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Upheaval in China; From Asian Neighbors, It's Silence and Anxiety

By **STEVEN ERLANGER** and **SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES** MAY 23, 1989

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Asian governments are largely keeping silent on the upheaval in China, waiting to see whether Beijing will move toward further democracy or repression.

The democracies of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations - Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei and Indonesia - are making unsurprising comments about supporting democratic aspirations and "dialogue." But they are concerned about instability in China, the potential emergence of a harder Communist line and the inevitability of some stagnation in policy-making, especially around the issue of a Cambodian settlement, which had been progressing nicely.

Nearly all the Asean countries also regard their democracies as relatively fragile, and some Thai officials are worried explicitly about the resurgence of student activism - already visible in South Korea, Burma, Japan, and even Indonesia - spreading in uncomfortable and unpredictable fashions. Role of the Military

At the same time, the boldness of the students in Tiananmen Square and the apparent unwillingness of the Chinese Army to disperse them is impressing upon

the South Korean military that the crushing of such dissent is becoming more difficult, if not somewhat obsolete, as a habit of policy, officials there say.

But it is also reminding the Filipinos, whose "people power" upheaval in February 1986 overthrew President Ferdinand E. Marcos, of the important role of the military in their peaceful revolution. Max V. Soliven, a columnist for The Philippine Star, said today that "people power" in China will be doomed if the military moves to support the party leadership, "just as it would have been doomed here in 1986 if the armed forces had remained solidly behind Marcos."

The Communist countries of Indochina, diplomats here say, have made almost no comments at all on events in China, and have barely covered the spreading student demonstrations in the press. This caution is hardly surprising, since so much is at stake and so much is in flux. "It's unlikely Vietnam or any of the others will say anything significant until matters are clearer in Beijing," a Western diplomat said.

One senior Vietnamese official admitted to private fascination with China, but saw events there as a matter of mass unhappiness being manipulated in the midst of a fierce internal party struggle. Asked about Cambodia, he shrugged. 'No Time for Policy Changes'

The concern in Asean, a senior Thai official said, is that there will be a reversion in China to a more doctrinaire or even revolutionary Communism under Prime Minister Li Peng. "Even words make people nervous," the official said. "When Li says the socialist system is being threatened, the whole tone is different. If the line used to suppress the students is this one of threats to socialism, there may be tighter discipline and even ideological furor," not unknown in Beijing.

An aide to the South Korean President, Roh Tae Woo, put it this way: "There is a feeling that a more democratic China is a less hostile China."

Deep down, the Thai official said, there is inevitable uneasiness that China might move so far as to try to resurrect its support for Communist insurgencies throughout the region. That had a bit of paranoia about it, he admitted, but China's instability, if it continues, is likely to make Beijing less likely to compromise on a Cambodia solution or to alter its policy toward the Khmer Rouge guerrillas.

"Instability brings bureaucratic paralysis," he said. "This is no time for policy changes." At the least, he said, the normal functioning of foreign policy had come

to a near halt, with all visits suspended, including that of a Thai deputy prime minister scheduled for later this month. 'A High Political Price'

Other Asian diplomats here suggested that with China in confusion, events in Cambodia might drift closer to civil war if the Vietnamese troop withdrawal goes ahead as scheduled -Hanoi says its troops will be home by Sept. 30 - and there is no international peace conference organized beforehand. With the Khmer Rouge stepping up its military activity, they suggested, Vietnam might find some pretext to delay its withdrawal.

The Japanese Government, with its own preoccupations with power, has said little, except that it is carefully watching events in China.

India has a rather more complicated relationship with China, and while the New Delhi Government has said little about events there, the student uprising has provided an odd sort of solace. In 1947-49, the two huge countries made very different choices. The Indian commitment to democracy has stuck, but China has moved ahead in village development.

"The Chinese have done better, but paid a high political price," said Giri Deshingkar, a China expert and director of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi. "But Indians feel vindicated in the sense that our economic record is not that bad. and we have preserved democracy."

Exiled Tibetans based in India have been quick to seize on the imposition of martial law in Beijing as an indication of the intolerant nature of the regime. Today the exiled Association of Tibetan People's Deputies issued a statement saying in part: "When such a magnitude of their own people are unhappy, how can the Tibetan people, living under Chinese domination, be happy?"

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