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China's Rise, Democracy's Decline

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INTRODUCTION

I do not know how the Chinese political system will evolve. I do not believe anyone knows, including leaders among ruling groups in China. Politics is a contingent arena, a very contingent realm. Karl Popper's writings on historiography long ago undermined claims to anyone knowing the future. The future is open to alterations that people of today can not even imagine. China's political future cannot be predicted.

I remember, during the last years of Mao's reign, the annual Mao succession crisis conferences. Except for predicting that Hua Guofeng, having no independent base of power, had little likelihood of persevering as paramount leader, no analyst, no matter how objective or well-informed, came close to imagining China's post-Mao destiny. Anyone who would have predicted the global competitiveness of the post-Mao entrepreneurial frenzy in China and the concomitant rapid and sustained growth of China to wealth and power would have been laughed out of court as a fantasist.

So I believe it will be with our well-intended efforts. So it always is. In summer 1991, the deservedly prestigious journal, *World Politics*, was coming out with a special issue on the nationalities problem in the Soviet Union. The best analysts all agreed that the USSR had devised institutions and policies to tame the desires or hopes of nations in the USSR, known in the Tsarist era as the prison house of nationalities, for their own national communities. It was quite an accomplishment. As the journal was about to begin printing, however, the Soviet Union imploded. Diverse nationalities established separate republics.

In like manner, Mr. Kohl, the head of the democratic government in West Germany, the Federal Republic, only a year before the Berlin Wall was smashed to

smithereens, rued that he would not live long enough to see a divided Germany united. Only a year later, Kohl, surely a shrewd and knowledgeable political leader, unexpectedly presided over the re-unification of Germany. As Tocqueville pointed out, revolution always comes as a surprise and only afterwards seems inevitable.

In a similar way, in 2006 in the USA, media pundits, even as the votes on Congressional elections were tallied, pontificated about how it was impossible for the Democrats to win control of both houses of the U.S. Congress. Six years earlier, it was just as “obvious” when George W. Bush became a president who won fewer popular votes than the loser because, perhaps, votes in Florida were stolen or the Supreme Court ignored the Constitution on respecting a state’s right to determine its own voting rules, everyone “knew” that Bush would have to act as moderate, a leader building a consensus from the middle. He would assuredly govern from the center.¹

None of us can be smart enough to imagine China’s political future. Therefore, as we discuss the topic, humility and self-parody should inform our deliberations. All we can do is describe dominant tendencies as best each of us can decipher them. I will do that. But given how history has a way of making today’s common sense soon seem ridiculous, making a mockery of futurological expertise, we should also try to figure out what might go wrong with our all-too-reasonable projections. I will attempt that, too. But I still expect that the future will make our contemporary efforts, whatever our caveats or alternative scenarios, seem silly. I take our task in this conference to be one of opening ourselves to ridicule by our successors.

¹ Just as the experts began to think that the rise of the Christian right meant permanent control of the US Government for religious right conservatives in the GOP, evangelicals became more complex. A focus by many on Christ’s message for the least of them did not seem so very rightwing. (Frances Fitzgerald, “The Evangelical Surprise,” *New York Review*, April 26, 2007, pp. 31-34).

My report will highlight realms in which I differ with what seems to me to be the professional consensus. I will pay less attention to the large areas in which most specialists, including myself, are in agreement. My hunch is that on these matters we will also turn out to be wrong.

In stressing differences with the consensus, I will argue against the mainstream view that today's CCP governance is fragile because of the many deep challenges facing ruling groups. I believe today's authoritarian China is strong, stable and resilient, a view I believe is shared by a diverse minority of analysts including Andrew Nathan, Jim Mann and Anthony Kroeber.

I will, in addition, argue against the consensus that China's economic rise has set loose forces of inevitable democratization. This position was again argued in early 2007 in a Brookings paper by the truly able Jeffrey A. Bader and Richard C. Buss III.² Gradual and unstoppable democratization was the conventional wisdom when Hu Jintao took power in 2002. Since he turned out not to be a liberalizer, many have recently backed away from this inevitabilist analysis of China's gradual democratization.

Finally, believing that China's strong and stable authoritarian regime is here to stay, I will argue that the CCP regime is not narrowly pragmatic. Instead, I expect China to become – indeed, I believe it already is – a global challenge to democracy and human rights. Contrary to the dominant view, the CCP regime is not peacefully integrating with global norms. Instead, it is trying to build and shape international institutions and norms in harmony with the CCP's authoritarian polity. It seems strange to expect CCP ruling groups to do anything but try to build a world which is safe for them.

² "Contending with the Rise of China," p. 13.

Since past experience teaches us how misleading it is to expect continuity, I will also explore an alternative future to the continuity just sketched. I will explain why the most likely alternative to the present regime would be more repressive, more militaristic and more nativistic. I will be delighted if others can persuade me of the high likelihood of some happier alternative future.

THE FUTURE IS ALREADY HERE

Clearly, today's China is very different from the China of Mao Zedong. At first, some saw this post-Mao transition as from hard authoritarianism to soft authoritarianism. Others saw it as a transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism. There were scores of positions on how to understand this transition.³ Most were quite vague on the specifics of the new regime. My view, expressed in a conference paper a decade ago, and subsequently published, was that the PRC regime has become right, populist authoritarian.⁴

In the post-WW I era, east and central Europe were dominated by right, populist authoritarian regimes.⁵ These polities were very stable, even through the era of the Great Depression. They were only undone by the armies of WW II that conquered these lands.

In like manner, I expect the PRC's right populist authoritarianism to be very stable, even if the regime is struck by downturns in business cycles or the bursting of real estate bubbles, events which do seem inevitable. The rulers of China have already proved themselves quite successful in grappling with numerous crises so as to maintain

³ These were sketched by Richard Baum, "The 'State of the State'," in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, eds., *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, ch. 15.

⁴ Edward Friedman, "Post Deng China's Right Populist Authoritarian Foreign Policy," in Chen Wenchen, ed., *PRC and the Asia-Pacific Region*, ch. 2.

⁵ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent*, Vintage, 1998.

their monopoly of power. They have also performed brilliantly in managing the currency and building infrastructure. They seem almost unique among authoritarians in seeking analyses about potential threats to the regime, such as a rising middle class, and then finding ways to defeat or coopt the potential threat.

Those who instead see the regime as fragile offer a well-known laundry list of challenges to the regime. This list of “horribles,” however, seems to me to be no worse than what confronted Britain in its 19th-20th century industrialization. That Dickensian world produced anti-regime movements and general strikes. Through it all, the regime survived.

In the similar era of America’s industrialization, which included the most violent repression of labor anywhere in the democratic world and the rise of the racist KKK and the spread of lynchings, the American regime not only survived but rose to become a global hegemon. A list of horribles proves nothing about regime survival. Indeed, I think the authoritarian core of Bismarck’s Germany or Weimar Germany or Meiji Japan could have persisted if not for the extraordinary impact of the global traumas of war and depression.

This is not to say that the PRC will not further reform. Of course, it will. CCP rulers are very worried by pervasive and brutal corruption, economic polarization, and political regionalism. The CCP goal is to become more like Singapore, that is, a polity in which the single dominant party maintains a monopoly of power but that party becomes more professional and technocratic so as to be able to deliver high standards of living with relative equity and limited corruption, thereby legitimating and further stabilizing the ruling group. The CCP has sent teams to Singapore to learn how to control the

internet. It is in 2007 learning from how Singapore turned foreign exchange reserves into a state investment corporation beholden to the ruling elite. The CCP sends officials to Singapore for course work in public administration.

Nonetheless, the CCP regime cannot actually copy the PAP government of Singapore. The legacy of Chinese history and the desire for superpower status make China different. So does the large hinterland. So does the unhappy heritage of the Mao era Leninist-Stalinist system.

Whereas Singapore survived by maneuvering as “a Chinese pea in a Muslim sea,” diplomatically swimming between Indonesia and Malaysia, Chinese leaders insist on making China the dominant power in Asia, as China supposedly was in the pre-modern past. This means that the CCP regime will act globally, build a strong military, and confront numerous regional and global nations. The balance of institutional forces in the CCP state and the policy priorities of the CCP will not look much like Singapore’s government and governance.

In addition, Singapore is a city-state. China began post-Mao reforms with more than 4 of every 5 Chinese living in the countryside. The blessings of deep interaction with the world market did not readily penetrate to the distant countryside, thereby fostering a marginalized rural population which could imagine Deng’s policies of openness and reform as betraying them and Mao’s revolution. There is a base therefore in Chinese society that could be mobilized against openness and reform should an international crisis disable the forces of post-Mao growth. That force could even serve militarist or neo-fascist purposes. This will be detailed in a subsequent section of the paper.

Finally, the inherited Leninist system is a base for the corrupt renting of power positions for self-enrichment. Critics usually describe this consequence of the Party's unaccountable authoritarian power as instead the result of neo-liberal globalization, although the Chinese state clearly is not neo-liberal. This deligitimating dynamic, in which great wealth appears as the product of nepotistic networks of greedy, uncaring capitalists dependent on global imperialism, did not exist in Singapore. Hence the CCP will struggle more over power and policy, be more economically polarized, and not come close to achieving the much softer authoritarianism of Singapore. In addition, the challenges will promote a national socialist ideology that will resonate with huge sectors of the population.

In sum, China will reform within its own authoritarian parameters. It will not become a second Singapore. But it will continue to reform. It will try to find ways to recruit more educated and technically competent personnel. It will pour money into potential hot spots to buy off or coopt trouble. The result will be a more polarized, single Party presidentialism similar to PRI Mexico in the authoritarian era. But it will, in addition, have a weighty military and state sector more like South Korea in its military authoritarian era. This regime will continue to promote the market, allow international openness, and meet consumer demands, much as did Kadar's reformist CCP dictatorship in Hungary.

China is a synthesis of all these tendencies, with some peculiarities of its own. Although it is not the highest likelihood, there even is a possibility that the military and the party hardliners could appeal to the marginalized, mobilize chauvinistic passions, and win a succession struggle without an internationally induced crisis. At least temporarily

that would constrain China's economic rise. It might even produce a more war-prone outcome.

But the highest likelihood is that the ruling group, while not capable of becoming like Singapore, has the smarts and resources to buy off and coopt diverse oppositions and keep on rising at an amazingly rapid rate. It will not break-down. It will not soon democratize.

But what happens if there is a major global downturn, if, for example, the largely uncontrolled markets for things like hedge funds and derivatives collapse, and, as with the Great Depression, there is a loss of faith in currencies and trade collapses? That is, if the motor of China's economic rise is its opening to the world market in the new age of globalization, what happens if China loses foreign markets, foreign exchange, foreign direct investment, and foreign tourists? Won't there then be massive unemployment in China? The nation has to absorb into new jobs the 100s of millions fleeing the stagnant misery left behind by Mao era catastrophes in the countryside, the tens of millions laid off from unprofitable SOEs in the cities, and the tens of millions of young people all over the country who are entering the job market annually.

In general, massive economic shocks threaten the stability of a regime in power, whether democratic or authoritarian. Still, democracies are more stable, since the people can blame those in power and replace them, doing so without changing the political system. Studies show that authoritarian systems are far more vulnerable in such situations of economic catastrophe. If societal stability were a real goal, and not just a code word for a monopoly of power by the CCP, then the CCP would be promoting a gradual opening to democracy.

If the right, populist authoritarian CCP regime were to fall, it is most likely to be replaced by a ruling group that was more chauvinistic. The new rulers would portray the old ruling elite as having sold out the country to imperialism and having left China vulnerable. There is great hatred against today's rulers that could be so mobilized. The new tendencies, if they were to succeed, would be more autarkic, more expansionist, and more militaristic. The supporters of such tendencies exist more in China's north and center than its south and west. They exist more in the security and propaganda apparatuses and less in the economic and diplomatic institutions. But their cultural critique of the present regime is nationwide. A good China (East) confronts a bad America (West) and has from time immemorial. The policies of reform and openness are immorally allowing evil to pollute the good.

If the PRC had not already, before the hypothetical economic collapse, incorporated Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea and the Senkakus, and the South China Sea and the Spratleys, then the new rulers would try to do so. Chinese nationalists depict these regions as historically Chinese. Territorial integrity and sovereignty are already imagined as legitimating a significant expansionism. In an Orwellian fashion, war can be called peace. A militarily adventurous China would merely be perceived from within China as restoring its sovereignty and territorial integrity, defeating splitist forces. The old and discredited CCP rulers would be denounced by chauvinists and new leftists as Li Hongzhangs and Wang Jingweis, that is, traitors who had not defended the *patria*. It already is a consensus position within CCP elites that China should be the predominant power in Asia and, globally, at least the equal of the USA.

This set of expectations and criticisms puts great pressure on reformers who believe time is on China's side. The reformers are time and time again compelled to make concessions to military and party people who believe that delay in achieving the patriotic agenda helps the enemies of China, rather than buying time for China's continuing rise, as reformers insist. There is a continuing power struggle in China among ruling groups. It could be tipped in the direction of military chauvinism and expansion, although, for reasons enumerated above, continuity seems far more likely.

A regime change after an economic collapse, and the subsequent militaristic expansionism might be welcome in poor rural Han areas where people already experience themselves as the victims of policies which unfairly privilege foreigners, undeserving people on the east coast of China, and in the south of China. People who might wish to take advantage of the crisis to work for a democratic evolution would have little base of support since middle classes see the CCP as their protector against the angry poor. Democratization does not seem a short term likelihood for the PRC. What is most likely is a continuation of right populist authoritarianism. The most likely alternative is a nativistic militarism, a national socialism damning openness and pluralism and weakness as anti-Chinese.