Tiananmen long legacy

BOOK REVIEW

SHYAM SARAN

I read Vijay Gokhale’s recent book on the events leading up to the Tiananmen Square incident of June 4, 1989 with special interest. Several years ago, while serving in the Indian Embassy in Beijing, like the author, I was eyewitness to the first Tiananmen incident of April 1976. In many ways, the second incident was a replay of the first. In 1976, it was the death of Premier Zhou Enlai, and the ensuing intra-party factional struggle that led to crowds gathering at the famous square and laying wreaths to pay homage to the late Premier. In 1989 it was the death of the former Party Secretary Hu Yaobang that was the proximate cause of crowds, in particular students, gathering at the square, laying wreaths and putting up posters to honour the memory of a popular leader. The occasion in both cases was the Qingming festival, when Chinese sweep family graves and honour their ancestors. The political backdrop in both cases was an intensifying factional conflict within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership. Zhou Enlai’s death in January 1976 emobdied the radical wing led by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, to attack veteran cadres led by Deng Xiaoping. In 1989, as Mr Gokhale has shown, it was a bitter contestation between Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang, who represented the reformist wing, and Premier Li Peng, who advocated more state control over the economy. Though Deng Xiaoping was determined to push ahead with economic reforms, he was equally committed to maintaining the party’s unquestioned leadership role. Mr Gokhale has sketched a rounded picture of Deng Xiaoping as consistently upholding the Leninist party state even while pursuing unprecedented economic reforms. As the author convincingly demonstrates, it was inevitable that any threat to the CCP would be ruthlessly suppressed. And this is what happened, with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) being deployed to clear the square and restore order. In 1976, the demonstrations lasted a few days. The 1989 replay extended over several weeks and the scale of the demonstrations was much larger.

Mr Gokhale is critical of western governments and media for misjudging the nature of the Tiananmen demonstrations and the role of the dramatic personae among the student ranks. He suggests that the clearing of the square was achieved with minimal violence and order was restored swiftly. While western assessments may have been misplaced and the number of deaths difficult to estimate, violence was widespread. In the initial stages, Chinese television itself carried gory images of PLA soldiers having been shot, beaten to death and strung from the rafters on overpasses. Even until recently, several hundred “mothers of Tiananmen” have gathered publicly with portraits of their children killed by the PLA during their anti-riot operations and asking for a “reversal of verdict” on the Tiananmen incident, which the CCP has condemned as a “counter-revolutionary turmoil.” There were also credible reports of violence in several other cities across China. So while Mr Gokhale’s criticism of the western media, its reliance on wild rumours then circulating and wishful thinking of a brewing civil war is well taken, one must appreciate the print and visual reports gathered, sometimes at great risk, by western and Japanese journalists, of an unfolding political and humanitarian crisis. Mr Gokhale draws attention to the factional infighting in the student leaders’ ranks and their hunger for personal publicity. But there is also the iconic video clip of a young Chinese blocking the way of a PLA tank, which does convey something of the courage manifest among those gathered at the square and the genuine yearning for freedom that many Chinese youth and ordinary citizens aspired to. The West may have been wrong in assuming that the demonstrations were for its style and substance of democracy but both in 1976 and in 1989, there is no doubt that Chinese people, particularly the young, did aspire for a political dispensation that is more participatory and less oppressive than the current Leninist state.

The book also contains a perceptive analysis of US-China relations as they have evolved since the Tiananmen incident. Mr Gokhale shows how even since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Chinese leadership has been convinced that the US is pursuing a policy of subverting the Chinese Leninist state through political and ideological subversion. Positive and sometimes even cooperative relations with the US have been tactical, designed to help achieve the levers of economic and technological power to enable the pursuit of the unchanging strategic aim of frustrating the US threat. Under Xi Jinping China is convinced that its time has come and that it can take on a declining America. Mr Gokhale’s analysis brings out the structural nature of the US-China contention very clearly.

What I enjoyed about the book was Mr Gokhale’s impressive grasp of the arcane dynamics of the political jostling that has been endemic in the CCP since its inception. His account of the political contestation playing out behind the scenes is gripping and testimony to his deep familiarity with China. His book is a welcome, though an all too rare, glimpse into the Chinese reality. As he points out, Indians need much more familiarity with their giant neighbour whose impact on India’s own future will be substantial.

The reviewer is a former Foreign Secretary and Senior Fellow, CFR.