightmare.