

THE CHINESE PUZZLE-II: POLITY

The authoritarian political system in China will last, because its goals are the ones the Chinese polity has sought ever since the Opium Wars, says DEEPAK LAL

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the only Leninist party (along with its Vietnamese and North Korean cousins) to have survived the turmoil of 1991, despite the Tiananmen wobble in 1989. It has also been the most successful in bringing the mass prosperity promised by the Marxist scriptures through its embrace of capitalism, albeit with Chinese characteristics. It is this implicit contract with its people, suppressing political liberty in exchange for prosperity, which continues to provide it with its legitimacy. The future of the CCP and its likely future geostrategic stance is thus of immense importance, not least for India. This is the subject of this column.

Predicting China's political future has become something of a parlour game amongst Sinologists. A useful book by David Shambaugh (*China's Communist Party*, California) deftly summarises the various prognostications ranging from a chaotic disintegration into warlordism, to full fledged democracy. Neither of these extremes is likely. The CCP has shown great skill in adapting to the social and economic pressures it has faced. Many of the threats noted by western observers arising from the rising inequality are misplaced as a recent study of Chinese attitudes by Martin King Whyte (Myth of the Social Volcano, Stanford) finds. Instead of anger, the dominant mood was "an upbeat 'rising tide is lifting all boats' view that more and more people would become rich in the future, while the numbers of poor would decline still further".

With its partial opening to accommodate dissent under Hu Jin Tao, unlike its repression under Jiang Zemin, the CCP's most likely future is what my UCLA colleague Richard Baum has called "Consultative Leninism". This would make China more like the single-party states of Singapore's PAP (People's Action Party) and Mexico's PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), of which the polity evolving in Hong Kong might be a precursor.

The party has already learnt to lighten its controls in the personal sphere. It has co-opted the rising capitalists and the intelligentsia which might provide leadership to any opposition to its rule. Those challenging its rule are dealt



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with harshly, but apart from the few dissidents, it no longer interferes in people's lives. Its most serious problems are related to the endemic corruption, which has worsened with the growth of capitalism with Chinese characteristics, which could threaten its legitimacy. But, even this downside can be overdone, witness the long success of the corrupt PRI in Mexico.

So, like Shambaugh, I do not expect the CCP to atrophy and disintegrate, rather it will, as in recent decades, adapt. The authoritarian political system in China will last, not least because this is the system the Chinese have known and tolerated for millennia, but also because the party has created a modern, highly skilled mandarin class. Its goals are the ones the Chinese polity has sought ever since the Opium Wars, and which have great resonance with the population: "attaining wealth and power; enhancing nationalism and international dignity; and preserving unity and preventing chaos." (Shambaugh, p.169).

What are likely to be the Chinese geostrategic objectives in the near future, given that the current political system delivering stellar growth rates is likely to continue? From an Indian perspective, there are numerous worrying signs. First, China is on the way to creating potential naval bases from

the deep water ports it is building in Burma, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. A benign interpretation can be given to this impending Chinese naval build-up, that these are to protect the vital sea lanes leading to the Malacca Straits through which 80 per cent of China's imported oil passes. But, combined with the large Chinese military presence in Tibet, its close alliance with Pakistan — the crucible of jihadi terror threatening India — the takeover of Nepal by Maoists sympathetic to China, and the Naxalite threat in eastern and central India, in geostrategic terms, India is right to fear being encircled by China.

Though, it is true that China has never been an expansionist imperialist power outside what it considers its territory, this provides cold comfort to India. Particularly in the light of recent bellicose statements from its military before cancelling a visit by the US defence secretary. For amongst the territories it claims as its own are Arunachal and Aksai Chin. Nor can the Indo-Chinese border war, which so traumatised Nehru and scuttled his policy of placating China, be easily forgotten. Though China has settled 12 of the 14 border disputes with its neighbours, including Russia and Vietnam, with which it too fought border wars, choosing to make large concessions by giving up large areas it had claimed. The long-drawn-out and continuing diplomatic negotiations on the

Sino-Indian border offer a glimmer of hope. But, India cannot rely on this alone. Apart from growing its navy and increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, and using diplomatic and economic means to ensure that the ports being built in Burma and Sri Lanka are not turned into Chinese naval bases, a two-prong strategy maybe in order. The first is to join the US (which I gather India is already aiding to protect the sea lanes though the Malacca Straits) together with Japan and Australia, which are expanding their naval presence in the Pacific in the face of the perceived waning of US military power, to offer China a partnership in keeping the eastern sea lanes open. This might mitigate its fear of economic strangulation. The second could be to expand the Indo-US strategic alliance to include Japan and Australia.

The Chinese are unlikely to want to replace the US as the global superpower. The main flashpoint with the US, Taiwan seems on the road to reconciliation with China. The weakening of US global power under Obama's watch does, however, pose the danger that if the economy falters, threatening the implicit contract which has provided the CCP with legitimacy, or there are other threats to its supremacy, it may play the nationalist card by attempting to achieve Asian hegemony. An outcome which India must at all cost try and avoid.