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The 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident



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Michael Flynn and John Hutcheson were in Beijing during the April – June 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident when the authorities negotiated with ‘demonstrators for democracy’ but ultimately employed military force to clear the Square and city centre of demonstrators. Here they recount their observations during the incident and the immediate aftermath. Hutcheson also visited Shanghai and Hong Kong and adds his impressions from those cities as well.

Key words: China; Tiananmen Square; 1989; democracy protests; incident; massacre; disturbance.

From April to early June 1989, the democracy movement briefly flowered in China, with university students, intellectuals, factory workers and city residents, who were all seeking greater democracy in China, demonstrating in vast numbers in Beijing and other cities. The demonstrations were sparked by the death on 15 April of Hu Yuobang, a liberal reformer and former General Secretary of the Communist Party, who had argued against nepotism and corruption and for more transparency in governance. The demonstrations reached their zenith in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in mid to late May when more than a million protestors gathered. This led to the entry of armed soldiers into Beijing and bloodshed on the streets before the demonstrators withdrew.

At the time of this incident, Michael Flynn was the Australian Embassy’s medical officer² in Beijing and John Hutcheson was attending an academic conference³ there. He subsequently participated in a post-conference tour which took in Shanghai and Hong Kong. This paper records their observations of what transpired during the Tiananmen Square ‘Incident’, also referred to as the ‘Massacre’, the ‘Disturbance’, or the ‘Protest’.

Beijing

John Hutcheson arrived in Beijing in mid May for approximately three weeks and was housed at the conference venue, a magnificent hotel built by Russian aid in a massive walled compound. Many of the Chinese hosts were English-speaking university professors who spoke freely about events in the Square and who said that they were providing transport for their students to go to the Square. Daily, he witnessed the crowds surging towards Tiananmen Square from all directions, choking all the streets leading into central Beijing and making movement around the city very difficult. Hutcheson was

able to move freely within and outside of the conference compound. The Chinese sponsors and attendees gathered around TV sets which openly showed the students and soldiers in the Square and student leaders in discussions with government leaders.

As the Post-Conference Shanghai Tour party drove towards Beijing airport in early June, Hutcheson and party observed a very long Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA) convoy driving into the city on a parallel road. The tour party assumed that this was the third army group to enter the city and, unlike its two predecessors, this group was armed.

At this point, Michael Flynn takes up the story. Flynn had arrived in Beijing on 16 May. The medical clinic and his accommodation were on one of the upper floors of a drab, but functional building reserved for foreigners who were unable to be located within their own diplomatic compounds. Importantly, it was only three blocks from Tiananmen Square. Both his consulting room and recreation space overlooked East Chang’an Avenue (Street of Heavenly Peace), the eight-lane thoroughfare that leads directly from the east to Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden Palace.

Flynn’s job was to run a medical ‘general practice’ in the clinic. The American Embassy was located close by and he also was able work with their doctor. Most of his patients were other than Australian personnel – diplomats from around 60 countries – and after the finish of each consultation, they would invariably want to discuss the developments of the day.

He consulted in the mornings, which left him free to roam the city in the afternoons. He had a sturdy bike on which he travelled widely within a 5km circle from the Square – the area around Mao’s Museum, the Great Hall of the People, the four great parks (Temples of the Sun, the Moon, Heaven and Earth) and the Winter Palace. It also allowed him to explore West Chang’an Avenue, where the hierarchy and political elite were located in the Zhongnanhai compound. This was where all the important debates were held, including the final decision to clear the Square.

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²He was providing short-term relief for the resident medical officer who was on leave.

³The 1989 Conference of the International Institute of Post-Graduate Engineering Educators.

One building that he was not able to enter was the main Museum, on the north-east corner of the Square. Flynn was told later that it had been used to garrison hundreds of the soldiers who participated with the armoured units in clearing the Square, having been brought into the building clandestinely via an extensive underground tunnel system which had been built in anticipation of major hostilities.

After a student-led hunger strike, which began in the Square on 13 May, galvanised support for the protest, Zhao Ziyang, the General Secretary of the Communist Party and a member of the Politburo, visited the Square on 19 May. He pleaded with the hunger strikers to leave and spoke to them through a megaphone saying: *"We have come too late and it is only right that you criticise us."* After Zhao's visit, the mood changed palpably. Hardliner and former Premier, Li Peng, visited the square late in the occupation, and harangued the students. It was clear that Zhao had failed in his attempts to influence his Politburo colleagues to negotiate. Military action became inevitable.

The government mobilised many PLA Divisions on 20 May 2015, perhaps up to 200,000 or more troops.⁵ These were moved towards Beijing and some, initially unarmed, subsequently entered the city. This made little impression on the protesters, though, who blocked the army's routes of access to Tiananmen Square.

By late May, there were endless processions of different groups moving along Chang'an Avenue expressing solidarity with the students who were occupying the Square. They included teachers, university students, factory workers, health care workers and ordinary citizens. Graffiti and messages of support appeared all over the bridges. An increasing number of obstacles were created by the demonstrators along Chang'an Avenue, mainly consisting of buses.

The decision to clear the Square by force was probably taken on Friday 2 June 1989 by the Communist Party leadership. The mood in the square and in surrounding streets was sombre but defiant. Flynn was still able cycle around relatively freely and was largely ignored by the big civilian police presence. On the street below his flat, Flynn observed a long convoy of military trucks held up by the crowds. In a friendly manner, like a strip-tease, the canvases were progressively removed by the demonstrators exposing the miserable looking soldiers who obviously did not want to be there. That afternoon, Flynn cycled to the Zhongnanhai compound where he observed long lines of armoured personnel carriers (APCs) in the nearby streets.

With evening descending, Flynn deemed it prudent to return to the relative safety of his flat to observe the unfolding events. Around 9 p.m., an APC roared down the wide motorway, smashing through several bus

barricades and into a group of protesters. The now angry survivors forced the APC to stop and then set it on fire, incinerating all the occupants.⁶

Late on the evening of Saturday 3 June, the clearance of the Square began. Flynn was in his clinic when he first heard the shooting and he remained there during the clearance. The distinctive sound of gunfire from AK47 assault rifles now became increasingly frequent and crept closer to the clinic. The adjacent diplomatic quarters were hit by several rounds, and it appeared that the residents were being deliberately targeted.

From what he could tell, many of the wounded and injured from the Square and nearby streets were taken by ambulance, bicycle or makeshift stretcher to one of the major military hospitals not far from his clinic. Their fate was uncertain. Only one casualty from the clearance was brought to his clinic – a reporter from Germany, who had sustained a peripheral gunshot wound (AK47) to his chest wall.

During all this increasing noise and violence, the English radio station gave out information as clearly as it could. There was access to live coverage from CNN, and Flynn's international telephone line continued to enable him to maintain contact with his family, the Embassy and with Canberra throughout the night, and the following day. The radio station continued to broadcast 'in the clear' until subjected to censorship (as best he recalls, on Tuesday 6 June).

Sunday morning, 4 June, saw Flynn cautiously exploring the surrounding streets. There was widespread evidence of violence. Warning shots were still being fired, but Flynn saw no actual casualties.

When the extent of the carnage became apparent, it was decided to transfer Flynn back to the Australian Embassy by car – he had not realised previously how important the Australian Flag was to the safe passage of diplomatic staff. On arrival, he was informed that all non-essential staff would be repatriated to Australia. The Ambassador, David Sadlier, determined that Flynn would be one of the ten to remain, as ongoing medical support was essential. Flynn was also used to track the whereabouts of Australian citizens throughout the country and to assist with the processing of the many non-Australians wishing to obtain visas. After another 4 – 5 days when the situation had been brought under control, Flynn was relocated back to the clinic to resume his consulting, albeit with a much reduced clientele.

Shanghai

While these events were continuing in Beijing, John Hutcheson arrived in Shanghai to be greeted by long peaceful columns of Chinese in the downtown area and suburbs with placards proclaiming their demands. He was told that academics led the columns. These demonstrations continued for the six days of his visit.

The tour group, all post-graduate educators in

⁴This was his final appearance in public. Being considered to be too close to the students, he was purged.

⁵There were reports in the international media that martial law had been declared, but neither Flynn nor Hutcheson can recall any such declaration.

⁶On departure four weeks later at Beijing airport, Flynn was handed a video of this incident.

engineering, visited technical sights, shops, banquet halls and the River Esplanade [during which Hutcheson was bowled over by one of the numerous push-bikers]. They were able to mix with local guides and guests; and they conversed freely, but mostly on technical matters. Hutcheson, though, remembers vividly one statement: *“Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong) must take some responsibility for the Cultural Revolution”*.

The tour guide was the Secretary of the Beijing University Communist Party Cell, a ‘Mr Wong’, who spoke excellent English. There were five or six American-educated English-speaking Korean professors who persisted in cross-examining Mr Wong. The tour group managed to gain a little insight into the demonstrators’ demands.

1. Mr Wong: *“What do you want from the Party leaders?”* Answer: *“We want nice shirts, trousers, cameras and maybe a car.”* [Hutcheson noted that Wong, himself, was better dressed than several members of the tour group. He had a camera, but had to share a party car.]
2. Mr Wong: *“What is democracy?”* Answer: *“Just like they have in America.”*
3. Mr Wong: *“Would you like to live in Pittsburgh in America?”* Answer: *“Of course.”*
4. Mr Wong: *“Did you know that there are frequent race riots in Pittsburgh right now?”* Response: Glassy eyes/rolling of eyes, but no verbal answer.

Hong Kong

When he passed through Hong Kong briefly on his way home to Australia, Hutcheson did not see any demonstrations in the central business district or in the parks or nearby suburbs. No one flashed the ‘V’ victory sign or raised clenched fists as he had seen in Beijing and Shanghai. No one told him that they were interested in the demonstrations that had been occurring in mainland China.

Hutcheon’s Reflections

The 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident was part of the Chinese democracy movement. Its causes included: the desire for economic and political reform; inflation; political corruption; the nepotism practised by the families of those who had participated in the Long March and the Revolution; poor career prospects; and the example of social unrest in Eastern Europe. The demonstrators were seeking social equality; a Communist Party free of corruption; freedom of speech; freedom of the press; socialism; and democracy. Their main tools were hunger strikes, sit-ins and occupations of public squares.

On 19 May, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ordered the PLA to enter Beijing. The generals objected but with reluctance on 20 May ordered unarmed troops to enter the city. Early on 3 June, a CCP committee ordered that armed troops were to be employed to clear Beijing commencing that day. Student leaders withdrew from the Square in early June after negotiating with the PLA. Some workers who were barricading the PLA

outside the Square were shot by the 38th Army. There were also unverified reports of some deaths in and near the Square. Total casualties are unknown. Estimates range from 240 to 2600 deaths and 7000 to 10,000 injured. Persistent protest leaders and activists were exiled or imprisoned. The democracy movement was suppressed and political reform was halted.

Ultimately reform was renewed by Premier Deng Xiaoping’s intensified attack on corruption, his reversal of Mao’s extreme Marxism and his (Deng’s) introduction of the ‘Socialist Market Economy’ into the Party’s Constitution.

Perhaps from the lessons of the Tiananmen Incident, the Chinese Authorities have reacted to the recent Hong Kong demonstrations by exhausting the people’s demands with minor concessions.

Conclusion

The student-led popular demonstrations seeking greater democracy in China from mid April to early June 1989 choked central Beijing for seven weeks and exposed deep splits in the Communist Party leadership. The hard-liners in the leadership eventually prevailed. Troops armed with AK47 assault rifles and backed by tanks and APCs cleared the Square and central Beijing on 3 – 4 June. There were an unknown number of dead and injured. The democracy movement in China was suspended and political reform was delayed. The international media reported that the government forbade all discussion or remembrance of this ‘counter-revolutionary riot’. The Chinese Communist Party united and continues the very difficult task of politically, socially and economically uniting over a billion diversified people.

The Authors

Michael Flynn, a medical practitioner with post-graduate qualifications in general practice, joined the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in 1969 as a medical officer. Along the way he qualified as a pilot of navy fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft. He rose to become Director-General of Naval Health Services before transferring to the Naval Reserve in 1998. He saw service in the First Gulf War (1990) and East Timor (2000) and led the first foreign medical response team to Banda Aceh in the aftermath of the tsunami in 2004. In May 1989, he was seconded as medical advisor to the Australian Embassy in Beijing.

John Hutcheson graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1947 and served for 30 years in the Australian Regular Army as a commando, engineer, staff officer and instructor. He saw operational service in Korea (where he was awarded the Military Cross), Malaya and Vietnam. He later served for 9 years in the Army Reserve, becoming Colonel Plans HQ 2nd Division. In later civil life, with a PhD on financial control of building contracts, he was an academic in the School of Building at the University of New South Wales for 25 years and published 22 books. Currently, he consults in the property, investment and building industries; and is Vice-President of the Institute.