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## **George H.W. Bush's Shameful Kowtow to China: A Cautionary Tale**

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Spiraling tensions between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the coronavirus and other issues have underscored the importance of a balanced, realistic policy toward the communist regime. Unrelenting U.S. hostility toward Beijing will prove unrewarding and potentially catastrophic. At present, American foreign policy thinkers appear to be more worried about that danger than about the opposite snare of trying to be too accommodating. But the response of George H.W. Bush's administration to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre provides a textbook historical example of the latter mistake.

The carnage in Tiananmen drew angry denunciations from American opinion leaders and journalists. Yet America's globalist elites were determined not to let the communist government's bloody crackdown disrupt the economic and strategic partnership between the United States and China for long. Some even tried to excuse the regime's conduct. Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger initially commented that no regime could tolerate the occupation of a huge square near the seat of government by thousands of people who repudiated its legitimacy.

Just hours after the tanks rolled in, former president Richard Nixon called President George H.W. Bush and urged him not to let the episode derail the bilateral relationship. Unlike Kissinger, Nixon at least described the Tiananmen Square slaughter as "deplorable," though he stressed that the United States needed to "take a look at the long haul." Bush agreed and emphasized that while he would have to impose some economic sanctions and put the relationship on hold for a while, he would not recall Ambassador James Lilly from Beijing.

As in the case of China's recent handling of the coronavirus pandemic, a nasty backlash in American public opinion followed. The Bush administration faced intense pressure to take strong measures against Beijing. They were determined to resist that pressure, however. Indeed, Bush himself flirted with outright appeasement. In mid-July, barely a month after the bloodshed in Tiananmen Square, the White House dispatched National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft on a secret trip to Beijing to mend ties. That visit followed an impassioned personal letter that Bush sent to Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. (That missive and others appeared a decade later in Bush's memoir, *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings*.)

The president's letter came perilously close to kowtowing to a brutal, autocratic regime. "I write in the spirit of genuine friendship," Bush wrote, emphasizing that his outreach came "from one who believes with a passion that good relations between the United States and China are in the fundamental interests of both countries. I have felt that way for many years. I feel more strongly that way today, in spite of the difficult circumstances." He asked Deng for his help in preserving

that relationship, adding, “I have tried very hard not to inject myself into China’s internal affairs.”

Bush seemed almost apologetic about the public revulsion over the crackdown in Tiananmen. Given fundamental American principles and values, he wrote, “the actions I took as president could not be avoided.” (Bush had suspended all military sales to China and all military contacts between the two countries.) Indeed, the president warned, “the clamor for stronger action remains intense.” He assured Deng, though, that “I have resisted that clamor, making clear that I do not want to see destroyed this relationship that you and I have worked so hard to build.” In particular, “I explained to the American people that I did not want to unfairly burden the Chinese people with economic sanctions.”

Bush noted later that Deng replied to that letter within 24 hours, and the White House sent Scowcroft to Beijing on his secret mission shortly thereafter. The president was quite pleased with the outcome of the subsequent meetings: “The trip was successful in that it conveyed to the Chinese how serious the divide was between us but also how much we respected our friendship.”

Diplomatic efforts to soothe tensions continued in the following weeks. On July 21, shortly after Scowcroft’s return, the president sent a second letter to Deng, this time with the salutation: “Dear Chairman Deng, Dear Friend.” Once again, the president came dangerously close to appeasement. Bush noted, for example, that the communiqué of the recently concluded summit of the G-7 nations addressed the developments in China. “I can tell you in total confidence,” the president assured Deng, “that the U.S. and the Japanese removed some rather inflammatory language from the Communiqué.”

Later in the letter, Bush again went out of his way to placate the Chinese leader. “I have great respect for China’s long-standing position about nonintervention in its internal affairs,” he wrote. “Because of that, I also understand that I risk straining our friendship when I make suggestions as to what might be done now. But the U.S.-China relationship, which we have both worked so hard to strengthen, demands the candor with which only a friend can speak.” Bush’s principal policy suggestion was that Deng’s government show “forgiveness” to the students and other demonstrators, an idea that seemed more than a little naïve. Another passage verged on supplication. “Please do not be angry with me,” he pleaded, “if I have crossed the invisible threshold lying between constructive suggestion and ‘internal interference.’” In his memoirs, Bush noted that “Deng’s reply was respectful, but he held steadfastly to their position that this was their internal affair.”

Bush’s effusive behavior toward Deng is a textbook example of how not to interact with the leader of an autocratic regime. It also holds some important lessons for dealing with (a now much more powerful) China in the aftermath of the coronavirus outbreak. It is important that U.S. leaders not overreact to Beijing’s duplicity and blame shifting, retaliating with a full-blown cold war policy. President Trump’s offhand comment that he might cut all economic ties with China was not helpful. In its current, very angry condition, American public opinion might well support a vehemently anti-PRC stance. And if reports prove true that Beijing intends to suppress Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement soon, American hostility will grow even stronger. But a cold war strategy could create extremely dangerous bilateral tensions. Like it or not, China and the United States need each other.

At the same time, it is imperative that President Trump not emulate George H.W. Bush and make the United States a supplicant superpower. There was no need for such behavior then, and there is no need now to make excuses for Beijing's misconduct regarding the coronavirus and other issues.

Unfortunately, some of Trump's critics seem so obsessed with their hatred of him that they flirt with doing exactly that. Instead, we should pursue a policy of skeptical realism. The United States needs to preserve a decent relationship with Beijing. But no one should have any illusions about the profoundly evil nature of China's communist regime. Bush preserved the China tie, but he did so at the cost of his personal dignity and American values. That mistake must not be repeated.

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