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The Immediate Aftermath

The Interim Regime

Given the constellation of forces that will be pressing in on China's heroes of retreat from every angle, the immediate aftermath of transition will be delicate at best. Democratic transitions the world over show how the interim period—which typically extends from one to two years—is no less crucial to maintaining the momentum toward democracy and setting it on a proper course than the breakthrough itself. Like the smooth but swirling wake thrown up after the passing of a great ship, this period can be deceptively unsettled. The economy may remain in crisis, while society will leap into a frenzy of political activity under new freedoms with few norms or rules to follow. All this bears heavily on a fragile new leadership struggling to erect a new constitutional order.

Not for the last time, China's achievement of a democratic breakthrough through an elite-led extrication will pay dividends here. In general, extrication produces less unsettled results than mass overthrows or collapses where protestors seize state power, as shown by the tumultuous examples of the Philippines, as well as many Latin American examples, especially Chile under the Allende government from 1970 to 1973. An elite-led extrication allows for the orderly creation of a "caretaker government"—in contrast to the revolutionary councils or power-sharing governments that result from more mass-led transitions.

Caretaker governments are typically the most stable and effective types of interim regimes because they are both inheritors of state power and legality from the old regime as well as legitimated builders of the future democracy—a situation described as "backward legality, forward legitimacy."[1] Backward legality provides the interim government with the resources of the state—its bureaucracy, its meeting places, its law-making powers—to prepare the way for democracy. This can be useful as long as the interim leaders are committed to that project and those resources are still of some value.

Typically—as in Spain and many Eastern European cases—the first law they pass eliminates the political monopoly of the old ruling party (if not the party itself). They also tackle some issues of the transition pact that cannot await an elected government, things like laws covering amnesties for human rights abuses, rules to stem capital flight, and macroeconomic stabilization. The interim government also has to raise revenue and maintain public order. Not least, and the source of its forward legitimacy, it must make plans for a new political system.

China should be in a good position on all counts. A caretaker government could quickly deploy the old CCP system for new purposes. The rule of law and the legislative and judicial organs were respected and workable in the late PRC era, while the bureaucracy was increasingly professionalized. The CCP's "leadership" could be ended with the mere stroke of a pen. One of the great ironies of that change, as was noted in the case of the USSR, would be that just as the entire PRC political system is about to be revamped if not ended, the PRC constitution will suddenly come into full play for the first time. The interim NPC will briefly shine as "the highest organ of state power."

An immediate issue to be confronted will be the takeover of the assets formerly controlled by the CCP. A fracas for control of these assets—factories, bank deposits, houses, cars, and public records—has ensued in other authoritarian collapses where remnants of the old regime and elements of the emerging democratic polity have contended for control. The newly "stateless" CCP will have to be unburdened of these chattels, which in turn will need to be put under the impartial custody of the interim regime.

Keeping the civil service in operation is a crucial task. The dismissal of large numbers of bureaucrats is usually a mistake. In fact, old bureaucrats typically swing quickly into line—for rational reasons if no other—and that in turn ensures better governance. Moreover, the interim government's "backward legality" would be undermined if it engaged in a wanton and lawless purging of former government officials, whose positions after all were legal and whose loyalties to the old regime were necessary.

Given the mere size of China, the imperatives of governance make it necessary to compromise with the old. The caretakers will have to vet and reappoint a swathe of top leaders in roughly 65 ministry-level and cabinet-level bodies as well as in 31 provinces or provincial-level cities. Within the provinces, the same processes will be repeated covering something like 60,000 sub-provincial governments. How that process proceeds in each province and locality will vary widely. One can imagine that the situation will be more parlous for the ancien regime in inland regions where resentment runs high-

est. Police may find themselves in impossible situations as angry peasants ransack the offices of predatory county cadres.

Most crucial will be the need for the interim regime to set out a plan for the new democracy, which we consider in part 3. Given the inevitable challenges of democratic consolidation even in best-case scenarios, an interim government would be advised to avoid creating exaggerated expectations. Ideally, its rhetoric stresses the importance of immediate and mundane tasks, and on learning the messy business of democracy, not grand dreams and impossible amity. Again, having a caretaker government rather than a revolutionary council in charge of the newly democratic China will make this valued sobriety more likely.

There is always a danger of interim governments becoming permanent, claiming some degree of present legitimacy for ousting the previous "scoundrels" and asserting that the necessary preconditions for a successful move (or return) to democracy have not been met. Caretaker governments may try to introduce some form of "tutelary democracy" or to inhibit the holding of free and fair elections. Yet the fact that the interim leadership is not elected, and probably not representative either, means that this brings dangers of a backlash. Gentle pressure from the world community to set and abide by a transitional timetable could help ensure that it does not happen in China.

Sudden Politicization

CCP leaders and their propaganda organs frequently warned in the late PRC era that China would descend into widespread anarchy if a half century of authoritarian rule were suddenly lifted. Deng Xiaoping was master of such scare-mongering. "As soon as they seized power, the so-called fighters for democracy would start fighting each other," he said shortly after Tiananmen. "And if a civil war broke out, with blood flowing like a river, what 'human rights' would there be? With each faction dominating a region, production declining, transportation disrupted and not millions or tens of millions but hundreds of millions of refugees fleeing the country, it is the Asia-Pacific region, which is at present the most promising in the world, that would be the first affected. And that would lead to disaster on a world scale."[2]

Party scholars have echoed Deng's words, writing cataclysmic tracts about the results of any democratic breakthrough in the country. One, imagining an elite move similar to what we have sketched above, conjures up the set-piece dark scene of national disunity, economic collapse, and social disorder.[3] Another cautions: "The countries of Southeast Asia along with Japan, Hong

Kong and Taiwan should be prepared to handle tens of millions of refugees from China if a civil war breaks out as a result of political chaos and the fall of the CCP. . . . Half of the world would be pulled into a situation of instability caused by China."[4]

Even pro-democracy advocates have issued sober warnings: "The moment dictatorship collapsed, violent populist politics would appear. Every kind of social demand from every sort of group will appear like a volcano. Terrible recriminations, cruel struggles, all sorts of lawless activities will appear taking aim not only at those who supported dictatorship but also at rivals within the anti-dictatorship camp. All sorts of people will use the name of freedom and democracy to trample on human rights and rule of law."[5]

To some extent these predictions may come true. It is almost certain that the democratic breakthrough will result in some degree of street violence between those celebrating the change, those opposing it, and those simply seeking to take advantage of the unrest to loot, rape, and rampage. China was already a heavily armed country by the late reform era—evidenced by the fact that police confiscated thousands of firearms every year. From January 2001 to July 2002, there were more than 15,000 separate incidents of violent attacks on Party and government individuals and their property.[6] As one democrat writes: "The CCP cadres know all the blood debts that have built up over the years, which is why they fear democracy. The moment they fell from power a countless number of people and their families would come out to seek revenge."[7]

One could imagine scenes of violence in Tiananmen Square as pro-democracy groups trying to tear Mao's image from the rostrum battle with remnant Maoists intent on honoring his memory. With little tradition of compromise, street violence could be ugly. Some bloodshed is a virtual certainty. Writ large, the threat of such social conflicts remains the biggest fear of those inside and outside China about the immediate consequences of a democratic breakthrough.

But there are several reasons to believe that society's reaction will be less calamitous than imagined. Most important, a new regime which promises openness, elections and freedoms will not be a cause for rioting. Like the takeover of the CCP itself with its promises of a new era, "liberated areas" would be easy to manage. The "chaos" of China's past was always a result of illiberal policies—like Maoist movements or the deployment of military might against peaceful protestors in 1989—not of liberal ones. Even then, as has been noted, Chinese society remained remarkably cohesive and unaffected by high-level tension during the Cultural Revolution, in part due to the strength of family units.[8]

Indeed, the social atmosphere would likely be quite the opposite, recalling the heady feelings of mutual respect and love—a veritable Woodstock—that broke out during Tiananmen, or on the streets of Beijing after the city was awarded the 2008 Summer Olympics. This would be especially likely if the breakthrough elites have draped themselves in the flag and promised to "revitalize China" and encourage broad-based economic development in addition to introducing democracy.

Excluding the mostly contained minority areas, there are not major ethnic or cultural cleavages within China waiting to split open the moment the old regime falls. Unlike Indonesia after Suharto, India at partition, and the USSR, China is more similar to Asia's other democratizers like South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines, which made smooth transitions to democracy after long periods of authoritarian rule partly thanks to their social cohesiveness.

Another reason to believe that the tensions would not lead to anarchy is the strength of provincial and local governments, one of the clear legacies of state-building under the PRC. While CCP leaders and many scholars continue to view China through the imperial prism of a vast unwashed held together by a grand central state, in fact, as we saw in the last section, regional power was already quite strong. Mao's one undisputed contribution to China was to erect a strong state, and his successors can claim some credit for having dispersed its powers.

High-level political instability is likely. Social anarchy is not. The self-serving "Yellow Peril" propaganda used by the CCP to try to scare Western governments into supporting its rule by invoking fears of thousands of migrants arriving in shipping containers off Orange County simply does not add up. As one democratic leader wrote: "Democracy will not cause social disorder. In China's cities today, people are very dependent on the stability of the system and would work to uphold it. Even if there were some riots and some clashes, there would rapidly be a compromise and settlement reached and peace would be restored. The new government would quickly take over from the old one and restore order. Democracy has been a long hope of the people. A democratic government would enjoy immediate support and people would draw together to maintain peace even if some people tried to destroy it. Those causing disturbances would have no market."[9]

Even when disturbances *do* find a market, the relevant normative question will be what degree of violence would negate the whole transition? That is, to what extent would the injustices of transition be acceptable as part of the process of eliminating the injustice of CCP rule? That question can be answered only by the people of China. Many democratic revolutions, as men-

tioned, have involved violence and unrest. Yet few citizens of today's democracies believe the price was not one worth paying. China's transitional violence will probably be limited. What violence there is may be deemed by its people as the acceptable price of freedom.

A less dramatic but probably more politically relevant question is how the interim regime will handle the sudden eruption of political participation in society. With new freedoms to speak out and organize, the interim regime will confront a boisterous polity the moment it takes office.

Among those who may feel aggrieved by the transition, ironically, are the very democrats who had long lobbied for change. Since the breakthrough will likely be elite-led, democrats may believe that it has been achieved in a nondemocratic way and call for a "completion of the revolution." Many democratizers, especially those excluded from the democratic pact, might accuse the new regime of having compromised too much with the ancien regime and not promised fast and full enough democracy. The mass protests might have empowered reformers to seize the day, but in achieving the breakthrough pact, the reformers may have locked the protest leaders out of the bargain. Overseas dissidents excluded from the transition would be immediate critics, as would those at home who were shouldered out of the way in the jostling of the transition. Tens of thousands of released political prisoners may join them.

It was this same tension that led to splits in the 1989 movement after one group had achieved talks with the regime. Post-1989 the often strident public disputes within the Chinese intellectual community about whether, for example, the U.S. government should endorse normal trade tariffs for the PRC or whether funding should be provided for village elections and judicial development, reflect the same latent tensions. In general, the narrower was the coalition that led the breakthrough, the greater the likelihood of renewed agitation by excluded groups. The broader the coalition, the less likely.

On the opposite side will be excluded hard-liners, the dislodged elites and their friends who sided with the nondemocratic camp. In the immediate wake of the democratic breakthrough, there will be a significant portion of the leadership at both central and local levels that fears the new disposition. Some will be deeply opposed to the democratic breakthrough. But most will be simply afraid of the uncertainties of the new era. With a newly freed press and civil society, they may fear the end of the corrupt gains from reform that constituted their reward for complicity. In addition, those who openly opposed the changes would rightly fear for their lives and safety. Some will fear mobs marching on their villas and throwing their mock-Renaissance furnishings into the street along with their half-dressed mistresses. They will, in the words

of one scholar, rue the day when they "become high-profile targets of newly-activated political groups and their self-enrichment activities are subject to press scrutiny and populist attacks."[10]

In the turmoil of the initial coup, one can imagine many of them fleeing from their offices in cars toward airports where special planes sweep them to freedom. Their children and wives may by this time already be stashed safely abroad, along with their money, a backdoor exit that was already widely in existence for many senior cadres around the country by the turn of the century.[11] Will foreign countries like Burma, North Korea, or Vietnam offer them safe haven from the changes? Will they "rediscover" their familial links to Southeast Asia, as Peruvian president Fujimori did his Japanese roots? Certainly, many have children and relatives who are U.S. citizens. Might they end up living in obscurity in Hawaii, as Marcos did after his ouster? Or will they flood Canada and Australia as "business migrants" as did corrupt Russian officials?

Some who have not been detained or fled might seek to oppose the fragile new leadership. They might collude with disgruntled elements of the military who are angered by their service's inaction. This is what happened in August 1991 when hard-liners in the Russian Communist Party tried to oust Gorbachev along with Yeltsin.

The natural response of the unstable new leadership may be to crush the antidemocratic forces with repression and witch-hunts. This would be a mistake, not only for the reputation of the regime itself but also for the impact that it would have on bestirring this group. It might also have the effect of making the democratic leadership itself more extremist. In successful transitions, the new leadership has sought to conciliate hard-liners as far as possible. The ideal response is to admit, even welcome, this group's existence and its right to compete in fair elections in future. If other post-communist countries and China's communal traditions are any guide, retro-communists will enjoy significant support at the polls. The key for the interim regime is to steer this threat onto the open and democratic path.

Fortunately, China will have the odds in its favor. The ability of hard-liners to retire peacefully has been a hallmark of extrications, in contrast to overthrows. The exclusion of radicals in the opposition makes this more palatable at the political level. Moreover, there is a kind of mutual dependence between the interim regime and the ancien regime. The interim regime must respect the right to a quiet retirement of the hard-liners because it has one foot in the old order with its backward legality. It also wants to offer them a graceful exit so that they will not pose a threat to the new order. The hard-liners, meanwhile, must recognize the interim regime because it offers them the best hope

to avoid jail, exile, or death. China had already established a norm of quiet retirement for purged elites in the late PRC era. There is every reason to believe it will be respected again.

Alongside the potential backlash from ousted leaders is a potential backlash from sidelined military leaders who had sought an early crushing of the democracy movement. Such figures may have failed to convince others at the time of mass protests. But they may find a larger constituency as military officers begin to consider the implications of the democratic pact for their own interests. Certainly, many, especially in the police force, will consider how the old days of easy money from corruption will end. The military will be less worried about this, given its withdrawal from business. But the pact itself will need to be one which makes most in the coercive forces confident that their corporate interests will be safe in the new era. If, as we posit, the new elite has emerged to promise more military money, an amnesty, and the protection of national stability and sovereignty alongside democratic reforms, there will be no pretext for action.

It was just such calculations that caused huge military defections from the antidemocratic backlash in Moscow in August 1991 when hard-liners in the Russian Communist Party tried to oust Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Most of the units simply did not respond to the hard-liners' appeal. Of those that did, a large group soon changed its mind and—composed of 10 tanks, 30 APVs, and 500 troops—surrounded the parliament in its defense, pointing their guns outward instead of inward. The leader of the defecting soldiers was Colonel Alexander Rutskoi, an Afghan war veteran and vice president of the Russian republic. He told the soldiers that they were as much a part of the new order as anyone else. "Today," he said from atop a tank, "the fate of the country, its freedom and democratic development are in your hands."[12]

International Reaction

No less than fears of domestic unrest, the threat of national disunity has been repeatedly invoked in China as an argument against democratic reforms. It is an issue that will appear frequently in the consolidation phase. Early on, it can stall democratic reforms if interim leaders revert to arguments for a firm hand to preserve unity. In the USSR and Yugoslavia, the threat of breakaway republics held up reforms at critical moments.

Tibet and Xinjiang would be the most likely sources of secessionist sentiment in the immediate aftermath of a breakthrough, although China's hidden diversity counsels us to keep in mind the possibility of division elsewhere. As the USSR example showed, the very triumph of "legality" and "constitutionalism" on which the interim government's authority partly rests creates new

openings for separatism. In Tibet and Xinjiang, the "high degree of autonomy" promised to these regions under the country's laws will suddenly seem not just viable but also necessary.

Although Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, has publicly ruled out independence and sought only greater autonomy for his homeland, younger and more fiery Tibetans, especially those in exile, might seek to lead a new uprising against Chinese colonial rule like that of 1959. In Xinjiang, where avowed independence movements operate across the border, oases along the border with limited Chinese influence like Hotan, Kashgar, and Gulja could be the source of similar movements. Such activity could provide ammunition for advocates of less than complete democratization in China.

The threat of immediate breakaway is less pronounced for democratic Taiwan since the island is already totally self-governing and would be well aware of the consternation it would cause in Asia and the West if it were seen as having exploited a fragile move toward democracy in China—something it has long advocated—for its own ends. As above, it might also strengthen the hand of remnant conservatives in China. There would be little incentive for Taiwan to make a preemptive declaration of independence at this stage, especially given that the longer-term prospects of democracy in China would provide brighter hopes for its eventual peaceful achievement of this.

Indeed, there may be a role for Taiwan's leaders in supporting the changes. In the USSR in 1991, Boris Yeltsin promised to support the secession of Baltic States to gain their support and thus win the upper hand over Gorbachev by portraying him as "antidemocratic." A similar pact might be negotiated with Taiwan. A Taiwan leader could promise to support the reformers and not declare independence in return for a promise that the future Chinese state would recognize Taiwan's autonomy and drop threats of war.

Certainly there are normative reasons to wish that breakaway movements do not erupt anywhere in China at this stage. But the "window of opportunity" presented by the transition may be too tempting. Some leaders may see the possibility of a more nationalistic China in the early years of democracy and argue for an immediate dash for freedom. It would be critical for world leaders to make it clear that they would not, at this stage, support such division. Although later derided as his "chicken Kiev" speech, U.S. President George Bush was probably right in 1991 when he asked Ukrainians to defer a vote for independence, fearing that it would sabotage Russia's fragile democratic transition. We return to the long-term resolution of national self-determination movements in part 3.

The broader international reaction to the democratic breakthrough will be important as well. The international community will need to provide robust

political and economic support for the move to democracy. Immediate recognition of the new regime and backing for its goals would be exigent. This would be especially true if the reformers are still facing the threat or even reality of an armed opposition to the change by some admixture of conservative and regional elites. Promises of financial aid and assurances that China's new government would retain its UN Security Council seat would be useful. Rhetoric, to paraphrase U.S. president George Bush after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, should not gloat about the end of CCP rule but rather express support for the bright new era.

Western nations will have to strike a careful balance between fortifying the new republic while not interfering in its transition. The U.S. military deployed naval vessels off the Dominican Republic to support its first elections there in 1978 and made overflights of the Philippines to support the new Aquino government in 1986. It would be advised to avoid such well-intentioned actions around China, because they would likely provoke nationalist reactions. The United States should not pretend that the new China is an immediate ally of the West, something that, in addition to being unlikely, might be seen as a revelation of a plot to "retake" China, "lost," in 1949. Nor would it be advised to offer its services in resolving outstanding issues of the transition, a job best left to the countries of Asia. Tiny Singapore, which is widely admired in China and takes a leading role in Asian political affairs, might be the better venue for this, as it was for the first meeting of top-level negotiators from China and Taiwan in 1993.

Washington and the West in general, then, might need to take a quiet back seat to the changes in China. It could tell Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang to stay within the fold and warn other Asian nations not to take advantage of the delicate transition in China. It could offer financial and political support through international agencies. But its voice might best be muted.

At the same time, the world community will want to ensure that the costs of democratic transition in China are contained. There will need to be preparations for contingencies such as an increase in illegal emigration, the possible loss of management over China's nuclear weapons, and perhaps the eruption of health emergencies. All this suggests that the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia must have a ready-made plan for fundamental political change in China. At present, it is believed that such a plan exists only at the military-to-military level and focuses on strategic issues only. The need for a broader diplomatic and issue-oriented plan is pressing.[13]

China's neighbors would likely adopt an equally careful posture toward the changes for similar reasons. Although nationalists in India, for example, would see an opportunity to invade the disputed mountain pass between the

two countries, such a move seems highly unlikely given the wider stakes for India. An untroubled and short transition in China to a more stable regime would benefit India in practical ways economic, military, and political. Moreover, as the world's biggest democracy it has a moral commitment to shepherding its giant brother along the same path. India's role could also be critical in moderating any Tibetan unrest since it plays home to the exiled leadership.

Many more contingencies too numerous to consider could turn for the worse through the actions of Asian neighbors. Southeast Asian countries could retake reefs in the Spratly Islands, a still unreconstructed North Korea could turn inward again without the pressure of a modernizing communist neighbor, Russian nationalists in the Far East could make incursions on borderlands given to China in a series of disputed demarcation exercises in the 1990s. The list goes on.

No less than in the breakthrough period, then, the transition period will bring to the surface a host of new issues that will confront a democratic China. The sudden eruption of these issues on the watch of a delicate interim regime makes them all sources of potential setback. We may find solace in the fact that most democratic transitions in the Third Wave with an equal onslaught of domestic and international issues—think of South Africa, Russia, and Brazil—succeeded in the end. Again, while it is useful to focus on the immediate and instrumental issues of transition, there is a deep and powerful normative undercurrent that has carried many countries through the same difficulties. The challenge for China and the world will be to minimize these costs of freedom.