

Do Revolutions Lead to Greater Security or Insecurity?

Written by Lin Alexandra Mortensgaard

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LIN ALEXANDRA MORTENSGAARD, MAR 12 2015

This essay will examine whether revolutions lead to greater security or insecurity. It will do so by first focusing on definitional issues such as the elements characterizing a revolution, time frame issues, and how revolution has developed as a concept. It will then examine whether revolutions lead to greater security or insecurity by focusing on two case studies: the Chinese Revolution of 1949 and Poland's Post-Communist Revolution of 1989. The essay will not focus on the revolutions themselves, but rather on the security consequences that the revolutions have led to. The issue of security/insecurity is examined by first looking briefly at state-level security in the traditional realist sense. The essay then moves on to include a broader definition of security by focusing on societal security – i.e. the security of specific groups below the state level such as landlords, peasants, and women. The essay, therefore, argues that the answer to the main question is contingent upon another question: whose security is concerned? The essay will conclude that no single answer to the essay question exists but rather that security is a multi-layered concept which is difficult to pin down in specific rules. To be sure, the essay will focus on the security implications that revolutions have for the revolutionary states themselves, not the effects revolutions have on the international system or other states' security.

In order to look at the effects of revolutions on security or insecurity, it is necessary to first identify what a revolution is. Surprisingly, little IR research has, however, been done on the topic[1] and perhaps as a consequence of this, no standard definition of the term 'revolution' exists within IR. A prominent scholar on revolutions, Theda Skocpol, defines revolutions as "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below." [2] David Lane expands on this by stating that "structural change" [3] must be present as a consequence of any revolution. 'Structural change' means the creation of a new socio-political system and the replacement of the political class. [4] If no structural change occurs, then the event might be a putsch or coup d'état, which are both characterized by their lack of socio-political change. Additionally, neither of them result in significant changes to leadership and they take place with a low level of public participation. [5] Both the 1949 Chinese Revolution and the 1989 Polish Revolution led to a change in leadership, enjoyed public participation, and led to enormous structural changes on the road to a communist and a democratic state, respectively.

However, a problem arises: how can we determine the end of a revolution and thereby evaluate the extent of its structural change? When Zhou Enlai refused to comment on the French Revolution because it was "a little too soon to say," [6] he made a very important point: history is continuous and it is difficult to draw clear lines through it. When are state reforms no longer structural, revolutionary changes, but rather normal political changes? In this context, Hannah Arendt's identification of two different types of revolutions may shed some light. Arendt distinguishes between those revolutions with a clear end-point, resulting in constitutional government (such as the American and French Revolution), and those that are defined as continuous and constant (such as the Russian and the Chinese Revolution). [7] This essay examines one of each type. The continuous character of the Chinese Revolution makes it difficult to assess its implications for security, which is why this essay only focuses on the beginning of the revolution, up until Mao's death.

Contrasting the Polish Revolution of 1989 and the Chinese Revolution of 1949 also necessitates another important question: how has the concept of revolution changed over time? As both Timothy Garton Ash and Theodor Tudoroiu have noted, revolutions have changed recently in two important ways. Firstly, violence is no longer a necessary

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component. Secondly, they no longer have to be class-based. The first becomes evident when looking at the post-communist revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989. These were largely based on civil disobedience rather than violence.[8] Garton Ash calls this “people power”[9] and assigns this to what he calls VR (Velvet Revolution) 1989-type revolutions. In contrast to VR-type revolutions is the 1789-type revolutions such as the French, Russian, and American Revolutions. The former is associated with the round table (i.e. negotiations and compromise), the latter with the guillotine. Moreover, VR-type revolutions are less utopian. Rather than striving for an imagined system that has never been tried before, the VR-type strives for a long-tried system of democracy. The second major change to the concept refers to the fact that to succeed, revolutions no longer have to appeal to a specific class. Unlike Mao and Lenin’s 1789-type revolutions that appealed to either the peasants or the workers, the VR-type appeals to all of society.[10] This is perhaps due to the decline of class as a form of social identification and the replacement of it by other modes of identification, such as ethnicity and consumer status.[11] The essay will look at one 1789-type revolution (China, 1949) and one VR-type revolution (Poland, 1989) in order to examine how the type of revolution may have bearing on the level of security/insecurity that is produced.

When examining whether revolutions lead to changes in security, it is necessary to recognize that security is a multi-layered concept which includes both the state level and the societal level. State security, in the realist sense, focuses on protecting the sovereignty of the state through self-help; securing the state is done by entering into alliances or building capacities which make it possible for the state to protect itself against aggression.[12]

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949 after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), headed by Mao Zedong, had won the Chinese Civil War. The Chinese Revolution is usually dated to 1949[13] by historians; however, as noted by Arendt above, this revolution exemplifies a continuous revolution and thus 1949 is interpreted as the starting point to the revolutionary changes. The PRC case shows how revolutions may lead to a reconfiguration of alliances. That is, non-revolutionary states may oppose the revolutionary state due to major ideological splits. This was the case when the Sino-American alliance was dissolved as a consequence of the Chinese Revolution.[14] The US could not ally with a proclaimed communist state, which was supported by the USSR. It would be difficult to argue that the Sino-American split left the PRC with greater state security than before. The PRC’s entry into the Korean War (1950-53), for example, was a direct consequence of its new alliance with the USSR.[15]

Poland’s post-communist revolution of 1989 serves as a good contrast to the PRC case. Poland went from being on the USSR-side of the Cold War to joining NATO and the EU. When joining NATO, a state’s military equipment and fighting forces will be raised to NATO standards. Moreover, NATO forces will be obligated to come to the state’s military assistance should the need arise.[16] Poland has thus gone from being antagonistic to a number of states due to its USSR-alliance to being part of a security alliance with no pronounced enemy. Moreover, in Poland, prior to EU membership, the common notion was that a ‘return to Europe’[17] would automatically solve any security challenges. Poland, therefore, does not want to find itself “once again on the ‘wrong side’” of any security divisions.[18] In this way, it could be argued that Poland’s 1989 revolution has led to an increase in material security (weapons, soldiers etc.) as a consequence of NATO membership and an increase in ideological security as a consequence of EU membership. Whether revolutions lead to more or less state security will necessarily vary from case to case, depending on alliances made or broken.

However, security is not just vertical, state-based. Any attempt to examine security must also include the horizontal, societal level within states.[19] How is the security of groups and individuals within the state affected by revolutions? Looking at the PRC, a wide range of examples point to the general insecurity of the population. One of the first undertakings of the Mao-led PRC was to attack those that did not fit into the working or peasant class. Thus, former landlords were not only stripped of property, but also seen as class-enemies who were attacked in political campaigns.[20] Confronting the former landlords was part of the land reforms instituted by the CCP. These confrontations often culminated in poor peasants venting their anger towards the landlords by violent means. An estimate concludes that 0.5-1 million landlords were killed in the early years of the PRC.[21] Evidently, the insecurity of this societal group increased exponentially as a result of the revolution. On the other hand, it is also necessary to mention that other groups became more secure as a consequence of the exact same land reforms. The redistribution of land meant more economic security and more opportunities for the poor peasants. Likewise, urban workers gained

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lifelong employment and welfare benefits such as health care and housing. In this way, certain groups within society gained in security as a direct result of the revolution.[22]

This class-based security was, however, soon destroyed by two reform-induced disasters: the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966 to the early 70s). The former sought a great leap forward socially and economically. Despite achieving some improvements, the overall effect of The Great Leap Forward was mass-starvation due to the failure of its agricultural programs. The reforms resulted in death from starvation of 20-25 million people between 1960 and 1961.[23] The CCP soon began another grand campaign – the Cultural Revolution. This campaign, among other things, aimed to give institutions such as universities and the military a general overhaul. The Cultural Revolution quickly took on a very violent dimension, partly because Mao encouraged it. Hence, Mao's Red Guards led to the deaths of millions, all while the police and military watched passively.[24] Evidently, the two biggest revolutionary campaigns of the CCP led to an enormous increase in the insecurity of the general population, not to speak of specific groups within, such as the peasants and the intellectuals.

The distinction between VR-type revolutions and 1789-type might offer some insights here; perhaps the horizontal insecurity that the Chinese Revolution led to can be attributed to its violent and undemocratic character? If so, has Poland's 1989 Revolution led to greater horizontal security as a consequence of its peaceful and democratic character?

Poland has experienced a successful transformation into a multi-party democratic system and has shifted from a command-based economy to a market-based one. Today, a multiplicity of political parties exist in Poland[25] such as the Civic Platform, the Law and Justice Party, and Democratic Left Alliance. Democracy in itself does not equal more societal security, but it does offer opportunities for the people to voice their grievances. Furthermore, Poland's post-1989 development has led to changes to welfare services such as pensions, which now cover all economically active individuals and social insurance schemes for people with disabilities.[26]

Poland has, however, also experienced setbacks in societal security as a consequence of its revolution. One area where this is visible is women's rights. Valentine Moghadam has noted that revolutions inspired by socialist ideology have tended to benefit women's emancipation, whereas revolutions inspired by nationalist ideology have tended to result in worse conditions for women. This phenomenon shows in Poland where re-entry of the Catholic Church into Polish society after 1989 has led to changes in abortion legislation. It is now possible for "doctors to refuse health services because of conscience-based objections"[27] and women may only get abortion under very specific circumstances. This has forced women to attend illegal clinics to get abortions. Not only is this often a costly affair for the woman, but it also increases the risk of complications and decreases the general quality of health care that the woman receives.[28] Evidently, whether a VR-type revolution leads to greater security or insecurity on the societal plan is contingent on which group or individual the spotlight is on.

This essay has examined whether revolutions lead to greater security or insecurity and has found that this question does not warrant a single answer. No clear pattern is discernible neither on the state level nor on the societal level. Furthermore, it is also problematic to draw conclusions regarding the differences between continuous and non-continuous revolutions and VR-type revolutions and 1789-type revolutions regarding security. On the one hand, it could be argued that Poland as a consequence of its VR-type, non-continuous revolution has become more secure on both the state level and the societal level. However, the fact that Polish women have to some extent become more insecure due to the new abortion law makes this argument problematic as well. On the other hand, the PRC under Mao also defies simple conclusions. Despite great increases in insecurity at the societal level, the security of some groups actually increased as a consequence of the reforms. This leads to the conclusion that whether revolutions result in greater security or insecurity is entirely dependent on whose security we are talking about. State security is different from the security of groups within society. And the security of different groups varies as well – sometimes to the extent where one group's security is increased at the expense of another's, as it happened to the Chinese landlords.

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