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Interpreting Protest in Modern China

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Abstract

Twenty years after the events at Tiananmen Square, we find protests on the Chinese mainland again making headlines, but with a couple of important twists. It is true that there are continuities with 1989, relating to both the cast of characters involved and some of the issues. For example, one of the most important recent acts of dissent involved Liu Xiaobo—a leader of the Charter 08 petition drive. And in 2010, as in 1989, workers clamoring for greater rights and talking of the need for autonomous unions challenged the authorities (though Han, while still involved in labor activism, is now based in Hong Kong rather than the mainland). And now, as then, anger at official corruption fuels many protests. On balance, however, the contrasts with 1989 are more striking than the similarities.

Afghanistan's economic and political future. After all, there is no evidence that Afghanistan has the capacity to maintain itself as a self-sufficient country. As has been the case for most of its history, it will rely, in some measure, on the largesse of others.

None of these steps will be easy—and in some cases, they will require an outlay of significant political capital by Obama. But the alternative is far worse: ignominious withdrawal or miring the country more deeply in the conflict that is sapping U.S. blood and treasure at a pace far greater than its relationship to actual U.S. interests. It's high time

for the United States to recognize its own limitations in Afghanistan and seek a solution that is not perfect but that is realistic and achievable. The moment cries for leadership and a demand that the nation's generals get with the president's program.

After nine years of the West's making poor decisions, Obama has a rare opportunity to make a right one. He cannot afford to let it pass him or the United States by.

Michael A. Cohen, a senior fellow at the American Security Project, blogs about Afghanistan at www.democracysensational.org.

Interpreting Protest in Modern China

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When Americans on the Left—and in the Center and on the Right, for that matter—turn their attention to the issue of protest in contemporary China, they most often think back to the traumatic upheavals of 1989, which began with inspiring student-led demonstrations in April and May and ended with the June massacres. What they sometimes forget, though, is that many of the Chinese who contributed to the struggle and who suffered most in that year of miracles and tragedies were not students.

Some were young teachers, such as Liu Xiaobo, who is now world famous as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, but who was then one of China's rising stars in the field of literary criticism. Inspired by the bravery of student activists—as many journalists, schoolteachers, and professors were—he joined them at Tiananmen Square. Liu soon became one of the most impassioned voices within the movement calling for moderation; he strove to persuade the most militant students to avoid taking steps that would box the authorities into a corner and make it hard for any kind of

compromise to be negotiated, even one that could be seen as a partial victory. In the end, Liu was among the last protesters to leave Tiananmen Square in the wee hours of June 4; as soldiers were firing on civilians nearby, he helped broker a deal that provided safe passage out of the plaza for many of the students who had remained there with him. He was later jailed for his alleged role as one of the inspirational “black hands” behind the movement, the first but not the last time he would end up a prisoner of conscience.

Other important participants in the 1989 uprising were neither students nor professionals but young workers. Members of this group were gunned down in greater numbers than were educated youths in the Beijing massacre and the related one that took place in Chengdu, one of Sichuan's largest cities. And some of them too, like Liu Xiaobo and student leader Wang Dan, ended up serving extended prison terms. This was the case, for instance, with Han Dongfang, who played a key part in 1989 in forming one of the autonomous labor unions that partnered with the student unions springing up on campuses throughout China. One of the main reasons the Communist Party's leaders called in the troops was because, with Solidarity's rise in mind (that organization, ironically, won its



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