

## THE CHINA CRISIS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PHILIPPINES

by Aileen San Pablo-Baviera

(Delivered at a symposium on THE CHINA CRISIS, sponsored by the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines, Sister Formation Institute, Quezon City, 16 September 1989)

SOCIALIST CONSTRUCTION in China since 1949 has been a painful process, rife with struggle and contradiction over what economic strategies and what political line needed to be pursued in order to transform a huge feudal nation into a modern socialist society. There were important achievements in terms of uniting the people behind socialism, providing food and security for an otherwise starving majority of the population, advancing in science and technology to the point of establishing nuclear capability, and creating the basis for industrial development.

However, after thirty years, the economy remained relatively underdeveloped, productivity was low, and the Chinese masses felt dissatisfied with the lack of amenities in both their material and cultural needs. Since 1979, bold economic reforms were undertaken by the Deng Xiaoping government to heave China out of its backwardness. These reforms entailed decentralization of economic decision-making, incentives to private ownership and to private production for profit, broad cooperation with foreign capitalist enterprises and institutions, and placing prime emphasis on economic prosperity rather than ideological purity. At the same time occurred the de-ideologizing and de-politicizing of norms of behavior. While the past decade of reforms succeeded in raising productivity and improving standards of living for a great number, it also introduced inflation, worsened rampant official

corruption, brought on loss of social security and a general breakdown in socialist morality especially in urban areas. These culminated in protests by students, intellectuals, workers, state employees and other social sectors. Some elements of the reform, which had seemed of great urgency and inevitability at the time they were put into place, were later adjudged ill-conceived, incoherent and shortsighted. They resulted in unanticipated economic and financial imbalances and negative social phenomena that the Chinese people and their leaders have had no past experience dealing with. Economic failures and widespread discontent finally led to a split in the Communist leadership. And in what has come to be known as the Tiananmen bloodbath, the desperate inner-Party power struggle was fought in the streets of Beijing between armed soldiers and an unsuspecting defenseless civilian population.

The rest is history.

China today is experiencing a crisis. More than economic difficulties, the real quandary is how China's communist leaders can recover their lost legitimacy in the eyes of their own people, a condition necessary for continued stewardship of socialist modernization. The problem is how they can mobilize a gravely demoralized workforce and a disenchanted intelligentsia for the more difficult tasks ahead.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PHILIPPINES

IN THE PHILIPPINES, it has been some time since an international issue of this sort has succeeded in holding the attention of a normally more parochial-minded population for such an extended period. And this is why we are today exploring the implications of the recent events in China for the Philippines and the Filipinos.

#### A. Implications on China's Relations with the Philippine Government

ON ONE LEVEL, we look at the repercussions of Tiananmen on relations between the Chinese and Philippine governments. Before the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975, China used to be considered the greatest external threat to Philippine security—because of its proximity, its size and armed strength, the ideological affinity of the Mao regime with the then fledgling Communist Party of the Philippines, the presence of a large ethnic Chinese community (a small



section of which was sympathetic to the mainland) and China's former active internationalist position supporting national liberation movements in the Third World. The Philippines, in turn, was seen by China as a mere pawn of American imperialism. This was because of Philippine support for United States' foreign policy, particularly in the Korean and Vietnam wars (conflicts in which China and the United States were antagonists), and in light of the Philippine government's rabid anti-communism translated into suppression of local communists from the Hukbalahap to the New People's Army.

The Marcos government decided to normalize relations with China on the basis of the drastically changed balance of forces in Asia in the early 1970s — following United States' withdrawal from Vietnam, Sino-US rapprochement on the one hand coupled with the worsening turn of Sino-Soviet relations, China's admission to the United Nations, plus the growing popularity of neutrality and non-alignment among Third World countries as exemplified by the 1971 ASEAN declaration of neutrality. The first oil crisis and the resulting recession of the US economy also forced our country to look elsewhere for sources of crude oil, while consolidation of power by the Philippine military after the Martial Law Proclamation gave it greater confidence in combatting internal insurgency. All these factors helped pave the way for the friendly and mutually beneficial relations we now enjoy with China.

Thirteen years after normalization of ties, at the time of the "searching for roots" Aquino state visit to China in April 1988, relations could be characterized as smooth, stable and quite close. In fact, the Philippines conducts more trade with China than with fellow members of the Asean, with China being a major source of crude oil, coal and soybean imports in exchange for Philippine exports of copper concentrates, phosphatic fertilizers, coconut oil, bananas and plywood.

However, even a cursory glance at the structure of the economies of the two countries will reveal that the economies are basically competitive, rather than complementary in nature. The productive forces of both countries are backward and inefficient, so that both countries seek to attract technology and capital from the advanced capitalist countries of the West, which are also their primary markets for exports. The Philippines does not have what China needs to buy at the moment, and vice versa. As far as the grand schemes of our economic development strategies are concerned, our two countries are not too important

to one another.

We may even say that economic relations have been largely instrumental in attaining political goals — e.g., neutralizing Chinese communist support for the local revolutionary movement from the Philippine perspective, and as far as the Chinese are concerned, gaining respectability and acceptance by its neighbors, and in particular, mustering ASEAN support for its Indochina and anti-Soviet policy.

Prior to the June 1989 Tiananmen massacres, there were already certain challenges to the close relations between China and the Philippines. Foremost among these were the apparent violations of the one-China policy by the Philippine government.

By proclaiming adherence to a one-China policy in 1975, the Philippines bound itself to recognize only one China and that Taiwan is a province of China. In the absence of formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, our relations with Taipei were limited to economic and cultural exchanges facilitated by the Pacific Economic and Cultural Center in Taiwan and the Asian Exchange Center in Manila. The lack of diplomatic relations obviously was no obstacle to expansion of ties, as Taiwan has now become our largest source of foreign investment and our fifth largest trading partner. Beijing is fully aware of this and, in consideration of our national goals of economic recovery, poses no objection.

Recently, however, certain Philippine officials have been pushing for the legislation of a "Taiwan Relations Act" that would formally upgrade relations with Taipei and in effect discard the one-China policy. President Aquino has received in Malacañang delegations of businessmen from Taiwan, whom official press releases referred to as guests from the "Republic of China". Lakas ng Bansa president and presidential relative Paul Aquino last year accompanied high-level Kuomintang officials to the Philippine Senate. No less than Vice President Doy Laurel, Trade and Industry Secretary Jose Concepcion, Local Government Secretary Luis Santos and Defense Secretary Fidel Ramos have made recent visits to Taiwan, and hundreds of local government officials this year went on junkets fully paid for by the Taipei government.

The Taiwan issue promises to be the single biggest irritant in Philippine-China relations as the Taiwan lobby in the Philippines prepares its case for the upgrading of relations short of establishing full



diplomatic ties. Most noticeably, immediately after the massacre at Tiananmen, proponents of the Taiwan Relations Act revived their measure in Congress, ostensibly responding to pressures by Taiwanese businessmen who, taking advantage of the worldwide horror and outrage against Beijing, have been pressuring Philippine officials for "better guarantees for Taiwanese investments". The Philippines is particularly vulnerable to promises of millions of dollars in Taiwanese investments, as our officials have already demonstrated beyond doubt their propensity to think principally in terms of dollars and cents. The question is—will China tolerate a two-China policy (or even, as it were—a 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  China policy) in the Philippines? If not, is the Philippine government prepared to deal with the repercussions should China decide to withdraw its support for the Aquino government?

Consider this: will such a provocation of China on the Taiwan issue help upset the ASEAN-China detente that is helping to keep the peace in the region, and be prejudicial to other outstanding issues between China and the Philippines—such as conflicting claims to the Kalayaan or Nansha Islands, attitudes towards the "overseas" Chinese, and support for the local communist movement?

Another irritant stemming from the Tiananmen incident was the position taken by the Philippine government before and after the crackdown on demonstrators. The fact that young Chinese students took some inspiration from the EDSA uprising inflated the Philippine ego and encouraged officials of State as well as Church to affirm their support for the students. First of all, the exaggerated parallelism between EDSA and Tiananmen contributed to misconceptions among the Filipino population about the dynamics of the events in China. Secondly, the lame and belated condemnations of the massacre by Philippine officials were most embarrassing compared to the excitement and encouragement with which the pro-democracy movement was received earlier on. The Department of Foreign Affairs was in a dilemma over what, if any, sanctions were to be imposed to express the Philippine government's position on the issue. We therefore ask how prepared is the Philippine government to face possible Chinese reprisals over increasing recognition of Taiwan should this occur?

One thing that is clear is that the handling of relations with China in recent years and especially in recent months demonstrates the absolute lack of vision in current Philippine foreign policy. In fact, it is

more accurate to assume there is no policy at all, only shortsighted responses, knee-jerk reactions and — "bahala na", let destiny do the rest. Moreover, the different agencies of our government are not speaking with one voice when it comes to foreign policy. The DFA is tasked with promoting relations with socialist countries but, owing to real and imagined pressure from the United States, a conservative local ruling elite, as well as a powerful military establishment, many obstacles to attaining genuine neutrality in our foreign policy are still in place.

One of the dangers of the Tiananmen crisis is it might be used as an excuse to re-introduce ideology as a major factor in foreign policy decision-making in the Philippines, at a time when gravely strategic questions involving the US bases and RP-US relations are up for resolution.

### **B. Implications on Local Political Forces**

THE FACT THAT THE PHILIPPINE MILITARY and other elements of the Philippine right seized on the events at Tiananmen as an excuse to launch an anti-communist and anti-Marxist propaganda offensive underscores the implications of the China crisis on domestic Philippine politics. Tiananmen was touted as undeniable proof of so-called communist use of terror and the incompatibility of socialism and democracy. But the more knowledgeable can see how simplistic such an argument is, yet at the same time agree that they are not entirely unfounded. In China, the situation was indeed complex. While the "Goddess of Democracy" was erected, we know, for instance, that many of the Chinese people themselves believed greater democracy could flourish within the socialist framework. This is precisely why student leaders exalted Gorbachev's efforts at political reforms in the Soviet Union and why they sang the Communist Internationale.

More importantly, we Filipinos know also that in historic as well as contemporary times, examples abound of the use of force by the state against unarmed civilians in countries labelled as "democracies"—to name only a few, Israel against Palestinians, the white South African regime against its black populace, our own Filipino marines against peasants in Mendiola.

However, the fact that so-called democracies are guilty of the same barbarities does not exonerate the socialists. On the contrary, socialists



who lay claim to superiority of their social system, Marxists who profess to champion the cause of the poor working man, ruling as well as struggling communist parties aspiring to be vanguards and as such, repositories of wisdom if not truth embodied in the "correct ideological line" — all are hard put to assert and demonstrate such superiority and correctness not only of their objectives and ideals, but their strategies and methods as well. This is especially challenging in an era where the socialist world is undergoing great changes—*glasnost* in the USSR, power-sharing in Poland and Eastern Europe, opening up in Vietnam, etc.

Important to the future directions of socialism would be the socialist countries' and communist movements' handling of opposition and dissent among its own masses.

A most relevant question, therefore, raised by the situation in China for Filipinos is—how attractive can socialism be as an alternative economic, political and social system to our chronically (perhaps terminally?) ill society?

The actions of the Chinese communist leaders and their armed minions at Tiananmen have undoubtedly damaged the prestige earlier enjoyed by socialists the world over. Many socialists have even condemned the act as an aberration to socialism, although there are those who choose to be neutral and those who would even defend it. Nevertheless, condemning the massacre is not the same thing as denigrating the efforts at reform by the Chinese people and government, nor does it imply dismissing the possibilities of their eventually achieving socialist modernization, perhaps under a more enlightened leadership.

The most optimistic view is that the death-cries and the anguish of Tiananmen may well be the birth pangs of a new kind of socialism, a socialism which, having assured the survival of its species and overcome the hostility of its neighbors, can now look forward to developing and enriching its socialist democratic institutions.

The Philippine left and the underground revolutionary forces are no doubt affected by the China crisis—in the same manner that all communists and socialists suffer diminished international as well as domestic respect due to the failings of a comrade party. Perhaps the Communist Party of the Philippines is bound to suffer more criticism on account of its historical and ideological affinity with Maoist China. But apart from this, predictions of serious injury to strategy and tactics

or to internal relations within the CPP as a result of Tiananmen are greatly exaggerated. It is common knowledge that the CPP has long ago given up its propensity to "toe the China line", especially following the death of Mao Zedong and the rapid improvement in Sino-US ties, China's own distancing from Southeast Asian communist parties plus the emergence of other Third World revolutionary models that local communists could draw lessons from. And needless to say, it is still the particularities of the Philippine context that will make or break the local communist movement.

Immediately, these are some aspects of how Tiananmen may have affected the Filipinos, from the perspective of the Philippine government, of the local revolutionary movement as well as society at large. There are bound to be other repercussions stemming from how the Chinese leadership will choose to navigate the present tempest-ridden sea it finds itself in. How far will retrenchment of economic reforms go? What are the prospects for true democratization and other political reforms beyond Party-building and ideological education campaigns? The directions of Sino-US and Sino-Soviet relations in the aftermath of Tiananmen, as well as the success or failure of *glasnost* in the Soviet Union, will also surely affect the people of the region—the Philippines included—and call for our ready responses.