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What Putin and Russia Can Learn From China

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President Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012, his new reactionary course, and now the acute crisis concerning Ukraine have finally taken economic reforms off the nation's agenda.

Russia, having launched retaliatory sanctions against the West, wastes its own reserve funds and citizens' pensions on the needs of the moment, while state companies ask the government for bailouts of billions and even trillions of rubles.

But as China's experience shows, that same refusal to reform can undermine both a regime's stability and even the foundational system.

Twenty-five years ago, on June 4, 1989, the communist authorities in China violently dispersed a tent camp surrounded by barricades on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Hundreds of protesters and dozens of government soldiers were killed by tanks and gunfire.

That event sent shockwaves throughout China and the rest of the world. It is historically significant in part because it raised the question of the relationship between stability, authoritarianism and reforms.

The widespread unrest began in China with the death of Hu Yaobang, the popular former general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, or CPC, who had only shortly before been pushed from his post by the all-powerful Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping for wanting to implement reforms too quickly.

In the early and mid-1980s, the Chinese public associated Hu Yaobang above all others with China's liberalization and modernization. He died of a heart attack on April 15, 1989, and protests among college students broke out the following day. Those soon swelled into mass protests engulfing 300 cities in China. The main slogan of the "Chinese Spring" was: "Down with corrupt bureaucrats!"

Events in the Soviet Union also played a role in events in China, as Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev simultaneously launched his radical political and economic transformations of society, giving priority to political rather than economic reforms.

Those developments in the Soviet Union inspired many Chinese who were eager for change to take decisive action.

The protesters on Tiananmen Square included individuals who demanded that the reforms move faster and expand to include the political sphere — with the goal of democratization — as well as those who, to the contrary, primarily opposed corruption and the stratification resulting from reforms, as well as those demanding a return to the egalitarianism of Maoism.

The same dilemma stood before Deng Xiaoping with regard to the CPC: Opponents of his policy of reform and openness were vying for power within the party.

Deng Xiaoping remembered well the lessons of Chinese history. He recalled the collapse of central authority in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the chaos that ensued, China's age-old dependence on foreign powers and decades of civil war and occupation.

He could not and did not want to permit the mass protests to undermine China's strength and integrity. It was for the sake of ensuring stability that he sent tanks into Tiananmen Square.

However, he was left with the question of what to do after successfully quelling the uprising. What would best ensure the long-term stability of China and the CPC authorities?

Should he continue and accelerate the very reforms that, at least in part, prompted the protests, or should he curtail the reforms and return to the former socialist and egalitarian status quo?

Deng Xiaoping chose the strategy of continuing and accelerating economic reforms and embracing openness to the outside world and friendship with the U.S. — all as the main conditions for strengthening stability.

According to this logic, the faster and more successful the reforms, the sooner the quality

of life would improve for the Chinese people, generating in turn greater support for the CPC leadership and resulting in greater stability of society and the state.

Deng Xiaoping's strategy was a paradox: He gambled that radical reforms would guarantee stability by enabling the ruling party to maintain its authoritarian control over the country.

After the crackdown on Tiananmen Square, Shanghai native Jiang Zemin became the new CPC general secretary. Together with the new Premier Zhu Rongji, he became the leader of the accelerated reforms and an extraordinarily successful reformer.

Six months later, Deng Xiaoping voluntarily stepped down from all of his leadership posts and retired, retaining the right to monitor and, if necessary, make adjustments to the country's political course. He simultaneously introduced the principle of changing the entire CPC leadership every 10 years.

Development as a guiding principle and a guarantor of stability was the essence of Deng Xiaoping's successful strategy. "Development is an absolute principle," he often repeated in his public speeches.

As for political reforms, Deng Xiaoping predicted that China would implement them by the year 2000, although Beijing has yet to begin that process.

However, that question will come to the fore as civil society develops and various interest groups crystallize.

In any case, China's experience shows that in the triad of authoritarianism, reform and stability, reform plays the most decisive role. A rejection of reforms or their failure in practice undermines long-term stability — the Holy Grail of all authoritarian regimes.

Putin's refusal to make economic reforms a priority and ensure the stability of his own regime could cost him dearly in the future.

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