

Chinese State-Society Relations: Why Beijing Isn't Trembling and Containment Won't Work

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Commentary

Under President Xi Jinping, China has become more repressive and ideological than at any other point since the country's economic reforms and opening to the West began in the late 1970s. This development is marked by a greater assertion of Chinese Communist Party authority over most walks of life, the installation of a nationwide electronic surveillance system, the internment of at least hundreds of thousands of Uighurs in Xinjiang, and a more assertive foreign policy posture.

Some observers see Xi's policies as the desperate reaction of an increasingly illegitimate and deeply insecure regime. These commentators paint the autocratic Chinese leadership, sitting atop a slowing economy and a rapidly modernizing society, as out of touch with an increasingly restive population yearning to be free.[†] The party's alleged desperation supposedly explains China's growing aggressiveness abroad too. The regime, the argument goes, is trying to generate domestic public support by picking fights with external enemies.

The logical conclusion that many observers have drawn from this depiction of a growing chasm between the Chinese government and society is that the West, led by the United States, should consider seeking to help unleash the forces of democratic change in China by pressuring, if not undermining, the Chinese regime. This viewpoint fundamentally misinterprets the nature of the challenge facing the Chinese government and the West's required response.

As they consider how to react diplomatically to China's latest authoritarian turn, Western policymakers must understand the country's complicated political history and the views of Chinese citizens more deeply. Although movement toward a more open and pluralistic society and political system, and a genuine strengthening of the rule of law, would undoubtedly create greater freedom and, eventually, greater stability in China, any serious attempt to force such change from the outside would almost certainly backfire badly.

Why China's Leaders Most Fear Uncontrollable Change

It is certainly true that China's leaders today are deeply concerned about the country's stability, especially given the enormous economic and social changes under way. But this concern, or perhaps even fear, is not born of desperation, nor is it primarily a reflection of a fundamental contradiction between an autocratic regime and a freedom-seeking populace.

In fact, any Chinese political leader, democrat or communist, would feel insecure ruling China today for two basic reasons, one historical and one contemporary. First, although the issue of stability is often dismissed by some Western observers as mere window-dressing to justify the regime's tight control over society, both Chinese leaders and the general public continue to harbor a deep fear of instability and the threat of foreign intervention, due to more than a century of internal upheaval and predation by imperialist powers. Second, the Chinese political system still exhibits a deeply rooted bias toward reliance on personal authority over law-based and constitutional authority.

Beijing's oft-repeated stress on the need to preserve stability is not simply political theater. It is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which a proud, historically powerful, and influential people were traumatized, in the modern era, by the experience of imperial collapse, prolonged civil war, economic weakness, and victimization at the hands of Western powers and Japan. This experience, passed down to every Chinese citizen through highly nationalistic textbooks and government propaganda, has created both a strong sense of nationalism and a deep, enduring sensitivity throughout society to the fragility of political rule and the potential threat posed by external powers. Moreover, this perception was magnified during the Maoist period by the upheavals and widespread deaths caused by the Great Leap Forward and the

Cultural Revolution. And this sensitivity has been worsened by the corruption and disruption generated by China's rapidly growing, outwardly extending economic system.

The personal character of political authority in China is another salient factor. Despite some success during the reform period in creating more predictable, rule-based political processes, Chinese political culture continues to emphasize personal values and outlooks over institutional and legal norms. For most Chinese people, the stability and justness of political rule are most reliably assured by the political strength and benevolence (or public-mindedness) of their rulers, not by the workings of an impartial legal system or institutional checks and balances. Under this kind of system, laws are intended to bolster the effectiveness of a strong, unified leadership and administrative apparatus, not to protect the rights of individuals in open competition with one another.

From this vantage point, in the Chinese political system, a powerful and public-oriented centralized leadership ruling over an obedient and efficient bureaucracy is prized over what many would view as dangerous attempts to institutionally recognize and balance fractious competing interests across society. If the rulers in such a system become venal, and if the bureaucracy weakens, a fate that befell China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it becomes almost impossible to maintain order and prosperity.

The pragmatic, nationalistic Chinese political leaders of the post-imperial period met this challenge by forming a fused party-army power structure featuring a single, disciplined, and highly motivated Leninist political party that exercised total control over the armed forces and was led by a charismatic national figure. Although the military serves as the ultimate foundation of political order in any state, the armed forces in modern China had special importance given the fact that the nation had only achieved a semblance of stability via a military contest against armed invaders and among various domestic aspirants for power.

In the early- to mid-twentieth century, even the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) under General Chiang Kai-shek—the leader of the major Western-oriented, anti-communist political force at the time—operated on the basis of a party-army system. The democratic successors of Chiang's Nationalist Party remain a significant political force in Taiwan today. In mainland China, the growing emphasis on Xi's farsighted and public-spirited nature, and the supposed necessity of strengthening the Communist Party and the party-led military's unity and resolve, are proof of the continued relevance of the party-army concept. Xi stressed the "army's absolute loyalty to the party" in an August 2018 speech to Chinese military officials, in which he declared, "Strengthening the party's leadership in the army is necessary for making China and its army powerful."

The Chinese People's Complicated Views on Governance

This outlook on politics and governance is not limited to Communist Party elites. It is true that, in recent years, many well-educated, urban Chinese people have developed a desire for the country to focus on the promises of the future, not the resentments and fears of the past. And some of the more progressive elements in Chinese society do want the country to move away from the autocratic party-army system toward a more broadly representative and law-based system. And these parts of society certainly do not like Xi's return to a more ideological and heavily intrusive form of rule. Given the aforementioned fears about instability and China's dominant political culture, however, this remains a minority view among Chinese people.

Indeed, survey data suggests that many Chinese citizens consistently have been deeply ambivalent about Western-style democracy. A seminal 1990 national survey by two U.S. university professors found that, while more than half of Chinese respondents wanted China to become more democratic, about three-quarters of them thought any move toward democracy should be predicated on the mediation of the Communist Party. The authors concluded that most Chinese people felt that whether a government is legitimate depends "not on pluralism and participation but moral rectitude and administrative performance." A few subsequent surveys conducted between 1993 and 2002 revealed that Chinese support for democracy in generic terms was greater than 90 percent. Yet these same surveys found that majorities of 60 percent or higher feared that too many political parties or interest groups would be overly disruptive, and a majority believed that the government should still have a controlling influence over public discourse on political subjects. A set of 2010 and 2014 surveys by another U.S. scholar found that nearly two-thirds of respondents were "satisfied or very satisfied with the level of democracy China has." Clearly, there is considerable evidence that Chinese political views on governance and democracy differ markedly from Western ones.

Such limited data points admittedly do not convey a complete picture of Chinese political preferences. And it is possible, indeed likely, that China's slowing economy and heightened repression could reshape the views of Chinese citizens over time. But for at least the near to medium term, the burden of proof would presumably fall on those wishing to prove otherwise—namely that these findings are not representative of the country as a whole or that the trends have since changed. Until then, it appears that even the more progressive corners of Chinese society have in mind a more elitist, top-down notion of limited, indirect representation and centralized bureaucracy that clashes with the traditions of Western democracies. And the daunting problem of how China could transition toward even this truncated version of democracy and the rule of law, without stirring up huge social and political unrest, remains unresolved. For most Chinese people, it would almost certainly constitute an enormous gamble, and one that most citizens would probably be unwilling to take, unless the country had already lapsed into chaos.

All this suggests that Xi does not see himself as a teetering despot besieged by the democratic aspirations of a fettered people. What he and his colleagues fear most is that chaotic forces of change, and popular domestic demands for order and prosperity, may produce insurmountable challenges that they cannot meet. Nonetheless, Xi (and many Chinese people) genuinely believe that China's current system is more workable and more in tune with Chinese history and the country's present conditions than a freer, more open system would be. So when Western observers suggest that Chinese leaders fear a near-term, widespread public push for more representative government similar to the Color Revolutions that have swept aside other autocratic regimes, they miss an important point: what the party actually fears is that external pressure and the minority of Chinese people who favor a more representative political system may contest and destabilize a system that many in the country view as workable if imperfect. Moreover, given their deep concern for stability, Chinese leaders would presumably seek to avoid, rather than create, external crises—especially if the country's domestic environment becomes chaotic—although they would likely react strongly to threatening crises created by others.

Why a Containment Strategy Doesn't Hold Water

This analysis is not intended to imply that democracy is eternally ill-suited for China or that the current government's repression is excusable. Rather, the point is that Western policymakers pondering how to respond to China's authoritarian turn should ground their decisions in how China actually is, not how they might wish it were.

That is why it would be exceedingly foolish and counterproductive for the United States and other Western nations to try to undermine and weaken the Communist Party regime by way of a Cold War–style containment policy. The chances of success are minuscule. China is too enmeshed in global markets and its economic clout is too considerable for containment to work.

Equally important, outside pressure of this sort would not drive a wedge between China's rulers and ordinary Chinese people. Instead, such a strategy would likely spook many Chinese citizens into rallying around government-sponsored nationalism, validating deep-seated suspicions that so-called hostile foreign forces seek to prevent China's resurgence. And even on the off-chance that Western pressure did succeed, Chinese society would almost certainly fragment in chaotic ways with disastrous ripple effects abroad.

There are more prudent steps Washington can take to put the relationship on surer footing. First, influential figures in both countries should take a stand against both reckless verbal sparring and hollow platitudes about win-win propositions. The relationship is undoubtedly becoming more competitive, but this shift should be managed with clear-eyed tactfulness and a strong appreciation of the need to maintain cooperation with Beijing in critical areas such as WMD nonproliferation, climate change, and economics. At the same time, to avoid or minimize inadvertent U.S.-China crises, policymakers should strengthen both Track I and Track II civil-military crisis management dialogues.

Second, Washington should strive to tackle its economic disputes with Beijing shrewdly. The United States should present its top priorities far more clearly, downplaying the misplaced emphasis on the trade balance in favor of a primary focus on commercial cyber espionage, uneven market access, and the creation of mutually beneficial and integrated economic structures in Asia. Furthermore, trade talks should leverage the fact that many U.S. partners in Europe and elsewhere harbor similar economic concerns and desires. Possible solutions should be framed to Beijing not as outright concessions to Western demands but as sorely needed reforms in line with China's own domestic plans for economic restructuring.

Third, U.S. policymakers should proactively map out the challenges and difficult choices they will face as Asia's strategic landscape continues to shift. Congress should hold hearings focused on assessing how the changing contours of Asia's security, economic, and political domains will affect regional stability and other U.S. interests. The long-term goal should be to explore how Beijing and Washington can both take steps to defuse regional hotspots and create at least the preconditions for a genuine, stable balance of power in Asia.

Like it or not, the Communist Party government leading China today is rooted in deep historical and political impulses. And while it is not the only conceivable regime that could meet the Chinese people's long-term needs, any more representative and less repressive Chinese government will need to emerge on its own terms. In the meantime, the United States should pursue and protect its interests in farsighted ways that increase the likelihood that its concerns about Chinese behavior will be addressed while minimizing the risks of counterproductive blowback.

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Notes

¹ In an October 2018 speech, Vice President Mike Pence stated that “the dream of freedom remains distant for the Chinese people.” Among China watchers, Gordon Chang holds a similar viewpoint and has been predicting the imminent collapse of the CCP regime since 2001.