PART 2

TRANSITION

5

Breakdown and Mobilization

Predicting Change

If the first part of this book was an elaborate exercise in stage-setting, then we have now come to the main performance. The task here is to narrate a plausible sequence of events that would bring about a lasting democratic breakthrough in China. In this "last mile" of democratization, the long development of liberal and institutional foundations reaches a terminus with the emergence of real participation and competition in politics.

As we saw, the recognition of needs and the balance of forces are now tilted decisively in favor of democratic transition. Many observers of China share this conclusion, but they differ on when the breakthrough will occur. Optimists put the event before 2010.[1] Others guess somewhere between 2010 and 2020.[2] Still more make predictions beyond 2020, perhaps well beyond.[3]

All of these predictions are plausible. Once the conditions for democratization are met, which I believe they are at present, the actual change can come as quickly or as slowly as circumstances permit. The collapse of an authoritarian regime numbers among one of the most contingent phenomena of politics. While the long-term forces that bring it about can be readily identified, the exact timing and path are highly volatile. Economic crisis can prompt popular protests that cause a regime to split and start a dash for democracy. During times of economic stability, however, such a split can lead to a democratic breakthrough that is phased and averts popular protest. Personalities emerge to take charge, leading figures die suddenly, uncertainty pervades choices, alliances shift like the sands.

To elucidate how a breakthrough might occur requires us to shift from the broad, long-term perspective of part 1 to a very narrow and immediate one. Here we will focus on three stages: the manifestation of crisis that provides the critical pressures and outlines for the democratic breakthrough; the "bargaining" issues of who and how the breakthrough occurs; and the immediate response to the change at home and abroad. The scenario I outline below is

a rapid elite-led move to democracy prompted by modest popular protest linked to an economic or political crisis.

For the record, I would be surprised if this change were delayed beyond the year 2020. Nonetheless, caution is the byword in predicting both the timing and the sequence of CCP collapse. While it is possible to see the manifest failures of the PRC and its seemingly inevitable replacement by a democratic system, the regime "just might survive on inertia, complicity, fear of worse, chauvinism, the provision of guaranteed minimums, and the like" for several more years.[4] As with many a debased authoritarian regime before it—Czarist Russia, Ceausescu's Romania, Suharto's Indonesia—the CCP could muddle along for years or disappear in a flash. The actual timing of the event will reflect sudden opportunities and situations that are grasped by conscious individuals, something virtually impossible to predict.

So the following can best be described as a stylized scenario rather than a predestined sequence for democratic transition. The purpose is to raise and illuminate the relevant issues that any transition will face—economic crisis, popular mobilization, military response—rather than to provide an ironclad forecast of events. The battlements of CCP rule have survived one crashing wave of democratic agitation after another since 1949. Its foundations are now very weak and the waves grow stronger. Rip-tides and wind shifts may protect it from the next torrent for longer than we imagine. But history suggests it is only a matter of time before the sea rises again.

Gradual Democracy?

Imagine that you are CCP chief Hu Jintao sitting in an idle moment gazing through the winter-frosted window of a meeting hall in the Zhongnanhai leadership complex in Beijing. The country is now full of pressing demands for democracy and society is fully equipped, so to speak, to bring it about. You have read your history books. You do not have any ideological hang-ups about one system of government or another. But you want to retain your power, privileges, and interests. What to do?

There are two options. One is to do nothing on the political front and continue to direct attention to issues of administrative streamlining, economic reform, great-power status, social freedoms, international linkages, the Beijing Olympics, anything that seems to divert attention from questioning your right to rule. It has worked since 1989 and, with a little luck and stepped up repression, it might continue to work, at least until your term of office expires in 2012.

A growing number of "lively" scholars in society, people whose opinions

you trust, like old colleagues from the Communist Youth League, are articulating another view: waiting is not an attractive option. The longer democratic change is delayed, they say, the worse the problems become and the more society is empowered. Regimes that waited too long saw their rulers dragged from their offices and shot in the head. That's not quite the settled retirement in the Western Hills of Beijing that you had in mind.

So the other option is to begin gradual democratic reforms. Many of those scholars, and not a few foreign experts, have already proposed various schemes that would take China through the last mile in a gradual, orderly fashion.[5] The idea is that the CCP, sometime in the first decade of the century, would expand direct elections to township levels, liberalize the media, and empower the people's congresses with, say, all economic policy-making. That would be followed in the next decade by expanded elections to, say, the provincial level, the formation of opposition parties, and a formal separation of the CCP from government. After that, the CCP would open the system completely and compete for power, expecting to win and enjoy a lengthy period as China's "natural" ruling party like Japan's Liberal Democrats or Malaysia's National Front coalition. Just being a communist cadre is no longer an obstacle to change. Since reforms began after Mao's death, the Party has sold off most state firms, professionalized the civil service and military, embraced the concept of rule of law, welcomed entrepreneurs into the Party, and allowed "bourgeois" thought to suffuse society. A few ideologues still talk of the CCP's heavenly right to rule. But you have no illusions: the Party must perform or be overthrown.

There is, however, one nagging worry: you may end up a loser. Authoritarian regimes that voluntarily initiated democratic changes in times of relative domestic peace, like the Nationalists (KMT) of Taiwan, eventually lost power, even if they enjoyed a considerable time to prepare for the day. Others found they could not control the process and lost power overnight, as in South Korea. Once rulers gave society an inch, it took a mile. Relax, say some scholars. "Multi-party competition may be avoided for some time until the CCP has completely transformed itself into an efficient and fully functioning social-democratic party that is experienced and confident in running elections."[6]

Weighing up the two options, while you are attracted by the possibility of voluntary withdrawal, you are too afraid of the consequences. You continue to talk to those lively scholars and begin to drop some vague tidbits into speeches about the need to "orderly expand democratic participation." Delegations are sent to Europe to study social democratic parties there. But when push comes to shove, you flinch. "Why risk the 'achievements of the regime' for the sake of the fuzzy long-term advantages advocated by the softliners?" you say, echoing many a dictator throughout the ages.[7]

Would Hu be right? From the standpoint of the power and privileges of the CCP "interest group," evidence suggests that the answer is yes. Empirically speaking, gradual democratization only works when an authoritarian regime is in a position of still-overwhelming power vis-à-vis society. That allows it to exploit its supremacy to manage the process and to protect its interests along the way. Until it lost the presidency in 2000, the KMT had retained power for a remarkable 14 years after launching democratic reforms in Taiwan, twice as long if political liberalization is dated to the early 1970s.

But the CCP is not the KMT. The power of the CCP—in terms of its political legitimacy, its fiscal capabilities, and its ideological dominance—has weakened considerably in the post-Mao era. While it remains a dominant force when compared to society as a whole, it is probably not dominant enough to successfully carry out a phased political transition. If it did, the reforms would likely take on a life of their own. That is what happened in Gorbachev's Russia. Plans for regime-dependent reforms suddenly become society-dependent.

If the Party were to begin gradual reforms to crack down on political corruption, say, by giving the media a free rein or by establishing an independent anti-corruption body, the impact would be too great. The move would expose the hypocrisy and rot inside the Party for all to see. Township elections, with their open campaigning, would do the same. Such a move would also come at a time of unprecedented democratic expectations in China, partly fueled by developments abroad. If citizens in Shanghai were offered the chance to elect their own mayor, farmers in Anhui will wonder about electing their governor. A free press in Shenzhen would create pressures for the same in Guangzhou. The forces are unstoppable once unleashed under these conditions. That was the lesson of Gorbachev's failed attempt to control corruption and expand local democracy in the USSR.

As a result, Hu Jintao, or whoever sits atop the declining CCP, will not launch gradual democratic reforms. In order to protect the Party, he must avoid changes that will take on a life of their own.

It was not always so. The CCP could have successfully introduced gradual reforms in the late 1980s, when there were very open plans for a gradual democratization over a decade or more. Reformist Party chiefs Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang outlined plans for reducing the role of the Party in a gradualist fashion that mirrored the phased erosion of state enterprises and planning in the economy. Deng Xiaoping even promised that China would be a democracy by the year 2035.[8]

Indeed, the phased introduction of direct elections at the village level beginning in 1987 was a classic case of authoritarian withdrawal. In this case,

an enlightened conservative, Peng Zhen, saw how decollectivization had created new pressures for good governance that Party-appointed village chiefs could not accommodate. As a result of voluntarily ceding power, the CCP enjoyed the privilege of guiding the development of village elections, often to its advantage.

But it could not do the same at the national level today. Reformers inside the regime cannot gain ascendancy in the absence of mass protests. Since 1989, the Party has been on high alert against the emergence of "splittists" at the top who might make a case for withdrawal. When liberal Politburo member Tian Jiyun called for direct multi-candidate elections for state premier in 1995, his speech was blacklisted and he was given a stern rebuke.[9] His standard-bearer, Li Ruihuan, was purged from the Politburo standing committee in 2002.

The CCP will thus continue to reject political participation and sink into deeper misgovernance. As a result, its fate will almost certainly be no different from that of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Democracy will be seized, not offered; and as a result it will come about in a short period. Communist China will end not with a whimper but with a bang.

CCP leaders are caught in a prison of their own making. They can refuse reforms and face protests, or grant reforms and lose their jobs. As one Chinese scholar wrote: "In recent regime transitions, autocrats compelled to liberalize and democratize were, with few exceptions, driven from power because by that time they had been thoroughly debilitated and delegitimized by their own misrule. The cold and cruel logic of political reform—those who can, will not; those who try when forced, cannot—has been tragically validated in all too many countries."[10]

When China could, the top would not. Reformist Party chiefs in the 1980s were purged by hoary Party elders. Now the Party cannot because society must. At this late stage, it is no longer possible to navigate between the Scylla of reforming and losing control and the Charybdis of not reforming and losing support. "As yet no one has found a way to bring a Leninist state through this narrow strait, and there is little reason to think that the current Chinese leaders will have more luck or skill than their colleagues anywhere else," notes one scholar.[11]

Or in the words of another: "The CCP may now be in a position where it is so discredited and so unpopular that attempts at adaptation, such as meaningful elections, would hasten its demise rather than strengthen its support . . . It is unlikely to sponsor the democratization of China 's political system, and unlikely to survive even if it tried."[12]

That compels us to consider the circumstances that might force change upon the reluctant CCP leadership.

Metastatic Crisis

One important dimension of democratic revolutions is whether they occur in periods of broad-based prosperity and relative stability or times of economic and social crisis. While transitions are usually easier and more stable under the former conditions, most occur under the latter. Autocrats rarely relinquish power when they are in positions of strength and democratizers can rarely overcome the incentive problems of collective action when there is not a pressing crisis.

Asia is one region with several glorious exceptions to that rule. In the 1980s, leaders in Taiwan, Thailand, and South Korea read the runes of the long-term forces that would drive them from power and chose to initiate change when they were in positions of strength. As is typical, two of those transitions, in Taiwan and Thailand, took place over several years. That of South Korea occurred faster, an outcome more typical of crisis transitions.

What about China? Despite two decades of relative prosperity and stability, the leadership has balked at change. That suggests the transition will take place in crisis conditions. Since the Party will not launch democratic reforms because it rightly fears the worst for its position, the only thing that can initiate the process is a national trauma that prompts popular mobilization.

What will the crisis look like? More than 30 major dynasties, both national and regional, have wielded the scepter in China since the third century BC, and as a result "end of dynasty watching" is a fine art. The CCP has encouraged the view that its own lifespan is subject to the same cycle as past dynasties. By claiming to have come to power as a result of "objective historical conditions" rather than popular mandate, it has legitimated discussion about what those conditions are, and whether they have changed.[13] If they have, dynasty-watchers say, it's time to watch for portents of collapse.

In traditional Chinese geomancy, such portents have included a wide range of natural and man-made disasters. In a country as large as China, there are always such catastrophic events and those willing to ascribe cosmic significance to them. The SARS health crisis of 2003 was a classic example, fuelling metaphorical comments on the "contagion" of CCP rule. Given the scale of ecological crisis in China, it is also easy to point to any number of plagues that have swept the country in recent years as evidence of coming change: floods, locusts, or the ominous but unstoppable approach of huge Mongolian deserts to the borders of Beijing. The Chinese expression "the heavens fall and the earth splits" (*tian beng tu lie*) conjures up imagery of typhoons and earthquakes shaking the polity.

Also watched closely is the collapse of dams, surely a key reason why the

twin dam bursts in Henan province in 1975 that killed an estimated 300,000 people were covered up and remain essentially a badly kept national secret. Certainly any problems with the Three Gorges dam would be read as signs of imminent change. But smaller collapses could be read with equal disquiet. Officials frequently wring their hands in public about the 33,000 dams in the country. A third of the total are deemed "defective," including 100 which are considered "large."

The collapse of sacred buildings elicits similar imagery. When "the clay crumbles and tiles sever" (*tu beng wa jie*) on a traditional Chinese house, it means the owner is ill-fated. The idiom was used to describe the fall of the first dynasty, the Qin. When the Dragon Pavilion in the central China city of Kaifeng collapsed in a rainstorm after being struck by lightning in 1994, officials put a news ban on the event until it had been repaired.

Geomancers also point to the growth of spiritual movements (such as today's Falun Gong sect and secret societies), moral rot (tattered social capital, pervasive official corruption), and national disunity (the election of a separatist party in Taiwan, the fleeing of Tibet's highest lamas abroad) as portents of dynastic failure.

While fanciful in their attractions, such portents are widely watched because they have a real connection to misgovernance. They may reflect a failing state that cannot afford to disinfect its hospitals, maintain its dikes, keep its officials clean, or protect its borders. In modern terms, they might signal the coming of the kind of crisis that has driven many an authoritarian regime from power.

How would a widespread national crisis begin in China? In one useful formulation, a Western scholar suggested that the key element is the emergence of "multiple metastatic dysfunction," in society.[14] Metastasis is when a disease like cancer transfers from one part of the body to another. Thus the phrase describes the spread of dysfunction beyond its initial boundaries—when a run on a local bank becomes a national financial crisis, or a failed bail-out of a national pension scheme becomes a fiscal crisis.

This formulation may overstate the conditions necessary for some authoritarian collapses but it is apt for Leninist dictatorships. They can usually contain single crises, preventing sparks from leaping across roofs. Thus it is a simultaneous exacerbation of low-level crises in several spheres that creates the environment for transition. Tragically, it also means that the transition is likely to be a bumpy one.

As we saw in the previous section, China's nodes of instability remained distinctly separate and "non-transferable," in the early 2000s. A conclave of scholars, government officials, and military strategists who met in 1998 to

consider the question of China's stability concluded that the country was in a position of "stable unrest" where "numerous nodes of instability exist throughout the society, but with little apparent connecting tissue to create a critical mass." The attendees predicted that the situation would remain this way for "some time" but warned against complacency: "No reasonable analyst would be wise to assume . . . continuance of Communist Party rule in China."[15]

If indeed China was facing varying levels of economic, social, political and diplomatic crisis by the early 2000s, how might these nodes metastasize?

Economic distress—as opposed to purely social, international, or political factors—remains the best predictive variable of authoritarian regime collapse. It seems to be both necessary and almost-sufficient to bring down dictatorship.[16] So it seems reasonable to predict the same for the CCP's end. Typically, this means slowing growth and rising inflation. But steady growth and stable prices may mask other types of economic crisis that are just as powerful. In particular, growing unemployment, financial distress, and sectoral recession can all provide the economic crisis needed to prompt regime change.

The direct impact of economic crisis is obvious. Workers and farmers experience falling incomes while the middle class watches its savings and prospects do likewise. The indirect impact is no less important. It can lead to a defection of business leaders to the cause of reform by raising questions about the competence of the regime. The handling of economic crisis also puts huge pressures on the unity of the regime itself. It tears apart the coalition of interests that benefited from the status quo.

With a CCP regime committed to high growth, there is little chance that economic growth would be allowed to slow significantly. Given the cautious approach to international capital flows, it is also unlikely to be a Latin American-style balance of payments crisis. Still, this may merely shift the economic crisis to other spheres. Helter-skelter growth with poor governance creates "bad growth," as outlined earlier, characterized by low productivity, rampant lawlessness and corruption, huge inequalities, and financial turmoil. This low-key economic crisis has been underway since the mid-1990s. In such a situation, it takes just one major stock market scandal or bankruptcy to shift the balance of economic benefits against the idea of upholding the regime. Capital flight worsens the crisis. If foreign investor confidence collapsed, it could do the same: one analyst calculates that a 50 percent fall in FDI flows would cut GDP growth in half.[17]

Liberal activist Peng Ming imagines that in the first decade of the century, China's economy will face multiple metastatic dysfunction caused by slowing growth, high transaction costs, financial crisis, falling stock markets, wild swings in macroeconomic policy, and fiscal crisis.[18] A prominent Western

student of China's economy, meanwhile, has predicted a fiscal crisis by 2006 or 2008.[19] Another scenario is a banking crisis.[20] A lack of capital account convertibility and limited foreign bank access to the domestic market were the only things standing between China's banks and collapse by the early 2000s. Yet those things were due to change with China's accession to the WTO.

We are not yet at the point of mass national protests for political reform. However, there may be large-scale strikes by workers over labor grievances, or a remote rural region may fall into anarchy as peasants rise up en masse over falling incomes, as has happened several times in China in the 1990s. Unlike in the past, however, this small-scale and dispersed protest cannot be doused with economic concessions for the simple reason that the indigent central state has nothing more to offer. The result: China begins heading towards "a swifter and more profound transition."[21]

A word of warning: metastatic crisis that brings an authoritarian regime to its knees is often seen only in retrospect. Only by examining the entrails of the former Soviet Union do we now realize how sclerotic and crisis-ridden the economy had become by the 1980s, once its last-minute resuscitation by oil revenues ended. For China, the crisis may already have begun. In a regime that lacks an adequate warning system, writes one mainland scholar, "problems get covered up and as a result economic issues become new breaking points of a political crisis."[22]

There are however signs to look for. Most important are signs that critical players are starting to defect from the cause of the regime. Business leaders may form independent groups calling for political reforms. Scholars may begin to openly say that the writing is on the wall for CCP rule. In the USSR, the appearance of articles in rival newspapers with diametrically opposite views of a new drama in 1988 signaled how divided the CPSU had become in the face of the secret economic crisis. Indeed, there were already tantalizing signs of this in China by the early 2000s, as we saw.

It is at this point, perhaps surprisingly, that many authoritarian governments have lost power. The mere crisis of governance causes a severe loss of morale in the regime and opens the way to the democratic solution. In countries with an organized opposition, the crisis has empowered the opposition to either win power in an election or seize power by overthrowing the regime, as in the Philippines in 1986.

Alternatively, where the ruling regime is an inclusive and mature coalition of interests, the crisis empowers insiders to seize the reins and launch fundamental changes—as happened in Spain. Even some narrow totalitarian regimes have lost power at this stage. The end of communist party rule in Bulgaria and Hungary, for example, was initiated by hitherto unknown re-

formist elites inside the leadership in the absence of any mass protest for political reform. In Bulgaria, younger elites within the Party launched a "palace coup" that displaced the discredited top leadership. In other words, the strategy of the reformers was to open up quickly to head off a slowly organizing opposition.[23]

But in China, the regime is unlikely to fall in the face of a mere crisis of governance, just as it did not in the USSR. The force of its repressive apparatus and its calculations of the dangers of withdrawal will remain unchanged. The CCP leadership will remain combative and inflexible. It is an authoritarian regime that while having disposed of its totalitarian past has yet to embrace a pluralistic future, either inside or outside. Its closet reformers, although widely known to exist, will remain too weak to seize the initiative because of a crisis alone. The regime may describe the problems as "transitional" and appeal to ethnic and national unity behind the banner of the Party's core leader. In some temporary crises, such as SARS, this may save the day. But in less tractable situations, history suggests that the crisis must move to the next stage: mass protest.

Popular Mobilization

When an authoritarian regime fails to respond to a prolonged crisis with political reforms, popular mobilization becomes more likely. The simple reason is that distress is suddenly transformed in the eyes of people from a broadly national issue into a narrowly regime issue. In the famous words of Tocqueville: "Patiently endured so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men's minds."[24]

The spark for mass protest may relate directly to the regime's failure to handle an economic crisis. Or it may be an unpopular economic policy, such as attempts to raise taxes, or changes to social welfare policies. Attempts to bridge the income gap with new taxes on the middle class, or new policies to ban migrant workers from cities, could do the same. Alternately, misgovernance on a huge scale could come to light. The National Auditor General—increasingly aggressive in recent years—might report a huge waste of infrastructure spending or an underestimation of state shares to be sold on stock markets. A revelation of massive mismanagement of public finances, over a showcase project like the Three Gorges dam, is another possibility.

China's history suggests that a nation-wide movement with the sense of mission to challenge the mandate of heaven of rulers might also be brought about by a purely political issue. Whether it was the May Fourth defenders

of national dignity in 1919, the Zhou Enlai mourners of 1976, or the "patriotic" students of 1989, issues of high politics or national dignity have often played a critical role in mobilizing people against a background of economic and social crisis. A failure to defend the nation against an imagined foreign slight is one possibility. Another would be the persecution of a well-liked senior leader in the process of a factional struggle. The perennial issue of official corruption, a major grievance in 1989 and a problem whose magnitude and sensitivity has only grown since then, could also be at stake. In the Russian case, for example, the nationwide movement that eventually embraced 15 million people began with a small protest of just a few hundred people in the capital of remote Sakhalin province in May 1988 over corruption by the local Party chief.

Such sparks can start a fire when protestors know that they have some degree of support from reformers at the top. While those reformers were too weak to seize the initiative on their own, their presence exerts a powerful incentive to protestors on the street. Both in China and elsewhere, the existence of such elites has been an important incentive to popular action, where "fissures at the top provided the opening for mass action from below."[25]

As in 1989, the ability of protestors to come together quickly is well established in China. So-called "collective and mass protests" had become commonplace by the early 2000s. Civil society does not need to be strong for proto-civil society forces to emerge and mobilize to put pressure on the regime for political change. All the things we traced in part 1—growing social resources and ideas, state breakdown, etc.—come into play as collective action takes off. Suffice it to say that the means for such action in terms of material, organizational, ideological, social, and strategic resources in China's society are well established. The People's Power mobilizations in the Philippines in 1986 and 2001 came about suddenly and effectively, aided by pagers and then by mobile phones. China's wired population—250 million mobile phones alone—provides the same technical capacity for rapid gathering.

The scope and nature of the protests could vary widely. Popular mobilization need not be as widespread as in 1989, when somewhere between one-third and two-thirds of China's then-434 cities were swept up in mass protest. Given the needs and resources for change spelled out in previous chapters, the regime could be forced to embrace change as a result of a far less massive movement. We can imagine how loose coalitions of student reformers, laid off workers in independent trade unions, welfare groups, and disgruntled peasants could emerge to lead protests for political change.

The role of women might also loom large. In Latin America in particular, women played a leading role in the popular mobilization preceding demo-

cratic transitions. That role was less in evidence in the frozen communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, where feminism and gender equality were notions associated with the discredited state ideology. But more than a quarter century into post-Mao reforms, the plight of women in China looks more like the Latin American case. In that model, "women first become conscious of the effects of their political marginalization . . . in the context of a larger political crisis" and then "take their issues into the political arena . . . with the broader goals of changing both the substance and the style of politics."[26]

The coming together of these groups into a general mobilization against the regime would, as in the past, be spearheaded by hitherto unknown individuals who enjoy the support of protestors. In 1976 it was an obscure worker dubbed "Little Crewcut" and in 1979 a Beijing Zoo electrician named Wei Jingsheng. The cast of characters in 1989 was even more diverse. Recent studies of peasant protests show how it is the young farmers who are less risk averse and more engaged in political issues who take the lead and foment "revolution," not better known elders who have been part of the system.[27] This is of course a prelude to the functioning of democracy itself, where charismatic outsiders with mass appeal rather than traditional elites who remonstrated with the regime become the new powerholders.

The mobilization of society reflects demands for political change. We need not guess here about specific demands—1989 showed how an array of suggestions appears, many of them mutually contradictory. More important is that the protests reflect a questioning of the political order—the mandate of heaven—and demands for its change. While protests may begin over a specific issue or issues, they almost always transform into basic questioning of the system, and a quest for solutions. We need not specify yet what solutions may be proposed and embraced by elites. It is necessary only to note that the political system will become the focus of protests.

As one hard-line Party book aptly warns: "If our work fails, we cannot rule out that in the near future some regions will experience limited disturbances or even turmoil. . . . The forces which oppose CCP rule will use slogans of democracy and freedom to cheat people and make a great fuss about shortcomings in our work. They will want the CCP either to be overthrown or to voluntarily hand over political power to them. We must be prepared to deal with this situation."[28]

Violence

Popular mobilization is directly linked to violence. Typically, democratic transitions have been less violent than other revolutions because of the embedded

ideas of tolerance and compromise as well as historical timing: they often take place against a background of authoritarian violence that has created a groundswell for nonviolent change. This in turn helps democracy to survive because its nonviolent habits and reputation engender popular support. More violent movements, by contrast, make political and social elites fearful of change and thus unwilling to offer concessions. They also create unstable democracies. Keeping violence in check helps democratic transition and consolidation alike.

At the same time, violence may prove necessary in some instances. It may be the only way for society to dislodge authoritarian rulers. Violence may convince social and business elites that the costs of upheaval are too great to bear where there is a reasonable assumption that non-radical opposition will emerge to seize power. Both the Philippines and South Korea along with Portugal had mass and often violent protests from radical groups leading to democratization and first elections.[29] As in so many instances in politics, limited violence may be necessary and morally acceptable in order to achieve a greater justice.

Fears of violence in China's case are widespread. One Chinese democrat worries that in China "a highly mobilized civil society may produce popular, radical and romantic politics rather than democratic politics . . . [that] may intensify the political struggle and make political concessions and negotiations more difficult."[30] But there is good reason to believe that violence will be both limited and unnecessary to bring about democratic transition. A deeply anti-violent strain in society at large and intellectuals in particular would likely constrain violence, as it did for most of the 1989 protests, when the independent trade unions favored a more violent approach but were overruled by the students until very late. Protest leaders such as Wang Dan in 1989 or Fang Lizhi in 1986 advocated peaceful protest, an appeal which resounded deeply with a society tired of the violence unleashed by the Party and eager to demonstrate its civility.

Nonetheless, democratic transition in China is sure to unleash communalist passions in which society organizes itself into identity-based groups—as protestors in 1989 marched under the flags of their universities or offices—and portrays the regime as a hostile tribe. In China, peasants identifying with their villages and workers with their factories are already the most violent, with ransacking of government offices and burning of police cars and public buses commonplace. Long-standing and immediate repression make the mobilization more radical than otherwise, just as the peaceful Falun Gong protestors became more aggressive as their post-1999 persecution dragged on.

Keeping in mind the causes of even this low-level violence, namely a long-

repressed people forced to extreme measures by an unresponsive regime, will be important for a world watching events unfold in China. It was Mao who said that revolutions are not a tea-party. Those rising up to question his regime will prove this to be all too true. As the long-time democratic Wei Jingsheng wrote: "More and more people are ready to wage a war in exchange for a living, since they have lower and lower expectations for a peaceful evolution towards democracy."[31]

Violence could come from the state as well. In the face of growing protests, the possibility looms that inside reformers are too weak to gain the upper hand and protestors too weak to overthrow the regime. In that case, the regime would violently repress protestors and purge internal reformers. That is what happened in 1989, with tragic immediate and long-term results.

Will it happen again? Not likely. In other words, there will be no repeat of 1989, just as there was no repeat of Budapest in 1956 or Prague in 1968. Society in all its aspects is stronger this time and popular protests are better organized and more persistent. And reformist ideals have a firmer purchase at all levels, both within society and within the regime.

Generally speaking, pro-democracy movements in the late twentieth century—in the Third Wave that began in the early 1970s—did not face violent suppression. Either hard-liners waffled in ordering suppression or coercive forces waffled in obeying such commands. They saw both the need for change and the resources mustered by the reformers. It was not in their interest to act. Policemen and soldiers world-wide lay down their rifles and welcomed change. Tiananmen was the exception that proved the rule. "The carnations of Lisbon" not the "carnage of Beijing," to use Huntington's phrase, was the order of the day.

Next time around, China is more likely to fit the pattern. We can find little evidence that the PLA or the police forces or state security forces would step in to prevent a political transition. The "last argument of kings" is no longer available to the frightened monarchs of Zhongnanhai.

For a start, hard-liners would not likely order a suppression. Certainly there will be some in the top ranks arguing for a muster of soldiers to crush the movement with armed might—to give them "death and no burial" as one hard-liner argued in 1989.[32] But it is unlikely that the CCP leadership as a whole would order suppression. The death or retirement of virtually all influential old-time Party elders by the turn of the century is one important reason. Another, as we have seen, is that the resort to violence was frowned upon within the broader Party membership by the late 1990s because of evidence that it made matters worse. Attempts to crush even isolated groups, like the Falun Gong, were costly.

From several perspectives—moral, political, professional, and practical—the Party has now schooled its cadres in the idea that the use of force to crush unrest is no longer advisable. It would be difficult to suddenly reverse that exhortation. If the political elites are divided, any command to the military would be ineffective. As one analyst noted: "The PLA can only form a final guarantor of stability if the elements of the CCP which have influence within it act in concert. As Tiananmen has shown, this will not necessarily occur."[33]

Even if the regime did order a suppression, there are grave doubts that the PLA would follow. Certainly, China's coercive apparatus—a total of 6 million officers including 3 million police, 2.5 million soldiers, and half a million paramilitaries—has the manpower to crush a mass protest movement. But the PLA felt its dignity impinged by the riot control duties of 1989. The 150 PLA officers who decried the impending use of force in Tiananmen through an open letter to the Party leadership is a reminder of this. "To many in the PLA, implementing martial law compromised the basic ethic of the PLA which is to serve the people," notes one Western military analyst.[34]

Since Tiananmen, the coercive forces have undergone a quiet internal revolution of their own that has made them even less of a conservative force. Internal professionalism, a weakening of political-ideological education, a withdrawal from business, growing contacts with other militaries, and more interactions with society have all diminished the PLA's view of itself as the Party's bodyguard. It lost its last remaining seat on the Politburo standing committee in 1997 and retained just two seats on the wider Politburo for coordination purposes. Today, it thinks independently of the Party, a big reason to believe it would not obey an official command or tacit attempt by some to suppress popular mobilization.[35] The PLA's General Political Department, once at the CCP's beck and call, now reinterprets Party policies in its own interests and broadcasts its views back to the Party itself. That is why Party hard-liners have begun to worry more and more about the military's declining loyalty, openly warning of the military's trend toward "republicanization, statization, de-partyization and de-politicization."[36]

There is also a little-noticed pro-reform faction inside the coercive apparatus. One paramilitary forces scholar, Jiao Jian, in his 2001 book *The Abuse of Power: Misconceptions About the Use of Public Power* calls for wide-ranging new controls on Party power through public, legislative, and legal means.[37] The popular military-backed journal *Strategy and Management*, meanwhile, runs many articles on political reforms, often panning anti-democratic visions as unworkable.[38] Some Western scholars have argued that the coercive forces may see democracy as a way to preserve their interests, an issue we take up

in the next section.[39] Indeed, coercive forces may be more "rational" than the regime itself. They may see that an attempt at violent repression that leads to the radicalization of mobilized groups will make matters worse. This was the lesson the police drew in internal reviews of the regime's crackdown on the Falun Gong.[40]

Having its own corporate interests to consider, the military would not want to take the risk of being on the wrong side of history. If it sees that the protests will be resolved peacefully and that whatever changes come, its interests (in terms of budgets and amnesties) will be protected, it may consider the costs of action as too high. The quiet internal changes in the military, writes one expert, "strengthens its sense of professional mission and corporate autonomy and its potential for making independent judgements about what the national interest requires."[41]

Might the military be a little too keen on political reforms? Some have imagined that under crisis conditions, the PLA might step in to assert a hitherto unknown ultimate authority over China. They imagine that well before any popular movement had a chance to bring democratic political reform, the military would seize power with promises to reestablish clean government with technocrats and rebuild national power, as did those in Pakistan and Iraq. "A formal imposition of military rule might come if the Party itself begins to split over the question of how to handle growing civil unrest," writes one Western scholar. "One can imagine a day when, instead of doing as instructed, a Chinese general will take over and then go on television saying in his first breath that 'Communism is nonsense, the Party is made up of criminals, and we have arrested them' and in his second breath that 'We are all Chinese, strong and proud of our homeland. We need order and discipline'."[42]

But the idea of independent action by the coercive forces seems highly implausible from what we know of the Chinese military (and police). Although it has long been involved in politics, China's military has never been an independent political force. There is no tradition of direct military rule in China even if there have been many militarized regimes. The Chinese model of communism emphasized the need to integrate the military into the political structure for the purpose of making the military obedient to the Party, not its substitute or partner. Like all coercive forces, its main concern was domestic stability and national sovereignty. The PLA has never enjoyed a messianic role as guardian of the state, as in Latin America.

Of course, the military may well be mobilized to maintain public order. As in 1989, soldiers might sit cross-legged face-to-face with idealistic students, grannies demanding their pensions, and peasants wanting to be paid for their grain. But there is every reason to believe that they would not obey an order

to open fire, nor would their commanders seek to oust the CCP and seize the reins of power.

The elimination of the threat of military action is a critical factor ensuring that the slide to democratic transition continues. It allows the popular mobilization that will empower reformist elites to carry on. Without it, the reformers end up being purged. In addition, the very absence of military voices in the political sphere is also an important resource for reformist elites. Unlike civilian leaders, military elites are typically less able to "initiate, negotiate or adjust to" calls for democratic reforms because of their greater distance from society.[43] By staying on the sidelines, the military serves the cause of democracy in both ways.

Last Ditchism

In an attempt to prevent mass protests planned for 30 cities in February 1990, the Soviet leadership aired a Polish movie on television with full nudity called "The Sex Mission." It didn't work. But it went down in the annals of democratization as one of the most comical attempts at last-ditch efforts to save a dying regime, perhaps beating out only Gorbachev's attempt to clamp down on vodka consumption the same year.

As in Russia, and in the crumbling Qing dynasty, we can expect the CCP to pull out all the stops to save its reign. This might involve redirecting attention and making vague promises of change. Might the regime find a new enemy on its borders or lost territory that required recovery for national unity and dignity? Might a mass movement uncertain of its goals be easily sidetracked by appeals to nationalism or promises of cosmetic change?

Any significant concessions are unlikely, for all the reasons that made Hu Jintao balk at gradual democratization when things were still calm. The natural reaction of the leadership will be to reject the movement as a threat and to crush any reformers within the Party inclined to negotiate.

Still, the Party's weakened ideology raises the possibility of a formal offer of modest concessions. An existing regime leader could come to the fore with no intention of launching real democracy but with at least the wits to try to head off the regime's fall with promises of change. Such a scenario has been suggested by one neo-authoritarian scholar in China who believes that a Party faction could seize power and declare that "rule of law" will be the focus of work to control corruption and create a fair society. This faction would also outline a 20-year plan in which the CCP would become a natural ruling party by liberalizing its internal leadership selection process while continuing to ban opposition parties.[44]

But it seems unlikely that such a last-ditch rescue would work. "Partial reform" is possible only if the Party is in a position of strength, as it was in 1989. Indeed, this is arguably what happened in 1989, when the Party's promises of a stepped up anti-corruption drive and greater political openness had appeased much of the movement by the end of May. This time, however, it will be too late. Last-ditch efforts to offer rigged elections or more accessible government when the regime is already weak would only stoke popular mobilization. If Tocqueville's paradox was at work empowering society in the era of gradual economic reforms, it will be doubly strong at the moment of rapid political reforms. As Tocqueville famously noted: "The most perilous moment for a bad government is when it seeks to mend its ways."[45]

More ominous as a piece of "last ditchism" would be an attack on Taiwan. U.S. officials and many overseas democrats believe that there is a significant chance of an attack on Taiwan if the CCP is embattled at home. Indeed, China's strategic journals make frequent reference to this contingency: "The need for military preparations against Taiwan is all the more pressing in light of China's growing social tensions and unstable factors which some people, including the U.S. might take advantage of under the flag of 'humanism' to paralyze the Chinese government," one wrote.[46] Such a move would allow the government to impose martial law on the country as part of war preparations, making the crushing of protest easier. It would also offer the possibility, if successful, of CCP survival through enhanced nationalist legitimacy.

Yet the risks, even to a dying regime, may be too high. An unprovoked attack on Taiwan would almost certainly bring the U.S. and its allies to the island's rescue. Those forces would not stop at Taiwan but might march on Beijing and oust the CCP, or attempt to do so through stiff sanctions, calling it a threat to regional and world peace. Such an attack might also face the opposition of the peoples of Fujian, who would be expected to provide logistical support and possibly bear the worst burdens of war. They, like much of coastal China, look to Taiwan for investment and culture and have a close affinity with the island.

As a result, there are doubts about whether such a plan could be put into action. A failed war would prompt a Taiwan declaration of independence and a further backlash against the CCP at home, just as the May Fourth students of 1919 berated the Republican government for weakness in the face of foreign powers. Failed wars brought down authoritarian regimes in Greece and Portugal in 1974 and in Argentina in 1983.

Even if CCP leaders wanted war, it is unlikely that the PLA would oblige. Top officers would see the disastrous implications of attacking Taiwan. Military caution would also guard against the even wilder scenario of the use of

nuclear weapons against Japan or the U.S.[47] At the height of the Tiananmen protests it appears there was consideration given to the use of nuclear weapons in case the battle to suppress the protestors drew in outside countries.[48] But even then, the threats did not appear to gain even minimal support. In an atmosphere in which the military is thinking about its future, the resort to nuclear confrontation would not make sense.

Beijing's last-ditch options will remain limited, then. It might try to calm the masses with promises of new spending or a crackdown on seafood banquets. It might even air some foreign beauty contests on television. But at this stage, it will be only so much bluster. The end of dynasty is near.

Collapse?

Would the entire PRC edifice simply collapse from the accumulated pressures of crisis and mass protest? In cross-country comparisons, "post-totalitarian" states like China are the most vulnerable to collapse because they are unable to respond creatively to protest and yet there is no organized opposition to assume control.[49] The East German regime was a perfect example. It simply collapsed when huge defections from the state occurred at every level and there was no organized opposition ready to take over.

In the German case, there was a neighboring fraternal state whose arms provided some cushion for the collapse. China would not have the same support. For this reason, the CCP and many of its supporters have warned of the dangers of collapse in words designed to scare the regime's opponents into quiescence.

Fear-mongering about the consequences of regime collapse in China has been a staple of PRC propaganda since reforms began. Deng said: "If the political situation in China became unstable the trouble would spread to the rest of the world, with consequences that would be hard to imagine."[50] Foreign scholars have taken up the histrionics with relish. One has worried about "societal disintegration" and even "the fragmentation of China into several competing polities."[51] Another warns: "At worst the resulting chaos from a collapsing China would have a profound effect on the stability of Asia and on the U.S. policy to guarantee the security of its Asian allies. At the least, China could turn to the West for economic relief and reconstruction, the price tag of which would be overwhelming."[52]

Yet these fears appear overblown or misplaced. First, as we saw in the last part, many of these dire descriptions are an accurate portrayal of China today. The problems of Party rule have created the very crisis that the fear-mongers allude to. China already has an AIDs crisis, an illegal emigration crisis, a

pollution crisis, and an economic crisis. Given its well-established state and social cohesion, China has far more to gain than to lose from political liberalization.

Second, there is a good argument that governance in China will not collapse further even with a top leadership in crisis. The country actually functioned quite normally during the Cultural Revolution, when there was often no rule at the top, as a result of strong local governments and a social fabric that held together. At this stage, with popular protests in full swing, a military on good behavior and a regime trying to confront the possibility of change, there is no reason to believe that the country will abruptly disintegrate. As in 1989, in fact, there is every reason to believe that people will act better toward each other and that local governments will look kindly upon the movement, an outpouring of civic behavior linked to the ideals of democracy.

Finally, as above, if we are concerned with the creation of a more just system, then some degree of "chaos" relating to unstable government may be a worthwhile price to pay, including for the world. Claims by some U.S. foreign policy analysts that "there is as great a 'threat' to US interests from a weak and unstable China as there is from a strong and antagonistic China"[53] are based on a highly instrumental and even then flawed view of U.S., and world, interests. A world community committed to the principles of justice through democracy has an overriding interest in its realization in China. To the extent that instability in China worsens conditions for greater justice there or abroad, it would indeed "threaten" world interests. But if the instability, despite its costs, leads to greater gains through a more just order in China and, through it, abroad, then this is very much in the world's interest. Few Americans, French, Croats, Romanians, South Africans, Filipinos, South Koreans, or Indonesians would say the "chaos" of their democratic revolutions was not a price worth paying. China's people should be allowed to make the same choice.

Moreover, an alarmist view of growing popular mobilization against an authoritarian regime has too often landed the U.S. in particular on the wrong side of a democratic movement. During a visit to South Korea in 1986, then U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz voiced support for the military regime's rejection of opposition demands for a direct presidential election, calling such an arrangement "unusual." A year later, the regime conceded to the demands. The U.S., now portrayed as an enemy of democracy in South Korea, found its consulates and embassy the subject of popular protest.

A better policy from both normative and instrumental points of view, then, would be to call for a peaceful resolution of the protests and to lean on the Party to heed the voice of the people. This might require some quiet coalition

building in the region to backstop the instability and fall-out. But again, from both normative and instrumental points of view, this is in the long-term interests of the world community.

China will not collapse, even in the face of metastatic crisis and popular mobilization. But it will certainly face grave instability. The best policy for the world community in responding to this instability will be to ensure that the democratic breakthrough occurs as quickly as possible.

The Eve of Transition

China, in our scenario, is now a country in tumult. Tiananmen Square, the vast 44 hectare square at the foot of the Forbidden City, is filled with thousands of the citizens that it was built to accommodate. But they are seeking the Party's demise, not its long life. Unlike in 1989, when the people made their point and headed home, this time they intend to stay until the job is done. Placards reading "Give back our China" and "Step down Hu Jintao" flutter in the air.

Foreign nationals are being withdrawn from the country and investors are closing their factories. A country that seemed to hold such promise has suddenly been revealed as dangerously unstable. The stock analysts and cheerleaders who ignored China's unresolved constitutional crisis are suddenly silent.

Party leaders are holding emergency meetings inside Zhongnanhai on the handling of the crisis. The Chinese expression for dilemma—*zuoyou weinan* or "danger on both left and right"—perfectly captures their plight: every choice leads to perdition. They rejected withdrawal in times of peace and now they certainly will reject it in times of crisis. They can neither repress nor appease the movement. What to do?