



REFRAMING CHINA POLICY: THE CARNEGIE DEBATES

Debate #1: Is Communist Party Rule Sustainable in China?
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Unpredictability

My role in this debate on the question “Is the Communist regime in China sustainable?” is to suggest that it is not. This is of course the more difficult case to argue. It is always simpler to project the present into the future. I have a further problem: timing. I can outline the dangers inherent in the political tectonics of communist China, but predicting when the system might go down the tubes is much more difficult. Take seismologists for example: they have pinpointed an earthquake along the San Andreas fault as being a potentially devastating threat to California. But to the best of my knowledge no expert has yet predicted when the San Andreas fault might blow. For the purposes of this debate, however, that is not good enough. So let me say that the problems I shall analyse are likely to result in a breakdown in the communist regime in years rather than decades. Thus this possibility is one which US policy makers should focus on now.

Let me give some examples of the uncertainties involved in analysing events in China. In 1989 the student democracy movement seemed to come out of nowhere; earlier in the year, Peking University students were described as being only interested in TOEFL and Mahjong. Suddenly the death of Hu Yaobang catapulted them into political action, and for a time, it looked as if the party’s back was against the wall. The ruling politburo standing committee-- five men--split three ways on the proclamation of martial law: two for, two against and one undecided. Without the toughness and determination of Deng Xiaoping to preserve the party-state, the outcome might have been very different.

Ten years later in 1999, 10,000 members of the Falungong suddenly appeared unannounced at the seat of state power, the gate to the Zhongnanhai. Fortunately for the public security services, it was a peaceful protest, but it frightened President Jiang Zemin into launching a massive persecution of the sect. A few years later, the SARS epidemic took the regime completely by surprise and overwhelmed attempts to keep it secret.

All these events were unexpected by the Chinese leadership. So dangers to the regime do exist, and as the student movement and Falungong episode illustrate, can quickly escalate nationwide. Almost every day in China there is a public protest somewhere--last year 87,000, according to official figures, involving a few million people--and sometimes they are put down with lethal force. Nobody can tell, not even the leaders in Beijing, if one of these might be the Maoist "single spark" that lights a nationwide prairie fire of protest.

PRC achievements

Nevertheless, the present looks very bright. The Communist party is presiding over the most astonishing example of economic growth in human history. Over the past quarter century, GDP growth has averaged almost 10% a year. China puts its total GDP in 2004 at \$6.2 trillion, second only to the United States. Its total reserves are about to hit \$1 trillion. Per capita GDP has risen from 460 yuan in 1980 to 8,184 yuan in 2002, that is, from under \$60 to about \$1,000. Never before has so much wealth been created by so many people in so short a time.

This extraordinary record was not the result of central planning; as Chinese leaders have expressed it, they have been crossing the river by feeling for the stones. But it did spring from a crucial belief: if the party did not take radical steps to increase national prosperity after the ravages of ten years of Cultural Revolution--during which the country lost the equivalent of more than a year of national income--they might well be thrown out by an angry populace. While China had been tearing itself apart, all round East Asia, there had been economic "miracles. The PRC had to jump on the East Asian version of the capitalist bandwagon, abandoning Maoism and even the Stalinist command economy.

Deng's conviction was reinforced by the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Within a couple of months, he was engaged in a barnstorming tour of south China, apparently fearing that if economic development was not speeded up, Chinese communism might follow Soviet communism into the dustbin of history. Egalitarianism was abandoned; some could get rich before others. Today, under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, the government is striving to reduce the inequalities between coastal and inland provinces that that Dengist doctrine produced, in case those inequalities should produce unrest.

For the prerequisite for economic growth according to Deng was stability: "The key to our success in modernization, the reform and the opening to the outside is stability...China cannot afford any disorder." Opinion polling and anecdotal evidence suggests that at least the thriving urban middle class along China's gold coast have bought this argument. But just in case, any sign, however tentative, of a democratic upsurge--the formation of the China Democracy Party for instance--is instantly and forcefully suppressed. Moreover, intellectuals, who might be thought to favor a plural society, seem glad to have finally been restored to their historic role as members of and advisors to government, and are probably not keen to embrace a democratic system which could put peasants rather than scholar officials in the driving seat.

The combination of stunning economic growth and apparent stability--foreigners rarely witness any of the tens of thousands of incidents of instability--has brought China to virtual great power status. The PRC is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. It is a significant nuclear power. It is one of only three countries to have put a man into space. It is a member of the WTO. It is about to host the Olympic Games, only the second developing country to do so. For the hundreds of foreign firms that have invested billions of dollars in China's modernization, for the tens of thousands of foreign

tourists who have gawped at the towers of Pu Dong, for the millions of customers of Walmart for whom almost everything seems to have been made in China, the idea that this juggernaut might collapse must surely seem off the wall. But in fact, the Chinese political system is fragile and could fracture, fatally. One needs a bit of history to understand why.

The strengths of the early Chinese communist system

Before the Cultural Revolution, China had what was arguably the best led and best organized, the most dynamic and most disciplined communist party in the Soviet bloc. Within seven years of the capture of power in 1949, the regime reunited the mainland, fought the US-led UN forces to a draw in Korea, collectivized the peasantry and small traders, and had taken over the running of industry and commerce. Even the utopian folly of Mao's Great Leap Forward and the terrible famine that ensued did not shake the party's grip. There were four elements that accounted for the CCP's power.

- Most important was the position of Chairman Mao himself, an increasingly remote and godlike figure whose unrivalled prestige as the architect of the CCP's victory meant his word was law. While some of his closest colleagues may have doubted the wisdom of his directives from time to time, almost none were prepared to risk dismissal, disgrace or worse by provoking his incandescent anger and withering scorn.
- Ensuring that Mao's word was made manifest were the cadres of the party. As a result of the violence involved in the successive campaigns carried out in the 1950s--land reform, collectivization, brain-washing, anti-corruption, anti counter-revolution, anti-rightist, anti-right-opportunist--party cadres had made it abundantly clear who was boss and what would be the consequences of defiance of party orders. The most tragic example of cadre supremacy was the famine of the early 1960s when peasants followed orders that contradicted their experience.
- Giving the cadres the confidence in their right to rule was their embrace of the "scientific" doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, the bible of regimes from the Elbe to the East China Sea. It explained the past, guided the present, predicted the future. Most significantly, it was the doctrine which Mao had successfully adapted to enable the party to conquer China. How could cadres thus armed not know what was good for the people?
- The fourth element was the People's Liberation Army, flushed with success from the anti-Japanese War, the Civil War and the Korean War. It had recovered the territories of Xinjiang and Tibet. It had thrashed the vaunted Indian Army in the Himalayan war of 1962. It was supremely loyal to Mao, the commander-in-chief who had led them to victory, and stood ready to act in defence of the civil power if necessary. It did not prove necessary until the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76.

The erosion of systemic strengths

These four sinews of power were seriously weakened by the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and the revulsion against it during Deng's reform era.

- During the Cultural Revolution, the Mao cult was hyped beyond belief. Chinese were supposed to stand before a portrait of Mao in the morning and ask guidance and then to report back to the portrait in the evening. Mao's short-lived successor, the unfortunate Hua Guofeng attempted to prolong this extravagant behavior by erecting the mausoleum that stands in Tiananmen Square. But realising that the blind worship of Mao had led China to disaster, Deng Xiaoping publicly blamed Mao for launching the Cultural Revolution. But he had a dilemma; as he put it: fully to discredit Mao

“would mean discrediting our party and state.” Instead, he took steps to try to ensure that China would never again be so turned in on itself that it could be in thrall to a Mao-like figure. Opening up China to the outside world was one of his methods. Another was to pick successors with little likelihood of emulating Mao. Hu Jintao is emerging as a canny bureaucratic infighter, but charismatic he isn’t.

- During the Cultural Revolution, even Marxism-Leninism ceded primacy to Mao Zedong Thought, the word of Mao as parlayed through the scripture of the Little Red Book. With the example of the East Asian miracles in front of him, Deng realised that China could no longer afford adherence to an antiquated doctrine or utopian fantasies. It didn’t matter what color the cat was as long as it caught mice. Deng labelled Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong as one of four cardinal principles to be respected by one and all, but only because to have thrown it out would have contributed to the regime’s delegitimation. It is doubtful if many of the party’s 70 million members ever consult its texts.
- During the Cultural Revolution, Mao unleashed society, in the form of the Red Guards, against the state. Party officials throughout China were beaten, tortured, imprisoned, sometimes killed. Mao may have thought he was merely removing cadres who had gone soft on revolution. But for the population at large witnessing the humiliation of thousands of officials whom they had hitherto obeyed implicitly, it was not just individuals but the party as an institution which was being trashed. Today the party has lost the respect, authority, and legitimacy it had in the early years of the regime. Membership is aspired to by careerists, but there are likely few true believers in the eternal correctness of the party.
- During the Cultural Revolution, as the party ceased to function, the PLA took its place. It became bloated and factionalised; its officers became overbearing and extravagant. In the reform era, they became corrupt too. The armed suppression of the 1989 student movement further undermined its standing as the one institution not fatally compromised by the Cultural Revolution.

Implications of the systemic erosion

“So what?” one might say. Despite all these setbacks and problems, the communist regime has shown resilience in the post-Mao era, and raised China to its present high international standing. What does it matter if Hu is not Mao or even Deng, if the party is not respected, if ideology has no place in 21st century China, or if the PLA is just another army? These changes matter for the following reasons:

- The regime was saved in 1989, in my view, only because Deng Xiaoping had the prestige, authority, and connections to ensure that the PLA obeyed his orders to suppress the democracy movement. At the time, eight generals protested against the entry of troops into Beijing, and the PLA’s two surviving marshals went along with it only on the assumption that there would be no bloodshed. Deng was able to have his way because he had high military credentials dating back to the revolution, and more recently had been Chief-of-Staff. What 1989 demonstrated was that in a national crisis, the political leadership fractured and an essentially political problem could only be solved by military means. However, no army relishes having to fire on its own people, and it is highly doubtful if Hu Jintao could emulate Deng if a similar crisis erupted.
- Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought was a totalist doctrine in that it was used both to guide state policy and to prescribe society’s organization. It was the glue that held the Maoist state together, binding party and people in one all-embracing ideological system. That the party is very conscious of what it has lost is shown by the

way successive leaders have tried to devise new formulations to take its place: “socialist spiritual civilization,” “the four represents,” “a harmonious society.” None have worked for they have little content. The party has also tried to use nationalism to court popularity, but that is a two-edged weapon. If anti-Japanese demonstrators feel the Government is not standing up for Chinese interests then they may well vent their anger on their leaders, as has been the case in the past. In fact, there is an ideological vacuum at the heart of the PRC. Hence the rise of the Falungong and other indigenous sects, and the spread of Christianity far beyond the dreams of 19th century missionaries. How long and how brutally can the party hold down the lid?

- Among party cadres, the Maoist injunction to “Serve the people” has been replaced by the permissive Deng era slogan “To get rich is glorious.” The current investigation of the highest levels of the Shanghai party certainly has political dimensions, but it is feasible because it is about corruption, including possibly by a member of the Politburo. As party leaders regularly acknowledge and bemoan, corruption is rife, probably endemic, within the party. The CCP’s corruption was a prime reason why ordinary people lined the streets of Beijing and other cities cheering on the students in 1989. Party leaders are very cognizant that the corruption of the Nationalist regime was a major reason why Chiang Kai-shek lost popular support in the late 1940s, and fear a similar fate.
- As for the PLA, it is obviously still capable of putting down unrest, but would it obey Hu as it obeyed Deng? Or would the PLA leadership split as the Red Army’s did during the abortive Soviet coup in the summer of 1989? Much would depend on the other half of the equation, for in addition to the erosion of state capacity for control, there is the rise of social activism.

During the Cultural Revolution, the population at large was liberated from the pressure of party rule. Mao advocated: “Dare to think, dare to speak, dare to act,” and it was not just Red Guards that heeded his admonition. Despite the revival of party rule under Deng in the reform era, the genie of social activism in diverse causes has not been put back in the bottle. Most Chinese doubtless support the party’s emphasis on the importance of stability for the country’s development, but that is also true of most people in most countries most of the time. Unlike most countries, however, Chinese society is no longer securely moored within the state.

Far from it. Reform and opening up have encouraged social activism. There have been a myriad examples over the 30 years since the Cultural Revolution ended. In addition to the major episodes mentioned earlier, Tiananmen and the Falungong, there have been demonstrations by workers over lay-offs and poor compensation, peasant resistance to land confiscations, illegal taxes and fees, the health hazards stemming from gross environmental degradation. Official corruption is very often a subtext in these cases. It is this interaction of diminished state authority and increased social volatility that makes for a fragile Chinese political system.

The CCP has acted as a competent fire brigade to date, imprisoning activists and appeasing their followers. By controlling the press, it normally manages to contain demonstrations locally. But in a world of cell phones, it has already proved impossible to suppress knowledge of the worst cases of regime violence. At some point, in my view, one of these “sparks” will ignite a national prairie fire. In that event, disagreement within the top leadership over how to react cannot be ruled out. It certainly occurred in the case of Tiananmen and seems also to have been an issue over the Falungong. Such disagreements would further endanger the viability of the political system.

Implications for US policy

If the communist regime in China does prove unsustainable, it will not be because of outside pressure, though the international norms to which China has been exposed, and in some cases has had to adapt, may have been having an educational impact on some of its officials. American policy makers are best advised to maintain current policies: engagement with China over a whole range of issue areas, but not endorsement of policies, for instance human rights violations, which offend American values. Americans may never reconcile themselves to accepting an authoritarian regime such as China's as a "strategic partner," but it makes very good sense to try to enmesh the PRC in all manner of international regimes to ensure acceptable behavior.

In the event of imminent regime collapse, a hands-off policy would be vital. Since there is currently no visible alternative to the Communist Party, it is difficult to predict what might ensue from its demise. A military takeover to maintain or restore order is certainly one possibility. An attempt by one faction to stem off complete collapse by reconstituting the party under a new name and with new policies is another; it would parallel developments in some East European countries after 1989. A third possibility might be a proclamation by some group of leaders or generals that they proposed to introduce a democratic system. Whatever the outcome, such a crisis could be prolonged, and the US would be well-advised not to do anything which could worsen relations with a post-communist Chinese government until it was clear what it stood for.

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