Thomas Heberer

How Stable is China Currently?

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This paper examines some of the political and social features and trends not only crucial for China’s domestic development but also for the understanding of her international behaviour. Since China’s economic, political and social problems are rather well known, the focus will be on specific features and patterns of domestic developments and change.

In political science it is frequently argued that authoritarian systems are per se economically inefficient, non-innovative, and regimes without legitimacy.² Moreover, such states are classified as “inherently fragile because of weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, overcentralisation of decision making, and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms”.³ China’s economic success and her relative stability in recent decades have displayed that such assignments are far too simplistic. Accordingly, the question arose why China does develop so smoothly and what the reasons for her stability are. US scholar Andrew Nathan speaks of a resilient authoritarianism and argues that China were “an autocratic system responsive enough to societal demands to keep itself in power for a long time”.⁴ American policy adviser Robert A Kagan speaks of an “authoritarian consolidation”.⁵ Political scientist Bruce Gilley in turn declares that China’s political leadership attains legitimacy by means of continuous institutional change and performance.⁶

In the following we sketch out further factors explaining stability in current China: the role of the state as a developmental state; the fragmentation of the political system; pragmatism and pragmatic learning and further specific reasons explaining a relatively high level of stability.

This paper highlights China's development patterns in seven basic hypotheses. At the end a conclusion will summarise major findings.

Hypothesis 1

China is a highly fragmented authoritarian system with extremely diverse structures and processes. People have shared but also diverging expectations and interests concerning human rights, general rights and the implementation of laws. Different social strata display diverging concerns and interests: The entire population is particularly interested in national strength, economic growth, stability, and the improvement of living standard. The socially weak expect

¹ This paper is based on a speech given to the China Delegation of the European Parliament in Brussels, 7 April 2010.
² See for instance Wolfgang Merkel, Systemtransformation, Wiesbaden (VS Verlag) 2009.
new patterns of social security; the new middle classes individual autonomy (living their own concept of life without external interference by the state) and legal security; the rural population and the workers in implementing laws and new modes of social security; ethnic minorities in strengthening collective rights of autonomy (self administration).

Undoubtedly, the reform processes since the late 1970s have not only generated tremendous economic, social and political change, but also entailed a plethora of social problems. Problems like a rapidly growing income gap (between urban and rural incomes as well as between various regions and social strata), corruption or arbitrariness of rural cadres are an enormous challenge for the country’s political leadership. Yet, we should not forget that firstly many of those problems are linked to the fact that China is still a developing country where the structures of a modern state and law system are gradually developing; and secondly, that many problems are grounded in the transition from a planned to a market economy. Currently, the party state is striving for solutions (e.g. establishing a workable social security system for the rural areas) something that needs time to develop.

Without doubt, human rights have tremendously improved since the late 1970s. China has been converted from a totalitarian entity (where a charismatic leader was controlling the entire country, a rigid planned economy was existing and where people permanently were mobilised to attend in innumerable political movements and campaigns) to an authoritarian one where people have a much higher degree of freedom, a collective leadership is governing the country, people are no longer forced to attend political campaigns and where opportunities for participation are increasing. The reform process entailed enormous economic and social liberties (more than 90 per cent of all enterprises meanwhile are private ones), a significant reduction of poverty (from roughly 450 million at the end of the 1970s to about 120 million people currently having an income of less than 1 US-$ income per day, the poverty criterion of the World Bank), a greater freedom of movement (from rural to urban areas), greater legal protection, greater freedom of organisation (e.g. in associations or NGOs) and greater freedom of opinion via the Internet. Although the party state attempts to control and monitor the Internet this is in fact appears to be a Sisyphus work, as specifically the younger generation is familiar in bypassing state control and censorship.

Nevertheless, many institutional and structural problems are existing leading to growing discontent particularly among intellectuals: for instance the discrepancy between the elaboration of laws on the one side and their implementation on the other side; a lack of checks and balances; the persecution of civil rights activists and lawyers acting in the interest of ordinary people (specifically at the local level); the lack of conflict solution mechanisms; the confinement of media reporting, etc. China, therefore, provides a rather ambiguous picture: On the one hand we find a successful economic development increasingly spawning prosperity for the majority of the people, hence leading to the emerging of a middle class; on the other hand an authoritarian one party-state rigidly handling political dissent, social protests, and social movements.
Hypothesis 2

China could be classified as a “developmental state”. Developmental states differ from so-called developing countries. They are “purposeful” states, because they are characterized by a will to develop and are capable to developing successfully and against all odds and obstacles in the domains of politics, economics and society. Undoubtedly, the Chinese party-state is such a developmental state: it is successfully developing the economy and it knows when to withdraw, for instance by giving up the planned economy and advancing a market economy or by dropping the “class character” of the Communist Party (CCP) (cf. hypothesis 4).

In the last 25 years China’s economy developed very rapidly and with high growth rates. The UK needed 60 years to reduplicate its gross national product (GNP), the US 40 years, China only 12 years.

The Chinese leadership is well aware that central planning excludes people who want to work for a common goal while, in contrast, a market economy integrates those people. China underscores the ways in which political power can contribute positively and effectively to economic well-being, for instance by means of long-term growth and structural change as pivotal goals; by political management of the economy; by institution building and institutional innovation.

Furthermore, the Chinese party-state is a strong state possessing “state capacity”. This capacity of the Chinese state encompasses five elements:

(a) **Legitimacy** in the sense of the legitimisation of the political system accepted by its citizens;
(b) **regulating and controlling capacity** in the sense of social control and regulation;
(c) **resources of enforcement**, e.g. financial and coercive means as well as personnel resources;
(d) **bargaining capacity**, i.e. the ability to incorporate new social groups, associations and organisations into bargaining processes and to find a balance between various particularistic interests; and
(e) **learning capacity**, i.e. the ability to learn from previous mistakes and failures.

State capacity in this sense is important for implementing a successful development program and for successfully coping with domestic problems and conflicts.

Hypothesis 3

China is not a homogeneous authoritarian entity but rather represents a system of a so-called fragmented authoritarianism. This kind of authoritarianism is characterised by four features:

a) Different actors affect political output: the central state, the provinces, the local state, the military, new social strata, new social organisations, public opinion, etc. This is true for

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the political output of domestic policies as well as that of foreign policies. Therefore, foreign policy is not solely shaped by the central leadership but by a broad variety of actors.

b) The Chinese party-state is not a homogeneous entity but a diverse entity. We therefore have to deconstruct our concept of the Chinese “state”: this state does not exist without society and it is based on an interaction between both state and society. Moreover, the state is subdivided in vertical and horizontal levels and organisations. Therefore, the state has to be conceived as an ensemble of various organisations interacting with society at various levels and shaped by inner tensions and conflicts.

c) Within China we find many different and diverging “models” (this could be called “one country, one thousand systems”). In Nanjie village in Henan Province, for instance, the inhabitants returned to a neo-Communist model with a strong Mao cult and a single ownership system which permits only collective ownership. A short distance away there is a village where only private ownership exists and the village leadership consists primarily of private entrepreneurs. These and other models co-exist and are accepted by the political leadership.10

d) Finally, a growing public sphere is emerging, for instance via the Internet and NGOs or GONGOS, i.e. government organized NGOs, and public opinion increasingly influences domestic as well as foreign policies.11

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Hypothesis 4

Political pragmatism is a salient pattern of Chinese development and political culture. The government has to tackle and solve concrete problems and issues and does this in a pragmatic way. This pragmatism is characterised by four features:

- **Economically** it translates into the transition from a planned to a market economy, and into the economisation of politics. The latter means that economic development dominates politics and the activities of the central and local governments. Economic results and economic development successes are decisive for the assessment of an official and his career.
- **Politically** the Communist Party has developed from a class party into a people’s party. This is substantiated, for instance, by the so-called “Three Represents” (sange daibiao) put forward by former party chief Jiang Zemin. According to these principles, which meanwhile have been officially included into the constitution, the Communist Party no longer represents classes but the entire Chinese people.
- **Ideologically**: Marxism-Leninism was first “sinicised”, i.e. adjusted to help tackle China’s practical problems, and then in the 90s it was complemented by the “Deng Xiaoping theory” which, in fact, does not constitute a “theory” but a set of practical advices. Meanwhile, the aim of the regime is no longer a far away “communism” but a not too distant “harmonious society”.
- **Regime legitimacy** is no longer based on ideology, but rather functionally defined: by the promises of modernisation and development; of gaining national strength; of preserving political, economic and social stability; and by establishing both a “socialist democracy” and a “rule of law”.

Many examples provide evidence for such a kind of political pragmatism. The economic reforms itself, the switch from a planned to a market economy, the revival of private sector development or the acceptance of foreign investment and of a rapid social change are only a few examples of such a pragmatism. Pragmatism even translates into the development of the Party constitution since the 1950s as the following table demonstrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements in the Party Constitution (1956-2007)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1956</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) takes Marxism-Leninism as its guide to action.”</td>
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<td><strong>1982</strong></td>
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<td>“The CCP takes Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as its guide to action.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1997</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“The CCP takes Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory as its guide to action.”</td>
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2002

“The CCP takes Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and the
important thought of Three Represents as its guide to action.”

2007

“The CCP takes Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the
important thought of Three Represents and the Scientific Concept of Development as its guide to
action.”

*Own figure.*

The adoption of the “Soviet model” in the early 1950s (classified in the Party constitution by the
term “Marxism-Leninism”) was followed by political sinification (中国化) since the late 1950s
and manifests itself in the ideas of Chairman Mao (毛泽东思想). The “Deng-Xiaoping-Theory”
(邓小平理论) stands for the economisation of politics and society in the late 1980s and 90s. This
“theory” stands for economic development plus macro-control by the Party. Deng Xiaoping's
pragmatic statement “Whether the cat is white or black, crucial is if it catches mice” was the
starting point of a switch of the political focus towards the economic sphere and therefore starting
point for the economisation of politics.

Former party Chief Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” (三个代表) are an expression of the fact
that the Chinese society has rapidly changed and that the Party no longer represents merely the
interests of the workers and peasants, but those of the entire Chinese people and the Chinese
nation. The 17th Party Congress in 2007 enshrined the formula “Scientific Concept of
Development” (科学发展观) into the Party constitution. This signified a stronger focus on
sustainable development, taking care for the socially weak and their problems, establishing a
social security net in urban and rural areas, etc.
The above article from a Chinese journal is a further example of this pragmatism. The shareholding system which Karl Marx has depicted as one of the “highlights” of the development of capitalism is now comprehended as an important phenomenon “leading to Communism”. Accordingly, the party newspaper “Renmin Ribao” (People’s Daily), on 12 March 2005 has written on its front page: “Reform has no borderlines” which means that there is no political taboo in terms of the modernisation of China.

Even the example of the mock bank notes on the next page, ceremonial paper money burned for the deceased reflects the pragmatic view of life of the Chinese people. The upper one shows the traditional money-paper (mingqian) burnt when the body of a deceased person is buried. Below we see “modern” money-paper which emerged during the financial crisis in Asia (1997/98). The salesman explained that in the post mortem world the traditional money-paper would probably lose its value. Therefore, a “hard” currency (US-$) were needed in afterlife being more worthwhile for the dead people in the world after.
Hypothesis 5

The central leadership and thus the political system enjoy legitimacy and trust. According to research findings of Chinese and Western scholars (including my own findings) a strong majority of the urban and rural population supports the political leadership and regime.12 This support is based on successful economic development, the capacity to achieve national goals such as reunification with Hong Kong and Macao or creating a “strong” China, and the preservation of political stability, i.e. a peaceful and stable order, and the conviction that the CCP has rescued China from a fate similar to that of the former Soviet Union.

Yet, Chinese people distinguish between the legitimacy of the central authorities and that of local authorities. As the perceived “good state” the central government possesses trust whilst the “bad” local authorities are blamed for all grievances and enjoy only a minimum or no trust at all.

Yet, in the long run economic growth is no guarantee for an enduring legitimacy. This was one reason why the CCP has put forward the new goal of creating a harmonious society and

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“harmonious legitimacy”, i.e. to orient policies towards the needs of the population, harmonising social interests and attaining social justice by means of redistribution of wealth.

Hypothesis 6

Chinese nationalism (or patriotism) currently is less an aggressive, externally-oriented ideology but rather serves domestic functions and purposes. I would argue that Chinese nationalism at present has two major functions: First, it is an integrative nationalism aiming at further state- and nation-building. Secondly, it is a modernisational nationalism directed at mobilising the people in the interest of a shared goal: modernisation. This could be called the “solidaristic vision” of the nation.

Since China conceives the Taiwan issue as an internal affair. Accordingly, the Taiwan issue is not an indication for a growing aggressive behavior. Rather, the Taiwan issue should be understood as an element of nation-building and thus of an integrative nationalism.13

Hypothesis 7

Chinese discourses on political reforms

Into which direction should China develop? Within China there exists a widespread discourse on the country’s political future.14 And we have no unitary opinion on this issue. A dominant position particularly among intellectuals argues that currently fundamental contradictions between the political, the economic and the intellectual elites are not existing. The economic elite (entrepreneurs and manager) were primarily interested in calm and successful entrepreneurial activities and less in democracy. China’s economic trajectory, the negative effects of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, western anti-China policies and the inclusion of intellectuals in political decision-making processes and discourses had modified the stance of many intellectuals towards the CCP. Citizens – so the argument – were primarily concerned and unsatisfied with corruption, unemployment and growing social inequality. An anti-socialist movement would currently not exist. The current political system were widely accepted, the people were primarily concerned with the solution of immediate everyday problems.15

Concerning political reforms we currently can discern four major approaches:

(1) Intra-party democratisation prior to societal democratisation

Gradual bottom-up democratisation

Liberalisation through advancing a legal system

Rapid democratisation to solve key issues.

(1) Argues that the decision-making processes within the CCP have to be democratised by virtue of competitive inner-party elections. Without democratising the party a democratisation of society were currently impossible.

(2) This concept champions that grassroots election (in villages and urban neighbourhood communities, implemented in the 1990s) should be elevated to the township, county, city, provincial and finally the central level thereby initiating democracy.

(3) The third point of view advocates that a well-functioning legal system were a vital precondition for more liberality and democracy.

(4) In order to curb corruption and to bring more equality into society – so the fourth argument – democracy should be established in the near future.16

The “Charta 08”, drafted by 300 oppositional Chinese intellectuals under the aegis of the former professor of philosophy, author and civil rights activist Liu Xiaobo (who was sentenced to 11 years in prison at the end of 2009) and signed by more than 10,000 people in the Internet, moves in a different direction. It demands a full-fledged democratic system but without explaining how to turn it in reality. Many items of the charta are publicly discussed among intellectuals close to the CCP for quite some time. New is the totality of the programme. Undoubtly, the charta is an expression of the discontent of many intellectuals with the slow progress of political reforms.

The “New Left”, another but still larger critical movement within China is critisising the Charta 08, too. It denounces the neoliberal policies of the party leadership and blames it for growing inequality, corruption, and privatization. A unbridled market economy, the privatising of state property and globalisation were the core evils which should be combatted with the help of Mao’s teachings. In a collusion of the party’s elite and economic interests an exploitation of the country would take place. The “New Left” opposes the “liberalism” of the “Charta 08” and accuses it to represent US interests.17

By the same token, intellectuals close to the party are reflecting China’s political future. A while ago, Yu Keping, an adviser to the CCP leadership and one of the most prominent intellectuals, argued in his seminal and popular book “Democracy is a good thing” (民主是一个好东西) that democracy is a positive phenomenon and on a global scale undoubtly the best among all political systems. Yet, the crucial issue were h o w and in what way China could achieve this goal. Under the current complicated and heterogeneous structures of China’s transformation it would be extremely difficult to establish a stable democratic system.18

16 Weiping Huang, Quanqiu huayu Zhongguo zhengzhi tizhi gaige (Globalisation and reform of China’s political system Chinas), in: W. Huang/Wang Yongcheng, eds., Dangdai Zhongguo zhengzhi yanjiu baogao (Research report on China’s current politics), I, Beijing (Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe) 2002: 21-30.
18 Yu Keping, Minzhu shi ge hao dongxi (Democracy is a good thing), ed. by Yan Jian, Beijing (Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe) 2006; an English version: Yu Keping, Democracy is a good thing, Washington, D.C. (Brookings Institution Press) 2009.
Merely demanding democracy does not automatically give rise to a stable democracy. Democracy cannot simply be imported. Specific preconditions are required in order to develop and stabilise democratic structures, like, for instance:

- Basic structures of a civil society,\textsuperscript{19} i.e. larger liberties for the media, for non-government organisations and the development of citizen values and attitudes;
- An independent law system protecting individuals and groups of individuals against arbitrariness by the state;
- Civilisational competence

By civilisational competence I mean the cognitive precondition of a stable democracy: the emergence of citizens with a society-oriented public spirit and a civic responsibility; learning to accept diverging opinions and political criticism by state and society; handling conflicts peacefully (by the state and society), i.e. the establishing of patterns of conflict management; and, finally, the development of empathy, i.e. to develop the capability to understand other people’s feelings, emotions and thinking.

We should understand that under the difficult conditions of the current transformation process conflicting interests between both various social strata and regions as well as lacking preconditions for a stable democracy a breakdown of the political system would not lead to a stabilisation of China. The likely outcome might be political turmoil, inner power struggles, huge movements of refugees and a protracted economic crisis – with severe consequences not only for Asia but also for the world economy.

\textbf{Conclusion}

China is not a pure dictatorship where no changes have occurred in the last decades, but a country that is gradually advancing towards a more open society with a growing degree of participation, legal security and individual autonomy. The cleavages within China are tremendous. It is, therefore, difficult to predict in which direction China will proceed in the next decades. This, undoubtedly, depends primarily on domestic issues. As long as the economy develops smoothly and the living standard of the majority of the people continues to improve, and as long as participation is enhanced, social and political stability could be preserved and China might increasingly become a trustworthy and accountable partner in world politics. On the other hand, it is easy to imagine the negative consequences which a failure of the Chinese state could bring about.

US political scientist Joel Migdal has shown that under the conditions of both weakly developed structures of a civil society and a weak society facing a strong state, states can function as

“political architects”. This is exactly the role the Chinese party state is currently playing. Therefore, the party state is not merely a “development dictatorship” but could rather be classified as a “developmental agency”. The latter requires more than pure authoritarian mechanisms of enforcement, i.e. the inclusion of social groups in co-determination and participation and the establishing of a corresponding set of institutions. Accordingly, the World Development Report of the World Bank in 1997 (“The state in a changing world”) has already emphasised that under conditions of a lacking civil society the state has to function as an “activating state”. I argue that the Chinese party-state has adopted this function and acts as a political entrepreneur purposefully pursuing the modernisation of the country.

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