China: A Threat to or Threatened by Democracy?

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How can one know whether China will or will not democratize? In general, as Karl Popper showed in *The Poverty of Historicism*, political futures in even the middle distance are unknowable because of the inherently uncertain and contingent dynamics of politics. Therefore, an analyst should focus on the multiple factors that make different futures more or less likely.

In *The Black Swan*, Nassim Haleb shows that in the post–Bretton Woods age of unregulated financial globalization, an extraordinary volatility is ever more likely. Thus, practical wisdom suggests a need to hedge against the unknowable and gargantuan risks of sudden booms and busts. Not even the hedge funds know how much to hedge. Unless one can create new international institutions to regulate the new monies created since the dollar floated in 1971 and since new instruments (non-bank banks) were invented in the middle 1980s, the global forces at work will produce unimaginable futures.

The almost impossible problem is how to imagine China's democratization potential in relation to the out-of-control and unpredictable workings of the new global economy. Are there ways to conceive the issue that might be more fruitful than others?

Despite the conventional wisdom, China is not a market-Leninist system in which the economic imperatives of wealth expansion are in contradiction with the political imperatives of control-oriented, anti-market Leninist institutions. China has already evolved politically into a non-Stalinist authoritarianism. Somewhat similar transitions occurred in nineteenth-century Imperial Germany and Imperial Japan, producing regimes that were readily compatible with sustained rapid growth. There are no hidden forces of history guaranteed to undermine China's resilient authoritarianism. China is a successfully risen superpower out to shape the world in a direction consonant with the priorities and imperatives of its authoritarian ruling groups—and, more especially, to preserve the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) monopoly of power without accountability.

In order to deal with a superpower—anti-democratic China—democracies feel compelled to become less democratic. The democratic tide, therefore, is ebbing. India constrains demonstrators. Japan fears to speak with the Dalai Lama. The European Union pulls back from democratic Taiwan and considers selling arms to China. Chinese security forces are allowed to police the Olympics torch run even in Western democracies. Chinese leaders visiting the West are protected from seeing or hearing people protesting rights abuses by the Beijing regime. Publishers hesitate to bring out works critical of the CCP.

As with the Japanese graphic novel (*manga*) *China Has One Less Bone* (a reference to the symbol for bone, which in Chinese has one less stroke), China's success is leading to a diminished appreciation and defense of freedom. Author Oda Sora misleadingly tells readers that Japan, too, restricts freedom just as China does. The distinction between authoritarianism and democracy blurs. Even the Chinese come to think that their authoritarianism is in fact just as democratic as liberal constitutionalism. In such a Chinese-defined context, the global struggle for democracy can lose its impetus and inspiration.

The People's Republic of China is not a fragile polity. It is an authoritarian success story. And authoritarian China is winning. African countries lean toward China. Westerners compete to do business there, on Chinese terms. And yet, the human desire not to live a life of

fawning and scraping to arrogant and unaccountable ruling groups inevitably ignites a desire for political freedom.

The forces of potential democratization are defined by the particulars of an era and the peculiarities of a region. Barrington Moore, Jr.'s classic study *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* offers a model for general analysis, even though his book is about the age in which agrarian empires came to an end and industrialization created new groups with very different interests. China's potential for democracy, in this type of sociohistorical logic, will be largely shaped by the dynamics of a region (Asia)—and by the groups and interests created by this socioeconomic moment: rapid industrialization and urbanization combined with post-Fordist globalization, the increasing importance of services, tourism (Macao attracts more gamblers than Las Vegas), advanced information technology, biotechnology, and a cohort that will live for another generation beyond the industrial-era retirement age of sixty-five.

To comprehend the likelihood of democratization in China, therefore, an analyst should look first at regional factors, then at the groups and interests shaped by rapid industrialization and a looming postindustrial future, and then relate both to the nature of the Chinese state.

Let's start with Asia, which is not, as many believe, a collectivist world with an overarching culture reflecting authoritarian "Asian values." Three of the six most populous democracies in the world are in Asia: India, Indonesia, and Japan, societies that are, in turn, majority Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist. Confucianism, likewise, is not an insuperable obstacle to democratization. The most Confucian country in the world, South Korea, has democratized (and Confucianism in China is far more liberal than it is in Korea: think of the Chinese as New England Unitarians and the South Koreans as Southern Baptist Evangelicals). Similarly, Confucianism exists in Japan and Taiwan, which are both democracies. Confucian Hong Kong would have democratized if not for its retrocession to authoritarian China. In sum, Chinese culture is not a permanent barrier to the victory of democracy in China, although the CCP strives to make it so.

People in China have been struggling and sacrificing for democracy since the 1898 reform movement for a constitutional monarchy. The 1911 anti-imperialist Chinese republican revolution that toppled the Aisin Gioro ruling family's Manchu monarchy led to nationwide parliamentary elections in 1912. The May 4th movement of 1919 relegitimated democracy as China's better alternative to the chaotic warlordism that engulfed the nation after the 1913 assassination of the prime minister-to-be.

Although Chinese military mobilization against Japanese emperor Hirohito's imperial military deflected the democratic cause until an American-led coalition compelled the surrender of General Hideki Tôjô and the withdrawal of his armies from China, the post–Second World War competitors for national power appealed to the people in terms of contrasting democratic agendas. Mao Zedong's Red Armies pointed to village elections as proof that the CCP would deliver a New Democracy. Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists drew up a new Constitution and chose a new Parliament.

When Mao's CCP, in power, actually imposed Stalinist political institutions, instead of the promised democracy, hundreds of thousands of Chinese protested Mao's betrayal of his democratic platform in the so-called Hundred Flowers liberalization of 1956-1957. During the next year, the Stalinist regime sent a million-plus democratic oppositionists to slave labor camps, where many died.

Nonetheless, a new generation joined Mao's so-called Cultural Revolution in 1966-1967, agreeing that the arbitrary rule of an unaccountable CCP was bad for China. Rebels for democracy were popular, but they were quickly suppressed.

After Mao died, a Democracy Wall movement exploded in 1978-1979. Its titular leader, Wei Jinsheng, insisted that Supreme Leader Deng Xiaoping's program of Four Modernizations needed to be supplemented by a Fifth Modernization, democracy. Wei was then imprisoned by Deng.

Nonetheless, a nationwide democracy movement grew in 1989. It was larger than many of the democracy movements in Stalinist

polities in East Europe that democratized from 1989 to 1991. The attraction to democracy, the hope of joining a prosperous Western Europe, was uniquely powerful in Eastern Europe. In East Asia, by contrast, democratic Japan, the wartime invader of China, was not an attractive democratic magnet for patriotic Chinese. Dictator Deng, a survivor of the first revolutionary generation, had sufficient support within the CCP and the military to crush the democracy movement headquartered at Tiananmen Square in the Beijing Massacre of June 4, 1989. Despite constant repression of democrats after that and a ceaseless antidemocratic propaganda campaign, a Chinese Democratic Party was formed in 1998. Its leaders were imprisoned. Nonetheless, a Rights Defense movement, introduced in the writings of Merle Goldman and attracting courageous and principled lawyers, journalists, and activists to aid victims of the regime, has grown. In sum, for over a century, Chinese people have been struggling for constitutional liberties to end the humiliations, degradations, and inhumanities of selfish and arbitrary power. Chinese are quite capable of implementing a democratic project.

Why, then, cannot the democracies of the Asian region join together so that authoritarian China becomes the odd nation out, and why cannot China democratize in order to have legitimate "soft power" in the Asian region? The answer is mainly that the region will not organize and present itself as democratic. India would not welcome such a regional policy. As with democratic South Africa's policy toward Robert Mugabe's corrupt and disastrous government in Zimbabwe, Indian anti-imperialist passions preclude human rights activism against an Asian government that is seen as having struggled against colonialism. In addition, the CCP works ceaselessly to discredit the credentials of democratic Japan based on Japan's Second World War-era militarism. Consequently, Japan cannot lead other Asian democracies. Democratic Australia's huge economic gains from China's rapid economic rise preclude Canberra from joining an effort on behalf of a democratic China.

The best hope for a rights-oriented politics in Asia might come from Indonesia. Jakarta does not wish to be subordinated to an authoritarian and hegemonic China. To preempt a spread of democracy in Southeast Asia, Beijing supports the military dictatorship in Burma and the authoritarian regime in Cambodia. As with its embrace of the Uzbekistan tyrant who crushed a burgeoning democratic movement in Central Asia and as with its opposition to a united, democratic Korea in Northeast Asia, the CCP expends great energies in the southeast to preclude the spread of democracy. China's military has even created the capability for anti-democratic regional interventions. One should expect China to be militantly and militarily opposed to the spread of democracy in its geopolitical neighborhood.

These CCP antidemocratic policies are significant. Democratization tends to occur regionally—for example, after 1974–1975 in Southern Europe, subsequently in Latin America, in the late 1980s in East Asia (the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan), and after November 1989 in Eastern and Central Europe. The CCP regime, in contrast, aims to create an Asian region where its authoritarian ruling groups are unchallenged, in which regional institutions are inoculated against democratization. China's successes in that direction make it hard to imagine Asia, in any foreseeable future, becoming defined by a democratic ethos that makes authoritarian China seem the odd nation out.

An exception is democratic Taiwan. Starting in the 1990s, Beijing has portrayed Taiwan as a trouble-making polity and a chaotic society. But the basic interests of China's economic modernizers are to move as quickly as possible into advanced technology and Information Technology (IT). This requires improving economic relations with Taiwan, a world leader in IT. Good relations between Beijing and Taipei would increase exchanges of students, tourists, families, and entrepreneurs across the Taiwan Strait. Democratic Taiwan, over time, could come to seem to Chinese victims of a repressive, greedy, corrupt, and arbitrary political system to be China's better future.

If Singapore, in a post–Lee Kuan Yew era, would then democratize, that, too, could help make democracy seem a natural regional alter-

native to politically conscious Chinese. For the CCP is trying to solve its governance problems, in part, by evolving into a Singapore-type authoritarianism, a technocratic, professional, minimally corrupt, minimally cruel, one-party, administrative state. In sum, although the CCP's foreign policy works against the spread of democracy, there are some ways in which regional forces could yet initiate a regional democratization. The future is contingent on unknowable factors.

One key is Indonesia. There are political forces in Jakarta that oppose Beijing's efforts in Southeast Asia to roll back the advance of democracy. If Indonesia were to succeed, and if nations in South Asia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, were also to democratize, it is possible to imagine politically conscious Chinese seeking to ride a wave of regional democratization, especially if Taiwan and Singapore were both admirable democratic alternatives. Although regional factors make all this unlikely, enough wild cards are in play that China's democratization is not impossible.

HAVING EXAMINED regional forces, we must then ask about the political possibilities inherent in the way economic forces create new social groups that interact with the different interests of state institutions. First, China's growth patterns have polarized the division of wealth such that China may soon surpass Brazil as the most unequal (but stable) major country in the world. All students of democratic transitions agree that great economic inequality makes ruling groups resistant to a democratization that they believe would put their ill-gotten gains at risk. This consensus hypothesis, that democratic transitions are more likely where economic polarization is limited, is formalized in a rational-choice model in Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

Too much economic inequality is a huge obstacle blocking a democratic transition. The rising urban middle classes prefer to be defended by the authoritarian state rather than risk their status and fortunes in a democratic vote, where the majority is imagined as poor, rural, and vengeful against economic winners, imagined as an undeserving and traitorous upper stratum.

To be sure, there are democratic tendencies that result from the move from collective farming to household agriculture and from the rise of property rights, a new middle class, literacy, wealth, and so on—as Seymour Martin Lipset long ago argued. But an adaptable and resilient CCP regime that continues to deliver rapid economic growth is not going to be abandoned by rising classes worried about vengeance by the losers in a polarized society.

Still, China is combining rapid industrialization with a climb into postmodern service and high-technology-based growth in which industrial workers can seem a dying breed, an albatross to further growth. Core areas of industrialization are beginning to hollow out. It is possible to imagine the losers from China's continuing rapid growth—for example, sixty million laid-off former State Owned Enterprise (SOE) workers—turning against the regime. Should a global financial shock cause China to lose its export markets, instability might threaten the regime. As Haleb's *Black Swan* suggests, a full exploration of democratic possibilities should look into all the wild-card factors. The regime's economic reformers, however, could be portrayed as having sold the nation's better future to Western imperialism if Chinese lost their jobs because of an economic virus spreading from New York and London to Shanghai. And then, opponents of the government would not back a move to democracy.

The West would be seen as a fount of evil, and then both the people and the ruling groups might choose a transition to a more chauvinistic and militarist order that would renounce China's global openness as a betrayal of the nation's essence. History suggests that left nationalists within the regime, who largely control the security and propaganda apparatuses, would be militantly against any opening to democracy.

Such a neofascist ruling coalition might turn to military adventures or close China's doors in order to appeal to nativists—in ways, however, that would lose China the sources of continuing high growth. That is, neofascist hardliners might implement policies that would alienate many people in China and in Asia, and thereby create a counterforce that might find

democracy attractive. But such imaginings rest too much on long-term speculations about concatenating factors leading to distant futures. Such meanderings of the mind should not be confused with confident predictions about a democratic outcome.

Still, it is clear that much depends on how the post-Mao right-authoritarian populist system relates to social contradictions. The CCP is moving toward presidential succession rules similar to what Mexico institutionalized in its earlier era of a one-party dominant presidential populism. Mexico had a one-term president for six years who chose his successor; China has a president who serves two five-year terms and chooses his successor at the close of the first. Chinese analysts fear that as economic stagnation, corruption, and debt delegitimated Mexico's presidential populism, so the same could happen with China. The danger is dubbed Latin Americanization.

Anxious analysts worry about the entrenchment of greedy local interests that resist the many adaptations required for the continuing rapid growth that wins legitimacy and stability for the regime. Ever less charismatic and weaker presidents in China will lack the clout to defeat the vested interests who will act much as landed elites acted in the days of the *ancien régime* to block the changes required for economic growth. Resultant stagnation would create a regime crisis, as occurred in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, leading there to a wave of military coups, but also, in the 1980s, to a democratic opening in Mexico—because, among other things, Mexico uniquely abutted the United States and wished to benefit from greater access to the U.S. market. China has no similarly large and attractive democratic neighbor, unless globalization so reduces distance that the two sides of the Pacific seem no further apart than the English Channel did in the eighteenth century. This is a real possibility in our age of transportation and communication revolutions.

The internal Chinese analysis of a future crisis brought on by Latin Americanization should be treated seriously. But East Asian economic growth seems to me to be of a different order than Latin America's. Region is decisive. In addition, household agriculture and physical mobility in China make it likely that Kuznets curve factors, in which the economic gap narrows after an initial widening as a country develops, will operate in China in the future. That is, the forces of polarization will be reversed. Chinese household agriculture is very different from the world of the landed elites that emerged out of slave-plantation Latin America. Perhaps there will turn out to be truth to the analogy of a feudal-like CCP-type system rooted in Russian czarist feudal institutions with the repressed labor relations of plantation slavery and its aftermath. My own hunch, however, is that anxiety about Latin Americanization in China is an indicator that the regime remains preemptive, flexible, and responsive to threats and will, therefore, head off dangers to the regime, nipping them in the bud. It is a resilient regime, not a fragile one.

Although we may be seeing through a glass darkly to try to locate forces of regime instability or democratization in China, what is clear is how to analyze the forces at work that will decide whether it is more or less likely that China will democratize. An analyst should try to understand how the forces of region, of groups and interests fostered by the economic moment globally and at home, and of the state, comprehended in terms of the strength and weakness of its diverse and conflicting elements, interact. My own reading of this interaction is that democracy is not impossible, but that a far more likely outcome is either continuity, that is, evolutionary change toward a dominant-party populist presidentialism imagining itself as becoming more like authoritarian Singapore, or a transition in a more chauvinistic and militaristic direction. China is not likely to democratize in any immediate future, but it is not inconceivable.

China is a superpower probing, pushing, and pulling the world in its authoritarian direction. Japan is out of touch in imagining a superior Japan leading China into an East Asian Community, with Japan showing China the way in everything from environmentalism to shared high standards of living. For Confucian China, China is the core, apex, and leader of an Asian community. The CCP intends for authoritarian China to establish itself as a global pole.

China will similarly experience it as a threatening American arrogance for the U.S. government to assume that an incredibly successful China, imagining itself as a moral global pole leading humanity in a better direction, needs to be saved by American missionaries of democracy. The democracies might be able to promote an end to systemic abuses of human rights in China, but Americans will not be heard in Chinese ruling circles unless they abandon a democratization agenda in which change for the better in China presupposes ending the leadership role of the CCP. Appeasement is the price of long-term good relations. The alternatives seem too costly.

There is no other long-lasting basis for trustful cooperation with the government in Beijing than to accept the regime's legitimacy. CCP ruling groups imagine foreign democracy-promotion as a threat to China's—and the world's—better future, identified, of course, as at one with the interests of CCP ruling groups. Can the world afford not to treat China as the superpower it is? The CCP imagines a chaotic and war-prone world disorder of American-led democracy-promotion being replaced by a beneficent Chinese world order of authoritarian growth with stability. There may be far less of a challenge to China from democracy than there is a challenge to democracy from China.

Democracy-promoter Larry Diamond concludes in his recent book *The Spirit of Democracy* that democracy is in trouble across the world because of the rise of China, an authoritarian superpower that has the economic clout to back and bail out authoritarian regimes around the globe. "Singapore . . . could foreshadow a resilient form of capitalist-authoritarianism by China, Vietnam, and elsewhere in Asia," which delivers "booming development, political stability, low levels of corruption, affordable housing, and a secure pension system." Joined by ever richer and more influential petro powers leveraging the enormous wealth of Sovereign Investment Funds, "Asia will determine the fate of democracy," at least in the foreseeable future. Authoritarian China, joined by its authoritarian friends, is well on the way to defeating the global forces of democracy. ●

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