



# What Tiananmen Square Can Teach Us About COVID-19

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For most of the world, the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre recalls familiar yet macabre vignettes of hopeful students and the iron tanks that crushed them, along with their cries for freedom. In China, however, there is nothing to recall on June 4th because, as far as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is concerned, nothing happened. In his chilling book *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State*, Kai Strittmatter details the pains the CCP has taken to whitewash this day—not just from the history books, but from the minds of the Chinese people: "You will find entries on Baidu Baike [China's Wikipedia] for the years 1988 and 1990—but 1989 doesn't exist. An entire year has been erased from history."

The party's crusade to rewire the memories of 1.4 billion people has been largely successful. In exchange for thinking the right thoughts and living pacified lives, the CCP has delivered the economic goods. But General Secretary Xi Jinping and his comrades aren't taking any chances, particularly as economic growth slows and the nation's demographic outlook dims. Through incentivized self-censorship and conformity with the help of its social credit system, the party believes it can forestall more "incidents" like Tiananmen Square.

Every so often, though, the facade breaks, and the regime's brutality is exposed. Tiananmen Square was one such event, but the United States misread the moment. As former National Security Council official Michael Green put it, President George H.W. Bush sought "to show the Chinese leaders and the U.S. Congress that the United States could not continue with business as usual, but in a way intended not to obstruct the core of U.S.-China relations." Under President Bill Clinton, the bilateral relationship quickly got back on track, propelled by a Pollyannaish hope that increasing wealth would change the Communist Party's soul.

The Trump administration was right to jettison this assumption, and it appears that President Biden agrees. Even so, with notable exceptions, neither Democrats nor Republicans have seemed interested in holding China accountable for its modern-day Tiananmen moment: the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the wake of the viral outbreak, the party's veneer cracked again, and Chinese citizens saw that the CCP was more concerned with political survival than public health. This agenda led Xi and his comrades to initially focus on containing information instead of the virus. Had it acted expeditiously, China could have reduced its number of early 2020 cases by 95 percent, by some estimates. Instead, officials censored medical professionals and prohibited researchers from publishing anything about COVID-19. The results were disastrous, and an epidemic morphed into a pandemic.

Initially, the Trump administration appeared poised to punish the CCP. In July 2020, then-secretary of state Mike Pompeo warned that "the world will absolutely make [China] pay a price" for the coronavirus. President Donald Trump mused publicly about slapping Beijing with tariffs amounting to a trillion dollars. Meanwhile, senators and representatives drafted legislation that would expose China to U.S. litigation over pandemic damages. Other members suggested waiving interest payments on U.S. debt to Beijing. All told, more than 350 China-specific bills were filed between January and June 2020.

Even so, Washington refrained from taking direct steps to punish Beijing—a hesitancy that has persisted into the Biden administration. In an interview on March 28, Secretary of State Antony Blinken punted when asked whether China should face repercussions: "I think the issue for us is to make sure that we do everything possible to prevent another pandemic." The following week, President Biden brushed off similar inquiries, indicating that he had not spoken with Xi about China's pandemic responsibility.

If, as Blinken says, preventing the next pandemic is a top priority, then America has already failed. The 2002-2004 SARS outbreak, in many ways, foreshadowed COVID-19, especially in the pains the CCP took to conceal the disease, silence medical professionals and punish those who raised concerns. The CCP is hardly a first-time offender.

That's why the president's apparent refusal to even discuss the issue with Xi is so concerning. Biden will presumably have no excuse to avoid the conversation once he receives the intelligence community's report on the origins of COVID-19, slated to be completed by August. China's leaders have taken great pains to ensure that their own people receive a sanitized version of history in which the CCP emerges heroic and blameless—first on Tiananmen and now on COVID-19. There's no reason the rest of the world should accept their version of the story.