Democratization in Greater China

Introduction

by Jacques deLisle

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Is sustainable democracy possible in "greater China"? If the PRC, the Hong Kong SAR, or Taiwan can—or cannot—create durable democratic polities, what are the implications for regional and global affairs, including international security and great powers' foreign policies? In this issue, leading authorities on China and greater China address these questions. They do so from a rich array of perspectives—including political science, history, sociology, law, and international relations—and focus on a wide range of issues, including dynamics of elite politics, the impact of social, economic, and cultural factors, the effect of external forces and contexts, the roles of domestic political and private institutions in the political entities that comprise greater China, and the implications of greater Chinese democratization (and its limits) for foreign policy. Most of the articles in this issue were presented at a conference on "Democratization (and its Limits) in Greater China: Implications for Governance and Security," held in Philadelphia in September 2003, co-sponsored by the Foreign Policy Research Institute and the Institute for International Relations (Taipei).[1]

Contexts

Whether democratic politics can lastingly take hold in China and environs is a venerable question. Some conclude that democracy is impossible there, others that it is inevitable, still others that it is possible but far from certain. The absence of democracy and the Chinese ruling class's hostility toward democracy were part of what Western democratic (or democratizing) powers saw as China's "lack of civilization," which justified their treating the Middle Kingdom as a second-class state during the latter part of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth. In China

[1] A summary of the proceedings, including papers we were not able to include here given space constraints, is available at www.fpri.org.

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and in the West, some saw little hope or reason for change in China's undemocratic politics, while others—including foreign observers and some leaders of China's nationalist and communist revolutions—saw some form of democracy as possible and even indispensable for China.

Although the point was obscured by alliances among states with disparate political systems and by ideological conflicts cast primarily in terms of anti-communism, a core premise of the Cold War era was that Western-style democracy and Soviet-style communism could advance or retreat almost anywhere in the world, including greater China. (Indeed, the infamous McCarthy-era charge that the U.S. had "lost China" to the communists would have been incoherent absent an assumption that China could have been "saved" for the democratic camp.)

Beginning in the 1970s and '80s, the notion that democracy was ill-suited and perhaps unachievable in greater China experienced a resurgence with the articulation of an "East Asian model," rooted in Confucian or broader regional culture and seemingly providing a viable recipe for development without democracy. Greater China—specifically, Hong Kong and Taiwan—provided two of the model's principal exemplars, and the first decade of the reform era in the PRC suggested that the model might extend to the mainland.

In the 1990s, arguments about "Asian values" drew on the tradition of the East Asian model. With the founding father of one ethnic Chinese city-state (Singapore) among its framers and the Beijing-appointed leader of another (Hong Kong) among its later proponents (along with, at times, PRC leaders and officials), this vision of human rights relativism typically included democracy—at least of a liberal, contentious, "Western" sort—among the alien values that Asians need not or should not embrace.

Such relatively recent arguments against the possibility or appropriateness of democracy in greater China have had to coexist, of course, with some formidable countercurrents: Taiwan's rapid democratization began in the late 1980s and extended through several national elections, including a presidential election in 2000 that produced a peaceful transfer of power to the opposition party and another, in 2004, that brought a close and heated contest between the former opposition party's incumbent and the former ruling party's challenger. Hong Kong's public was enthusiastic about late-colonial moves to introduce more democratic political institutions and has greeted with anger and resentment the rolling back of democratization since the territory's reversion to China. Even the PRC has seen the growth of village-level elections and more extensive discussion of inner-party democratization and liberalization. Such changes, and the American-led triumphalism that followed the collapse of the Soviet empire, fed hopes, predictions, and policies based on the premise that democracy could deepen and rapidly extend its hold along the periphery and into the core of the Chinese region.

The post-9/11 world has added an ambivalent new layer to this complex story, not least through its effect on how U.S. policy approaches the

question of democracy in greater China. As Washington has pursued Beijing's support in the war on terror and in dealing with the North Korean program to develop WMD, it has muted its criticism of the PRC's lack of democracy and is less receptive to Taiwan's invocation of its democratic politics as a basis for international status and respect. This was recently underscored by President Bush's statement, at a meeting with Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, rebuking the referendum plans of the "leader on Taiwan." However, President Bush has also reiterated that a centerpiece of post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy remains the promotion of democracy internationally, as a key strategy in a war on terror that is cast as a fight for the preservation of universal democratic values.

The contributors to this issue examine the state of democratization and the prospects for democracy in greater China against the backdrop of these developments. They do so at a particularly dramatic moment, when potential turning points are at hand in China, with a new leadership team in Beijing that has tried to stake out a more "populist" and "reformist" agenda and has had to cope with criticisms of their authoritarian system's failures in dealing with the SARS crisis; Taiwan, where President Chen Shui-bian has made Taiwan's democracy a central theme of his hard-fought campaign for reelection in March 2004; and Hong Kong, where conflict is sharpening over the pace of democratization, fueled by a controversy over the SAR government's failed attempt to pass a set of security and anti-sedition laws.

Whether the prospects for creating or sustaining democracy in greater China are today bleak or bright depends on answers to two prior questions: What factors most affect the possibility of democratizing or maintaining democracy? Do those factors push mostly for or against democratization or consolidating democracy in greater China? Answers to these questions raise another, given that it is widely believed—and U.S. policies often assume—that regime type affects states' international behavior: What would democratization, or its failure, in greater China mean for international relations, including regional security? On all these issues, the contributors to this volume shed a good deal of light.]

Factors

Several decades of research and foreign policies have sought to discern and evaluate forces that make it more or less likely that a country will become or remain democratic. The articles in this issue point to several factors at work in greater China.

Will and skill of political elites. Capable authoritarian elites who conclude that democratization is necessary or inevitable are a possible source of democratic change. Joseph Fewsmith's assessment of China's post-16th Party Congress leadership at the one-year mark suggests that the PRC's top

leaders will move, at most, marginally in this direction. Fewsmith argues that President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have recognized policy challenges and articulated policy themes that, on most analyses, have some democratic element or would be essential preconditions to effective democratization: institutionalizing a highly personalized political system, reducing rampant and deeply unpopular corruption, attending to the needs of the majority of the population that has fallen far behind the urban coastal minority during China's long reform-era boom. Still, the new leadership's incipient populism and tentative loosening of the strictures on discussions of political and constitutional reform do not show significant commitment to democratic change. Moreover, the prospects for more disjunctive change are constrained by the long shadow of Jiang Zemin, who packed the Politburo with his protégés and retains the key post of Central Military Commission chairman, along with great informal power. Fewsmith concludes that political reform in the PRC is likely to proceed very slowly, while noting that a political crisis might unsettle the leadership and open up possibilities for more dramatic change in any direction.

Taking a somewhat longer-term view, Arthur Waldron foresees a greater likelihood that China's rulers will open the way to more sweeping democratic change. Waldron asserts that, given the relatively weak and divided nature of China's central leadership, Hu's calls for strengthening inner-Party democracy and his "lip service" to popular democracy may permit discussions of, and local experiments with, slightly more significant democratic change and, in turn, to an elite competition to channel the social forces favoring more fundamental political transformation.

Across the Taiwan Strait, rulers' will and skill played central roles in creating democracy. As Shelley Rigger's analysis stresses, democratization in Taiwan was in part a top-down development, framed by presidents Chiang Ching-kuo and Lee Teng-hui, with its pace and content controlled by the ruling Nationalist Party. Further, Rigger reminds us, the elite-created roots of Taiwan's democracy lie still deeper, in the democratic thought of Sun Yat-sen and the democratic principles embodied in the still-operative, elite-crafted constitution of the Republic of China—ideas that the Nationalist leadership energetically indoctrinated Taiwan residents to accept following the island's retrocession from Japan. Some aspects of a top-down process of democratization persist in Taiwan today. Presidential politics, which now more than ever are electoral politics, continue to generate initiatives to develop and deploy democratic measures—in this case a national referendum, coinciding with the March 2004 presidential election, on the question of the PRC's threats to Taiwan's security and peace.

In Hong Kong too, ruling elites have greatly shaped the prospects for democracy. Tahirih Lee, Deborah Brown, and Arthur Waldron recount some of the many ways in which SAR chief executive Tung Chee-hwa and his administration have stifled democratization in Hong Kong: embracing

Asian-values arguments, undertaking to reverse a rights-expanding decision by the SAR's highest court, pushing civil liberties–restricting legislation to implement the Basic Law's anti-sedition provision, and generally answering to Beijing more than to the people of Hong Kong. Support from the territory's business elites helped consolidate a more tightly authoritarian order as reversion approached and arrived. On the other hand, as these contributors also recognize, some members of the administration and legislators from the pro-government coalition have continued to embrace democratization or oppose its evisceration. Moreover, in the twilight of colonial rule, the territory's British rulers introduced democratic reforms that can be credited with laying some of the foundations for democratization in contemporary Hong Kong, and were condemned for doing too little too late to establish effective democratic institutions that might constrain the SAR administration.

The contributors to this volume also remind us that "counter elites" or "opposition elites" can play significant roles in enhancing the prospects for democracy. As Lee and Waldron note, reformist intellectuals such as Yan Jiaqi or Cao Siyuan have been and can be vital voices for reforms that support or are consistent with democracy in the PRC. Similarly, Chen and other leaders of the "outside-the-party" movement that became the Democratic Progressive Party did much to advance Taiwan's democratization. As Brown and Lee point out, members of Hong Kong's non-ruling elite—including prominent barrister and democratic party co-founder Martin Lee and Roman Catholic Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-kun—have made important contributions to nurturing and sustaining pressure for democratization in the SAR.

Level of economic development and its social consequences. A long-standing verity of political science and comparative history is that achieving relatively high levels of economic development can produce social consequences, including an economically secure and well-educated large middle-class, that increase demands for democratization and foundations for democracy. An equally venerable proposition is that rapid economic development, especially where it leaves many behind or worse off, can produce social dislocation that can produce an upsurge in participation that often leads to disorder and repression. The reform-era PRC in many respects seems to fit both scenarios.

In a wide-ranging contribution to this volume, Gilbert Rozman describes how some foreign observers, Chinese modernization theorists, and, later, Chinese globalization theorists have seen the reform-era PRC heading down the path foreseen by the optimistic vision associated with modernization theory—one that linked economic development, resulting social change, and peaceful, gradual democratization. Rozman explains, however, that such a sanguine view has held only incomplete and intermittent sway: PRC policy makers and influential PRC thinkers have perceived dangers to stability and growth that come from democratizing too rapidly (as Gorbachev did in the Soviet Union), while other Chinese and foreign observers have perceived an

urgent imperative to democratize rapidly, despite the risks, in order to sustain economic vitality and social order in the face of growing popular discontent.

In her article, June Teufel Dreyer provides a sobering catalogue of the threats to sustained economic growth and factors feeding social unrest that could imperil political stability in the PRC: a still-rising, aging and increasingly gender-imbalanced population; burgeoning and hard-to-satisfy demands for energy; vast and growing income inequality; an inadequate social safety net; high and rising unemployment; dangerously weak financial institutions; pervasive corruption; economic dislocations; and severe pollution. In all this, Dreyer perceives non-trivial risks of crisis and disruptive regime change, although she also suggests that fragile shoots of a more orderly democratizing response might be found in the regime's willingness to sack some corrupt officials and to press local rural governments to rein in exactions from peasants. Waldron takes a more optimistic view, seeing China's dynamic economy and increasingly affluent and informed society as powerful forces for democratic political change. He sees some prospect that ambitious elites will find ways of accommodating those pressures in an orderly transformation.

As all of the scholars who address Taiwan or Hong Kong recognize, relatively high levels of economic development, the emergence of large middle classes, and high levels of education figure prominently in any plausible account of successful democratization in Taiwan and the emergence and continuation of popular pressure for democracy in Hong Kong.

Culture. Another factor is culture, or, more narrowly and malleably, political culture. The broad claim that Chinese, East Asian, or Confucian culture is somehow inimical to democracy can find few defenders among contemporary scholars and observers. As several articles in this issue explore, however, the connections among culture, political culture and democratization may be a good deal more subtle. As Rozman explains, the idea of Chinese, East Asian, or Confucian culture has provided a shifting series of focal points for decades-long Chinese debates about democratization. On one hand, "culture" has been used to justify state-managed development and social solidarity and deferred democratization. On the other hand, such usage has been condemned as a rationalization for continued authoritarianism and a cover for elites' pursuit of self-serving agendas at home or abroad. Rozman's detailed account of political leaders' moves to define and redefine "culture" or "civilization" and its implications for democratic politics, along with Waldron's vision of a China that will democratize in part due to the influence of democratic politics on the PRC's periphery, underscore the inadequacies of any analysis that sees culture as a fixed and monolithic factor affecting prospects for democracy in greater China.

As the articles addressing politics in Taiwan and Hong Kong remind us, some societies in greater China have manifested at least incipiently democratic cultures during the last decade and a half. They emphasize that the political-cultural distinctiveness of these two peripheral Chinese entities

predates democratization. In Taiwan's case, the roots lie in the island's amalgam of Southeast Asian and Chinese lineages, experience of Western and Japanese colonization, and decades of indoctrination in and, later, practice of democratic ideals. In Hong Kong, such wellsprings of difference can be found in its southern Chinese consciousness, its population of refugees who fled China, its long experience of separation from China under British rule, and the outsized influence of the Catholic Church and lay Catholics in Hong Kong's politics and education.

Rigger and Yuan-kang Wang remind us, however, that there are democracy-weakening features in Taiwan's political culture, including authoritarian era–instilled expectations that a paternalistic state will fix problems and satisfy particularistic demands, and electoral politics that have continued to appeal to cultural or political-cultural cleavages between "mainlanders" and "native Taiwanese." In Hong Kong, much evidence pointed to a weak and fading democratic political culture—at least until the resurgence of popular pro-democracy sentiments in opposition to the sedition and security legislation in mid-2003.

External contexts. Powerful forces that advance, retard, or otherwise affect democratization often can come from without. The analyses herein conclude that this proposition applies to greater China. Rozman recounts how post–Cold War U.S. policy envisioned globalization as a force for democratization in the PRC, through direct international pressure for human rights and democratic reform and through the indirect political effects of China's deepening integration in the international economy. Fearing that the assumptions behind American policy might be right, China's rulers pushed back by turning to a more assertive nationalism that did not favor democratic reform. As Rozman shows, China also turned to regionalism and continued to do so even as post-9/11 shifts in U.S. foreign policies abated the transformative agenda of the 1990s. Regionalism was appealing both because China was relatively powerful as a regional actor and because aggressively democracy-promoting agendas were relatively weak among the nations of the Northeast Asian region. But, Rozman argues, the implications of regionalism for democracy in the PRC are still uncertain: economic integration with increasingly democratic neighbors and those neighbors' responses to their growing fears of an undemocratic China's economic and military prowess could play out in any number of ways. In contrast, and focusing primarily on the PRC's near-abroad, Waldron and Dreyer see significant pressures for democratization in the PRC flowing from the examples of Taiwan, Hong Kong, the newly democratic or democratizing states around the Asian region, and the Chinese diaspora.

External contexts, especially those created by Beijing, have obviously and profoundly affected democratization in Taiwan and Hong Kong. As Rigger emphasizes, the turn to democratization in Taiwan is in part the product of the PRC's relentless and successful quest to secure recognition as

the sole government of China. Losing the diplomatic battle in the 1970s and '80s, the leadership in Taiwan had to stake its claim to international status increasingly on being "Free China" and, later, a human rights-regarding democracy. As Wang and Lee argue, the PRC's strict insistence on its sovereignty over Taiwan did much to fuel the formation of a distinctive Taiwanese national identity that has been a core contributing (if also complicating) factor in the development of democracy in Taiwan.

The tight link persists between Taiwan's precarious external situation and its domestic democratization: China's threats have prompted Taiwan's leader to call for a democratic "peace referendum." Moreover, as Wang argues, PRC attempts to scare or threaten the Taiwanese population to eschew moves toward more formal independence, to acquiesce in a lack of international status, or to accept PRC demands for unification, have backfired. That backfiring in turn has clearly affected the character of democratization and the foci of democratic politics in Taiwan. More starkly, the fate and the development of democracy on Taiwan remain under the shadow of the PRC's reservation of an asserted right to use military force.

For Hong Kong, Beijing equally clearly shapes the relevant quasi-external environment for democratization and its limits. Although our contributors agree on that obvious and incontestable point, they offer interestingly divergent assessments. Lee, Brown, and Waldron emphasize the many ways in which pressure from Beijing and cooperation from the SAR's rulers have stifled democratization or rolled back incipient democracy, effectuating the territory's political reintegration through the central authorities' agenda of subordination. On the other hand, Brown also discerns a promising pro-democratic blowback among electoral politicians, religious leaders, and citizens. Waldron goes further, perceiving division among PRC leaders over how to respond to democratizing pressures in Hong Kong and concluding that they may become resigned to acquiescing in relatively rapid democratic change in the SAR.

Path-dependency. A state's democratization also depends on prior trajectories in the development of its democratic institutions. While exogenous factors are important, democratization is also an endogenous process. The prospects for durable democratization and the nature of democracy in any polity reflect the lingering influences of pre-democratic political institutions and early steps down the road of democratic change. The articles in this issue provide ample illustrations of this proposition. As Rozman documents, much of the consideration and pursuit of political reform—including potentially democracy-promoting reform—in the PRC has focused on the problems of reforming a socialist system and has proceeded partly from lessons drawn from the Soviet and post-Soviet experience. Dreyer and Fewsmith both suggest ways in which infirmities in contemporary Chinese communist institutions may preclude pursuing reforms that might offer a promising path to reform or a "soft-landing" democratization.

Waldron recognizes such obstacles but foresees the possibility of a radically reorienting breakthrough, perhaps catalyzed by democratic examples from China's periphery.

Rigger's and Wang's assessments identify ways in which Taiwan's authoritarian past and its gradual, controlled, and seemingly best-case democratization underlie institutional problems that make Taiwan not yet a best-case democracy: a constitutional structure that permits a previously unimaginable situation of divided government; a party system characterized by weak intra-party coherence, thin policy packages, and marked unwillingness to work with other parties; and political habits of paralyzing partisanship and tolerated neglect of critical issues. The challenges to Taiwan's democracy, Rigger argues, are all the more daunting because of authoritarian-era hangovers of popular cynicism about politicians and popular expectations of paternalistic government. The prospects for reforms to remedy the weaknesses of fragmented and insufficiently democratically accountable institutions are, Wang argues, uncertain in light of Taiwan's history of incomplete and partisan constitutional amendments.

Approaching the questions of the trajectory of institutional development from a different perspective, Tahirih Lee sees the struggle over democratization in Taiwan and Hong Kong as in part a battle over federalism in greater China. She depicts a process in which PRC authorities have sought at every turn to construe the vaguely federal structure adopted for Hong Kong and proposed for Taiwan in ways that would centralize power within the smaller polity and thereby ease its unification with and subordination to China. On the other side, framers and supporters of democratic institutions for Hong Kong and Taiwan have sought decentralization and autonomy through democratizing innovations within or against the PRC's federalism. With respect to Taiwan, Lee points to the impact of democratic elections that have emphasized and exacerbated divisions among the public on cross-Strait issues and channeled those schisms into political institutions that are themselves fragmented and therefore unable to move Taiwan toward possible reunification. Parallel examples from Hong Kong include democrats' resistance to the SAR government's agenda for enhancing its power through election law rules, judicial autonomy, and security and anti-sedition legislation. For Brown and Waldron, the constricted, imperfect, and imperiled democratic institutions and processes in the Hong Kong SAR provide important loci for the development of effective constituencies for more thoroughgoing democratization.

Implications for International Relations

How thoroughly or lastingly democratic the political regimes in greater China are has a significant impact on the external policies those

regimes pursue, and those policies in turn have important effects on regional and global affairs. The contributors to this volume accept this proposition that regime type matters and explore its possible implications.

Fewsmith's account of a PRC leadership in a process of protracted transition implies that China's at-most slowly reforming authoritarian regime is unlikely to undertake on its own initiative any major changes in foreign policy. Rozman suggests a strong but complex link between the Chinese ruling elite's rejection of substantial democratic reform and PRC foreign policy. The commitment to preserving authoritarian ways at home prompted nationalist and, to a lesser degree, Northeast Asian regionalist foreign policies to rebuff or evade international pressures for democratic reform. At the end of the 1990s (and especially as U.S. policy shifted after 9/11), the PRC's diplomacy evolved somewhat as it saw less serious external threats to its political order and perceived greater costs associated with foreign policy positions that suggested that the PRC was not a "normal" and relatively status-quo power, or that the PRC did not accept globalization and coexistence with its politically diverse neighbors.

Waldron's thought experiment on what a democratic China would mean for the world asserts several links between China's undemocratic regime and its foreign policies. Unlike today's authoritarian China, in Waldron's view a democratic China would bring its foreign policy more into line with China's real national interests. It would do this by abandoning a military build-up that is destabilizing and has no basis in security needs; reallocating resources to address its myriad domestic problems; dropping policies that have promoted nuclear proliferation in North Korea and Pakistan (and, in response, India) and have harmed China's security; abandoning the ideologically motivated support for the rogue and imperiled brotherhood of communist and other rigidly authoritarian regimes; and improving the ideologically impeded relations with key democratic countries.

Whatever the future may hold, for now the regime-type gap across the Taiwan Strait contributes to an especially tense relationship that is among the greatest threats to regional and international peace and security. While Wang and Waldron both appear to accept the democratic-peace thesis (at least where the democracies are liberal democracies), they recognize that it is not applicable in contemporary cross-Strait relations. Accordingly, Taipei sees no choice but to adopt a foreign policy that preserves the status quo and assertively protects Taiwan from Beijing's coercion. As Chen's comments illustrate, democratic Taiwan's foreign policy emphasizes Taiwan's democracy, invoking it as a key basis for international acceptance and support. In Wang's analysis, democratization, nationalism and the emergence of a national identity—and subnational ethnic political identities—distinct from China have gone hand-in-hand in Taiwan's domestic political development. That volatile mix, combined with structural features of Taiwanese democratic political institutions, has produced cross-Strait policies that collide with the

PRC's diametrically opposed and strikingly "rigid" position on sovereignty and cross-Strait relations. That PRC position in part reflects the PRC's undemocratic internal order in which, Wang argues, an uncompromising nationalism has replaced Marxism-Leninism as the ruling party's legitimating ideology.

As these analyses of the factors contributing to the perennially precarious state of cross-Strait relations and the links between China's domestic regime type and its foreign policy underscore, the world has much at stake in whether, when, and how the polities of greater China democratize and sustain democracy. The articles that follow provide an excellent field guide to identifying signs of hope and reasons for concern.