

## *Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, and Reversing the Verdict on the 1976 “Tiananmen Incident”*

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### *Abstract*

In the context of wider misunderstanding of the roles of Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping in the post-Mao “reversal of verdicts,” conventional wisdom views Hua as an obstacle to the vindication of the 1976 Tiananmen protests, and the outcome as contributing to Deng’s victory in an ongoing struggle between the two. In fact, the politics of the Tiananmen reversal were complicated and multilayered, and at clear variance from common assumptions concerning the two leaders. At the level of specific policy, there is no evidence of differences between Hua and Deng. But in terms of engagement, Hua was more proactive in pushing the process forward, albeit hoping that this could be done in a relatively quiet manner, while Deng showed little interest. When the crucial moment came during the 1978 Central Work Conference preceding the Third Plenum, Deng was overseas while Hua took decisive action to affirm that the protests were “completely revolutionary.” Back in Beijing, Deng supported “the decision of the Party Center headed by Chairman Hua,” a decision reflecting Hua’s political approach from virtually the outset of his leadership. As both leaders sought to explain the decision, Deng’s main concern was to temper the result, particularly by warning of “consequences” that could damage Mao’s reputation if not handled carefully.

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