

## China's Future: Changes or More of the Same in Politics and Foreign Policy?

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### Prof. Andrew J. Nathan

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### Summary:

Prof. Nathan in his presentation shared his understanding on three main topics.

1. How does the Chinese political system work?
2. How is China changing and how will it in the future?
3. What are the implications of these changes for its foreign policy, and especially towards India?

Prof. Nathan began his arguments by recalling the period post-1989 Tiananmen incident, when everybody in the West had predicted the collapse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This did not turn out to be the case as the CCP re-stabilized its rule and re-launched its economic reforms programme and ensured continued economic growth in the country. This created a puzzle for China scholars – how did China remain resilient and successful? Quoting from his article of 2003 published in the *Journal of Democracy* titled “**China's Authoritarian Resilience**,” Prof. Nathan highlighted six aspects of China's success in stabilizing its rule or in other words, how China continues to work:

- Leadership stability and succession: The Achilles heel of authoritarian regimes is often the power struggles at the time of succession. Deng gave special attention to this aspect from the 1980s to 1992 when he eventually distanced himself from positions of authority and his final policy intervention. The system he created was built around ‘real retirement,’ unlike other communist systems where the real leadership never retires. China too had suffered power struggles during Mao and post-Mao period. However, Deng refused to stay in power till his death and retired from formal authority after appointing Jiang Zemin as his successor. This system continued in 2002-03 when Deng's successor retired on time giving way to Hu Jintao. Thus, a new institutionalized succession pattern is evolving within the CCP leadership – the next leadership change is going to happen in 2012-13 – with leaders staying for two five-year terms. These changes have further strengthened the institutionalization of the division of authority unlike under the leadership of Mao, leading to consensus-based decision-making without fear of intimidation and influence, though it is mostly the party secretary who supervises and co-ordinates the final outcomes.
- Regime's ability to make and implement policy: The party-state's has had remarkable success in addressing various problems including economic and social ones. While this does not mean that CCP has always been successful in addressing every problem, it has the capabilities to decide when the issue has to be addressed. For instance, the abolition of mandatory grain to the state, construction of health insurance system, employment system, higher education, infrastructure, and some banking reforms, have been implemented with much efficiency with good flow of information and through the recruitment of experts, internal reports and assessments. These

have become even more professionalized with the efficient organization department of the party and personnel with decisions taken on priority-basis based on performance.

- Co-optation of middle class, intelligentsia, and entrepreneurial groups in the party: Co-operation of these classes in the business of the state, their appointment in government agencies, educational institutions of repute, and especially the cooptation of foreign returnees, has brought much stability to the party-state.
- Tremendous growth of the economy: This has given the party a cushion of support from a cross-section of the people from peasants to business classes. Economic growth has led to development in different regions and areas of the state. Thus, the people are reluctant to “rock the boat” of the system, and the state has a performance-based legitimacy.
- Role of the official media: People have little or no access to independent news and information, and there is strict control of cyberspace allowing the government to control or clamp down on incipient protests.
- Repressive state control: The state has an effective and muscular apparatus for repression. Even the control of cyberspace in China though not 100 per cent is rigidly controlled by the state in a fairly successful manner as state-owned and -controlled servers block forbidden terms. Apart from these, there is the human component i.e., the cyber police who check and shape the discussions on the internet. The technical capabilities of surveillance and limiting instant messages, chat-rooms and blogs. Though they may not be successful in the long term but in the short term, they can monitor and check any communications against the state. At the same time, the police can and are capable of quarantining dissidents by house arrests, detention, and false indictments in crimes. Thus, there are a range of repressive sources both technical and personnel-based supported by financial resources.

### ***Challenges before China: How will China Change?***

The regime is “quite robust, and not failing, but not forever,” according to Prof. Nathan. The sense of impermanence is noticeable among ordinary people, intellectuals and the party with calls for political reforms – inner-party democracy, participation in decision-making, etc. Prof. Nathan identified three weaknesses.

1. Legitimacy of the system is not normative or ideological, but performance-based.
2. There is dissatisfaction on issues of the economy, environment, corruption, and the unjust political system are widespread even among those who benefit from the present system – witness the recent controversy over the government’s covering-up of high speed train accident in Wenzhou. Religious beliefs are also spreading outside of the five state-sanctioned religions in the form of the yellow hat (Dalai Lama) version of Tibetan Buddhism, underground Catholic groups, the Falun Gong, and so on.
3. Challenges to the regime in the form of a risk of economic slow-down, inflation, overheating, energy security, environmental collapse, and other vulnerabilities.

So how will China change? It is the responsibility of China scholars to make a consistent study of these trends in China. Prof. Nathan stated that he did not see the party-state democratizing from the top-down or the presence of a democratic faction within the party at least on current evidence. However, he did not negate the possibility completely. Unless there was a crisis like 1989, it seemed unlikely that democracy would be ushered in..

Another scenario talked about by China scholars is of the Chinese democratic movement taking the route of the Arab Spring movement. Chinese democratic activists from abroad started a 'jasmine movement' which did not take off. Thus, Prof. Nathan was skeptical of this route to democracy also. Even there are many disparities and problems in China, the state has the machinery to nip protests in the bud.

The third scenario Prof. Nathan highlighted was of the 'collapse' of China referring to the term by Gordon Chang. The Soviet Union disintegrated into many republics but in China this is impossible as the minority ethnic population in China consists only up to 6 per cent unlike the Soviet Union where it was more than 50 per cent. Further, he argued that China is much more unified with better means of communication, and infrastructure, and is also economically and militarily superior to the Soviet Union and thus can act much faster and efficiently..

A military coup is also not an option, as the PLA is penetrated by political commissars and top leaders are transferred regularly from one area to another thereby giving them no station permanently.

Resurgence of the left (Maoism) scenario especially the Chongqing model (under Party secretary Bo Xilai) promotes 'red culture' but Prof. Nathan argued that this had little to do with the original definition of Maoism. In fact, Maoism itself is debated in terms of whether it is culture, songs, arts, symbols, TV shows, etc. or any sort of roll back into the autarkic market disengaging from the world market which China can hardly afford to do. Thus, despite its sense of impermanence, China is not on the brink, but fairly stable.

### ***Implications for Chinese Foreign Policy***

To analyze the implications of change for Chinese foreign policy, Prof. Nathan laid down two primary missions or national interests:

- Geostrategic security – The survival of the regime which is a complex problem; first, because of the way China is constructed and placed with more than 40 per cent of its territory inhabited by national minorities that do not like the Chinese state. (e.g. Tibet, Xinjiang). Second, the stability of the Han areas has to be secured owing to frequent social turbulence and economic unrest. China has a big internal security agenda which is linked to foreign policy because the Tibet problem is linked to border problems with India, and with the US owing to human rights issues and the Uyghur problem affects relations with neighboring Central Asian states, the US, Turkey. The stability of the Han problem is also linked to foreign policy because it is linked to issues of foreign influence.

China faces an unenviable security agenda around its borders which looks better today because it has invested in managing these problems with Russia. However, there are still outstanding issues with Japan, Korea, and India. China has been surrounded by difficult neighbours both at land and sea.

China has to worry also about its economic security such as its interactions with Africa, as huge investments have been made by the state-owned enterprises. Thus, the security challenges of China are huge.

- China's integration with the world – This flows from the strategic decision to embrace a globalised economy initiated by Deng Xiaoping which has rewarded China hugely. It is deeply integrated into global systems of all kinds – economic, financial, transport, climate talks, international

human rights, arms control, and anti-terrorism. It is tied to this regime like the US, Japan, Europe or any other country by the benefits that flow in despite all the problems from this system. Hence, China does not have the option of pulling out of this system and going it alone as this would prove too costly.

These are thus, two policy agendas for any future Chinese regime that in any rational or quasi-rational way seeks to further its national interests. These will not change even if the regime changes. What could change would be the ability that a regime has to make and implement foreign policy with the changes in political structure. Chinese foreign policy is not really influenced by public opinion or nationalism but it is nationalistic and seeks these things out of its interest.

Therefore, if the regime changes there can be a possibility of:

- a government that becomes weaker and finds it harder to coordinate its geostrategic interests
- succumbing to internal lobbies, interest and pressure groups (democratic included), and can become antagonistic to its neighbours,
- a weakened economy leading in turn to reduced resources not just for military build-up but for its diplomacy
- China facing challenges in dealing with Japan, an emerging India, a resurgent Russia, and collapsing North Korea and/or Pakistan

### ***Sino-Indian Relations***

By way of conclusion, Prof. Nathan talked about views on the Chinese threat to India. He pointed out that in the Chinese security agenda, India ranks quite low. This despite the fact that control of Tibet is a core Chinese foreign policy interest, and it remains a key objective of China to prevent the Dalai Lama from internationalizing the issue. The boundary issue that two countries have is unlikely to be a casue for Chinese belligerence even if they might not relinquish their claim.

With regard to Pakistan, and using it to constrain India, China will be cautious moving to close to Pakistan when US-Pakistan relations have been deteriorating.

Short report prepared by Bhim B. Subba, Research Associate, Institute of Chinese Studies

### ***Brief Bio:***

Prof. Andrew J. Nathan is Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. He is the author of several books on China, and some of his latest publications include *Constructing Human Rights in the Age of Globalization* (2003) and *How East Asians View Democracy* (2008).