AFTER DENG, WHAT?
WILL CHINA FOLLOW THE USSR?

A. DOAK BARNETT

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Introduction

With communism everywhere disappearing or in disarray, the question of future developments in China assumes added significance. Events in the Soviet Union revealed that Leninist giant to have three crumbling pedestals: ethnic rivalries and separatist tendencies in the Republics, economic collapse, and a total loss of legitimacy of the political system. Professor Barnett examines these same issues in the case of China and comes cautiously to conclusions that emphasize the differences between the Soviet and Chinese situations.

Ethnic differences exist, but apply to a much smaller part of the population, which is overwhelmingly Han Chinese. The economic situation in China over the past fifteen years has had its ups and downs, but the per capita GNP has substantially more than doubled. The question of political legitimacy is more complex, because the Tiananmen massacre both capped and preceded periods of repression that have alienated both the intellectuals and the new entrepreneurial class. But the governmental and party organizations retain considerable authority.

All this leaves the question of how much further regionalization of political power will take place as a result of differences in economic growth, some deliberate decentralization from the center to encourage such growth, and the historical oscillation of power in China between the center and the provinces.

Professor Barnett’s examination of these issues, and of their interaction with Chinese foreign policy, illuminates any consideration of the appropriate American policy toward the remaining Communist giant.

The Foreign Policy Institute is pleased that Dr. Barnett has inaugurated a new series, The Foreign Policy Institute Papers: New World—New Directions, which will focus on the nature of the epochal changes in global politics and their implications for U.S. foreign policy.

Harold Brown, Chairman
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The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), have altered the world scene in fundamental and irrevocable ways. Will the winds of change soon sweep away the remaining Communist regimes, including the only one that still rules a major nation of global importance—China? It is widely assumed that the answer is yes.

This assumption is understandable. Although it is based partly on wishful thinking, it has deeper roots. In recent years, the pace of change has accelerated in much of the world, reaching hurricane velocity in many places; frequently, the forces at work have had awesome and unexpected effects: the success of "people power" in facing down tough authoritarian leaders; the communications revolution that has made borders porous and made isolation almost impossible; the economic interdependence of nations that has exerted growing pressures for change within lagging countries; the erosion of ideology and revival of ethnic-based aspirations and old-fashioned nationalism—these and other trends have had far-reaching effects in many parts of the world.

China obviously has not been immune to the spreading virus of change. Moreover, wholly apart from the effects of developments elsewhere, recent trends and events within China have highlighted the fact that it has entered an important transitional period in which the situation is inherently unstable and the future inevitably uncertain. The Tiananmen massacre in 1989 discredited the octogenarian party elders and their protégés because of their responsibility for that disaster, and, as a result, the country is now holding its breath, waiting for the succession to occur and for new leaders to emerge.

In this situation, could some dramatic development trigger a collapse or disintegration comparable to the events in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union? The safe and easy response would be "perhaps" because "anything is possible." In light of the fact that virtually no one accurately predicted the course of events in those areas, how can
one say that a comparable cataclysm, no matter how unexpected, would be impossible in China?

China and the USSR:
Major Differences

However, possibilities are one thing; probabilities are another, and the essence of political analysis is distinguishing one from the other. There are many reasons to believe that analogies emphasizing similarities between China and the European and Soviet regimes are misleading; that, despite some resemblances, the differences are crucial; and that, although China, too, is undergoing a period of historic change, its regime is not on the verge of collapse or disintegration, and its future evolution is likely to follow its own distinctive path.

Of the many differences between China and the others, several are crucial. Most important, unlike the Soviet Union, during most of the 1980s China did not suffer a disastrous economic decline; instead, it achieved remarkable economic growth, which more than doubled average living standards, and it took major steps toward reform that began to transform the structure of its economy. In China there is food on the table and consumer goods in the stores. In contrast to both the Soviet Union and several East European nations, moreover, China has not been threatened by ethnic fragmentation; it does face serious problems with its minority groups, but these groups are less than one-tenth of the country's population. The Communist Chinese regime also differs fundamentally from the former Communist regimes of Eastern Europe, which always lacked legitimacy because they were imposed by a foreign power; the Chinese Communist regime, however, was homegrown and rose to power by appealing to nationalism, as well as to peasant dissatisfaction. Over time, even in the Maoist era, the legitimacy and strength of the Chinese Communists' ideology, organization, and leadership were seriously weakened by the consequences of the anti-Rightist campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and, above all, the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, during the 1980s, some of the side effects of decentralization and reform, including inflation, corruption, and increasing inequities, further eroded its popular support. But the regime's legitimacy has by no means been completely destroyed as it was in some other Communist-ruled countries. The Communist regime has continued to maintain sufficient control of the army and the public security apparatus to enforce order. Popular dissatisfaction has not been translated into effective organized opposition, and fear of chaos, which is widely shared even among opponents of the present leadership, has inhibited open challenges to the legitimacy of the system.

For these and many other reasons, it is unlikely that the Chinese Communist regime will experience the same fate, or follow the same path, as the regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. However, it clearly will be affected by the changes in those countries. Its initial response will probably be to try to restrict the impact in China by strengthening its mechanisms for domestic political control. However, its eventual response could well be different, especially after the next generation of leaders in China takes power. Such leaders are likely to recognize—drawing lessons from China's own experience, but also from the course of events in other countries—that even if they are able to contain some problems through tightened controls, the long-run solutions to basic problems will require more extensive reform. Whatever
influences play on China from abroad—whether from East or West—Chinese leaders can be expected to search for a distinctive "Chinese road." However, that road will almost certainly involve far-reaching changes, dictated by the dynamics of domestic forces now at work within China.

The Approaching Succession

One logical way to begin an analysis of the situation in China today and to try to understand the probable dynamics of change in the near future is to examine the nature of the country's present leadership and to estimate the likely outcome of the approaching succession. Already, China has entered a watershed period. While it is gradually recovering from the political and economic crises suffered during 1988-1990, the country faces the uncertainties of the post-Deng era and is trying to prepare for the transition. Historians label the years from 1949 to 1976 the Maoist era; they will undoubtedly regard the period starting in 1978 as the Dengist era. During the decade after 1978, under Deng Xiaoping, China embarked on a remarkable path of reform. Then, following a decade of rapid growth, it encountered mounting problems, which culminated in the adoption of an austerity program, growing popular dissatisfaction, student protests, and, finally, the military clamp-down and the Tiananmen massacre of June 1989.

Because the 87-year old Deng has played such a dominant role since the late 1970s, his passing from the scene at some unpredictable point in the near future will clearly be a major turning point. Many analysts, in assessing the likely process and outcome of the succession, focus their attention, therefore, almost exclusively on the passing of Deng himself. Even though this is understandable, such a focus obscures the complexity of both the present situation and the nature of the succession. Powerful as Deng has been, he has not been able to exercise one-man rule, as Mao Zedong often did. Deng has had to compromise with many other members of the coalition that has ruled China during this period. This coalition has included men with a diversity of views. However, the most powerful of them have been the handful of surviving party elders of Deng's generation, most of whom formally retired several years ago, but continue to exercise great influence from the background; these men strongly reasserted their influence during the crisis of 1989.

What China now faces is a "generational succession," the passing from the scene during a very brief period, either through death or incapacitation, of all of the surviving revolutionary "founding fathers." These men are all in their eighties. No one can predict exactly how long this "rolling succession" will take, but it cannot be more than a few years. However, it will not be complete—and therefore, the characteristics of the "post-Deng" period will not become clear—until this entire group no longer exercises decisive influence.

Apart from Deng himself, the most powerful of the surviving founding fathers is Chen Yun. However, a number of others still exercise significant influence because of seniority and the special legitimacy deriving from their revolutionary roles. They include Yang Shangkun (who, as China's president, is the only one who still occupies a top formal post), Li Xiannian, Peng Zhen, Wang Zhen, and Bo Yibo. The most important struggles about policy in China still take place among these elders. The next generation of leaders, who occupy the top formal positions, are protégés of particular party elders. No one in this successor
generation—including party General Secretary Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng—has yet built a strong power base of his own. Although there are significant differences of views among the party elders, as a group, they have tended to be conservative or at least cautious about reform, and they all have placed extremely high priority on the goal of political stability. The views of the elders are reflected at present in those of their likely successors, but there is reason to believe that the spectrum of views among the latter is broader, and it almost certainly is weighted more toward active economic reform and even, perhaps, more toward cautious political liberalization.

When all of the elders pass from the scene, the dynamics within the top leadership will change fundamentally. With their sponsors gone, the successors will be compelled to define their own positions, build their own bases of power, find their own sources of legitimacy, and work out new relations among themselves. In the meantime, in the course of the rolling succession, as each of the party elders passes from the scene, the balance within the leadership will shift to some degree—although not necessarily dramatically—either toward somewhat greater conservatism or toward more active reformism, depending on the order in which the elders depart. Most important in this respect will be the timing of the deaths of Deng and Chen Yun. If Deng goes first, cautious or conservative views could well be strengthened temporarily, whereas if Chen's death precedes Deng's, the impetus toward further economic reform could well gain strength.

Today, on the eve of the succession, what are the characteristics of the existing coalition? What is the balance of views represented by its members, and what differences can one see between the party elders and the successor generation? Do answers to these questions, even if they are only tentative answers, provide clues about the course China is likely to follow during and after the succession?

Although the party elders' predisposition toward political conservatism has been reasserted since the crisis of 1989, and this conservative thrust is likely to influence policy in important ways until the old guard is replaced, there are significant differences even among the octogenarians, as well as among their protégés. Symbolized by disagreements between Deng and Chen, these differences, which have mainly concerned the pace and extent of economic reform, created a situation of near-stalemate or gridlock in the period following the crisis of 1988-1989, when the leadership found it virtually impossible to agree on major new policy directions. There were some minor policy initiatives, but often, instead of demonstrating real consensus, these highlighted the fact that conflicting pressures were pushing the regime in different directions.

In the realm of economic reform, however, after a period during the second half of 1989 and early 1990 when the regime appeared to be retreating to some degree from earlier economic reforms (although not as much, even then, as some outside observers assumed), since late 1990 and early 1991, there have been signs of a gradual and cautious resumption of economic reform. However the leadership has not been able, to date, to define clearly any new dynamic reform strategy to cope with the difficult problems facing the country. Politically, the main trends have continued to be retrogressive. Despite minor steps recently to modify the repressive policies adopted following the events of June 1989, there have been continuing efforts to reassert
authoritarian controls, suppress dissent, and revive old methods of ideological and political indoctrination—although such efforts have had only limited and superficial success.

It seems probable that throughout the succession, and perhaps into the immediate post-Deng period, the top Chinese leadership will continue to be a complex coalition representing a spectrum of conflicting views and buffeted by competing pressures. There undoubtedly will be shifts in the political balance, and these could result in some policy changes, but until there are major leadership changes these policy modifications are likely to represent only partial and limited adjustments, rather than the adoption of any comprehensive new strategy. The latter will only be possible when a new and stronger consensus emerges.

The Spectrum of Chinese Views on Economic and Political Reform

Could there, at some point, be a basic long-term reversal of the reform process initiated a decade ago? One cannot say that this is impossible, but, on the basis of what is known about China’s present and prospective leaders, it is unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future. Any categorization of the top leaders’ views inevitably involves oversimplification, but some attempt to classify them is desirable if one wishes to assess the parameters of probable change in the period ahead.

Virtually all of China’s top leaders favor, in general terms—albeit in varying ways and degrees—the regime’s commitment to Deng’s slogans of “economic reform and opening.” Therefore, virtually all of them can be labeled economic reformers of one sort or another. However, they can be grouped, very roughly, into three categories on the economic reform spectrum: cautious reformers, moderate reformers, and bold reformers. It is difficult to identify any top leader as an economic reactionary, or arch-conservative—that is, an individual who would favor moving backward toward a Stalinist model of a command economy, with a high degree of centralization and comprehensive planning, or toward a revival of populist Maoist policies, or who would even wish to see the reform process more than temporarily halted at its present stage. Certainly, no leader has publicly tried to define any comprehensive conservative economic program.

Some analysts would classify as economic conservatives those who are labelled here as cautious reformers—men such as Chen Yun, as well as protégés such as Premier Li Peng and Yao Yilin (recently head of the State Planning Commission)—but “cautious reformer” is really a more appropriate label. In the Maoist period, Chen was universally regarded, and rightly so, as one of China’s foremost proponents of reform; the fact that his present position places him, as well as his protégés, on the conservative end of the spectrum reflects the considerable distance that China already has moved toward economic reform, as well as the strength of the general consensus favoring further reform of some kind. Throughout the years, Chen has maintained a remarkably consistent position; however, the situation in China has changed greatly and so,! too, have the attitudes of most other leaders.

The disagreements among China’s leaders concerning the pace and extent of economic reform, although not as great as some observers have argued, nevertheless have been of tremendous importance. Such differences have been at the heart of policy debates within the leadership for many years. These debates will unquestionably continue, and their outcome will determine China’s future
economic course—and its degree of economic success—in the years ahead. Cautious reformers will favor only very gradual movement toward marketization and privatization, and they will try to insist on the continuation of a significant measure of state planning and a predominant role for state enterprises.

Moderate reformers will push toward market socialism, but they, too, will argue for incrementalism. Although the mix of planning and market endorsed by moderate reformers calls for a substantial increase in the role of the market, these moderate reformers will probably continue to argue against rapid change because of their fear of instability. The boldest reformers will try to push for a much more rapid and far-reaching transformation of the economy, including full price reform, reducing state planning greatly, shifting from direct planning to indirect macroeconomic management, establishing market predominance, and encouraging more extensive privatization of enterprises. The kind of reformers who emerge from the succession with predominant influence will have far-reaching effects on the course of China's future development. Even though almost any outcome is conceivable, the most likely scenario in the period ahead is that moderate reformers will gain influence first, probably fairly soon; yet, it is also likely that bolder reformers will acquire increasing influence at a later stage, especially after the succession produces a new leadership.

The spectrum of political views within the Chinese leadership requires a different classification, and the main political groupings can best be categorized as follows: political conservatives, moderate political reformers, and political liberals (although the term "liberal" is not one that the Chinese themselves would use). The surviving party elders have clearly been conservative in their views on political reform. This has been true of Deng himself. Although, on occasion, Deng has gone along with some steps toward liberalization, in every period of tension or crisis, Deng has reemphasized his so-called "four cardinal principles." Although in many respects, these concepts are fairly vague and subject to various interpretations, they strongly assert the importance of the "socialist road," ideology, the state, and, most important, the party leadership. Deng proclaimed these principles the year after he initiated moves toward economic reform.

Most of the other party elders have been even more politically conservative than Deng. They have been willing to endorse some limited political reforms, including rationalization of the bureaucracies, improved decision making, reduced party intrusion into ordinary activities, and greater consultation with nonparty groups, but they have opposed major structural political reforms, and have placed highest priority on the maintenance of political stability. Moreover, among the regime's old-time ideologues, a few men, such as Deng Liqun, clearly deserve the label of reactionaries, but they are in a minority, and their efforts to revivify ideology and political indoctrination have not been effective, except in the most superficial sense.

The successor generation clearly includes some individuals who are politically very conservative, much like the party elders, but a sizable number of them could well prove to be, in time, either moderate political reformers or political liberals. This, at least, is the estimation of some very knowledgeable Chinese. The last two party general secretaries, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, clearly belonged to one or the other of these two categories. Of the six men currently serving on the Central Committee's Standing Committee (the top decision-making body in the
party), three men are almost universally viewed as conservative—Li Peng, Yao Yilin and Song Ping—but some (though not all) well-informed Chinese believe the other three—Jiang Zemin, Li Ruihuan, and even Qiao Shi (who currently is responsible for China’s security apparatus)—could, in time, prove to be moderates or liberals. In varying ways and degrees, the political moderates and liberals in China are likely to favor less party intervention in both day-to-day government affairs and enterprise management, as well as a significant loosening of ideological and political controls, greater freedom of expression, a toleration of some movement toward increased pluralism in society, a more responsive attitude toward the views of intellectuals, students, and other potential interest groups, and a gradual increase in genuine political participation. Broadly speaking, they favor more active efforts to improve relations between state and society. Such views were among the reasons that Hu and Zhao ultimately were ousted by more conservative party elders.

A significant number of intellectuals and students in China (and, since 1989, a large number of those living or studying abroad) have called for major steps toward democratization in the Western sense, leading toward a multiparty system. However, they do not, at present, have either a strong political base within China or a well-defined program. It is not possible to identify any individuals among China’s top leaders—even among the most liberal reformers in the regime—who seem likely to support this kind of democratization in the near future. Even many reform-minded Chinese intellectuals now seem to fear that pressure for political change that is too rapid might result not in sustainable democratization, but rather in increased political instability, which could produce a reactionary backlash.

The spectrum of views among China’s elite suggests, therefore, that, politically, major progress toward multiparty democracy is unlikely in the near future. Trends are likely to be either toward a conservatism that seeks to maintain stability through political controls or toward a more liberalized form of authoritarianism that would loosen controls in order to repair relations between the state and society, thus more effectively mobilizing support for modernization. Although even the latter would not evoke great enthusiasm among advocates of genuine democracy, within China or abroad, for most ordinary Chinese, it would represent progress, nevertheless. The imminent generational change in leadership also seems likely to increase the possibility that the future trend will be toward some degree of liberalization. Actually, despite cycles of conservatism and liberalization in the years since the initiation of reforms in China in 1978, there had been significant, albeit gradual, movement toward a liberalized form of authoritarianism prior to June 1989. Despite the retrogression of the past two years, this trend seems likely to resume at some point following the leadership succession. Conceivably, liberalization could begin in a very cautious manner, even while the succession process is under way, although the immediate reaction of Chinese leaders to the consequences of glasnost in the Soviet Union is likely to argue for caution, and this could well delay liberalization in China.

An extremely reactionary trend cannot be totally excluded, especially if China were to suffer very serious economic and political crises that led to greatly increased instability. However, assuming that the Chinese leadership can prevent such problems from getting out of hand, this it not the most likely trend. In the long run, as China’s economy and society develop, there should be
movement toward genuine democratization, but probably only gradually, with political reform lagging substantially behind economic reform. Some Chinese leaders, and not a few intellectuals as well, regard the experiences of Taiwan and South Korea, in which democratizing trends gained strength only after a decade or two of major economic development and reform, to be very relevant to—and perhaps even models for—mainland China.

**Probable Trends in Policy**

Using the above economic and political categories to classify leaders who have held key positions in China since the start of the 1980s, one can see significant differences, many but not all of them generational. Deng Xiaoping has been a bold economic reformer, but a political conservative—although, on some occasions, he has endorsed moderate political reform. Chen Yun has been a cautious economic reformer and a political conservative. Among the younger leaders, former General Secretary Hu Yaobang was a moderate, economic reformer and a fairly bold (in Chinese terms) political liberal, while Zhao Ziyang, Hu’s successor as general secretary, was a bold economic reformer, who sometimes acted as a moderate political reformer and, at others, seemed inclined toward bolder political liberalism. However, Li Peng, the present premier, is similar to Chen Yun in that he has been a cautious economic reformer and a political conservative. The present general secretary, Jiang Zemin, is harder to classify; his public statements have generally been conservative, but many people doubt that these reveal his personal views, which some Chinese believe will eventually reflect his career as a technocratic minister and mayor and will prove to be those of a moderate economic and political reformer.

Obviously, it is not possible to predict with certainty the dominant policy trends at every point throughout the rolling succession process because these trends will depend on unpredictable leadership changes. However, it is plausible to believe that in the near future, the main trends could well be toward renewed, but probably only cautious or moderate, economic reform, combined with political conservatism, perhaps leavened with very limited political reforms carried out in a very cautious manner, with priority still given to the goal of achieving stability through control.

After the succession is complete or near-complete, however, it is extremely likely that there will be more far-reaching shifts affecting both the leadership and the regime’s policies. Although, in theory, these could move the regime in any of several directions, what seems probable is the emergence of a more reformist leadership that will try to accelerate economic reform and to move gradually toward further political liberalization. In some respects, such trends would represent a return to the kind of leadership and policies characteristic of the early and mid-1980s. In the 1990s, the leadership is likely to be pressured to carry reform much further. There are many reasons for this judgment, but several are particularly important.

**Pressures for Change**

One is the probability—in fact, virtual certainty—that there will be growing pressures from below, from within Chinese society, that will impel China’s leaders to carry reform further. The economic pressures will be especially strong, but pressures resulting from social and political changes
will also increase. China's economic situation at present is not by any means disastrous, as is that of the Soviet Union, but the problems the country faces are nevertheless very serious, and many of the most intractable ones cannot be solved without moving economic reform forward. This fact, moreover, appears to be recognized by a large percentage of Chinese leaders in the successor generation, at all levels. It is difficult to predict when the Chinese leadership—even if were to be led by bold reformers—would be able to face up to the most difficult steps necessary to implement thorough economic reform—including comprehensive price reform, which must be implemented if China is to move beyond the unstable halfway house of reform at which it now finds itself. It will depend, of course, on when the leadership can overcome its fears of the inevitable risks of such moves.

Comprehensive price reform will involve, at least for a transitional period, unavoidable increases in unemployment and inflationary pressures and probably a short-term decline in living standards. No Communist nation has yet completed this transition successfully, although Poland is now attempting to do so. The risks are clearly great. Nevertheless, China's problems will no doubt force the leadership to move in this direction, although even the most reform-minded leaders may delay doing so until they are convinced that the resulting problems will not lead to chaos and disintegration, such as can be seen in the Soviet Union today.

The pressures from below for some further political liberalization also are likely to increase. At present, a large percentage of China's intellectuals and educated youth are alienated and have bitter feelings about leaders such as Li Peng, for whom they blame the Tiananmen massacre. A sizable part of the general population, especially in urban areas, is cynical because of the perverseness of corruption, nepotism, and growing economic inequities. These attitudes have multiplied and exacerbated the problems of maintaining social stability and mobilizing active support for the regime's modernization efforts. These problems will result in growing pressures on the Chinese leadership to resume a process of political liberalization from below.

Many other pressures from below will be exerted by a variety of powerful forces working for change—forces that were first released in China during the initial decade of reforms. The full effects of trends that were initiated in the 1980s will take time to be felt, but they will have a profound impact on society, the economy, and the polity over time. Some of their effects have already begun to change the fundamental context of the situation in which Chinese political leaders must operate. Lack of space precludes discussing all of these new factors and forces, but a few of the important ones must at least be mentioned here.

Since the start of the 1980s, there has been a significant trend toward the pluralization of the society, beginning with an economic structural pluralization and broadening to include many different social, occupational, professional, and other groups. Such groups are only beginning to develop into interest groups with political significance, but they will, in time. There has also been an extraordinary revolution in communications, which had extended the reach of modern media, including television, throughout the country. In major cities, facsimile and photocopying machines now link many institutions with counterparts, not only within China but abroad. Even when the regime tries to maintain a fairly tight control of political content, as it has since
June 1989, new information and ideas continue to flow through the modern communications networks. The political impact of the media was powerful for a brief period before the 1989 crackdown, and it doubtless will be again. The rapid rise of living standards in the 1980s also fueled growing consumerism, and the revolution of rising expectations has become a powerful force in China, which no leaders will be able to ignore.

The force of traditional ideology has dissipated, and the Chinese population is increasingly open to new ideas. No longer able to rely on old ideological authority, the leadership now must try to achieve a new definition of national values and goals, which will doubtless have to be based on a mix of patriotism, traditional values, and a vision of modernity. What is likely to emerge eventually is a new version of the goal—first defined in the 19th century of achieving "wealth and power," combined with the goal defined early in the 20th century of promoting "science and democracy." The erosion of Marxist and Maoist ideology also means that the leadership’s future legitimacy will depend in large part on economic performance.

The increasing flow of ideas and influences from abroad and the web of institutional ties that has developed with foreign nations—an inevitable consequence of an open policy—now exert unrelenting pressures for changes of many kinds. The pressures that have been resisted by some Chinese leaders are unavoidable and will continue as long as China pursues its present economic strategy. There are also strong pressures, because of the new requirements of economic development and reform, to build China’s legal system. In the 1980s, China made progress in certain economic aspects of legalization, but relatively little in the field of civil rights. The leadership has not yet been compelled to end egregious human rights abuses or release all political prisoners; however, Beijing can no longer ignore the strong criticism it receives in this regard from both Chinese and foreigners. All of these factors are creating a new context in which the Chinese leaders must operate and are creating new pressures from below for further reform. Future leaders, whoever they are, will be compelled to take these new forces into account and respond to them.

A New Generation of Technocrats

Another reason the post-succession trend in China is likely to be toward greater reform is that, at almost all levels below the very top, there has already been a sweeping generational change, which has brought younger individuals into key leadership positions. These new leaders are very different from the generation that they have now largely replaced. From the mid-1980s on, with the support of Deng himself, the regime’s policy was to promote younger, better educated, and more professional people. Throughout the country—not just in central ministries, but also in local governments from the provinces down to and including the counties—key positions are now held by large numbers of leaders and bureaucrats, most of whom are in their fifties or even younger, who did not participate in the party’s revolutionary struggle for power, have little interest in ideology, and are essentially technocratic and pragmatic. The prime concern of these new leaders is economic development. Although, again, there is a range of views about specific reforms (they react to particular reforms in part on the basis of the way they think these reforms will effect
their own local and institutional interests), most can be expected to favor moving the economic reform process forward.

Their political predispositions are less clear, although most of them are likely to favor some liberalization because they recognize that it is necessary for successful modernization. Extremely few of the reformist technocrats who emerged in the 1980s (even those regarded as the most reform-minded), have been purged since June 1989. This is true even at the center. Apart from a very small number of Zhao Ziyang’s closest associates, most of the technocratic reformers who rose in the 1980s are still in place. This is also true of most reform-minded intellectuals in universities and research institutions (again, with the exception of a few most closely linked to Zhao). Many people in these categories have been quiet and passive since June 1989; however, in private, some are remarkably frank in their support for further reform and in their criticism of conservative leaders. Their views undoubtedly still influence some top members of the leadership and, if and when the balance at the top changes significantly, they will probably reemerge as a very important constituency pressing for further reform.

Once the party elders have entirely passed from the scene, and the effects of the generational change take hold, the balance is likely to shift, probably fairly soon, in a more reformist direction, leading toward some acceleration of economic reform and toward increased, although still cautious, movement toward political liberalization. So far, there have been remarkably few changes in the top leadership since the period immediately following the crisis of 1989. Priority has been given to avoiding signs of disunity. Recently, however, there have been some new appointments, which are harbingers of the likely direction of future change. Most notable of the recent appointments have been the elevation of Shanghai’s reform-minded mayor, Zhu Rongji, to a vice premiership, and the partial rehabilitation of Hu Qili, who was one of the top reformers in the party’s Standing Committee and was purged along with Zhao Ziyang. He has recently become a vice minister. At some point, a general reshuffling of the top leadership will almost certainly occur. Conceivably, this could begin in 1992, when the party will convene its next congress (the first since 1987). If the party congress makes major changes in the Central Committee and Politburo, the National People’s Congress can be expected thereafter to reshuffle the top government leadership. Whether or not this kind of reshuffle starts as soon as 1992, once the party elders are gone it is virtually certain that there will be far-reaching changes in the top leadership. When such changes occur, what kind of leaders are likely to be the winners? Making specific predictions about future leaders is even more hazardous than outlining likely general trends, but on the basis of what is now known, a number of guesses are plausible.

After Deng, Who?

If asked to specify the ideal qualifications for China’s next top leader, many Chinese would probably say that he (it will almost certainly be a man) should be an individual untainted by the Tiananmen massacre—identified with Deng’s commitment to economic reform and an open policy, acceptable to both the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the country’s most influential provincial leaders. He should be able to work effectively in a coalition including at least some people with different views, and
committed to maintaining political stability and unity although willing to move gradually toward political liberalization and reconciliation between state and society. No one on the horizon fully meets these qualifications. Because no individual will be able soon to assume the kind of leadership role that Deng has enjoyed, the leadership will have to be even more collective or coalitional than it has been in recent years.

Jiang Zemin may well continue as party general secretary at least in the immediate post-Deng period. Deng has strongly supported him as the "core" of the successor generation. Even though Jiang does not have a history of close relations with the military, he has—unlike both Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang—become, with Deng's support, the formal head of the Military Affairs Commission. Yang Shangkun, who is close to Deng (and who, together with his younger brother Yang Baibing, now supervises day-to-day military affairs), seems likely to support Jiang, mainly because he is Deng's choice. Essentially a pragmatic technocrat (he formerly headed the electronics ministry and then became mayor and subsequently party secretary of Shanghai), Jiang has important links with both those heading the central bureaucracies and with leaders working at the provincial level. Jiang will probably favor more active reform, especially economic reform. He has not yet built a strong political base of his own, however, and there is no certainty that he will be able to do so. Being designated successor certainly does not guarantee long-term political survival, as was highlighted by the fates of all those previously selected as successors by Deng as well as Mao. Jiang may or may not last long as general secretary. If he demonstrates that he can exercise effective leadership on his own, he could retain his position for some time, but many Chinese doubt he has the qualities necessary to stay at the top. If this proves to be the case, he could be a transitional figure, similar to Hua Guofeng, who succeeded Mao.

President Yang Shangkun clearly will be a transitional figure because of his age (he belongs to the group of octogenarians), but he could play a very important role for a short period as a kingmaker. If an intense power struggle were to split the leadership wide open, it is conceivable that Yang might assert primacy, but this does not seem likely. If it were to occur, it would probably not last long. It is more likely that Yang will back Jiang Zemin.

Premier Li Peng seems very unlikely to rise higher, or, in fact, to retain his present position for long. Although, in some respects, he may have temporarily strengthened his position to a degree since the Tiananmen crisis, his own base of support remains relatively weak, and he is dependent mainly on the support of Chen Yun and other party elders. Moreover, because he played such a prominent role in the Tiananmen crackdown, he is one of the most widely despised political figures in China. After the party elders who have supported him pass from the scene, he is likely to be pushed aside—or "promoted" to a position with less power (the chairmanship of the National People's Congress is rumored to be one possibility).

One cannot totally exclude the possibility of a comeback by Zhao Ziyang, who remains a leading symbol of reform for many people in China. (Deng himself, of course, was able to make two comebacks from political disgrace.) In early 1991, rumors circulated among Chinese intellectuals that Zhao might be rehabilitated. If he were to regain power, this would signal a dramatic shift in the leadership balance, and
Zhao probably would try to accelerate the reform process more than most other potential successors. However, Zhao's return to power does not seem probable, in part because of his age and in part because such a comeback would be extremely controversial, would evoke some strong opposition, and might impose severe strains on the leadership.

The identifiable pool of other men (there are no women in this group) who could play significant roles in the post-Deng leadership, and conceivably at some point could rise to the top, includes a number of persons currently in the leadership as well as some who have been excluded since 1989. Those in the pool who seem to be at or near the reformist or liberal end of the political spectrum appear to outnumber those who seem to share the conservatism and caution of most party elders. Individuals such as Li Ruihan, the former reformist mayor of Tianjin who is now a member of the party's Standing Committee; Zhu Rongji, who as noted earlier has recently moved from Shanghai to Beijing; and Ye Xuanping, the leader of reform in Guangdong who was recently given a second position at the national level in the People's Political Consultative Council, are all strongly identified with reform, and all clearly have a potential for rising to (or near) the top. So, too, does Qiao Shi, who, despite his present position as security chief, is regarded by some Chinese as a potential reformer, perhaps of the Yuri Andropov type. (There were reports in 1989 that Qiao was seriously considered for the position of general secretary at that time, but was not chosen because he opposed the use of force in the Tiananmen crisis.) Others in this category who, although less likely candidates for positions at the very top, nevertheless might rise higher, include men such as Hu Qili (recently rehabilitated, as noted earlier), Tian Jiyun, and Wang Zhaoqiao.

Those belonging to the pool of potentially important post-Deng leaders who are viewed by the Chinese as clearly being, like Li Peng, conservatives—and protégés of party elders such as Chen Yun—appear to be less numerous and also older and therefore less likely to rise to the very top. The most notable men in this category have been Standing Committee members Yao Yilin and Song Ping; few people have regarded them as serious candidates for the top leadership position, however.

It is very possible, of course, that during the succession process some little-known leaders—real darkhorses—will emerge. Some observers would argue that this is likely. One cannot be confident, therefore, about predictions concerning specific individuals. However, the chances seem better that even that, whatever the fate of specific individuals, the general trends will favor the emergence of reform-minded individuals, either technocrats or strong provincial leaders.

At this point, in short, there cannot be any certainty about the outcome of the succession. Many variables will affect the degree to which China encounters severe crises or enjoys relative stability in the period ahead, which obviously will have an influence on the kinds of leaders to emerge and the course they will follow. Several of these variables will be especially important factors shaping future trends.

The Role of the Army

One is the role of the People's Liberation Army. There is no question that the PLA will play a major role—in the background, if not the foreground—throughout the succession period. The PLA began as a highly
politcized revolutionary army, but over time, with ups and downs in the process, it gradually moved toward becoming a professional national defense force, less directly involved in civilian politics. This trend was reinforced in the 1980s by changes in the officers corps; in the PLA, as in the civilian bureaucracies, there was a sweeping generational change that promoted younger, more professional, less ideological men. However, in times of crises the PLA has repeatedly been drawn back, sometimes reluctantly, into the political arena. This happened, for example, during the Cultural Revolution and at the time of Mao’s death. It happened again in 1989.

There are reasons to believe, however, that many of the PLA’s present leaders feel that it is not in their interest to become too deeply or directly involved in civilian politics or to be used to enforce public order among civilians. Some retired senior officers actively opposed the use of the army against civilians in 1989, and many in the PLA were dismayed by the consequences of the massacre. However, if a future crisis were to involve a major split in the leadership, the PLA would probably be drawn into the struggle, and the way they used their power would greatly influence the outcome. If there were again to be mass urban demonstrations with which public security and people’s armed police could not cope, the PLA might well feel compelled, reluctantly, to help restore order, although it would doubtless try to do so with nonlethal means.

Even though command of the PLA seems to be effective at present, the military establishment is by no means entirely monolithic, and if it were to split in support of competing leaders at the center, or if some units were to support local leaders against the center, the outcome could be extremely dangerous and damaging to the country. This does not seem likely, however, in light of what is known about the PLA. It still appears to be a well-disciplined organization, under effective centralized control, led by officers who are intensely patriotic and who wish to see a stable, unified China that can make rapid progress toward overall modernization—including modernization of the armed forces.

The impulse of most PLA leaders is likely to be to use the power of the armed forces to try to help preserve order and stability (although if a coup of some sort appeared to be imminent, it might support a countercoup). However, this does not mean that it is likely to support reactionary or even conservative forces; on the contrary, many PLA leaders favor further reform to accelerate China’s modernization because it is necessary for the PLA itself to modernize. Military leaders will probably, therefore, use their influence—in the background rather than the foreground, to the extent possible—to support civilian leaders who they believe can lead the country more rapidly and effectively toward becoming a more developed, modern country and who will provide the PLA with strong financial and other support. No civilian leader is likely to be able to rise to the top, or stay at the top, of the party or government without the military’s support, or at least its acquiescence. In the immediate post-Deng period, the PLA’s leadership seems likely to back Deng’s chosen successor, Jiang Zemin, unless they were to conclude that he was incapable of being an effective leader.

A Key Variable: The Economy

Another key variable will be the state of the economy—and the direction of economic trends. Of the many causes of the 1989 crisis in China, the increasing rate of inflation, which had very destabilizing effects on
society, was one of the most important. Inflation can create social unrest and instability in any country, but it may be particularly destabilizing in China because of the national memory of hyperinflation in the 1940s and because the Chinese became accustomed to stable prices during the Maoist era. The opposite side of the coin is that recession and declining living standards can also be very destabilizing, especially in a situation in which popular expectations are rising, as they have been in China during the period of Deng’s reforms.

During Deng’s reforms, the rapid gross national product (GNP) growth rate, which averaged close to 10 percent a year during most of the 1980s, increased average incomes two to three times. The austerity program adopted in 1988, which was designed to reduce inflation, cut the growth rate to a low level, and the resulting drop in many urban residents’ living standards caused increased dissatisfaction, especially in urban areas, for a period of time. China’s GNP is now rising again, however, and this should lead again to an improvement in living standards, which will contribute to stability. But if China were to experience an economic recession or depression of major proportions—such as that now engulfing the Soviet Union—the social and political, as well as economic, consequences could be disastrous, and avoiding this is high on the list of most Chinese leaders of all political persuasions.

Since the start of reforms in the late 1970s, China has experienced repetitive cycles of boom and bust. Periods of excessive investment and excessive expansion of the supply of money and credit have produced growth that was too rapid, sizable budget deficits, and general overheating—followed by periods of retrenchment, cuts in investments, a contraction in the supply of money and credit, and recessionary trends. Beijing urgently needs to develop more effective monetary and fiscal mechanisms to prevent such wide swings in economic performance. It has made some progress in this respect, but not nearly enough. Chinese leaders have demonstrated that they have the ability in recessionary periods to pump up the economy and stimulate growth by loosening controls and infusing money and credit into the economy. They have also demonstrated that in inflationary periods they can tighten controls, slow investment and growth, and reduce or halt the rise of prices. But in so doing they have taken the country on a roller coaster ride that has alarmed many people. Until the government is more skillful in fine-tuning its policies, there will continue to be destabilizing cycles that will be harmful to the process of long-term development. Nevertheless, Beijing probably will be able to avoid both runaway inflation and prolonged recession, the two possibilities that would have the most destabilizing social and political effects; either inflation or recession, if severe, could create crises that might lead to fairly drastic and unpredictable changes in leadership and policies.

A third important variable will be the relationship between Beijing and the provinces and the balance between centralization and decentralization. In the past few years, there has been a major shift of economic power from the center to the provinces. This has been partly the result of deliberate decentralization and a delegation of decision-making authority to local levels to spur economic growth and reform, but it has been partly the result of an unintended weakening of central authority. The principal local beneficiaries have been the coastal provinces—especially Guangdong but also those in the Yangzi Valley and some other coastal areas. Most interior areas have
acquired far less power, and those in China's far west have remained basically dependent on central government subsidies. This redistribution of power has resulted in many new tensions, especially between Beijing, which has encountered increasing difficulty in obtaining the revenue it needs to build the national infrastructure and carry out overall national policies, and the coastal areas, which have wanted to expand their own resources, pursue their own policies, and accelerate local growth.

The emergence of anything resembling old-style "warlordism" is unlikely, unless there were to be major splits in the central leadership, paralleled by splits in the military—developments which do not seem probable. There will probably even be limits to the degree to which a new kind of "economic warlordism" emerges. The central authorities still have very substantial power to determine basic policies, allocate resources, and appoint and remove local leaders. Provincial leaders, moreover, still think in national, as well as local, terms and recognize that the state of the country's entire economy is important to their own success. Nevertheless, managing the tensions between Beijing and the provinces, and achieving a reasonable balance between centralization and decentralization, will present the leadership with major problems. Broadly speaking, pressures from the provinces are likely to push Beijing toward further reform because leaders in key areas such as Guangdong and Shanghai will continue to push for more reform, and their leverage on Beijing is considerable. It is also likely that, in the future as in the past, some provincial leaders—probably those who favor more rapid reform—will rise to central leadership, and they may possibly even reach the very top (as did Jiang Zemin).

State and Society

Still another important variable will be the general level of popular dissatisfaction and social unrest, which will both reflect and shape the basic relationship between the state and society. There is no doubt that, at present, the widespread disillusion, dissatisfaction, and criticism of the country's present leadership—especially those held responsible for the Tiananmen massacre—pose major problems for the government in Beijing. Moreover, as noted earlier, faith in Marxist or Maoist ideology has nearly evaporated, and faith in the Communist Party has been gravely weakened. The reasons are numerous, and they date back many years, to the failure of the Great Leap Forward and the disasters of the Cultural Revolution. In the recent past, despite the obvious benefits resulting from reform, disillusionment has grown because of the reform's side effects. The reforms have brought not only increased living standards, but also, as noted earlier, inflation, growth in corruption (often linked with nepotism), and increasing inequities among individuals, groups, and regions. The resulting dissatisfaction was, more than anything else, the motivation for those who participated in the mass urban demonstrations in support of students in 1989.

Relations between the top political leaders and intellectuals pose special problems, as they always have in China. Since the start of Deng's reforms, there have been several periods during which important groups of intellectuals and students have pressed for greater democratization. This will probably happen again. To date, however, no well-organized, coherent movement with a significant social base has developed. It may, in time, but probably not soon. Nor have dissident intellectuals been able to tap the dissatisfaction among the general populace to
create an organized opposition to the regime. If there are seeds of an underground organization in China—conceivably there may be, even though they are not publicly visible—certainly no groups have yet appeared that could soon pose a major threat to the Communist Party, nor have they provided, so far, any credible alternative national program. If popular dissatisfaction intensifies in the period ahead, it is probable, at least in the immediate future, that it will be expressed mainly in passive resistance to authority, or in outbursts on the streets. Development of any well-organized opposition would, at best, take a long time, and it is not likely to occur unless there is a serious and prolonged national crisis in which economic and social conditions deteriorate much further than they have so far. Although this is possible, it is not the most likely prospect in the period immediately ahead.

Nevertheless, the existing level of dissatisfaction, and tension between the state (i.e., the party, as well as the government) and society already poses and will continue to pose serious challenges to China’s leaders. The regime could probably, by maintaining repressive controls, prevent dissatisfaction from developing into effective opposition for a considerable period of time, but at a great price. If, in the period ahead, Chinese leaders have to deal constantly with alienated intellectuals and youth and with a passive or sullen general population, much of what they hope to achieve in developing and modernizing China will be difficult, or even impossible. The gap between the leaders and the people of China will continue to exert pressure on China’s leadership both to carry out reformist economic policies that benefit the general population—by raising living standards, controlling inflation, and dealing more effectively with corruption and inequities—and to proceed with at least cautious political liberalization, to try to defuse dissatisfaction among intellectuals and students, and strengthen the leadership’s claims of legitimacy. In sum, although there are likely to be competing pressures—some arguing for strong controls to prevent instability and chaos and others arguing for a process of reconciliation between the leadership and the population—those arguing for conciliation should become stronger when the balance in the leadership shifts in favor of younger reformist leaders.

Influences from Abroad

Finally, another extremely important variable affecting China’s course will be, in the future as in the past, its foreign relations and influences from abroad. When China embarked on its domestic reforms, it also changed its foreign policies in far-reaching ways. The most important changes came with the adoption of a new "open policy" in 1978. Almost as important, however, was the adoption in 1981-1982 of a new "independent" policy calling for the avoidance of close strategic alignment with any foreign power.

Adoption of the open policy was based on a recognition by Deng and others that China was lagging economically far behind not only the major industrial nations, but also many of its smaller neighbors. Abandoning the autarchic, isolationist policies pursued during much of the Maoist period, Deng proclaimed that, to accelerate its development, China would have to look outward, become a full member of the international economy and community, and rapidly expand its imports of capital, technology, goods, and general knowledge. The results have been remarkable. China’s
foreign trade, borrowing abroad, and foreign investment in China all have grown at a much more rapid pace than the outside world thought possible. China's current development strategy is now inextricably linked to the new foreign economic ties that it has developed. Trade has grown faster than GNP, and as a percentage of GNP, it has risen steadily. China's coastal provinces in particular have gone far toward integration into the Asian-Pacific trading system and the world economy.

Developing these economic ties has not been easy, either for foreign business executives dealing with the Chinese or for the Chinese themselves. Beijing has been compelled to develop new laws, adjust its bureaucracies, and modify its economic system in many ways to accommodate the requirements of the international system. As China's interdependence with the world economy has increased, so too has its vulnerability to trends abroad. Moreover, the flow of information and ideas from abroad has had a large and growing impact on Chinese society, often in ways that have dismayed some Chinese leaders. Many of the results have been very controversial and, in some respects, destabilizing.

The Chinese have by no means resolved the issue of the type of basic relationship they wish to have with the outside world—an issue with which the country's leaders have wrestled throughout the modern period. Conservatives have continued to warn about the dangers posed by foreign ideas, and they have periodically mounted campaigns against "bourgeois liberalization" and "spiritual pollution" and have accused foreigners of trying to subvert socialism through a strategy encouraging "peaceful evolution." However, Deng and the majority of leaders have not wavered in their commitment to the open policy. This is not likely to change in any fundamental way in the post-Deng period, certainly not under reformist, liberal leaders and probably not even under relatively cautious, conservative leaders. To abandon the open policy, the leadership would have to devise an entirely new strategy for developing the country, and no important leaders have offered any credible alternative. Any attempt to turn inward again, moreover, would probably result in an economic decline that would generate new pressures to turn outward. The prospect, therefore, is for the continued integration of China into the world economy in the post-Deng period and continuing—and probably growing—external influences that will pressure Chinese leaders to move forward with reform.

The adoption of an independent foreign policy was based primarily on the Chinese leadership's perception that changes in global geopolitics had reduced the danger of external strategic threats to China. However, it, too, was motivated partly by economic considerations. During the Maoist period, Chinese foreign policy had been dominated by security concerns, and it was also strongly influenced by ideology. In the early 1980s, Beijing, although by no means ignoring security issues, decided that it could and should give priority to its economic interests and adopt a non-ideological, flexible, and pragmatic foreign policy designed, above all, to promote its domestic and foreign economic interests. Pursuing the goal of creating a "peaceful international environment" that would assist its development, China since then has attempted to improve and expand its relations, especially its economic ties, with virtually all nations (except, until recently, Vietnam), while at the same time trying to ensure that the geopolitical balance would protect China's security.
As a result, China's most important foreign ties are now with the major non-Communist industrial nations. Beijing has viewed relations with Washington as particularly important, in part because it believes the United States could be of great importance to China economically and in part because it has seen it as a nonthreatening power that plays a crucial role in the East Asian and global strategic balance. Sino-American relations have been severely strained since 1989, principally because of the U.S. reaction to the Tiananmen massacre and concern for human rights issues, which led Washington to impose sanctions on China, but also because of growing economic friction and differences about arms sales. Repair of the relationship will clearly take time, and it will depend in part on the adoption by China of less repressive policies at home and in part on the evolution of U.S. attitudes toward China. Despite intense Chinese resentment about U.S. pressures on human rights issues, however, there has been no sign to date that Beijing has considered reversing it basic policy toward Washington.

China's relations, especially its economic relations, with Japan have been steadily strengthened in recent years. Politically, however, the relationship remains extremely complex. The Chinese, remembering past conflicts, continue to be uneasy about the prospect that Japan could become overwhelmingly dominant, economically, and might also emerge once again as a major military power. Therefore, Beijing is very ambivalent about the relationship. Nevertheless, because, among the major powers, Japan is now China's largest trading partner and its most important source of credit, the relationship will continue to be vital to China's economic development, and Beijing is unlikely, therefore, under foreseeable circumstances, to reverse its policy toward Tokyo. (China's relations with nations in the European Community are comparable in some respects to those it has with the United States and Japan, although they are less extensive, or important, and also involve fewer problems.) Economically, the so-called newly industrializing economies around China—South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore—have become steadily more important to China. This is particularly true of Hong Kong, whose trade and investment ties, especially with south China, are now of vital importance to both—and which, in 1997, will return to China. Taiwan is also a special case, because Beijing's goal is reunification, and both economic relations and unofficial contacts between the mainland and Taiwan have been growing rapidly. Although China has important relations with a number of developing Third World nations and continues in its official statements to stress its identification with the Third World generally, in reality, its ties with these nations vary greatly and are of only secondary importance to Beijing's interests.

China's relations with the Communist countries of Europe have changed constantly in recent years; China does not now have especially intimate ties with any of them, but its policy is to maintain normal relations with all of them. The interactions between China and these countries have been complex and Beijing is now either uneasy or ambivalent about the rapid transformations taking place within them. When Beijing started its reforms, it looked to Hungary and Yugoslavia for ideas, but soon its economic reforms moved far ahead of those in any European Communist nation and influence flowed the other way, especially to the Soviet Union. However, the collapse of
Communism first in Eastern Europe and then in the Soviet Union and the chaos accompanying disintegration in the USSR have clearly alarmed the Chinese leadership. These developments appear to have reinforced Beijing’s leaders in their belief that, in contrast to Eastern Europe and the USSR, China should continue to give priority to economic reform and exercise great caution in considering political reform.

China’s most important relationship with any of these countries is, of course, with the Soviet Union. From the late 1950s to the early 1980s, Beijing was obsessed with the potential security threat from Moscow. Although the Chinese have not totally rejected the idea that the Soviet Union might again pose a threat in the future, this is no longer their major preoccupation. Since 1982, Sino-Soviet economic and other ties have steadily expanded and improved. However, Beijing now has a new concern, that the rapid political change and trends toward disintegration in the Soviet Union could have destabilizing spillover effects in China. Its aim, therefore, is to limit the impact on China, to the extent it can, of trends in the Soviet Union, but at the same time to maintain “normal relations.”

One cannot exclude the possibility that unexpected developments could lead to significant changes in Chinese foreign policy in the post-Deng period, but, at present, it appears that there probably will be more continuity than change. China’s economic development almost certainly will continue to preoccupy Beijing’s future leaders, and, if major new security threats do not appear (none is on the immediate horizon now), economic interests seem likely to continue to dominate foreign policy, and this should impel China to continue moving in directions already defined.

The impact of China’s foreign relations on domestic trends in China is likely to be mixed. Anxiety about both developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and undesired influences from the West could well reinforce the views of those favoring some kind of political conservatism in China. However, China’s increasing economic ties with, and the powerful influences emanating from, both the major industrial nations and its East Asian neighbors, as well as the need to adjust China’s policies to accommodate the requirements of the world economic system, will continue to push Beijing in the direction of further economic reform and cautious political liberalization. In the immediate future, China’s leaders may try to hunker down and fend off the “spiritual pollution” from either East or West, but, in the long run, the pressures to proceed with reform will probably be more compelling.

The Future

To return to the original question, will China follow the path of the Soviet Union? The answer is: probably not. Will it, then, become the last bastion of conservative Communism? The answer, again, is: very probably not. The winds of change are having profound effects on China, pushing the regime to reform, but Communism in China is not on the verge of collapse. The process of reform, which began to transform China in the late 1970s, has suffered a serious setback since 1989, but it is bound to move ahead again in the future, after younger leaders assume the reins of leadership, if not before. If conservative Chinese leaders were to try to move the clock back by fundamentally reversing the reform process, they might provoke a hurricane comparable to that now sweeping the Soviet Union. This is unlikely, however.
What is more likely is that China will continue groping along the rocky road to reform, zigging and zagging as it goes.

Along the way China will continue to undergo profound changes, but at its own pace and in its own distinctive way.
About the Author

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The Johns Hopkins Foreign Policy Institute (FPI) was established in 1980 as an integral part of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C., to unite the worlds of scholarship and public affairs in the search for realistic answers to contemporary problems facing the United States. The FPI is a meeting place for SAIS faculty members and students, as well as for government analysts, policymakers, diplomats, journalists, business leaders, and other specialists in international affairs.

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