Democracy & Society
A Publication of the Center for Democracy and Civil Society

Volume 7, Issue 2
Democrats, Dictators, and Demonstrators Conference Issue

Regime Security and Counter-Diffusion: Sources of Authoritarian Learning and Adaptation

Sheena Chestnut

The current debate on China's stability is illustrative of gaps in the democratization literature. Among the domestic structural factors cited as reasons for China's failure to democratize are a lower level of development and industrialization; sociological characteristics such as the People's Republic of China's (PRC) comparatively high ethnic homogeneity, lower urbanization and lower literacy rates; the different sequencing of political and economic reforms; and generational differences among the ruling elites in the late 1980's when the crisis of regime stability was thought to have reached its peak.[1] The skill of the Chinese political leadership or the potential for international factors to contribute to authoritarian stability do not feature explicitly on this list.

Voluntarist explanations, though not uncommon in the literature on democratization, are nearly absent from the debate on authoritarian stability. As Lucan Way notes, "Relative inattention to authoritarianism in regime studies has resulted in a disproportionate focus on the ability of regime actors to create and sustain democracy rather than on their capacity to maintain autocratic rule."[2] Analysts of competitive regimes often consider the importance of political skill and institution-building, he suggests, but the study of incumbent capacity in affecting authoritarian stability has been left relatively unexplored. An agent-driven explanation is needed to explain for the relative longevity of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule, and by extension, for the longevity of other authoritarian regimes.

The use of diffusion to explain democratization processes is a particularly clear example of the lop-sidedness of the current literature. The "diffusion" hypothesis of democratization suggests that the success of certain democratic transitions is based in part on the "emulation of the prior successful example of others."[3] Within the literature, each pro-democracy movement has a higher probability of success because it has observed and learned from the ones before it. Logically speaking, for diffusion to result in increasing democratization over time, the learning capacity of these anti-regime actors must

---

1 Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

2 Lucan A. Way, "Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Regime Competitiveness in the Fourth Wave: the cases of Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine," *World Politics*, vol. 57 (January 2005), pp. 231-61.

3 Mark Beissinger, "Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: the Diffusion of the Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007), pp. 259-276; Daniel Brinks and Michael Coppedge, "Diffusion is No Illusion: Neighbor Emulation in the Third Wave of Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2006); Jeffrey S. Kopstein and David A. Reilly, "Geographic Diffusion and the Transformation of the Post-Communist World," *World Politics*, Vol. 53 (October 2000), pp. 1-37.

outpace the adaptive ability of the regime itself. Thus the diffusion hypothesis of democratization depends on the assumption that authoritarian regimes are less capable of 'learning' – in the sense of rationally updating information – and adapting policies based on new information as compared to the civil society or pro-democracy movements that they harbor. Scholars have posited a number of factors that should be expected to create ossification and impede effective feedback and adaptation among authoritarian regimes: short time horizons that limit the acquisition of negative feedback; restrictions placed on horizontal and vertical information flows to facilitate central control; and structural incentives in these systems.[4] The literature also assumes that there will be no variation in the capacity to learn and adapt across different authoritarian regimes or leaders. Neither assumption has yet been subjected to rigorous empirical testing.

How can one reconcile theoretical arguments about democratic diffusion with the evidence of China's unexpected adaptability? To answer this question, I argue that we should reconceptualize diffusion to include counter-diffusion – the acquisition and employment of anti-democratic repressive strategies on the part of the state. If pro-democracy activists succeed in part because they learn from the successful efforts of their neighbors, authoritarian regimes holding power in those states should be able to observe these democratization movements as well. The ones that learn well or quickly may be able to avoid their fellow autocrats' fatal mistakes. Arguments of democratic-diffusion must be interacted with an anti-democratic diffusion variable, or one that measures the learning capacity and adaptability of the remaining authoritarian regimes.

I suggest that the dynamics of counter-diffusion are an integral part of the story of China's authoritarian resilience since 1989. Chinese leaders drew stark parallels between their own domestic troubles in 1989 and those abroad. As a series of separatist protests escalated in the western "autonomous regions" and protestors gathered in the central square, nationalists a continent away agitated against and then broke free of Soviet control. Fearing a repeat of the European 1989 inside their own borders, the Chinese leadership embarked in the early 1990's upon a series of efforts to learn from the mistakes that had weakened their fellow socialist regimes and ultimately disintegrated the fabric of their rule. These efforts produced a process of observation, analysis, and policy adaptation that should be incorporated into any understanding

---

[4] See the chapter on authoritarian leaders in Stephen P. Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2004); Chirot, *Modern Tyrants;* Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and William Murray, "Saddam's Delusions: the View from the Inside," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2006), online at http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61701/kevin-woods-james-lacey-and-williamson-murray/saddams-delusions-the-view-from-the-inside.

of why the events of 1989 and after produced such different outcomes in Beijing compared to Warsaw or Moscow.[5]

Counter-Diffusion and Chinese Ethnic Minority Policy

One key area demonstrating the capacity of the Chinese regime to analyze external events and adapt to them in ways that facilitated its continued rule was in ethnic minority policy. A range of analysis identifies ethnic separatism as a key problem that must be managed to ensure continued stability in the People's Republic of China. The CCP International Department recommended the government "Emphasize the unity of different ethnic groups and fight separatism,[6] while Li Zhengju directs the CCP to "Place priority on solving ethnic, religious, and other social problems." [7] The collective group of scholars goes a step further toward a specific solution, suggesting that regimes "Manage ethnic issues well. Economic development is the basic solution to ethnic tensions."[8] The most expansive suggestion comes from Li Jingjie, who argues that the leadership must "Fully comprehend the complexity and fundamental causes of ethnic issues and tensions, ensure equality and the right of self-determination to all ethnic groups, and expedite economic growth as the fundamental way to solve ethnic tensions; but recognize the danger in implementing political pluralism in a multi-ethnic region."[9] The basic premise that raised standards of living and economic growth will offset separatism has been reiterated in another volume, which though it expresses concern about the minority "problem," expressed confidence in economic and financial measures to offset secessionist tendencies.[10]

These recommendations reflected both the Chinese analysis of events in the Soviet Union, and a historical concern of long standing about the ability of the Chinese regime to keep these regions incorporated under

---

5 Andrew Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 6-17. Colin Mackerras, *China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalization* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2003), pp. 30-31.

6 Zhong Lian Bu Ketizu, "Su-Gong kuatai."

7 Li Zhengju, "Sulian Gongchandang xingshuai chengbai de shige jingyan jiaoxun."

8 Lu Nanchuan, et al, *Sulian Xing Wang Shilun.*

9 Li Jingjie, "Historical Lessons of the Failure of the CPSU."

10 Ge Linsheng and Hu Yanfen, "Sulian jieti de minzu yinsu," in Lu and Jiang, eds., *Sulian jubian shencengci yuanyin yanjiu*, (1999); Huang Weiting, *Sugong Wangdang Shinian Ji* (Jiangxi: Jiangxi Gaoxiao Chubanshe, 2002). A valid concern about this expression of causality in the Soviet case, and confidence in the Chinese "correction," however, is raised by Marsh, who notes that political pressure may cause authors skew their interpretations to validate China's current policies, even if they do not necessarily believe that this was actually the problem in the Soviet case. Marsh, p. 113.

Beijing's political control. Though ethnic minorities (少数民族, *shaoshu minzu*) make up only 8.4% of the population (104.49 millon people), they exist in regionally autonomous zones of various sizes that cluster along strategically important land borders and occupy sixty-four percent of PRC territory, including resource-rich and spacious areas capable of easing eastern overpopulation.[11] As a result, one of the first systematic studies of China's minority policy notes that the *minzu* receive attention from the center in amounts disproportionate to their numbers, based on the assumption that if hostile, "such minorities could weaken border defense, increase the danger of attack by a foreign power, and result in loss of territory for the Chinese People's Republic."[12]

Chinese scholars and policy analysts recognized that a major factor behind the disintegration of European and Soviet Communism was the mismanagement of ethnic nationalist tensions, which one Chinese scholar has referred to as the "powder keg of the Union's collapse."[13] Another study argued forcefully, "The collapse of the Soviet Union was precipitated by political autocracy, economic dogmatism, ethnic chauvinism, and international hegemonism."[14] More specifically, researcher Xu Zhixin suggests that from Stalin onward, the Soviet system made the mistake of propagating a glorified vision of ethnic Russian chauvinism that regarded ethnic tension solely through the lens of class struggle and led to the harsh repression of non-Russian nationalities.[15] Once reform began, Chinese scholars believed, Gorbachev underestimated the development of autonomous national identity and lost the ability to control non-Russian ethnic nationalism.

One contentious debate centered on the extent and effects of Soviet federalism. Some scholars argued that

---

[11] Autonomous zones exist at the regional, county, prefectural, and township level. These areas comprise 107 of the 155 counties that make up China's land borders. Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China," (Beijing: February 2005), online at http://english.gov.cn/official/2005-07/28/content_18127.htm. See also M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Fall 2005); Mette Halskov Hansen, *Frontier People: Han Settlers in Minority Areas of China* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005);

[12] Dreyer, *China's Forty Millions*, p. 3.

[13] Zhang Shengfa, "Sulian jieti yuanyin zai tan," *Eluosi Yanjiu* [*Russian Studies*], (December 2001), pp. 16-27.

[14] Xu Xin et al, eds., *Chaoji Daguo de Bengkui: Sulian Jieti Yuanyin Fenxi* [*Collapse of a Superpower: Analysis of the Causes of the Soviet Union's Disintegration*], (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenzhai Chubanshe, 2001), p. 202.

[15] Xu Zhixin, "Muwu de jibi – Sulian zhidu de lishi genyuan [Patterns of long abuse – historical origins of the Soviet system]," *Dong-Ou Zhong-Ya Yanjiu*, no. 6 (1992), p. 23.

the mistaken encouragement of ethnic self-determination and the Soviet Union's system of granting republics limited autonomy was a key cause enabling the rise of separatism, and that the federal system should have been abandoned in favor of a unitary state.[16] Others suggested that the problem lay in the fact that the Soviet Union was not federal enough. They argued that the aggrandizement in practice by Stalin and successive Soviet leaders, of the formal constitutional autonomy granted to the republics, only served to foster nationalist resentment.[17] The apparent lack of resolution in this debate is particularly notable given that the Soviet federal system served as a loose model for China's own system of "ethnic autonomous regions," which though they were granted neither full autonomy nor the right to secede, still shared historical parallels with their Soviet counterparts.

The baseline response of the Chinese Communist Party and state to the internal and external crises related to ethnic nationalism in 1989 included the strengthening of both positive incentives and negative coercive elements. On the one hand, central authorities have affirmed the preferential policies granted toward minorities, and even increased economic redistribution to poorer areas. At the same time, they have stressed a key different from the Soviet model: unchanging intolerance for any hint of secessionism and willingness to suppress it by force where necessary.

As noted above, some of the major analyses of the collapse of the USSR specifically argued that the fundamental way to resolve ethnic instability or separatist tendencies in the PRC was to grow these areas' economies and provide economic benefits to the population. Despite being entitled from the beginning to certain social and cultural benefits, minorities had been granted no special financial provisions under the 1952 General Program for Implementation of Nationality Regional Autonomy.[18] In the aftermath of 1989-91, however, the push to raise living standards – part of a general bargain wherein the population accepts limited political participation in exchange for economic growth – applied especially to ethnic minorities.[19]

---

16 Shambaugh p. 73; Editing Group, Xingshuai Zhilu; Zhen Yifan, "Suweiai shehuizhuyi gongheguo lianmeng: cong chengwei dao jieti [The USSR: from establishment to collapse]," *Guoji Gongyun Shi Yanjiu*, no. 1 (1992), pp. 1-7; Xin Guangcheng, "Sulian jieti hou geguo guanxi poxi [An investigation of relations with various countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union]," *Dong-Ou Zhong-Ya Yanjiu*, no. 2 (1992), pp. 53-60.

17 Shambaugh, p. 73, cites Zuo Fengrong, "Historical and Ethnic Causes for the Collapse of the Soviet Union," presented at the conference, "Analyzing the Collapse of the Soviet Union: Chinese and American Perspectives," 31 May 31 - 1June 2004, Beijing.

18 Dreyer, *China's Forty Millions*, p. 105

19 Marsh, *Unparalleled Reforms*, p. 116.

In July 1994, therefore, the Third (National) Tibet Work Conference expressed an urgent need for economic development in Tibet, approved sixty-two infrastructure projects costing 2.38 billion yuan, and set a goal of 10% annual growth to double Tibet's gross domestic product by 2000.[20] Overall assistance to minority areas also increased sharply after the Central Ethnic Work Conference in 1999, when Jiang Zemin referenced events in Kosovo and East Timor and called for improved management of ethnic issues. As a result, the government launched a campaign to shift the focus of economic development from the coastal east to the poorer, inland west;[21] minority autonomous regions became special targets of the western development and investment campaigns (*xibu de kaifa*).[22]

At the same time, however, the party strengthened its commitment to retaining political control of ethnic minority areas, by coercive force if necessary. In January 1992, at the State Council and Central Committee's First National Conference on Ethnic Affairs, General Secretary Jiang Zemin reiterated government commitment to ethnic autonomy and development, but also emphasized, in implicit contrast with the Soviet model, that Beijing would not grant minority autonomous areas the right to independence.[23] Educational and cultural policies (in Tibet for example) were revised to limit exposure to nationalist ideologies, while a 1996 campaign instigated "political re-education" in monasteries and led to the arrest of political dissidents.[24] In Xinjiang, the CCP warned local authorities to take firmer police action against separatists or risk subjecting the entire country to turmoil and instability.[25] Indeed, as Murray Scot Tanner notes, incidents of public/social unrest in minority areas have a higher chance of being classified as "antagonistic" (anti-regime), a determination which enables local Party officials to authorize the use of higher levels of force than would otherwise be the case.[26] Although police have been criticized

---

20 *Beijing Review*, 8-14 August 1994 (originally cited in Goldstein, p. 93).

21 Hansen, *Frontier Peoples*; see also Dali Yang, "Patterns of China's Regional Development Strategy," *The China Quarterly* 122 (June 1990).

22 This development drive, however, has been accompanied by an influx of Han settlers that have diluted the number of minority residents, exacerbated income inequalities across ethnic groups, and weakened minority protections, thereby risking exacerbated "sons of the soil" dynamics. Hansen, *Frontier Peoples*; Morris Rossabi, ed., *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

23 "Party Chief," p. 5.

24 Melvyn Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997), p. 97.

25 Mackerras, *China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalization*, pp. 48-52.

26 Murray Scot Tanner, "How China Manages Internal Security and its Impact on PLA Missions," in Roy D. Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions Other than Taiwan* (2009).

domestically for being slow to respond with force in the cases of unrest in Tibet in 2008 and Xinjiang in 2009, the crackdowns and increased presence of the People's Armed Police (PAP) that did follow the protests show the CCP's willingness to levy coercive power when necessary to manage a fractious ethnic population.

Thus, although Chinese leaders have gone to some lengths to increase economic redistribution and mitigate minority grievances through an affirmation of the autonomy system, they have also publicly affirmed that unlike Eastern Europe in 1989, the CCP is willing to use force to maintain its control over the areas contested by ethnic nationalist movements. Each of these policy developments was, at least in part, the result of the Chinese regime's post-1989 analysis.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the twin crises of 1989, the leaders of the People's Republic of China initiated a series of studies to gather data and analyze the causes of instability among their former authoritarian counterparts, as well as to craft recommendations for avoiding similar problems within the PRC. The extensive data-gathering effort, and the subsequent push to incorporate its findings into policy, defy baseline expectations both about the general capacity of authoritarian regimes to adapt, and more specifically, about the responses of authoritarian governance structures to the transnational diffusion of democratization strategies.

This suggests that theories of authoritarian stability that rest on inflexible structural variables need to be rethought to incorporate ideas about diffusion, agency, and the importance of political skill or leadership in responding both to structural conditions and to the agency of pro-democratic actors in civil society. By focusing only on the learning capacity and temporal progression of democratic movements, the diffusion literature neglects the strong incentives that authoritarian regimes also have to draw lessons from the success and failure of democratic movements abroad in order to maintain control at home. Perhaps democratization and authoritarian stability should be thought of, instead, as alternate outcomes in a process which scholars studying law enforcement have termed "competitive adaptation," in which criminal organizations and police bureaucracies adjust their patterns of behavior in response to the other's evolving

strategies and tactics.[27] The post-1989 history of the PRC clearly demonstrates that CCP leaders saw this kind of analysis and adaptation to be in their interest, and pursued it aggressively. In contrast to some existing arguments, therefore, political agency, diffusion and international influence, all currently thought to favor the pro-democracy movements, can also play a role in the maintenance of authoritarian stability.

[27] Michael Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State Press, 2006).