



REFRAMING CHINA POLICY: THE CARNEGIE DEBATES

Debate #1: Is Communist Party Rule Sustainable in China? Library of Congress, Washington, DC October 5, 2006

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Defining the subject of debate

Analyzing China's current trajectory is not the same as predicting what will happen in the future. Unexpected events can throw any country off whatever track it is on. This has often happened in China, and it probably will again. For example, China's trajectory could be derailed by a downturn in the U.S. economy, a public health crisis, or war in Korea or the Taiwan Strait.¹

However, as I understand it, the debate in the "whither China?" literature is about what is likely to happen based on the facts that are already visible. Is China now facing so many challenges and meeting them so badly that its political system will most likely collapse?² (What happens after that is not specified by proponents of this view.) Or is the yearning for democracy growing so strong that the system will probably democratize?³ Or – as I argue – do the forces currently at work in the system, despite the fact that they are complex and pull in various directions, instead tend as a whole toward the continuation in power of what I have called a resilient authoritarian regime?⁴

In other words, we are talking more about the present than the future – or about the future insofar as it is discernable from the present. Change will happen, but the only way to say anything specific about the probable nature of that change is to look at the forces that are now in existence. My argument is that forces adequate to cause collapse or democratization are not in place, while forces that sustain the authoritarian regime are at work. I do not claim to know how long that situation will persist.

¹ Andrew J. Nathan, "Present at the Stagnation: Is China's Development Stalled?", *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2006), pp. 177-182.

² A view proposed, for example, by Gordon Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001).

³ Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁴ "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14:1 (January 2003), pp. 6-17.

In saying that the authoritarian system is resilient, I do not mean that it is static. It makes numerous policy changes and fewer, but some, structural changes. The ability to adapt is part of resilience. But pending the impact of some force that is not visible today – some exogenous change or contingent event – the trajectory at present is for continued authoritarian rule, not for change in the nature of the system.

U.S. China policy needs to be based on this fact.

Resilient authoritarianism

I describe China's authoritarian regime as "resilient" because it remains robustly authoritarian and securely in power. Some signs of the regime's resilience are:

- Hu Jintao's smooth succession to power in 2002-2003 and his consolidation of power since then.
- The regime's ability to discern problems in economy and society and to make policy changes to respond to these problems. Recent examples are reforms in the banking system and the abolition of the rural grain tax. Such reforms are seldom implemented smoothly, but over the long run they often have significant effects as shown by the entire history of the reform program since 1978.
- High levels of support for the regime in public opinion. When asked in a national random-sample survey in 2002, "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in our country," 79% of Chinese respondents expressed themselves as fairly or very satisfied the second highest percentage among eight Asian countries surveyed. (Many Chinese accept the regime's claim that it is a form of democracy.)
- The inability of social discontent and political dissent to cumulate. Social disorder happens viz. the much-quoted statistic of 84,000 "mass incidents" in 2005 but the protests do not link up. To invert a famous phrase of Mao's, a single spark nowadays does not start a prairie fire, and this is due to the efforts of the regime's fire brigades.

Roots of resilience

The authoritarian regime's grip on power remains secure for the following reasons:

- Economic growth has improved the welfare of most of the population, giving them a
 stake in the survival of the current regime as long as they continue to benefit from its
 policies and its stability.
- The regime has scored real as well as perceived achievements in foreign policy, such as securing the 2008 Olympics for Beijing, standing up to the U.S. and Japan on a variety of issues, and (in the perception of Chinese citizens) effectively containing the proindependence moves of Taiwan president Chen Shuibian. Such accomplishments generate a sense of pride among a nationalist public.
- The regime maintains a variety of safety-valve institutions which, however ineffective they are, nonetheless offer dissatisfied citizens an alternative to opposing the ruling party. These include the letters-and-visits system, the court system, the system of administrative litigation, the option of writing letters to the media, and Internet chat rooms that the government surveils and manipulates.
- The regime has been able to use repression to prevent the rise of any substantial political opposition. It buys off demonstrators with partial concessions while arresting organizers. When confronting determined, organized opponents like the China Democratic Party or Falungong, it observes for a while and then arrests and imprisons

⁵ Tianjian Shi, "China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System," in Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin, eds., *Citizens and Democratic Politics in East Asia* (forthcoming).

- activists. The regime has invested in a large Internet police force and in technology that has so far allowed it to prevent use of the web either to coordinate organizations or to spark spontaneous movements.
- The regime has managed the far-flung and complex propaganda system in such a way that the broad public perceives diversity and significant freedom in the media, while at the same time sensitive political messages are eliminated from the public sphere.⁶
- The Party has developed the ability to co-opt economic and social elites, so that it is "the only game in town" for ambitious persons. Either through membership or informal clientage, most entrepreneurs and ambitious intellectuals work with the Party.
- The regime has the necessary policy-making systems in place to respond to economic and social change. Although much of the local bureaucracy may be corrupt, nonetheless the regime has assembled within the central and some provincial organs a well qualified technocracy that gathers intelligence, maintains experts and think tanks, and deliberates internally so that bureaucratic stake-holders are heard. The government is capable of identifying its main problems (e.g., in the financial system, in environmental policy, in regard to peasant burdens, in regard to the social welfare safety net) and often (not always) makes technically adept decisions. In addition to being able to reach decisions it is often, although not always, able to enforce them on the bureaucracy.
- Crucial to the resilience of the regime is the elite's will to power. The leadership hangs together. If it were to split (as Gilley suggests will happen) then I agree that the regime would quickly fall, either by collapse or by democratic transition. But the leadership has drawn the lesson from June Fourth and "Su-Dong-Po" (the fall of communist regimes in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Poland) that the most important thing for all its members is not to show disunity. As Mao said, "Of all the important things, the possession of power is the most important." To that end, the elite has developed norms that limit the intensity of political conflict. These include the norms that top leaders retire at age 70, that top leaders have power to make decisions within the domains that they manage, that important decisions are made collectively, and that retired elders do not intervene in politics. As a result, under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the leaders have managed their relations in such a way that no destructive splits have emerged over either power or policy.

Trends

Of course, there are strong social trends that challenge the regime. These include:

- Vulnerabilities in the economy. The financial system is weak. State owned enterprises
 remain privileged and continue to operate inefficiently. Growth is overly dependent
 on exports. The economy faces an energy crunch. The regime has trouble
 constraining investment.
- The weakness of the authoritarian style of rule in providing public services, dealing with public health emergencies and natural disasters, curtailing corruption, and handling other "governance" issues. ⁹ Corrupt land seizures have been a potent source of rural and urban discontent. Corruption contributes to environmental damage and

⁶ Ashley Esarey, *Speak No Evil: Mass Media Control in Contemporary China* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2006).

⁷ Being "the only game in town" has become a political science indicator for the consolidation of democratic regimes. Logically, the same standard applies to authoritarian regimes.

⁸ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 168.

⁹ Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

- coal mine disasters, among many other ills. The regime faces an intensifying water supply crisis.
- The continued existence of a vast class of migrant workers who have second-class status and are dissatisfied with it, and of a class of laid-off and furloughed state enterprise employees who are just making ends meet; the continued backwardness of large parts of the rural countryside; the growth of religious movements independent of state control. With the rise of rights consciousness, disadvantaged groups seem to be pressing their claims more actively. A slowly growing cadre of lawyers and other activists are helping them. Although I said above that the public generally supports the regime, there are still tens of millions of people who are deeply dissatisfied.
- Against the background of these conditions, mass public support is fragile. People are satisfied as long as they perceive that the regime is performing and is determined to hold on to power. If the economy weakens, the country loses a war, or the regime shows indecisiveness in the face of challenges, public support can evaporate and the many repressed criticisms and dissatisfactions can surface. In short, an authoritarian regime is more vulnerable to "power deflation" than a democratic regime because it relies more on coercion to stay in power. The regime lives on a thin edge, which may help to explain why it acts as if it is so vulnerable, by taking such egregious measures as, for example, allowing local authorities to railroad to jail a blind legal activist who was trying to use the legal system to defend local women from coercive abuses of the population planning program.

Although the regime faces these challenges, we learn more about the sustainability of an authoritarian system from the "top-down" perspective than from the "bottom-up" perspective. Such regimes are not toppled, they fall. This happens only when they allow it to happen. To be sure, the etiology of authoritarian collapse involves a causal circle whose component steps are hard to disentangle. An authoritarian regime may give up its grip on power if it finds itself unable to deal with a rising tide of opposition. But the tide of opposition does not rise that high if the regime responds to problems with new policies that are generally effective, represses opposition with force, and constrains intra-regime disagreement within limits. It is as a result of its own actions —not because of a lack of problems — that the regime faces no organized opposition with a capability to challenge its hold on power.

To survive in the future, the regime will have to continue to respond to new challenges which no doubt will continuously emerge. China is vast, rapidly changing, and subject to all sorts of surprise events. The regime's power will deflate if it is perceived as underperforming, weak or divided, or if it loses its control of the information available to the public, or appears ineffective at repression. It is daunting to consider what the government has to do to survive – continue to deliver economic growth and nationalistic achievements, control the Internet, keep its policies a jump ahead of social, economic, and environmental problems, maintain excellent domestic intelligence operations, wield force effectively, and contain its internal disagreements and rivalries. Yet this is what the regime is currently doing.

Will the effort to achieve all these goals lead inevitably toward some gradual "modernization" in the system of rule, so that the regime would "grow out of authoritarianism" in the same way in which some scholars believe it has "grown out of the plan"? Not on current evidence. The regime's institutional changes have so far served to consolidate rather than weaken authoritarianism. The program to build "rule of law" has

¹⁰ Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change*, Second Ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), pp. 29-33.

resulted in courts that are subservient to the Party. The institution of village elections has strengthened the regime's grip on the countryside by purging local leaders who were unacceptable to the villagers. Diversification of the media and the spread of the Internet have allowed the regime to spread its view of the world more effectively. The institution of village elections has strengthened the regime of the villagers.

If the CCP regime is to continue to succeed it will, to be sure, have to recruit more technocrats, pursue higher educational standards, refine its legal system, upgrade its social welfare system, and do better in public health and environment. It will have to "modernize" its rule in certain senses. But this will not amount to a transformation in the type of regime.

Theoretical perspectives

Underlying the arguments about China's future that I am disagreeing with are three theoretical perspectives that in my opinion are being misapplied. I can thus summarize my argument about authoritarian resilience by suggesting, in Chinese style, three theoretical "It Ain't Necessarily Soes."

It ain't necessarily so...

... that a rising middle class will demand democracy (a theory associated with Seymour Martin Lipset). The middle class won't demand democracy when it is afraid of an even more numerous class of peasants and migrant workers, and therefore sees the authoritarian regime as a bastion of order against chaos. It won't demand democracy, when the middle class is coopted by the regime and prospers by alliance with it. It won't demand democracy, when the middle class understands democratization as a plot by foreign governments (a "color revolution") to undermine China's rise and its competitiveness in the global economy. Given these conditions, the class theory of democratization does not apply to China today.

... that in a modern economy and society (whether industrial or post-industrial and informationalized), government must allow freedom so that society can self-regulate and the economy can operate efficiently (a theory associated with sociologist Talcott Parsons' theory of functionalism in the 1950s and with the golden arches globalization theory of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman today). The government doesn't have to do this while it rides the cheap labor advantage in the open global economy to high levels of economic growth; while it maintains a nonconvertible currency that insulates its economy from global financial markets; while its dirigiste institutions manage the domestic economy tolerably successfully even without maximal efficiency; and while it is able to invest the resources to control information so that economic information flows while sensitive political information does not. China's authoritarian regime has designed a combination of market functions and state-dominated and controlled enterprises and sectors that, so far, has worked. They have done this with the crucial assistance of the U.S. and its open consumer market. Given these conditions, the functional theory of democratization does not apply to China today.

... that socialization to the global culture, or the spread of human rights and democratic norms, will produce democratization because that view of man-and-society has

¹¹ See Benjamin Liebman, "China's Courts: Restricted Reform," prepared for the conference on "Recent Developments in Chinese Law: The Past Ten Years," All Souls College, Oxford, September 15-16, 2006.

¹² I argued at the start of China's media reform in the mid-1980s that this was its purpose; Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1985), Ch. 9.

¹³ As is suggested by Bruce J. Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change* (N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Margaret Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Results of Economic Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

proven itself to be right (a theory associated with Frances Fukuyama; Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink; and John Meyer's theory of "sociological institutionalism"¹⁴). The spread of global culture will not produce norm change when the citizenry feels that the country is under siege by this global culture for ulterior reasons; when there is a long, proud tradition of "centrism" so that the culture does not want to be "de-centered" and instead wants to develop its own non-Western "alternative modernity"¹⁵; and when the regime keeps control of ideology and public culture through propaganda. Given these conditions, the global socialization or norm diffusion theory of democratization does not apply to China today.

Policy implications for the U.S.: why it matters

In a forthcoming book, James Mann argues that U.S. policy of engagement with China has so far been based on two comforting scenarios, one that engagement will lead to China's collapse and the other that it will lead to China's democratization. ¹⁶ I believe Mann is right when he says that we need to base our policy instead on the expectation that the current authoritarian regime is here to stay. Moreover, it will grow stronger and more influential as we continue to contribute to its economic growth with market access, investment, and technology transfer.

I do not conclude, however, that we should adopt policies to slow China's growth, subvert the regime, or divide the country. There is no effective political support for such policies in the U.S., they are unlikely to work, and they would have unpredictable negative consequences like poverty, disorder, refugees, and international conflict. Meanwhile, American administrations pay a price for selling their China policies to the public as devices to change China. Chinese policy-makers tend to give credence to such pronouncements and view American policies with greater suspicion than they really warrant, while the American public is disappointed with the results.

Actually, in my view, Chinese and American core security interests in Asia and in the global economy are broadly compatible.¹⁷ The multi-decade policy of engagement pursued in one form or another by seven administrations starting with Nixon has enabled the two countries to discover and act on areas of common interest. A post-authoritarian Chinese regime would be no easier for the U.S. to deal with, and perhaps harder if it was unable to reach decisions, vulnerable to nationalistic public pressure, or unable to control sub-national actors in its own society.

The policy implications of Chinese authoritarianism, in short, do not concern a "China threat" to American national security interests. Rather, they concern a range of behaviors by the Chinese regime that affect American interests short of national security at three levels: our

¹⁵ The idea of not wanting to be decentered is from Lynch. The idea of an alternative modernity is from Lin Chun, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). See also Wang Juntao, "Reverse Course: Political Neo-conservatism and Regime Stability in Post-Tiananmen China," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2006.

¹⁴ Meyer's theory is described and critiqued in Daniel C. Lynch, *Rising China and Asian Democratization: Socialization to "Global Culture" in the Political Transformations of Thailand, China, and Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2006), Ch. 1.

¹⁶ Citation to come. Another recent work that reaches a similar conclusion – China will continue to grow and gradually reform, and we should get used to dealing with the Chinese regime – is C. Fred Bergsten, Bates Gill, Nicholas R. Lardy, and Derek Mitchell, *China: The Balance Sheet* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006). ¹⁷ Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security* 23:4 (Spring 1999), pp. 81-118; Thomas J. Christensen, "Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy toward East Asia," *International Security* 31:1 (Summer 2006), pp. 81-126.

ability to work and travel within China, our ability to solve problems that involve interdependence with China, and at the level of the kind of globalization we are building.

At the first level, within China, repressive, arbitrary, and corrupt behavior by Chinese officials creates a bad environment for foreigners to do business, journalism, scholarship, NGO work, or travel. Lacking an independent legal system, China has protected major Western investors through political patronage in order to continue to attract investment, but this kind of protection is more expensive and less effective for the investor or exporter than rule of law. Smaller, especially ethnically Chinese, investors and traders have often paid the price of lack of legal protection, facing shake-downs, arrest, or de facto expropriation. Whites are more protected, but not always; their cases are less well known because the victims are reluctant to go public. Investors may accept high risks because of the prospect of high returns, but they would do better under a fair system of law. Likewise, China's law-violating authoritarianism has been bad for those doing scholarship in or on China, and bad for journalists, foundations, environmentalists, public health workers, and travelers – again with those of Chinese ethnicity (even if foreign citizenship) suffering more often than whites, but not exclusively.

At the second level, that of interdependence, repression and corruption affect American and other foreign interests through such issues as global health, the environment, crime, and migration. Repression of dissent and of media freedom contribute to the spread of epidemics that jump Chinese borders, to pollution that crosses borders, and to other crossborder global issues.

At the third level, that of globalization, Chinese government behavior involves the question of whether we can build a people- and environment-friendly globalization. China uses the "authoritarian advantage" to help create a form of globalization that damages human rights and the environment. The success of its Chinese example is exerting growing influence on other regimes around the world.

These concerns are wide-ranging but one theme that links and helps to organize them is human rights. ¹⁸ This is so because human rights is not just about protecting dissenters. Human rights properly understood involves a range of fundamental claims in the areas of bodily integrity, nondiscrimination, freedom, health, welfare, and education. If you look on the website of any general-scope human rights organization you will see treated not only the rights of political dissidents but a wide range of other urgent contemporary issues – in China, for example, HIV/AIDS, environment, land seizures, access to education, abuse of women, mining disasters, abuse of migrants. Often the dissident cases and other issues overlap, because dissidents become dissidents for pursuing issues like HIV/AIDS or the environment.

I restricted myself to "realist" or selfish reasons to be concerned about the character of Chinese authoritarianism because I wanted to answer the question of why it matters for the United States. This does not mean that there are not also important ethical and legal reasons why repressive Chinese state behavior matters to us – namely, because such behavior is ethically wrong and illegal. But I hope to have suggested that these ethical and legal reasons are not trade-offs against pragmatic, self-interested reasons, but are consistent with them. In a world that is increasingly linked, the outside world has important interests that are hurt by the complex consequences of pervasive human rights violations in a country as large and influential as China.

¹⁸ Disclosure: I am co-chair of the board of Human Rights in China.

Policy implications for the U.S.: what to do

U.S. policy at all levels – government, foundations, NGOs, businesses – should work harder to promote human rights in China even if it is true that the authoritarian regime is resilient. It is possible to do so because:

- Even though full realization of human rights would involve regime change, there are many elements of human rights that the authoritarian regime wants for its own purposes. ¹⁹ The central government does not benefit from the corruption and abusiveness of local officials in areas like population planning, land tenure, worker safety, environmental protection, and public health standards. The central government wants certain parts of human rights to fight corruption, provide safety valves for public criticism of abusive local officials, improve public health and family planning, and improve central surveillance of local officials. Of course, there are other aspects of internationally recognized human rights that it does not want and will resist, such as the rights to full religious, press, and political freedom.
- The Chinese government is not always aware of human rights violations that its lower level officials commit. In the past, the government has responded to human rights issues after they learned about them from domestic dissenters and international media and organizations.
- The Chinese government cares about what goes on in the UN and other international human rights arenas, and fights hard not to be humiliated. It fears loss of face, the diplomatic and financial costs of winning allies to defeat diplomatic antagonists, and the ratchet effect of evolving norms which are used by the government's domestic and international critics. It responds to pressure, although slowly and incompletely.

The old strategy of bilateral U.S. government-to-government shaming and threats of sanctions does not work well under the conditions of a rising China and resilient authoritarianism. But some new strategies give promise of results, albeit hard-won and slow. These include:

- Greater, more serious use of UN mechanisms (treaty bodies, special mechanisms) by government and NGOs.
- Intensifying the work with Chinese civil society undertaken by many foundations and NGOs, including more support for independent Chinese lawyers and civil rights activists.
- More "constructive engagement" at the government level, following the track blazed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, academia, and foundations, to build capacity in China for more effective work by those agencies and individuals who understand the need for human rights in various areas.
- Investment of more time and attention in diplomatic multilateralism, that is, cooperation and coordination with allies in human rights démarches, dialogues, resolutions proposed for the UN Human Rights Commission, and so on.

Such policies would require some conceptual adjustments that I recognize would be difficult for the American political system to undertake. Human rights promotion should be separated from democracy promotion, which the Chinese understand as a threat to state security. This runs counter to the U.S. tradition of viewing rights as a component of democracy. Human rights should be promoted on the basis of international law rather than

¹⁹ An influential view among Chinese reformers is that rule of law is desirable and possible while democracy is neither. This view was articulated in an influential article by Pan Wei. Pan's argument is presented and discussed in Zhao Suisheng, ed., *Debating Political Reform in China: Rule of Law vs. Democratization* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

American values, which is difficult to do under an administration that denies the validity of international law and violates it itself. Policy should pursue a broad human rights agenda, not just the civil and political rights that many Americans consider the only real rights. And the policy would be more successful if the members of Congress limited their rhetoric and settled in for the long haul of promoting discrete changes in a system that will change at best slowly, at its own pace.

Human rights has long been an important component of U.S. China policy. My analysis suggests that the work is both more important than we usually think, and more challenging. If the authoritarian regime is going to stay for a while, our modest yet crucial goal should be to press it to honor its international and domestic human rights commitments so that both China and the global system become better places to work.

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