



The Long March Ahead by Michel Oksenberg

At the Fortune Global Forum in Shanghai this past September, President Jiang Zemin called for a China by 2050 that will be “wealthy, strong, democratic, civilised, and socialist”.

But what is the strategy for reaching this objective? The mainland’s continued ascent is by no means guaranteed. It still confronts massive problems: environmental degradation; an ineffective state revenue system; inefficient state-owned enterprises; a banking system plagued by non-performing loans; alienation among its strategically located ethnic minorities; the inevitable dislocations brought on by rapid economic and social change; and an educational system still suffering from 30 years of neglect and oppression during the Mao era.

The biggest problem is neither economic nor social nor cultural. It is political: can the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reform itself and retain its relevance? Can the party, through self-reform, lead the nation through the major transitions that loom ahead? Or, will the party prove unable to meet the challenge, resulting in serious disruptions and setbacks in the modernisation process?

The CCP remains the most important organisation in China. Through its control of key personnel appointments, its coercive capabilities, its eroding propaganda apparatus, its manipulation of patriotic and nationalistic appeals, and its command of the government and the People’s Liberation Army, the CCP still provides the glue that holds the country together. The mainland’s unity would be imperiled today without the continued existence of the party. By design, it has no substitute.

Since 1989, the leaders have made no serious attempt to redefine the party’s purpose within a market economy and an increasingly diverse society. Ideologically and organisationally, the CCP was designed to carry out revolution, wage class warfare, and run a Stalinist economic system. In theory, it remains a vanguard and mobilisational party, enforcing the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (that is, the wishes of the leaders), while in reality it is an increasingly corrupt instrument of authoritarian rule and a dispenser of patronage. It persists in using old methods to solve new problems. This is a sure prescription for obsolescence.

Many political reforms have been initiated during the past 20 years: introduction of village elections; efforts to establish the rule of law; strengthening of parliamentary bodies; introduction of a civil service system; administrative decentralisation; loosening of censorship; and steps to create a professional military under civilian control. But none is truly meaningful without reforming the party’s role. How can the rule of law be established when the party and its leaders can

intervene at will, overturning judicial decisions and altering laws that begin to displease them? How can village elections be meaningful when party branches in the villages control the process? How can parliamentary bodies be strengthened when the delegates are, in reality, selected by the party? How can administrative decentralisation be effective when its main result is to strengthen the authority of local party committees over the local agents of central government bureaucracies? How can the party improve its internal procedures without public scrutiny?

The party asserts its right to rule on three claims: its policies yield high growth rates and improve standards of living; it protects China’s unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity; and it maintains stability and prevents chaos. But these claims are under pressure and boldly challenged.

Already, the growth rate is slowing and unemployment rising. Taiwan’s drift from the mainland challenges the CCP’s claim about unity. The need to accommodate international financial markets and to increase the access of foreigners to mainland markets makes the defence of sovereignty seem hollow. The rise in crime, corruption, and social unrest raises questions about the party’s long-term ability to prevent chaos. And millions of recent urban migrants and private entrepreneurs are not effectively incorporated into the state structures.

The party is not in imminent danger of collapse, nor is China likely soon to break apart. But the party is in trouble. It is approaching the point where its decay will be irreversible. The 1980s and 90s have witnessed a severe erosion in the efficacy of the party’s ideological appeals, a weakening of its authority over other institutions, and an atrophying of its core apparatus. In many localities, the party is defunct.

Thus far, China’s leaders have been reluctant to embark upon a genuine reform of the CCP. Five main reasons explain their reluctance: deep and potentially polarising differences among the leaders on the ultimate objectives and urgency of political reform; fear that the results would be the same as Mikhail Gorbachev’s effort to transform the Soviet Union; concern that foreign powers and Taiwan would seek to overthrow the party; a desire to focus on what they know best (economic development); and little overt indication that the population demands political reform.

While these considerations have merit, they mask the real issue: what path do the leaders envision for the party in the next 50 years? In essence, they have five unpleasant alternatives: stay on the present path, risking accelerating decay, irrelevance, and ultimately disruptive change; return to totalitarian rule, risking economic stagnation and international isolation; transformation into a highly nationalistic and externally assertive party, risking a coalition against China and exposure of Chinese weakness; transformation into an

instrument to guide political reform, with the risks mentioned above; and postponement of choice, risking purposelessness and drift.

None of these choices is attractive. But increasingly, the fourth alternative seems preferable: within one to three years, explicitly proclaiming the party's purpose during the coming decade or two is to lay the foundation for a Chinese democracy.

A swift transition to democracy is not possible. The ancillary institutions to sustain effective democracy are not in place. This transformation entails embarking on a process of gradual democratisation under party guidance and preparing the party for the day when its right to rule can be derived from the consent of the governed through fair and competitive elections. The benefits would be enormous. The party would acquire a galvanising mission and renew its legitimacy among the population. It would assuage international critics. Understanding Beijing's long-term objective, foreign countries would be more sympathetic with its short-term difficulties. And it would be warmly welcomed in Hong Kong and greatly enhance China's attractiveness to Taiwan.

Over time, the reforms should include a number of measures. Some of these even now are beginning to be implemented although without an overall design.

- Announcing that gradually, on a controlled, step-by-step basis, elections would be held for township, county, and then provincial party and government officials;
- Separating the party from the government, as began to be done in 1988-89, so that over time the CCP would only play a supervisory role in formulation and execution of policy;
- Removing the judiciary from party control as an essential step towards the rule of law;
- Strengthening the Ministry of Defence and transferring the military from party to government command;
- Relaxing the current tight restraints on the formation of interest groups and voluntary organisations;
- Modifying policies that produce the greatest opposition and alienation to party rule (such as those towards ethnic minorities, religion and on birth control) or that retard China's scientific and technological transformation (such as restrictions on academic freedom in universities);
- Subjecting the party to greater external scrutiny by a vigorous press and more assertive parliaments.

The initial steps in this process need not include allowing the organisation of opposition parties nor do all steps need to be implemented simultaneously. These reforms would not undermine the supremacy of the party during the transition but would renew its purpose. And if it leads the transition well, it would probably emerge as the dominant party in an electoral system.

China's leaders are unlikely to embark on this course. President Jiang and his associates give little sign of being bold political reformers. They seem to prefer remaining on the present political path and postponing choice.

Due to their caution, instead of being remembered for the economic achievements they have engineered in the past 20 years, China's present talented leaders could easily go down in history – as Mr. Suharto – as having wasted an opportunity to fashion a stable, durable political system. And ultimately, that failure could harm China's economic progress and political evolution as well.

Instead of a steady though difficult march towards a bright future, the nation's path could tortuously twist, as in the past, between periods of progress and periods of enormous tragedy and despair.

Michel Oksenberg is professor of Chinese Studies at Stanford University, California.