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FROM MAO TO DENG AND BEYOND: THE FATE OF POLICY OSCILLATIONS IN THE QUEST FOR A “HARMONIOUS SOCIETY”

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Perhaps the phrase that best characterizes the Maoist era is “never forget class struggle.” By contrast, the mantra that the Communist Party has endorsed most recently, “harmonious society,” is distinctly unMaoist, even somewhat Confucian: It is a long way from class struggle to harmonious society. The easiest organizational framework for considering this span of political history is by leadership chronology: to define a Maoist and a post-Mao era. This is a crude but useful framework. Certainly, most of the Maoist era was characterized by the personal dominance of Mao over policy and politics and the ideological dominance of Mao Zedong Thought. The post-Mao era begins, not in 1976, with the death of Mao, but at the end of 1978, with the Party's official rejection of Mao and Maoism.

POLICY OSCILLATIONS

What this framework ignores are the significant policy oscillations within the Maoist era. More than anything else, that era is characterized by these policy oscillations from “left” to “right,” from “control” to “liberalization,” from the reach for a “communist utopia” to a more pragmatic focus on “economic growth.” Policy oscillations are major, usually sudden, shifts in economic and political orientation. Why were they so extreme? Are they different now from the Maoist era? If so, are the changes self-sustaining?

Mao's successors have officially and publicly rejected most of the premises, strategies, and outcomes of Mao's revolution, essentially declaring it a failure. They define their current quest mainly in pragmatic economic terms, rather than utopian ideological terms. They identify economic growth as the nation's highest priority and the communist Party's main assignment. To achieve economic growth, the party-state has largely retreated from thirty years of direct

administration of the economy. Openly acknowledging the superiority of the capitalist experience, Chinese reformers are promoting a “socialist market economy,” with a place for foreign investors, private entrepreneurs, and stock markets. More than anything else, Chinese leaders have staked their legitimacy on the performance of this new economy.

China has thoroughly abandoned the strictures of communist ideology, has experienced an awesome economic revolution, and is taking its place as an important world power. Yet, China has experienced no second political revolution. Today, it is a strong communist party-state. Chinese policymakers have promoted limited liberalization, sometimes as an antidote to corruption at the grassroots. While they have opened up political processes to more diversified inputs, they have also firmly suppressed organized challenges to the Party.

Moreover, despite the official rhetoric, a “harmonious society” seems to be an ever more distant goal. Meeting with President Bush in late 2005, Chinese President Hu Jintao frankly acknowledged that problems of political corruption, rural unrest, a growing wealth gap, and severe pollution consume nearly all his time.¹

Some of these problems represent new policy challenges for Chinese leaders; others are not new, but their magnitude and impact have only recently been understood. The new and ongoing policy challenges arise very significantly from China's economic successes in the past quarter-century. How will Chinese leaders address these new challenges: incrementally or boldly? What lessons have been learned from the past? In particular, is the pattern of extreme policy oscillations that characterized the Maoist era truly over? To begin with, why were policy oscillations so extreme? This question asks us to reflect on how power is organized.

POLICYMAKING

First, in formal organization, there is a tremendous concentration of decisionmaking power at the top of the Chinese political system, in fewer than a dozen leaders on the Politburo Standing Committee. The Party is organized hierarchically and dominates governance in organizations

¹ Joseph Kahn, “In Candor From China, Efforts to Ease Anxiety,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2006.

and localities from top to bottom. In the Maoist era, Mao himself dominated decisionmaking: when other leaders and formal policymaking bodies decided in ways he did not support, Mao was able to invoke his cult of personality, control of the army, and historically “best guesses” to outmaneuver his colleagues, often with end-runs around formal organizations and procedures. This was evident in the rapid pace of agricultural collectivization after 1955, the radicalization of the Great Leap Forward after the Lushan Plenum in 1959, and destruction of the CCP in the Cultural Revolution.

This concentration of power produces a lack of open debate on policies and a smaller pool of ideas. Under Mao, his ideas could supersede all others. It is easier in such contexts to adopt extreme policies: there is less need to negotiate compromises. It is also easier to implement extreme policies when competition among ideas is smothered.

Today, power is no longer as concentrated as in the Maoist era or even under Deng Xiaoping in the post-Mao era. Economic power has been significantly decentralized. Politically, the cult of personality has been officially repudiated and collective leadership promoted. Neither Hu Jintao nor Wen Jiabao have the stature of a Mao or a Deng. In policymaking, central agencies rely on their own think tanks as well as research institutes outside the Party and government. Businesses, including foreign businesses, regularly lobby government departments about laws and regulations that affect their bottom line. There is greater transparency in policymaking. Of course, mass media openness has been severely curtailed in recent years, and this is unlikely to improve—at least until after the 17th Party Congress in fall 2007 or the Olympics in 2008. Still, the media is not the slavish Party instrument of the Maoist era.

This suggests that policy decisions will be more incremental than in the Maoist era: power is relatively less concentrated, debate is more open, and more players are involved in the debate. The impact of policy decisions made in Beijing are also likely to diminish in implementation due to greater decentralization of state power.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Secondly, Maoist-era policy implementation took the form of mass mobilization campaigns. Policy became a test of political correctness, especially in “leftist” periods. This campaign style leads to exaggerated responses at lower levels by officials and activists who seek to get along and ahead in the windows of rapid promotion opportunity provided by campaigns. This was perhaps most evident in the disastrous Great Leap Forward.

In campaigns, involvement is essentially obligatory. Officials and ordinary Chinese are expected to demonstrate their support for policy behaviorally. For officials, their performance is judged not by a constituency below of the mass public but by leaders above, who will determine their promotion. For ordinary Chinese, not only is it risky to be against policy, but it is risky to be passive.

The pressure to demonstrate political correctness when

policy implementation is a campaign leads to “overfulfillment” of policy targets in the form of extreme responses.

Post-Mao leaders have explicitly and officially repudiated the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the campaign style of implementation more generally. Indeed, post-Mao leaders have reason to fear unleashing mass emotions, as they no longer have the normative power to control them and a reliance on blunt coercive power is costly to regime legitimacy.

CHANNELS OF MOBILITY

Finally, in the Maoist era, the CCP was the only viable channel of upward mobility. This includes not only explicitly political mobility but also getting along and ahead as an intellectual, as an enterprise manager, even as an ordinary worker. This was an additional incentive for demonstrating political correctness whenever the opportunity arises.

In recent decades, new paths of upward mobility have emerged. These include higher education in the West and the accumulation of personal wealth through private entrepreneurship. Indeed, these can also be paths upward in political careers: in recent years, CCP recruitment has favored intellectuals and private entrepreneurs.

IMPLICATIONS

All this suggests that policy shifts in the future, as in recent decades, are likely to be less extreme and more incremental. If we think of policy as a pendulum, the range of movement in the post-Mao era is narrower than before. Not only is the range of movement of the policy pendulum narrower, but also the entire pendulum movement has shifted to the right—that is, away from “communist utopia” and within a range of policies that are all essentially pragmatically oriented toward economic growth. In the Maoist era, when confronted with ambiguity about policy signals from the center, the guiding principle for officials and ordinary Chinese was “better left than right,” that is, a “leftist” error is safer than a “rightist” one. In the post-Mao era, this is no longer a sensible calculus.

China today, relative to the Maoist era, is quite far away from the “leftist” utopian vision. It is firmly anchored in its focus on economic growth. Obviously, if the point of departure is the status quo and we accept the argument that future pendulum swings are likely to continue to be incremental, not extreme, then incremental movements left and right are possible.

Yet, it is difficult to imagine a movement very far toward a leftist utopian vision, despite the growing discontent over income inequality and official corruption. It is not difficult to imagine proactive and perhaps even bold policy responses to a less fearful and more confident society by a less confident leadership than in the Maoist era. This is the core of today’s mantra to “build a harmonious society.” It is an era away from the Maoist mantra of “never forget class struggle.”

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