
Democracy with Chinese Characteristics? Political Reform and the Future of the Chinese Communist Party

China should take its own path in enhancing democracy. We never view socialism and democracy as something that is mutually exclusive. . . . We should focus on efforts to promote economic development, protect lawful rights and interests of the people, fight corruption, increase public trust in government, strengthen government functions and enhance social harmony. And we should continue the reform in the political system by expanding democracy and improving the legal system. This will enable other members of the international community to better appreciate and accept the path of development taken by the Chinese people.

— Wen Jiabao, February 26, 2007¹

That the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has apparently recognized the need for political reform to accompany economic reform is much welcomed. Less certain, however, is the likely trajectory of this reform path over the coming decades and its implications not only for the CCP and the Chinese people but also for the United States.

Buoyed by the success of adhering to Deng Xiaoping's wily advice to "cross the river by feeling the stones" in the economic realm, the Party clearly intends to pursue its own distinct path in the political realm. In China's gradual transition to "democracy," the Party is once again eschewing the "shock therapy" of radical reform closely associated with the Washington Consensus² and intends to borrow selectively from various democratic systems to build a so-called deliberative democracy (*xieshang minzhu*),³ which combines authoritarian Party leadership, expansion of popular participation in the political process, and governance through the rule of law, while rejecting universal suffrage, true parliamentary bodies, and contested multiparty elections.

Deng Xiaoping outlined the initial plans for China's political reform in a famous speech to the Party leadership in August 1980;⁴ however, the process was stymied in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis and collapse of the Soviet Union. The lessons learned from that period and the recognition that lack of political reform is impeding further socioeconomic development has put the issue back on the Party's agenda. The current "fourth generation" leadership—the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao administration—articulated its own vision of China's political future in a white paper on building "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics," first unveiled in 2005.⁵

While there is much to dispute about Chinese-style democracy and it is difficult to predict whether it will succeed over the long term, it is clear that, for the foreseeable future, the CCP will lead China's political reform, which will remain largely instrumental, incremental, and idiosyncratic. *If* all goes according to the Party's plan, in the coming decades the United States is likely to encounter a "democratic" China that resembles its East Asian neighbor Singapore more closely than any Western liberal democracy.

Evolution of China's Political Reform: Instrumental, Incremental, and Idiosyncratic

While the CCP apparently now accepts the need for more serious political reform, it is important to understand that, for the Party, political reform remains a means to an end—an instrument to help ensure continued "socialist modernization." The Party is pursuing "democracy with Chinese characteristics" primarily to address the socioeconomic and political challenges that have emerged in the course of China's modernization, including a widening income gap, increasing regional disparities, corruption, environmental degradation, and rising demand for public goods amid the state's decreased ability to supply them, as well as the social unrest these problems have helped spark. These challenges threaten the realization of China's development goals upon which the CCP's legitimacy now largely rests, and as such, political reforms are ultimately aimed at retaining the Party's ruling status.

The Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989 and demise of the Soviet Union soon thereafter served as a warning for the CCP: Rather than burying its head in the sand, the Party investigated the rise and fall of not only the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) but also other ruling parties around the world. In 2004 the leadership soberly admitted that the organization was in disarray and that its ruling status "will not remain forever if the Party does nothing to safeguard it."⁶ The Party, therefore, adopted a decision to absorb the "negative" lessons from the collapse of the Soviet bloc as well as the "positive" lessons of ruling parties, not only in East Asian countries such as Singapore and Japan but also as far afield as Cuba and Mexico.

Subsequently, the Party began to implement incremental reforms aimed at strengthening party building and ruling capacity, including gradually increasing “inner-party democracy” and cautiously expanding grass-roots political participation through village-level elections, as well as establishing the rule of law and adjusting center-local, party-state relations.⁷

While some Chinese academics joined the international discourse over the notion of “democratic deficit,” which points to the political and/or economic difficulties that have followed rapid introduction of Western-style liberal democracy in developing nations,⁸ others examined China’s historical tendency toward political radicalization—associated with tragedies such as the Cultural Revolution—calling henceforth for evolutionary rather than revolutionary responses to the nation’s problems.⁹ The discourse has supported the Party’s contention that the decision to pursue China’s own development path of economic before political reform and incremental rather than rapid democratization is the correct one. The Party’s future leaders—the so-called fifth generation now rising to power—all of whom experienced the Cultural Revolution firsthand, are unlikely to diverge from this path.

In addition to being incremental, China’s political reform remains highly idiosyncratic. The Party rejects the “one size fits all” notion of democratization, choosing instead to draw on an eclectic mix of Marxism with both Western and traditional Chinese schools of thought adapted to suit China’s particular sociopolitical circumstances and stage of economic development. An example is instituting what the CCP calls a system of multiparty cooperation rather than multiparty competition. According to the white paper on democracy:

In building socialist political democracy, China has always adhered to the basic principle that the Marxist theory of democracy be combined with the reality of China, borrowed from the useful achievements of the political civilization of mankind, including Western democracy, and assimilated with the democratic elements of China’s traditional culture and institutional civilization. Therefore, China’s socialist political democracy shows distinctive Chinese characteristics.¹⁰

Although the basic guideline for building “democracy with Chinese characteristics” was outlined in the white paper, it remains very much a work in progress and the subject of fierce debate both inside and outside the CCP.¹¹ As with China’s economic reform, in the coming years we can expect periods of policymaking characterized by *fang/shou* (loosening, then tightening), steps forward and backward, especially if the Party fears control of the process is slipping through its hands. The CCP will experiment with political reform—keeping what works and discarding what does not—adopting Deng Xiaoping’s other famous aphorism, “It doesn’t matter whether the cat is black or yellow as long as it catches mice.”

China’s political reform project is also more inclusive than is at first apparent. Characterizations of China as having a monolithic, top-down pol-

icymaking process fail to account for the diverse debate taking place in the country and pressures on China's leadership. As discussed in chapter 2, decision making is becoming increasingly complex and is beginning to reflect disparate social interests. Absent official channels for the expression of public opinion, Chinese intellectuals continue behind the scenes to articulate these diverse interests and mediate between state and society.

Rather than advocating liberal democracy as a response to China's challenges, many new generation intellectuals reject Western "capitalist-style" democracy, charging that it will benefit only the newly rich members of Chinese society, but they do not advocate a return to orthodox Marxism. These "New Left" intellectuals are instead exploring a third way for China's development, akin to the so-called Beijing Consensus.¹² To quote Joshua Cooper Ramo, who first popularized the term:

The idea that Chinese are all striving for 'the American Way of Life,' as Richard Madsen has observed, is a dangerous misconception. They are striving to make 'The Chinese Way of Life.' As a result, Chinese development has a certain kind of prideful, internal energy that helps the nation's confidence.¹³

In the opaque world of Chinese politics, it is difficult to judge how closely the ideological cleavage among intellectuals in recent years mirrors splits among China's top leadership and the real extent to which the discourse has affected policymaking. However, one indication that the consensus forged by Deng Xiaoping on China's modernization was in serious need of reaffirmation by 2007 was the extent to which Hu Jintao strongly reinforced Deng's "basic line for the primary stage of socialism" at the 17th Party Congress. Moreover, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have found it necessary to launch a third "emancipation of the mind" campaign to garner support for the latest phase of reform (see box 2.1 in chapter 2). As Gao Shangquan, a leading light of China's modernization, commented:

A large scale debate occurred in 2005 and the issues of the controversy were very focused Is the reform itself wrong, or has it run into problems? Should we re-think the reform or deny the reform? This is still a major political issue concerning the party's and country's future and destiny. The debates have been very vigorous, drawing attention from all sectors of society, and the central government is extremely concerned, too."¹⁴

Putting Theory into Practice

As the debate over reform continues and the CCP traverses its path toward "democracy with Chinese characteristics," the Party has so far proven remarkably responsive, pragmatic, and willing to adapt to China's changing circumstances, which partly explains its resilience in the face of emerging challenges. This approach has enabled the CCP to put in place mechanisms by which the system can be opened enough to retain legitimacy and

support, while also maintaining the Party's power. A prime example of the Party's pragmatism is the doctrinal elasticity of former President Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" theory,¹⁵ which removed the remaining ideological roadblocks preventing once reviled private entrepreneurs from joining the Communist Party. The CCP has thus been largely successful in coopting China's emerging middle class of entrepreneurs and intellectuals—thereby at least slowing the emergence of a critical elite and viable political opposition. The mechanisms the Party has put in place bear more than a passing resemblance to the "soft authoritarianism" of its East Asian neighbors.

The Rule of Law: A Means to Strengthen the Party's Ruling Capacity

In 2004, the leadership openly recognized the need to improve Party governance and frankly acknowledged that the ruling status of the CCP "is by no means a natural result of the Party's founding, and will not remain forever if the Party does nothing to safeguard it."¹⁶ A number of measures to enhance the CCP's ruling capacity, particularly governing the country according to the rule of law, have subsequently been taken.¹⁷

To stem the "moral degeneration" of Party cadres, in particular corruption among local officials—a source of widespread discontent across the country—the Party launched an old-style rectification campaign for members in January 2005, focusing on intensive education sessions in Party ideology and good governance for cadres at all levels. A cadre responsibility system and improved supervision and oversight mechanisms have also been announced. Hu Jintao's report to the 17th Party Congress emphasized expanding the "democratic rights" of people to supervise local cadres.

The approval of "freedom of information" regulations in April 2007 was a major step toward improving government transparency. These regulations ostensibly give citizens the right to access "nonexempt" government information and compel officials to disclose it—though what information is subject to "exemption" remains at the government's discretion.

Even the National People's Congress (NPC), traditionally considered a "rubber-stamp" body, has shown some signs of independent thinking since the early 1990s: It no longer unquestionably approves all legislation put before it by the State Council, as the protracted drafting process for controversial bills such as the Property Law and Anti-Monopoly Law attests. In 2003, one-tenth of NPC delegates voted against Jiang Zemin staying on as the chairman of the Central Military Commission. The Administrative Supervision Law has enhanced the supervisory role of party congresses at the local level, and practically all draft legislation is now made available for public comment. Elections for people's congress deputies are also becoming more competitive, with some even electing independent candidates.¹⁸

In February 2008, China issued its first white paper on promoting the rule of law. Emphasizing the progress made in establishing a "modern Chi-

nese legal system" since reform and opening up, the paper includes an appendix of 229 laws now in force. However, the paper points out that China would not "copy indiscriminately" from foreign legal systems but rather proceed from its "actual conditions." The paper reasserts the ultimate authority of the Party over the legal system, noting that "the CPC [Communist Party of China] always plays the role as the core of leadership in directing the overall situation and coordinating the efforts of all quarters in legal construction."¹⁹

While still far from being a rule-of-law country, China has made progress. Citizens are more conscious of their rights—adding to the danger that rising expectations could spark popular discontent if they go unmet. Significantly, the new politburo's first study session in November 2007 focused on improving and expanding public participation in China's legal system.²⁰

Promoting Inner-Party Democracy

The lessons learned from the demise of the CPSU partly prompted the leadership's latest push to promote "inner-party democracy" (*dangnei minzhu*), which has been debated at various junctures in the Party's history. Polls taken of the attitudes of Party members, which revealed widespread apathy and "wavering ideals and beliefs, a weak sense of purpose, and lax organization and discipline,"²¹ also reportedly alarmed the leadership. Significantly, inner-party democracy serves as a bellwether for China's incremental democracy project, the aim of which is to establish democracy first within the party, then expand it to society at large—first at the grass-roots level and then at higher levels.²² As Yu Keping, a leading Party theoretician and adviser to Hu Jintao, has stated: "Without inner-party democracy, China's democracy today is nothing but empty talk."

Efforts are under way to institutionalize CCP procedures and also make them more transparent, in place of the Byzantine "informal politics" that have historically dominated inner-party life. At each level of the Party, members must now vote on major decisions including in the critical area of personnel appointments, and party standing committees at all levels must deliver annual work reports. A proposal that local party congresses be in session more regularly, instead of meeting only once every five years, has been implemented on an experimental basis and was endorsed at the 17th Party Congress. Regulations governing the convening of party congresses, selection for and retirement from official posts, fixed-term limits, and other measures have helped to institutionalize Party processes, diminish the formerly dominant role of paramount leaders and retired elders, and improve the "democratic" character of inner-party deliberations and decision making. To make Party procedures more transparent, the Chinese media now report on politburo meetings as well as discuss the division of responsibilities among its members.

The official media lauded the “democratic processes” applied in the election of the Party’s new leaders at the 17th CCP Congress, at which there were 8 percent more candidates than slots available. The Congress decided to expand the scope of multicandidate elections, and Party leaders praised experiments with direct election of party secretaries and members of township party committees in Jiangsu and Sichuan, suggesting these elections may also be expanded.²³

The institutionalization of Party procedures would also remove one of the most persistent stumbling blocks for Communist parties: leadership succession. The transfer of power to Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, and the “fourth generation” of Chinese leadership in 2002–03 was the smoothest and most bloodless in over 80 years of Chinese Communist history. Unlike his predecessors, Hu Jintao has not assumed the mantle of the “core” of his generation, instead preferring to promote the norms of collective leadership. The much-remarked upon failure of Hu Jintao to designate a successor at the 17th Congress could be interpreted more positively as an important step in the evolution from informal, personality-driven politics to a formal, institutionalized, and ultimately more stable leadership system.²⁴

Pursuing “Multiparty Cooperation”

Following the 17th Party Congress, China issued its first-ever white paper on the political party system, which, according to a spokesperson, is aimed at clearing up “misunderstandings” commonly held overseas about the political system and emphasizing that China has “established its own unique political party system and its own way to fulfill democracy, which is unique in the world.”²⁵

China’s eight “democratic parties” enjoyed a brief power-sharing relationship with the CCP immediately after the People’s Republic was established in 1949. But they were persecuted during the antirightist campaign and Cultural Revolution and subsequently fell into political obscurity. While their rehabilitation could be viewed merely as a means to stave off international criticism, the concept of multiparty cooperation and consultation has actually been the subject of much discussion in China. Central Party School Vice President Li Junru, among others, has expounded on the idea of “deliberative democracy,” calling for an expansion of the supervisory role of the NPC and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) as well as consultation with China’s eight democratic parties and other nonparty figures.

In March 2005, the NPC adopted “Suggestions on Further Strengthening Multiparty Cooperation and Political Consultation under the Leadership of the CPC,” and, in 2007, Wan Gang, a member of the Zhi Gong (Public Interest) Party, was appointed minister of science and technology, and Chen Zhu was named minister of health—the first non-CCP member appointed as minister since reform began.

While an expanded role for consultation and inclusion of non-CCP organizations in China's governance is encouraging, the Party has left no room for doubt about the limits to multiparty cooperation, pointedly recommitting to its Four Cardinal Principles at the 17th Party Congress: upholding the socialist path, people's democratic dictatorship, leadership of the CCP, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.

Greater Openness and Democracy at the Grass-Roots Level

Experiments with political reform at the grass-roots level have been under way since the 1980s. In 1987 the government enacted an experimental law on direct village committee elections, which was revised in 1998 to make village elections mandatory and included such requirements as secret ballots and open vote counting. Currently, elections occur in almost 1 million villages across China, affecting about 80 percent of the population in the countryside. Direct elections are also being held at urban residential and township committee levels in some parts of China.

International organizations, including both Republican and Democratic institutions operating under the National Endowment for Democracy as well as the Carter Center, have provided technical assistance for these elections. According to the vice president of the International Republican Institute, Elizabeth Dugan, although the elections were largely devised to "create a release valve to prevent political pressures from exploding" and are controlled by the Party, they have "introduced the element of free choice into the political process."²⁶ The report card, however, remains mixed. While in some parts of China, the elections "approach free and fair," in other parts "they are weak."²⁷ To control what the Party would view as too much democratization, especially the loss of Party influence at the local level, nominees for village chief in some areas must now be drawn from Party branch members. A classified party document reportedly found that up to 75 percent of rural party branches are in a "state of collapse" and that other organizations, including "reactionary forces, both traditional clans and triads and also newly established Christian churches," are stepping into the political vacuum.²⁸

Some observers note that secret balloting, as well as the more recent empowering of villagers to report on election irregularities and unseat unpopular leaders, has improved the quality and competitiveness of village elections.²⁹ In some areas, however, elections have exacerbated social and political tensions: Corrupt local leaders who have no intention of adhering to Beijing's rule of law have responded violently to "rights conscious" villagers.³⁰

Other experiments with grass-roots political reform are under way across the country, notably the Wenling, Zhejiang Province experiment with "democratic consultation" (*minzhu kentan*), in which ordinary citizens

are free to raise questions or give opinions on important issues such as budgets during open meetings with local officials, as well as the permanent party congress representation system.³¹ In Sichuan Province, experiments allowing some non-Party members to participate in the nomination of candidates for township elections are also under way.

Amid criticism that the glacial pace of grass-roots political reform has done little to alleviate social tensions—not to mention expand democracy—at the local level, Hu Jintao has called for the deepening of village- and township-level government reform to “safeguard the people’s rights to be informed, to participate, to express and to oversee,” suggesting some forward momentum is on the horizon.³² While it remains to be seen how his call will be put in practice, it is the first time the Party has promoted grass-roots democracy, specifically self-government, as a key issue.³³

Shenzhen: A “Special Political Zone”?

Guangdong Province has been a pioneer in China’s modernization and played a unique experiential role in reform and opening up, notably establishing China’s first special economic zone in Shenzhen in 1980. Not surprisingly, it is here that the inadequacies of China’s current political-administrative system to deal with the social, economic, and political challenges that have emerged during the course of modernization are most visible. Guangdong party secretary and close associate of Hu Jintao, Wang Yang, has been at the forefront of the aforementioned “emancipation of the mind” campaign, calling on the province to set an example for the rest of the nation in implementing the political-administrative reforms that the Party has launched in response to these challenges.³⁴

It is speculated that Guangdong will follow the model of China’s gradual economic reform and be the first province to establish “special political zones”—speculation heightened recently by publication on the Shenzhen municipal government’s website of a draft proposal entitled “Shenzhen’s Future Reform.”³⁵ The draft proposal, which has been published to solicit opinions from the public, outlines plans for experiments with both inner-party and grass-roots democracy, including direct election of deputies to the district people’s congresses, a permanent representative system for district Party congresses, and mayoral elections. The draft lists key tasks that must be accomplished and envisages that it will take Shenzhen around three years to establish the zone’s socialist democracy and legal system; a clean, efficient, and service-oriented government; and a people-centered harmonious society.³⁶

Rhetoric Versus Reality

The mechanisms discussed above have helped the Party retain its ruling status, and China’s ongoing experiments with political reform are cer-

tainly encouraging. But closing the gap between rhetoric and reality—between the policies articulated by the central leadership and their implementation, especially at the local level—is where the rubber hits the road for the CCP going forward (see chapter 4).

There is growing dissatisfaction with local-level government and increasing pressure from “rights conscious” citizens for the Party to not only live up to its own promises but also provide public goods, including better education, healthcare, environmental protection, and clean government. Again, the Party—at least at the level of the central government—has adapted remarkably to China’s changing circumstances. For example, the Scientific Development Concept, adopted at the 17th Party Congress, seeks to balance rapid GDP growth while addressing the pressing socio-economic and political issues that have emerged in the course of reform and been the subject of such intense debate.

At the 1st Plenary Session of the 11th NPC in March 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao unveiled an overhauled administrative system, aimed at both streamlining and increasing government transparency, and called on officials to “accept the oversight of the news media and the general public.”³⁷ Wen said the overhaul was designed to:

... build a service-oriented, responsible and honest government ruled by law to carry out the people-centered concept of governance more effectively, earnestly solve problems of the interests of the masses that are most real, most direct, and the cause of the most concern³⁸

Much, therefore, hinges on the success of the third “emancipation of the mind” campaign in fighting entrenched bureaucratic and local government opposition to the economic and political-administrative reforms launched under the Scientific Development Concept.³⁹ Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang warned Party members:

Cadres with party membership in the province should unite their minds with the requirements of the central authorities If we do not think of making greater progress and innovation, are unable to work for and lead scientific development, or even become impediments to scientific development, we will be eliminated by the society⁴⁰

Ongoing Support for the Party

China’s political future, as mapped out by the CCP, has been hotly debated not only among theorists who continue to argue over definitions of democracy as well as the sequencing of political reform in post-Communist and developing countries but also among observers both inside and outside China, many of whom dismiss CCP-led democratization altogether.⁴¹

Within China, some intellectuals, Party advisers, and retired officials are calling for wider political reform.⁴² However, while many intellectuals

are willing to push the envelope, with some even advocating Northern European-style democratic socialism in China,⁴³ most support incremental reform under the leadership of the CCP and are engaged in a sincere, in-depth research effort that will likely provide the theoretical underpinning for the Party's political reform policies.⁴⁴

Several possible scenarios for China's political future have been posited:

- A China led by the CCP will remain "authoritarian" for the foreseeable future;⁴⁵ absent democracy—measured by liberal democratic standards including multiparty elections and a range of political and civil liberties—the country will likely become "trapped in transition" and be marked by crony capitalism, which has afflicted many developing nations.⁴⁶
- Economic development will, eventually, lead to political freedom and China will traverse the same path as other modernizing countries. Rising income and education levels will produce a middle class, which, when it reaches critical mass, will push for more political rights, in support of either reform within the CCP (possibly renamed) or a change of regime by around 2025.⁴⁷
- China will follow its own path to democracy—actually a variant of the East Asian development model—and pass through a lengthy period of "soft authoritarianism" to what the Party calls "democracy with Chinese characteristics." The CCP will then resemble Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) or even Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The timing is unclear. By comparison, under the leadership of the Leninist Kuomintang (KMT), it took Taiwan nearly 50 years to go from grass-roots elections in the 1950s to its first democratic presidential election in 2000.⁴⁸

While the glacial pace of China's political reform and ongoing egregious human rights violations, religious persecution, and lack of civil and political liberties—illustrated most recently in Tibet—keep it at the bottom of international rankings of "democratic" countries, it is the Chinese people who will ultimately decide the CCP's fate and the kind of China that the United States will face in the coming decades.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most enduring image of China in the popular American imagination is the Tiananmen Square crackdown on June 4, 1989. Those who assume that the only thing standing in the way of liberal democracy in China is the People's Liberation Army (PLA) may be surprised that research suggests not only China's elite but also a majority of the population support CCP-led political as well as economic reform—some 95 percent, according to one poll.⁵⁰ While caution is advised when interpreting such polls, survey evidence continues to find that while the Chinese people do demand democracy, they also believe the Party is actually supplying it.⁵¹

When asked to compare present conditions with those prior to opening up in 1978, not surprisingly, 97 percent said the government's economic performance was much or somewhat better. However, government performance in expanding civil liberties and political rights also received high approval ratings, ranging from 60 to 80 percent.⁵²

The impact of China's tragic history of political upheaval, which many in the "fifth generation" now in their late 40s and early 50s experienced firsthand, should not be underestimated; polls find overwhelming support for the Party's prioritization of social stability.⁵³ Time may actually be on the Party's side. People have only to turn on their television sets to compare the results of "shock therapy" in countries such as Russia, Indonesia, Iraq, and Afghanistan with the relative success of the Party's incremental approach to reform. Until recently, even Taiwan, which many hoped would be the catalyst for wider political reform on the mainland, has had a largely negative impact—the official Chinese media often play up the partisan politics and resulting economic difficulties the island has experienced. There is growing support not only among intellectuals but society at large for a uniquely "Chinese model" of development, which rejects much of the Western liberal democratic blueprint for political reform.⁵⁴

Finally, as long as the majority of Chinese people continue to *perceive* that the Party is providing them with the economic and political goods they demand, the Party will retain "the mantle of heaven." In a 2005 international survey of public attitudes in 17 countries China ranked the highest, with 50 percent of Chinese people feeling they had made personal progress in the last five years and over 70 percent expressing satisfaction with national conditions.⁵⁵

To be sure, the Party faces numerous challenges in the coming years, not the least of which is bridging the gap between the rhetoric and reality of promised political reform and meeting the rising expectations of the Chinese people. However, research suggests that in the absence of any unforeseen external shocks—and continued absence of any viable political opposition—the CCP, far from being on the brink of collapse, is likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It remains to be seen whether the CCP will succeed in the political realm as it has in the economic realm and establish "democracy with Chinese characteristics," in which the system can be opened enough to retain legitimacy and support, while also maintaining the Party's power over the long term. Whether it succeeds or fails will have serious implications for the United States.

There are those who argue that the United States should not engage with a "nondemocratic" China. The idea of regime change or collapse is

also actively encouraged in some quarters, though it would result in an economic, political, and humanitarian crisis, which, in an era of globalization, would be devastating not only for China but also the United States and the wider international community. It is in all our long-term interests to see China modernize successfully.

Those who support the promotion of liberal democracy should also be careful not to view it as a panacea for the difficulties in US-China relations. Even a liberal democratic China would continue to pose both an economic challenge and opportunity for the United States. As the history of US-European relations suggests, contentious trade disputes arise even between states with close political values as well as economic interests. While the “peaceful democracy” theory holds that there would be less to fear from China’s military modernization and international intentions, given rising nationalism in China and identity politics on Taiwan, there is no guarantee that it will help end the impasse. Furthermore, as elections in other places have shown, one cannot predict whether a democratically elected leader of China would be pro- or anti-American. Certainly, a successful transition, especially one led by the CCP, is likely to lead to a more confident China and one that not only wants to sit at the table but also wants to be given a seat at the top.

The foregoing discussion of the evolution of political reform in China, apparent ongoing domestic support for the CCP, and the international discourse on the “democratic deficit” in developing countries underscores why attempts to force liberal democracy on China are likely to remain ineffective and ultimately counterproductive. Alternatives include:

- Rather than debating whether or not China’s reforms are evidence of real democratization and arguing over the yardsticks by which to measure it—which the CCP can brush off as evidence of American “cultural hegemony” and find a receptive audience that supports it—the United States should apply selective pressure on China when the Party fails to live up to its own promises and violates the political and legal reforms it has put in place.
- US policymakers need to accept that in the absence of organized opposition, the CCP will continue to control the pace and scope of political reform in China. However, the United States can still exert a positive influence and the necessary pressure to keep the process moving forward by actively participating in international institutions and multilateral forums and by supporting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in their efforts to expand grass-roots democracy, establish rule of law, and improve corporate governance in China.
- In addition to “track one” government-to-government engagement, “track two” dialogue among US and Chinese intellectuals and officials working on political reform issues should be established to seri-

ously discuss the merits and demerits of liberal, East Asian, and even Chinese-style democracy. Further, regular contacts and formal partnerships between US and Chinese think tanks and other NGOs should be encouraged.

- Finally, a “Beijing model” of not only economic but also political development, whether valid or not, is already gaining influence among developing nations. A successful transition to “democracy with Chinese characteristics” led by the CCP would present a de facto alternative to the long-established “Washington model” of development and require a ready response from the United States.⁵⁶ A plethora of polls in recent years has shown the steady decline in US “soft power” and moral authority, and policymakers need to take immediate steps to reverse this decline.

Notes

1. Xinhua News Agency, “Wen Jiabao: Guanyu shehuizhuyi chujǐ jieduan de lishi renwu he wo guo dui wai zhengce de ji ge wenti” [“Wen Jiabao: Several Questions Concerning the Historical Duty of the Primary Stages of Socialism and Our Nation’s Foreign Policy”], February 26, 2007, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.
2. For a discussion of the Washington Consensus versus Beijing Consensus, see Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, May 2004). Ramo notes that whether China’s reform project ends in success or failure, “the Beijing Consensus is already drawing a wake of new ideas that are very different from those coming from Washington” and “marking a path for other nations around the world” to follow.
3. Also referred to as “participatory” democracy and “consultative” democracy.
4. Deng Xiaoping, “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership,” August 18, 1980, in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping 1975–1982* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1983).
5. Xinhua News Agency, “Zhongguo de minzhu zhengzhi jianshe” [“The Building of China’s Democratic Polity”], October 19, 2005, <http://politics.people.com.cn>.
6. Xinhua News Agency, “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang dang zhizheng nengli jianshe de jue ding” [“CCP Decision on Strengthening the Governance Capacity of the Party”], September 26, 2004, www.people.com.cn. For an excellent discussion of this period, see David Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008).
7. Author’s interview with Chinese party scholar in Beijing, March 2008. See also Xinhua News Agency, “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang dang zhizheng nengli jianshe de jue ding” [“CCP Decision on Strengthening the Governance Capacity of the Party”], September 26, 2004, www.people.com.cn.
8. Ding Gang, “The Failure of the US Model is Not the Failure of Democracy” [“Meiguo de Shibai Bushi Minzhu de Shibai”], *Huanqiu Shibao*, February 13, 2008,

www.chinaelections.org; and Ding Gang, "Is US Democracy 'Transplantable?'" ["Meiguo Minzhu Nengzai Shijie Puji Ma?"], *China Daily*, February 5, 2008, www.chinaelections.org. Michael McFaul notes that of the 28 former Soviet republics, 22 are now dictatorships or rocky transitional regimes; see McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Non-cooperative Transitions in the Post-Communist World," *World Politics* 54, no. 2 (January 2002).

9. For example, see Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, *Farewell to Revolution* [*Gaobie Geming*] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1996).

10. Xinhua News Agency, October 19, 2005.

11. For a discussion of these debates, see Melissa Murphy, *Decoding Chinese Politics: Intellectual Debates and Why They Matter* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007).

12. Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus*.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Nanfang Dushi Bao* [*Southern Urban News*], "Xin yi lun sixiang jiefang cong nali qibu?" ["What Should Be the Starting Point for a New Round of Discussion of 'Mind Emancipation?']", March 3, 2008, www.eeo.com.cn.

15. Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" theory—that the party must always represent the development trend of China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of people—cleared the way for the admission of private entrepreneurs into the Communist Party and a constitutional amendment to include the protection of private property. See Bruce Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Bruce Dickson, "Cooptation and Corporatism in China: The Logic of Party Adaptation," in *China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition*, eds. Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

16. Xinhua News Agency, "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang dang zhizheng nengli jianshe de jue ding" ["CCP Decision on Strengthening the Governance Capacity of the Party"], September 26, 2004, www.people.com.cn.

17. For a discussion on China's rule of law, see Jamie P. Horsley, "The Rule of Law in China: Incremental Progress," in *The China Balance Sheet in 2007 and Beyond (Phase II Papers)* (Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics and Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007).

18. *China Daily*, "Independent Candidate Elected," December 17, 2003.

19. Xinhua News Agency, "Zhongguo fazhi jianshe" ["Establishing the Rule of Law in China"], February 28, 2008, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.

20. Xinhua News Agency, "Hu Jintao zhuchi di shiqi jie zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhiju di yi ci jiti xuexi" ["Hu Jintao Presides over the First Group Study Session of the 17th Politburo"], November 28, 2007, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.

21. *Ching Chi Jih Pao*, "HK Daily: CPC To Launch Education Campaign To Reinforce Faith in Communism," November 24, 2004, in Open Source Center (OSC): CPP2004112400042.

22. *Nanfang Dushi Bao* [*Southern Urban News*], “Yu Keping: jiefang sixiang yao gei ren yi jihui, zhe jiu shi minzhu” [“Yu Keping: Emancipation of the Mind Is About Providing Opportunity: This Is the Essence of Democracy”], February 21, 2008, www.beelink.com.
23. *People's Daily*, “Li Yuanchao: Tuijin dang nei minzhu jianshe, zengqiang dang de tuanjie tongyi” [“Li Yuanchao: Promotion of Intra-Party Democracy’s Construction, Strengthening Party Unity”], November 1, 2007, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.
24. For Cheng Li, this might even presage the emergence of a collective leadership with competing factions, a “one party, two factions,” formula that would presumably see the party evolve to resemble Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). However, this evolution would require the CCP elite to mature beyond viewing politics as a zero-sum game in which such factionalism could actually split the party—which is why it is currently proscribed. See Cheng Li, “China in the Year 2020: Three Political Scenarios,” *Asia Policy*, no. 4 (July 2007), 17–29.
25. Xinhua News Agency, “Zhongguo de zhengdang zhidu” [“China’s Political Party System”], November 15, 2007, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.
26. Elizabeth Dugan, “Is Democracy Stirring in China?” (speech to the United Nations Association–National Capital Area Young Professionals for International Cooperation, June 29, 2005).
27. *Ibid.*
28. Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China*, 48.
29. Kevin O’Brien, “Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China,” in *China’s Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition*, eds. Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).
30. Agence France Presse, “Murder, Corruption Part of Chinese ‘Democracy,’” October 17, 2007.
31. *Nanfeng Chuang* [*Southern Wind Window*], “Wenling minzhu, ouran he biran zhijian” [“Wenling’s Democracy: Between Chance Occurrence and Inevitability”], February 5, 2008, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.
32. CCTV, “Dang de shiqi da kaimu: Hu Jintao zuo baogao” [“The Opening Ceremony of the 17th Party Congress: The Report of Hu Jintao”], October 15, 2007, <http://news.cctv.com>.
33. *Caijing*, “Expert Comments on 17th Party Congress Report, Breakthroughs in Political Reform,” October 27, 2007 in OSC: CPP20071030456001.
34. *Nanfeng Ribao* [*Southern Daily*], “Wang Yang: Ba jiefang sixiang xuexi taolun huodong yinxiang shenru” [“Wang Yang: Deepening the Discussion & Activity Related to ‘Emancipation of the Mind’”], March 3, 2008, <http://news.southcn.com>.
35. Author’s interview with Chinese party scholar in Beijing, March 2008. See *Nanfeng Ribao*, “Attempting a Major Breakthrough in Political Reform, Democracy and Legal System Again Establishing Special Zones,” May 23, 2008, www.nanfangdaily.com.cn.
36. *Ibid.*

37. Xinhua News Agency, "Government Officials Told to Facilitate Supervision from Public Members," March 5, 2008, <http://en.chinaelections.org>.
38. Xinhua News Agency, "Shenhua xingzheng guanli tizhi gaige, jianshe renmin manyi de zhengfu" ["Deepening Reform of the Administrative Apparatus, Building a Government that Satisfies the People"], March 4, 2008, <http://news.xinhua.net.com>.
39. Entrenched bureaucratic and business interests are thought to have watered down Beijing's plan to establish "super ministries" in March 2008 as part of the administrative overhaul, seen particularly in the failure to create an energy ministry.
40. *Nanfang Ribao*, March 3, 2008.
41. For further discussion, see Randall Peerenboom, *China Modernizes: Threat to the West or Model for the Rest?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also James Mann, *The China Fantasy: Why Capitalism Will Not Bring Democracy to China* (New York: Penguin, 2007).
42. Zhu House, former minister of propaganda who was purged in the wake of the Tiananmen Square crackdown, has criticized Chinese-style democracy as "fake democracy" so long as it remains controlled by the CCP, in Wu Yong "Commentary: Can China's Communist Party Implement Democracy?" *UPI Asia Online*, July 20, 2007, www.upiasiaonline.com. See also Liu Junning, "China's Reform: Approaching a Dead End," *China Security* 3, no. 4 (Autumn 2007), 90–102.
43. Murphy, *Decoding Chinese Politics*.
44. Author's interview with Chinese party scholar in Beijing, March 2008. The latest 300-page research report from China's influential Central Party School—reportedly commissioned by the central leadership—charges that the "backwardness of the political system is affecting economic development" and warns of serious social instability unless democratic reforms are implemented that strengthen supervision over the CCP. The report provides a detailed guideline for the gradual implementation of political reform. See Zhou Tianyong, Wang Changjiang, and Wang Anling, *A Hard Task: After the 17th Party Congress: China's Political System Reform Research Report* [Gongjian: Shi Qi Da Hou: Zhongguo Zhengzhi Tizhi Gaige Yanjiu Baogao] (Xinjiang: Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Publishing, October 2007).
45. Andrew Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 9 (January 2003), 6–17.
46. Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
47. Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). See also Henry Rowen, "When Will the Chinese People Be Free?" *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July 2007), 38–52.
48. Peerenboom, *China Modernizes*. See also Dali Yang, "China's Long March to Freedom," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July 2007), 58–64.
49. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2007: Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, eds. Arch Puddington, Aili Piano, et al. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

50. Zhengxu Wang, "Public Support for Democracy in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, no. 16 (November 2007), 561–79.

51. It is difficult to dismiss these findings as the result of political indoctrination or fear of reprisal because the same surveys found people willing to be highly critical of rising inequality, corruption, and other issues. See Tianjin Shi, "How Do Asian People Understand Democracy" (presentation at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 28, 2007), www.carnegieendowment.org.

52. Zhengxu Wang, *Journal of Contemporary China*, no. 16, 561–79.

53. Liberal reformer Ding Xueliang has warned, "If an anarchic situation appears in China, the violence the Chinese will inflict on each other will far exceed the barbarism inflicted by the Japanese when it invaded in the 1930's." See Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen*.

54. See Tang Wenfang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). See also Ding Gang, "Emancipate the Mind: Break the Western Discourse Cage" ["Jiefang Sixiang: Tupo Xifang Huayu Laolong"], *Huanqiu Shibao*, February 19, 2008, www.chinaelections.org.

55. Peerenboom, *China Modernizes*.

56. Ian Buruma, "The Year of the 'China Model'," *The Nation*, January 9, 2008.