

Which Side Are You On, Comrade?

Potential for Convergent Protests across the People's Republic of China

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ABSTRACT

The Communist Party of China (CCP) has ruled from its palaces in Beijing for seventy years, but that does not mean that their rule for another seventy is inevitable. The Party faces serious challenges not only to its legitimacy, but also its own psyche, its soul. The plight of environmental pollution has spurred ever more citizens to protest year by year, often violently. At the same time, much of the Party's legitimacy is drawn from its image as having successfully modernized and industrialized a once poor country. Yet, should this economic prosperity run out, can the Party find another way to win support from the people?

Every Chinese ruling organization for the last two-thousand odd years has had to maintain its control over the "mandate of heaven" (the divine right to rule), or force being replaced with a different administration. Xi Jinping and his allies within the Party are staring into a stark mirror: one that is ever changing, and growing ever more perilous. Can they do what it takes to continually renew the Party and its mandate in the face of social, environmental, economic, and even existential threats? This article argues that social tensions, environmental stresses, and economic downturn could severely undermine the Party's legitimacy in the eyes of the population, and – over time – could even threaten the continued rule of the CCP.

INTRODUCTION

The Communist Party of China (CCP) is currently facing numerous challenges to its continued rule as the country's legitimate government. Political scientist

Bruce Dickson dubs this crossroads a “dictator’s dilemma,” as the more they work to tighten their grasp, the more people will slip through their fingers, as authoritarianism can inflame underlying tensions and rebellious sentiment.¹ These existential threats to the Party’s rule include societal, economic and environmental discontent. The Party is clearly aware of the threats: in Xi Jinping’s first-ever speech as General Secretary, he declared that “the whole Party must be vigilant” against acts that reduce their legitimacy in the eyes of the people.² According to the scholar Minxin Pei, the CCP has long worked to achieve “authoritarian resilience,” to which he states there are three main tactics: “refined repression, economic statism, and political cooptation.”³ To date, it has been through these coercive methods that the Party has survived, but has the tide now turned against the Party? Will economic, environmental, and social degradation lead to all-out revolt? Can Xi Jinping manage to salvage a status quo with the Party still holding the reins of power?

This paper argues that there are three main factors of unrest among the Chinese populace that threaten the continued rule of the CCP: social tensions, environmental stresses, and economic downturn. The paper first introduces the reader to the contextual map of how the CCP arrived to where it is now. Then an outline of the threats is followed by a short description of three potential scenarios should any of the above threats escalate or intensify. Finally, the paper seeks to explain the existential threat that the Party poses to itself and proposes possible future visions for China.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Threats to the Party’s legitimacy are not recent phenomena, and the Party has long worked to mitigate such threats and stay in power. For example, following the disasters of the Great Leap Forward (1958-62) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76), both the Party and the nation were severely damaged. Thus, in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping assumed the mantle of paramount leader following the death of Chairman Mao Zedong, the Party stood at an inflection point. Deng aimed to rekindle the Party’s relationship with the masses. Doing so would mean taking actions to improve the lives of the hundreds of millions of peasant farmers. To win stomachs, Deng prescribed economic reforms. To win hearts, he defended the core of CCP ideology, the Four Cardinal Principles (“the socialist road, dictatorship of the proletariat, leadership by CCP, Marxism-Leninism and Mao Thought”).⁴ To win minds, he prescribed the strengthening of state institutions and “limits on the authority of the Party.”⁵ Another crucial component prescribed was the orderly transition of power.

Yet despite best efforts, Deng’s coalition experienced continual struggle. During his leadership, and that of his successors, the Party found little unity.

Instead, reform was rather sporadic and contradictory. Deng was forced to come to terms with the fact that most Party members and peasants were tired of upheaval: they favored the stability of gradual reforms over the “big bang” style of revolutions of the past.⁶ Thus, in the words of a Chinese saying attributed to Deng, the CCP “crossed the river by feeling the stones” – results were frequently two steps forward and one step back.⁷ Nevertheless, when Deng retired in 1992, the Party and the nation had come a long way from the cold communist winters of yore. He had accumulated enough power to hand-pick not only his successors, but also the successors to his successors.⁸ And since the 1980s, his mandate of term limits worked to force the Party to care about its own future.⁹ Harmony, or at least acquiescence, was a precept of governance.

For two decades, this system of joint rule and retirement served to prevent ideologues or radicals from seizing the reins and keeping hold of them. However, it eventually failed due to the political weakness of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao (both in office from 2003 to 2013), both of whom lacked significant support other than that they were chosen by Deng himself. The rise of Xi Jinping represented the end of the Deng era and a return to personalized strongman rule similar to that of Mao Zedong, Chiang Kai-shek, and Yuan Shikai. He has no heir. In governance, Xi has placed himself at the top of new “Leading Small Groups (LSG)” which act almost as cabinet positions, and in doing so, the “Chairman of everything”¹⁰ has extended his power downward into the inner workings of the Chinese government.¹¹ While this does allow him ultimate authority, it also places squarely on his shoulders the ultimate responsibility for the outcome of the CCP’s struggle to maintain legitimacy.

KEY INTERNAL THREATS TO CHINA’S POLITICAL FUTURE

Today’s China is one of glaring contradictions and drastic inequity. It is a China where the people on the whole believe their immediate future is a better one¹², but it is also a China where a consensus is building that corruption among local Party cadre – a major source of discontent – is also increasing.¹³ In a nationwide survey, results showed a roughly 17 percent disparity in trust between local and central government, with Beijing decidedly more popular.¹⁴ The same survey showed that public trust in civil servants across the country was almost 30 percent lower than in central officials.¹⁵ The unrest is very real: “mass incidents” of protest “surged from 10,000 in 1994 to 74,000 in 2004, to more than 120,000 in 2008.”¹⁶ What is worse is that when the government reacts to opposition, it can further inflame the issue. For example, protests in Zhejiang province in 2005 escalated symmetrically with repression tactics by the government as the plight of the protestors became more visible and the participants became more implacable.¹⁷

Since the nationwide democracy movement and crackdown of 1989, localized protests have not spread across the country in any sort of wave, but embers of discontent have nevertheless remained among some of the populace. Currently, there exists a possibility for the disintegration of the social fabric. Growing pollution and the threat of associated natural disasters threaten to mobilize wider protest. An urban-rural economic gulf is widening, while growth everywhere is slowing. These grievances, if they grow and are harnessed by protest leaders, could become very real concerns to not only Xi Jinping, but the entire CCP itself. Potential outcomes could include widespread protests, resulting in another vicious Tiananmen-style crackdown. Worst of all, the people's faith in the Party has been compromised.¹⁸ Any action or inaction that further rocks enough of the population's faith in the Party could be the straw that breaks the camel's back, sending China into an uncertain, chaotic future.

THREAT #1: SOCIETAL TENSION AND IDEOLOGICAL DRIFT

The Party's rhetorical claim to legitimacy is often based on its past achievements: whether that be wartime actions, post-war land reforms, or even the opening-up reforms.¹⁹ However, the Party's legitimacy has in recent years been threatened by three interrelated phenomena: the population's distrust in the local officials that represent the Party; rising expectations and increasing "rights consciousness" among the population; and its own ideological drift from its core values.

The population's distrust in local officials -who, for most, are the primary point of contact with the Party- has proven to be disruptive to the Party's legitimacy among the populace. While more than 90 percent of the nation believes that the system of government itself is "very trustworthy,"²⁰ there is a "local legitimacy deficit,"²¹ with trust in local leaders at only 58.9 percent.²² Proclamations and regulations from Beijing are often ignored due to simple corruption or lack of funding and enforcement.²³ Often, villagers' only resort is to fight for what Beijing had promised them, described by Kevin O'Brien as "rightful resistance."²⁴ As far back as the 1990s, violence between farmers and Party cadres has sometimes escalated to the point that "even national leaders were worried that local power holders were 'driving the peasantry toward rebellion.'"²⁵ Popular and widespread discontent with corrupt or inept local authorities - or those that are perceived as such - could undermine the CCP's legitimacy.

At the same time, the Party has created structures that have increased the population's expectations of what the government should provide, and the personal rights they should uphold. In 1987, the Chinese government began to allow the people to experiment with democracy and direct elections

on the local level by way of the Organic Law of Village Committees.²⁶ At the beginning, this may have seemed like a nuisance to the average Chinese peasant; however, over time, it has grown, and these newly enfranchised voters have “gradually mobilized.”²⁷ Today, these elections are “semi-competitive” with “more candidates than seats” up for election.²⁸ Secret ballots are now used in the overwhelming majority of cases.²⁹ By 2002, voter turnout for local elections reached as high as 90 percent, with almost all of rural Chinese citizens participating in village elections.³⁰

As access to such civil rights has grown, “rights consciousness” demands to the government are also growing.³¹ Educational attainment in China is exploding upward. In 2016 alone, Chinese universities enrolled over 7 million new domestic students, which represents a huge increase over averages from the previous decade (compared to around 1 million in 2000 and around 5 million in 2009).³² Trends toward a more rules-based society (authoritative legal systems, higher education rates, more internationalization, open local elections, etc.) may have led the growing Chinese middle class to a state of “informed disenchantment” whereby they feel the Party is lagging behind their expectations – within the Party there is rule *by* law, not rule *of* law.³³

Many scholars argue that there has been a loss of popular faith in the Party in recent years, stemming from a “values vacuum” whereby its version of Communism is no longer true Communism.³⁴ To proponents of this argument, the CCP is losing the ideological war by ceasing to have a coherent ideology at all.³⁵ In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping recognized an earlier iteration of this as the “Three Beliefs Crisis” in which the masses had a crisis of faith in socialism, Marxism, and the Party.³⁶ When Deng Xiaoping argued that any cat that catches mice is a good cat – meaning that any economy that works is a good economy – and that poverty was not socialism, both were a direct attack on Communist ideology.³⁷ Under Mao, Deng was purged as a “Capitalist Roader” – or, someone who believed that socialism could include markets.³⁸ However, after Mao’s death, Deng’s rule of the Party saw Maoist thought replaced with the one “hard truth”³⁹ of economic development – which, in reality, meant free markets. To many, this was not Communism at all.⁴⁰

In 2002, President Jiang Zemin expanded the base of the Party to include the “advanced productive forces” in his “Three Represents,” allowing magnates and titans of business to join the Party for the first time. It was seen in the eyes of many as the Party continuing to turn away from its core ideologies, leaving Communism spiritually rudderless.⁴¹ The reality of discontent and lack of faith in the Party has certainly not been missed by its leadership. In 2004, during the fourth Plenum of the 16th Party Congress, President Hu introduced the idea of “social management,” by which the Party saw it as its rightful duty to craft public opinion at every level.⁴² The Leftist clique of the Party has long clamored about the “sugar-coated bullets” of reform, whereby liberalization might seem

appealing, but would be the death of the Party.⁴³ As China's decades-long period of miracle growth indicates, Deng's vision of economic development did manifest. But can it continue to survive? Can the CCP continue to maintain enough legitimacy in the eyes of the people while trust in the Party's local officials is low, expectations are rising, and the Party does not have a unified, coherent ideology?

THREAT #2: ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS

In the 2015 banned film "Under the Dome," journalist Chai Jing brought to the attention of the masses that children were growing up under such a blanket of smog they did not know the color of the sky and had never seen a star.⁴⁴ In the race to modernize, China has degraded its ecosystems; polluted its air, water, and soil; and used up large swathes of its natural resources. As much as 60 percent of China's groundwater has been polluted to the point that it cannot be used.⁴⁵ Industrial accidents, such as the Tianjin plant explosion in 2015,⁴⁶ are grim reminders of the cost of development. Other accidents, such as coal mine cave-ins, also occur regularly.⁴⁷ For example, in 2005, a petrochemical plant explosion in Jilin city spilled benzene into the Songhua river, leaving millions of freezing residents in Harbin city without access to water.⁴⁸ Xi Jinping has promised a "War Against Pollution" and warned that damaging the environment "will eventually return to haunt us."⁴⁹ While China does have regulations and environmental law, enforcement is rare, due in no small part to the strong backlash against whistleblowers who often end up ostracized by local officials, or even jailed.⁵⁰ As such, in recent years, a full two-thirds of "mass incidents" of protest in China can be attributed to anger over local pollution.⁵¹ Due to dramatic increases in reported protests since the 1990s, spending on public security has spiraled upward.⁵²

Some protests have inspired further demonstrations, often in response to the government's handling of the initial protest and its demands. In 2011, two herdsmen in Inner Mongolia were killed while protesting polluted ground – caused by rare-earth mineral mines – and this sparked a much larger protest in the region, culminating in a short period of martial law.⁵³ In the Haidian District of Beijing in 2009, citizens gathered to protest a planned incinerator. This protest followed previous demonstrations protesting the odor from the landfill that the incinerator sought to replace.⁵⁴ Studying events such as these also highlights that environmental protests are not just the domain of one specific demographic group among Chinese society: for example, in 2011, there were many children among those holding banners against a proposed chemical plant in Dalian, Liaoning.⁵⁵ In 2012, a small protest against the planned extension of a Sinopec plant in Ningbo, Zhejiang, quickly spread from suburban farmers to middle-class urban dwellers, and resulted in clashes

between protestors and the police.⁵⁶ In case after case, people across in China want a decrease in pollution and are often willing to protest to see an end to it.

Whether they were isolated events or influenced by others, protests in China have had varying levels of success. In the above case of Ningbo in 2012, for example, the government eventually capitulated and moved the planned plant elsewhere.⁵⁷ While this was a success for the protestors of Ningbo, it was only partial: the plant was still built nearby. Similarly, in Xiamen, Fujian in 2007, there were protests against the planned construction of a toxic chemical plant. The original plans were scrapped, but the plant was still constructed – just further away from the protestors.⁵⁸ In other cases, the protestors not only do not succeed, but face government backlash in the process. For example, Wu Lihong, an “eco-warrior,” was arrested as a troublemaker after interviews with foreign journalists emerged during a 2007 protest caused by toxic algae blooms in the famous Lake Tai.⁵⁹

The government’s response to many of these protests, as shown above, is to move rather than solve the problem, or to respond with police force or arrest. This could prove to be unsustainable. Protestors are already making use of technology to increase protest networks and better coordinate: in the case of Xiamen in 2007, roughly a million text messages calling people to protest were circulated by over 20,000 people.⁶⁰ Should environmental protests become more coordinated and more focused on wider climate change than local pollution, and should networks of leaders emerge, the CCP will have a far larger problem on their hands that cannot be solved simply by relocating their planned projects. Ultimately, progress on curbing pollution must be made to ensure the survival of the Party against the risk of an environmentally-minded mass protest movement. Some within the Party seem to recognize this. In 2011, an engineer from the Ministry of Environmental Protection spoke at the National People’s Congress warning that over just the previous year alone, “major environmental incidents” (protests) had increased by 120 percent.⁶¹ Environmental and climate change grievances will not vanish on their own and neither will the protests they inspire.

THREAT #3: ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

Under Deng Xiaoping’s “new cat theory” – which stated that “whatever promoted the socialist economy was socialist” – the economy began its bonanza.⁶² Yet, this was not without its problems: economic growth was very unequal across society.⁶³ In this “moderately prosperous society,” few are prosperous and the inequality is not moderate.⁶⁴ As of 2010, China had “more billionaires than Russia” while over “five hundred million people continued to live in grinding poverty on less than \$2 a day.”⁶⁵ To maintain the CCP’s image in the 1980s, Premier Zhao Ziyang attributed growing inequality to the fact that capital

markets were the “primary stage of socialism,” which is a line that held out longer than Zhao did.⁶⁶ Now, China’s economy is slowing. Debt has reached unsustainable levels, with a combined household, corporate, and government debt-to-GDP ratio of over 300 percent.⁶⁷ The amount of investment needed to maintain growth – known to economists as Incremental Capital Output Ratio (ICOR) – is quickly becoming too high. The Shanghai stock market is young and volatile, with a huge crash occurring as recently as 2015.⁶⁸ The growth that Deng promised looks to be running out.

Further factors are coalescing to create a potentially turbulent economic future for the country and the CCP. The trade situation with the United States appears to be a tug of war with no clear winner as of yet, and despite the hope for deals, the way forward looks to be rocky. Worse still, China’s demographic dividend (the economic benefits of having a larger working-age than non-working-age population) is over, and the population is rapidly ageing.⁶⁹ The tax base is therefore dramatically shrinking: “in 2009, there were 13 people of working age for every elderly person, by 2050, the ratio will decline to just 2:1, at which time 40 percent of China’s population will be over retirement age.”⁷⁰ This demographic shift will continue to increase the economic burden on the country and government of providing a social safety net. At the same time, China is rapidly urbanizing. Roughly 25 percent of these new urban residents have no legal claim to public services in urban areas, as their “hukou,” or legal status, is rural, not urban.⁷¹ Lastly, China’s growing middle-class is much younger than the populace at large, and they are much more likely to be vocal about any negative impacts on the standard of living they have come to expect.⁷²

As a result of these socioeconomic and demographic trends, two different realities exist within the borders of the People’s Republic: the huge urban megalopolises, mostly along the east and southeast coast, and the bucolic hinterlands where few outsiders wander. The divide between rural and urban China is stark. During their administration, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao were acutely aware of growing resentment among the rural poor. In response, taxes on farmers were abolished and rural healthcare was expanded. Promises were made of a “harmonious society” with “inclusive development” that would heal the divisions between the people and the Party.⁷³ However, the fact remains that many Chinese people today are still forced to migrate to the major cities on the coast in search of work: the urban-rural divide still exists.⁷⁴

The modern Party is aware that if they cease to control the economy, then the average person has far less reason to be beholden to the Party; thus, they strive to maintain Party influence over critical sectors and key positions.⁷⁵ A recent turn toward further Party control has been to privatize public services into Party-run companies – what Patricia Thornton calls “Party-organized Non-governmental Organizations” (“PONGOs”) – thus cutting out the

government while enhancing the Party's grip on the economy.⁷⁶

However, moves like this could have a negative impact. While economic growth alone may not have ever been enough to maintain the Party's power, overly controlling the economy could have unintended consequences, given that few rich societies tolerate authoritarian governance. According to the scholar Minxin Pei, China is entering into an economic "transition zone," whereby autocracies are at the highest risk of being subsumed by popular democratic waves.⁷⁷ An economic crisis could be the spark that ignites the powder keg.

JOURNEY'S END: POTENTIAL SCENARIOS

Based on the three threats described in the previous section, there are three potential scenarios that seem the most plausible. The first scenario resembles something akin to a status quo; the sands are shifting, but no major uprising occurs. The second of these scenarios is a situation where protests spiral out of control and spread across the nation and ultimately remove the CCP from power in Beijing. The third scenario envisions a crushed uprising where the Party is able to bring protests to heel. The first scenario is also the baseline where China is today, and this would be where the second or third scenario would begin.

Given that it has already ruled China for decades, there is no doubt that the Party has an ingrained toolkit to help maintain its "authoritarian resilience."⁷⁸ However, these scenarios represent a stark reality with which Beijing may be forced to reconcile sooner, rather than later. According to Dickson, "a stable situation can turn unstable very quickly, often for unexpected and idiosyncratic reasons."⁷⁹ Dickson also explains that there may not even be a single spark that starts mass popular unrest, because "even if the Party does not face organized opposition at present, it may be undone by the revolution of rising expectations."⁸⁰

SCENARIO 1: COOLING COALS

If the Party can deal with the social, economic, and environmental factors that it faces, it would go a long way toward reinforcing their legitimacy and ensuring a compliant populace for years to come. The biggest threat to a new protest movement is a lack of popular support for disruption. Knowing this, the Party remains committed to achieving social stability by building a regulatory state of "consultative authoritarianism."⁸¹ In this world, the system remains authoritarian, but the will that is being enforced is that of the people, or in other words, a "dictatorship of the proletariat" – a core Maoist belief.⁸² If the Party can prove to the people that they work for them, then the people – in theory – have little reason to work against the Party. The Party can therefore frame their

response as follows: because protests do not have widespread popular support, the Party is right to counter any disruptive movements. This scenario sees a future for China where the status quo is mostly maintained, through continued accommodation, repression, and cooptation.

SCENARIO 2: INSURGENCY EMERGENCY

Mao once said, “Destroy and there will be destruction. Do not destroy and there will also be destruction.”⁸³ This may be the exact case for rebellion in China again today. In effect, if the Party is perceived by the population as illegitimate and causing personal suffering, then why suffer the Party? What happens if the “local legitimacy deficit” is so widespread that it becomes national? The potential for the dominoes to fall is there. The economy is no longer growing like it once was and the private sector is smaller than it has been since reforms were initiated. The environmental crisis, local or global, is unlikely to abate. Sea-level rise alone threatens to displace hundreds of millions of the coastal population.⁸⁴ If cells of “rightful resisters”⁸⁵ coalesce or congeal around a central leader or idea, they may prove to be an immovable union from which protests become revolution.

SCENARIO 3: FAILED REVOLUTION

Should the protests in Hong Kong continue and spread into the mainland, a second Tiananmen Square-style situation could emerge. Of course, as discussed above, large numbers of protests are already occurring in China; but, should the Party take a more openly violent stance against them, then the protestors might have little hope. Public security funding was around \$25.6 billion U.S. dollars in 2016.⁸⁶ This was an increase of 5.3% from the previous year.⁸⁷ If there are forces at work within China that seek to undermine the Party, the Party, like any rational actor, will work to save itself by any means it deems necessary. In a scenario where there is a full crackdown to end protests, the question then becomes: what will be the social cost for calm? How long would the peace based on violence last?

THE ROAD AHEAD: WITHER THE PARTY?

The scenarios above – and the threats they respond to – could become existential challenges to the CCP. At the same time, threats from within the Party could undermine its ability to respond to these external stressors. In order for the Party to remain in power, it must remain intact. As factions within the CCP are constantly striving to gain advantage against each other, Party in-fighting could lead to collapse. Minxin Pei reminds us that “regime decay” may lead to “open

factionalism” within the top ranks of the Party.⁸⁸ Xi Jinping is keenly aware of these threats between and even within factions – indeed, he achieved his own rise in part by toppling and replacing the rival flagbearer of the “Neo-Maoist” movement, Bo Xilai.⁸⁹ Dubbed “China’s Hope” by the Neo-Maoist Journalist Red Wing,⁹⁰ Xi sees returning to the Party’s Maoist roots as the way forward and has warned of what he calls “historical Nihilism” (erasing or questioning the glorious history of the Party).⁹¹

Xi has taken various measures to maintain Party discipline and commitment to these ideals, and to his rule. In 2012, the infamous “Document 9” was leaked, which outlined the Party line on the “seven no’s” that will not be tolerated: “universal values, press freedom, civil society, citizens’ rights, the party’s historical aberrations, the “privileged capitalistic class,” and the independence of the judiciary.”⁹² The document is widely thought to have been issued by the Central Committee General Office, and approved by Xi.⁹³ In his quest to tackle powerful regional semi-warlords, or “tigers,” and armies of local corrupt cadre, or “flies,” all who would dare oppose him know danger.⁹⁴ Xi is working actively to reduce the threats to his rule from both left and right, including by removing websites deemed radical.⁹⁵ The Party has a member on the boards of many major state companies.⁹⁶ Cadres are embedded on almost every corner, tracking the actions of citizens to assign them a lifelong “social credit” score.⁹⁷ The longer the Party, and Xi Jinping in particular, is in power, the more they can construct a narrative of legitimacy – through their patriotic education campaigns, every year more and more students are learning from history texts that continue the Party’s approved narrative.⁹⁸ Xi Jinping believes that unity, hierarchy, and institutionalization are more important than correctness.⁹⁹ To prove it, he removed term limits.¹⁰⁰

Not all of the CCP’s destiny is determined within China’s borders. In the United States, politicians continue to condemn CCP authoritarianism and human rights abuses. Our own Congress currently has a fellowship named after the Nobel peace prize-winning civil rights activist Liu Xiaobo, who spent ten years in a Chinese prison before his death.¹⁰¹ As recently as December 2019, a bill scrutinizing the “one country, two systems framework” passed the House of Representatives, in response to six months of massive unrest in Hong Kong.¹⁰² In the same month, a bill was passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate that condemns China’s repression against Muslims in Xinjiang.¹⁰³ The national mood in America has changed: China is no longer a partner, but a competitor.¹⁰⁴ While Western political moves such as these aim – in part – to pressure the CCP to change, and to encourage the Chinese population to question their leadership, it could have the opposite impact. Our response may in fact strengthen Xi’s position by allowing him to continue to stoke nationalism – in response to hypocritical Western attacks – as a justification for Party rule.¹⁰⁵

According to Suisheng Zhao, the reducing centrality of Communism in the CCP's rhetorical pull in recent decades has been "accompanied by the rise of nationalism."¹⁰⁶ To buttress against another democracy movement, the Party has sought to be the "paramount patriotic force and guardian of national pride."¹⁰⁷ Thus, the Patriotic Education Campaign was born. The 1993 State Education Commission document, "Program for China's Education Reform and Development," urged patriotism as a "guiding principle" for the future of the Party.¹⁰⁸ All students would learn official CCP history, emphasizing how the Party delivered a glorious return to national unity.¹⁰⁹ Many scholars agree that nationalism in China remains just as much top-down as it is bottom-up.¹¹⁰ It is now common practice for the government to encourage protests against foes like Japan, using the masses as a tool of foreign policy, all while stoking nationalism.¹¹¹

LIKELY OUTCOMES: FATES AND FORTUNES

The present outlook indicates the Party will maintain asymmetrical and diffuse power by continuing proven methods of coercion and repression.¹¹² While threats to Party rule are vast and myriad, Richard McGregor warns us from being overly cavalier in our predictions, saying: "as a political machine, the Party has so far proved to be a sinuous, cynical and adaptive beast in the face of its multiple challenges."¹¹³ Ultimately, even though the populace has grievances with the Party, the lasting impacts are more likely to result in a change of mentality or way of thinking, rather than political upheaval.¹¹⁴ Naturally, the main goal for Beijing remains sailing a straight and smooth course while keeping the ire of the people focused on their local cadre. How long Xi Jinping and the Party will be able to hold onto these red coals has yet to be determined.

Attempting to gauge China's future is often futile: frankly, nobody knows what will happen until it does. China experts were on the television here in the United States in 1989, the day that the tanks rolled into Beijing, and almost all of them said it would never happen. We know that today, if the Party does not take more stringent action to address the sources of instability in China – grievances over pollution, corruption, and economic inequality, coupled with party infighting – then there will be serious social consequences. More polluting factories means more protests. More graft and bribery means less faith in the system. More international scorn – if not convincingly dismissed by the CCP in nationalist terms – means more divisiveness and a more implacable populace.

While the threats outlined in this article could be effectively mitigated by the CCP over time, it is not inconceivable that they could become too powerful for the Party to contain, and eventually come to a head forcing a change of the winds and ushering a new government – or even a new system of government – into power. In the meantime, the Party will continue to squeeze its grip on the

people in order to ensure it stays in power in perpetuity.

ENDNOTES

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