

China's Democratic Immunity

By Ying Ma

Promoting democratization under authoritarianism is hard work. Americans often behave as if democracy will blossom at the snap of our fingers. As the daily violence in Iraq reminds us, though, reality is often much more grim and complicated than our most fervent wishes.

Away from the birth pangs of democracy in Iraq, democracy has not blossomed in another country where Americans had promised it would: China. For more than a decade, Washington has declared that political liberalization leading ultimately to democratization in China would be desirable and decidedly in America's—and the world's—interests. From President Bill Clinton's policy of "constructive engagement" to President George W. Bush's call for China to become a "responsible stakeholder," the United States has maintained that a China headed down a democratic path—even as it amasses military, political and economic might—would offer the best hope for peace, prosperity and cooperation.

China, however, appears immune to U.S. wishes. Even as it wields international influence in global hotspots such as North Korea, Iran and Sudan, the Chinese authoritarian behemoth presses on with grave humanitarian abuses at home. Unpleasant though it may be, the reality is that the U.S. can and must do more to understand and promote democratization in a country that is crucial to the destiny of the 21st century.

The "inevitability" of change

For much of the 1990s, China enthusiasts in Washington trumpeted Chinese encounters with liberal and market forces as harbingers of giddy, new political beginnings. Current U.S. engagement with China is based largely on their assumptions.

In 2000, the U.S. Congress granted permanent normal trading relations (PNTR) to China with the underlying assumption that market forces unleashed by international trade and investment would necessarily spur economic and political change in Chinese society. Similarly, when the Chinese government institutionalized nationwide rural village elections in 1998, agreed to conduct rule-of-law cooperation with the U.S. on legal training, education, and administrative and commercial law in 1997 and 1998, and readied the country for the global Internet revolution in the late 1990s, numerous observers predicted that China's embrace of these liberal instruments and institutions would inevitably pave the way for broader democratization.

Some six years after PNTR, giddiness is gradually giving way to reality. The U.S. Department of State's "Annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices" continues to declare the Chinese government's human rights record to be "poor" or "in deterioration." Though millions of villagers throughout China have now experienced elections firsthand, many such elections are uncompetitive, fraudulent and undemocratic. China now eagerly participates in rule-of-law exchanges with the U.S., but it has limited legal reform only to politically safe areas, such as commercial

and administrative law, and has barred legal reform from politically sensitive areas such as political dissent, labor unrest and religious freedom. Though China has embraced the Internet as a vehicle for economic modernization and technological advancement, it has aggressively neutralized the medium's democratizing effects, deploying sophisticated censorship technology and at least 50,000 Internet police in the process.

Through it all, Beijing has done precisely what enthusiasts in Washington believed was impossible: divorcing economic gain from political challenges.

Authoritarian resilience

Sustaining authoritarianism, however, has been no cakewalk. For Beijing, staying in power is a brutal, daily fight. It not only must neutralize the democratizing powers of market forces or liberal instruments and institutions that come with an open economy, it must also aggressively stifle the democratizing effect of the increased social pluralism that comes with modernization.

Today, massive discontent plagues Chinese society. Two and a half decades of economic liberalization have resulted in the state's withdrawal from the economy and social welfare network. As a result, the official registered unemployment rate in urban areas hovers at 4.2%. In rural areas, the unemployment rate could be as high as 20%. At any given moment, there are over 120 million rural migrant workers roaming the streets of Chinese cities looking for jobs. Riots take place in China every day, with the Ministry of Public Security reporting 87,000 protests in 2005.

The disgruntled are aided by support networks that once did not exist. Protestors and activists now rely on booming information resources and a new thriving civil society. The Chinese online population exploded from a paltry 620,000 in October 1997 to about 137 million at the end of last year. Registered nongovernmental organizations, numbering only 4,500 in China, mushroomed to 317,000 in 2006, with some observers estimating that as many as 3 million unregistered NGOs exist.

Meanwhile, China's "vanguard" is finally coming to the aid of its "proletariat." Intellectuals, lawyers and activists from the big cities have begun to help peasants challenge rigged village elections and uncompensated land confiscation, as well as helping factory workers to seek health care and pensions, and religious believers to fight against persecution.

Top-down control

In many ways, bottom-up pressures for change in China are intense, spontaneous and multifaceted. Every day, Chinese leaders worry about the challenge to regime stability, but they continue to exert brutal and sophisticated top-down control by allowing diversification of activism and expression while suppressing organization, mobilization and coordination among citizens.

In almost every sector prone to increased pluralism and dissent, Beijing has refused

Anti-Americanism and Nationalism

In addition, the Chinese government combats democratization not just on a practical level, but also through ideological indoctrination. In an era where the Chinese Communist ideology has become defunct through the pursuit of market capitalism, China has aggressively maligned Western-style democracy as chaos-inducing and unsuitable for the country's economic conditions. Through its propaganda machinery, Beijing emphasizes that U.S. democracy promotion masks nefarious motives to undermine China's meteoric rise.

Numerous Chinese citizens, particularly those in the emerging middle class, have succumbed to ideological indoctrination. According to an opinion poll conducted by the Chinese newspaper The Global Times (*Huan Qiu Shi Bao*) in 2006, some 59% of the Chinese people who live in or near urban metropolises believe that the U.S. is seeking to contain China, with 56.3% seeing the U.S. as China's competitor. A similar Global Times survey in 2005 reported that almost 79% of the respondents have negative views toward U.S. criticism of China's human rights abuses.

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The resilience of Chinese authoritarianism was not what Washington predicted. China, as it turns out, is far less malleable to U.S. wishes than expected. Washington can, as it already has, become indignant about misplaced assumptions underlying the policy of economic engagement, or it can do more to promote democracy in China. The U.S. can begin with a few steps.

First, America should try harder to counter the vehicles of Chinese authoritarian repression. It should boost funding and support for the free flow of information and support the development of anti-censorship, anti-surveillance online technologies.

Second, the U.S. should more aggressively support the ability of Chinese activists to organize. Currently, the political demands of the Chinese people are dispersed and scattered by the government's targeted efforts to prevent organization and mobilization. In response, the U.S. should strive to fund, train and link together Chinese groups and individuals with different concerns, such as lawyers with trade unionists, and intellectuals with peasants.

Third, the U.S. should engage in much more proactive public diplomacy to promote democracy in China. In addition to criticizing China's atrocious human rights record, the U.S. should also explain with facts, figures and examples that democracy complements economic growth and strengthens human dignity.

Fourth, the U.S. must recognize the limits of its influence. It must expect the Chinese government to push back aggressively in every area that it tackles. Ultimately, democracy in China will emerge not merely because Americans advocate or support it, but because Chinese citizens are courageous enough to fight for it.

International peace and security in the 21st century will depend in no small part on the future of China. Peaceful democratization there will not serve as a guarantee for peace, but it will offer much better prospects. Given the tremendous stakes involved, the U.S. should stop snapping its fingers and get down to the hard work.

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to tolerate any viable political challenge. It has allowed the vibrant NGO sector to take on social work that the government cannot tackle by itself. But it permits them to operate only in politically safe areas such as environmental protection, health education (HIV/AIDS) and services for the disabled, while barring them from sensitive subjects such as human rights, labor and religious freedom. The Chinese leadership sees rural and worker protests as serious problems, but as they tend to be spontaneous, leaderless and unorganized, Beijing defuses them with a combination of intimidation and cash payoffs. Where the uprisings are organized and aided by outside activists or urban intellectuals, the CCP cracks down on them severely before they spread. The vanguard that dares to fight for the proletariat is often severely punished by beatings by hired thugs, prison terms or worse.

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