

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Chinese Politics and Comparative Authoritarianism: Institutionalization and Adaptation for Regime Resilience

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## ABSTRACT

China's authoritarian regime under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains resilient and responsive to domestic and international threats to its survival, especially considering the inherent instability of other authoritarian regimes. What strategies allow the CCP to stay in power? How do institutions help the CCP to sustain one-party rule, if at all? How does the regime maintain centralized rule over its vast population and territory? Finally, how does the regime respond to the people's demands and dissatisfactions? This review essay discusses how the growing literature of comparative authoritarianism helps (or does not help) us to answer these questions. It discusses three books—one on comparative authoritarianism and two on Chinese politics. In *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse*, the authors (i.e., Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz) test various hypotheses exploring the issues regarding the central political processes that shape the policy choices of authoritarian regimes, such as seizing power, consolidation of elites, information gathering, and how dictatorships break down. Are their findings consistent or contradictory with observation of Chinese authoritarian politics? To answer this question, we draw empirical evidence from Bruce Dickson's *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* and Min Ye's *The Belt Road and Beyond: State Mobilized Globalization in China, 1998–2018*. These books suggest why China's authoritarian regime remains resilient.

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Chinese Politics and Comparative Authoritarianism: Institutionalization and Adaptation for Regime Resilience

Bruce J. Dickson. *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 352 pages, paperback, \$25.43.

Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 257 pages, paperback, \$29.99.

Min Ye, *The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China, 1998–2018* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 252 pages, hardcover, \$99.99.

With the expansion of China's sphere of influence, more and more countries are turning to the "Beijing model" of authoritarian rule, which is what Martin Walker defined as a model of "state ownership, state-led industrial strategy, currency controls, and authoritarian politics" in the Fall 2007 issue of *The Wilson Quarterly*.<sup>1</sup> This "no strings attached, no judgment, no intervention" tradeoff with China has proved surprisingly appealing even to relatively new democratic countries such as Hungary, the Philippines, and Turkey. This shift is unexpected considering the comparative stability of democratic systems versus the inherent instability of authoritarian regimes. Andrew Nathan once noted that "weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, over-centralization

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Walker, "Globalization 3.0," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Fall 2007, <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/fall-2007-overdrive-competition-in-american-life/globalization-30/>.

of decision making, and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms” would all make authoritarian systems volatile and vulnerable.<sup>2</sup> Despite these attributes, China’s authoritarian regime remains resilient. What strategies allow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to stay in power? How do institutions help the CCP to sustain one-party rule, if at all? How does the regime maintain centralized rule over its vast population and territory? Finally, how does the regime respond to the people’s demands and dissatisfactions? This review essay discusses how the growing literature of comparative authoritarianism helps (or does not help) us to answer these questions.

We discuss three books—one on comparative authoritarianism and two on Chinese politics. In *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse*, the authors (i.e., Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz) test various hypotheses exploring what are the most prevalent political processes that shape authoritarian regimes and how these decisions impact the regime’s resilience. They examine how authoritarian leaders concentrate great power in their own hands at the expense of other members of the regime’s elite. As a result, authoritarian leaders who can monopolize decision making in their countries cause much of the erratic, warlike behavior that disturbs the rest of the world. Are their findings consistent or contradictory with observation of China’s authoritarian regime, which seems far more effective, efficient, and resilient than most other authoritarian regimes? By exploring empirical evidence drawn from Bruce Dickson’s *The Dictator’s Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party’s Strategy for Survival* and Min Ye’s *The Belt Road and Beyond: State Mobilized Globalization in China, 1998–2018*, we argue that China’s authoritarian regime remains resilient for two reasons.<sup>3</sup> First, it has established patron-client

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Nathan, “China’s Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy*, 14, no. 1 (January 2003), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Dickson’s *The Dictator’s Dilemma* examines domestic sources for regime resilience through legitimacy of one-party rule, co-optation of societal groups, and repression of the people. Ye’s

networks in a party-based dictatorship by institutionalizing one-party rule and making effective governance systems that manage the central-local governmental relationship to provide public goods. This strategy is not uncommon in many authoritarian regimes, but it is not always successful in implementation.<sup>4</sup> Second, the CCP is quick to adapt to internal and external factors that may strengthen or threaten its power. These adaptation strategies are taken as response to the world trend of economic globalization and technological advancements.<sup>5</sup>

### **China as a Party Dictatorship**

In their comparative large-N study of authoritarian regimes, Geddes, et al. find that a party-based dictatorship tends to be more resilient than a military or personalist dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> They show that the “regimes led by a political party that was organized either to lead an insurgency or to participate in elections before the authoritarian seizure of power” (p. 188) *ceteris paribus* tend to be more durable than the regimes without such a party organization, and that “economic crises

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*The Belt Road and Beyond* explores China’s international investment but demonstrates how foreign policy is made “inside out” to serve for the regime’s principal goal of maintaining one-party rule.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Lisa Blaydes shows that Hosni Mubarak’s regime in Egypt manipulated the distribution of public goods to keep winning authoritarian elections. Moreover, Beatriz Magaloni suggests that Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party used fiscal transfer to subnational governments as a means to maintain one-party rule. However, these strategies eventually failed to work and led to the demise of authoritarian rule. See Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak’s Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> On economic globalization and technological advancements, see Richard Baldwin, *The Great Convergence: Information Technology and the New Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Richard Baldwin, *The Globotics Upheaval: Globalization, Robotics, and the Future of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Erica Frantz finds that party-based dictatorships last an average of 26 years, compared to 11 years for personalist dictatorships and seven years for military dictatorships. See Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 127–8.

are less likely to destabilize dictatorships led by parties that have developed extensive patron-client networks” (p. 190). This finding is consistent with observation of Chinese authoritarian politics. During the Maoist period, China’s authoritarian regime relied on Mao Zedong’s personal charisma and the military’s support. Following the Cultural Revolution when Mao had brought the regime to the verge of collapse, Deng Xiaoping initiated the post-Mao reform focusing on the institutionalization of one-party rule to turn China away from a personalist dictatorship toward a party-based one.<sup>7</sup>

Being a party-based dictatorship rather than a military or personalist dictatorship provides China with a significant source of strength. The CCP’s monopolistic authority over legislation, implementation, and enforcement of the policies has reinforced its legitimacy, especially over the military, which has helped the party to avoid insider coups or overthrows. As Geddes, et al. show, historically, the most common form (i.e., 45 percent) of autocratic seizures of power is an insider coup in which the few opposition officers from inside the regime overthrow the regime (p. 28). Fifty percent of these seizure groups are military ones, and forty percent are party-based groups (p. 31). Thus, it is important for the ruling party to secure its advantageous position over military and other elite groups in the party. In other words, party-based dictatorships are more resilient because they are more able to contain the military or other elite groups and prevent them from gaining too much control.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On Deng’s decision-making process to initiate the post-Mao reform, see Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Walder’s recent finding shows that during the Cultural Revolution local cadres seized power from their superiors, a mishandled military intervention intensified a chain reaction of violence, and as a result China’s authoritarian regime came close to collapse. See Andrew G. Walder, *Agents of Disorder: Inside China’s Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

In China, the military, called the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has been an *extension* of the party itself, alleviating the threat that a conventional military may pose toward the ruling party. However, the modernization of military power since the 1980s has made the CCP engage in the "statization" (*guojiahua*) of the PLA, which should transform the PLA from the party's military to the state's military. Interestingly, to maintain the CCP's control over the PLA while advancing the statization of the PLA, the CCP has adopted the cooptation strategy by creating shared interests with the PLA.<sup>9</sup> This strategy is consistent with the finding by Geddes, et al. that "economic crises are less likely to destabilize dictatorships led by parties that have developed extensive patron-client networks" (p. 190). Despite the threat of overthrow in any regime, party dictatorships are the least likely to be overthrown by internal or external threats thanks to the militaries that have been coopted by the parties with extensive patron-client networks (pp. 123–5).

Moreover, it is easier to ensure loyalty to an established party such as the CCP rather than a single person or even group in the military. To ensure the necessary loyalty of their officials, parties "limit government jobs and official posts to party members" (p. 133), hoping that this dependence on the ruling party will create shared interests between the party and its officials to prevent non-compliance with central government actions. In fact, when the Tiananmen democratization movement in 1989 had reminded Deng that a market economy would lead to increasing popular demands for democratization, the new President Jiang Zemin employed the cooptation strategy, encouraging former officials and former state-owned enterprise (SOE) managers to start businesses by using their political connections, and this strategy prevented the

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<sup>9</sup> On the statization of the PLA, see Andrew Scobell, "China's Evolving Civil-Military Relations: Creeping Guojiahua, in Nan Li, ed., *Chinese Civil-Military Relations: The Transformation of the People's Liberation Army* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 25–39. On the creation of shared interests, see Nan Li, "Chinese Civil-Military Relations in the Post-Deng Era: Implications for Crisis Management and Naval Modernization," *China Maritime Studies*, No. 4 (2010), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-red-books/6/>.

market economy from threatening China's one-party rule.<sup>10</sup> In short, the cooptation by an institutionalized party strengthens regime resilience internally.

Still, the CCP must maintain strong relations and consistent rewards or incentives for *all* CCP members, including the PLA, to avoid being overthrown. Geddes, et al. suggest that there are many reasons why the inner circle may defect, even in an established party such as the CCP. For example, the potential defectors may defect if they are excluded from the inner circle or do not receive hoped-for posts (and will likely not receive them in the future). Moreover, they may defect if joining an opposition group outweighs future benefits of loyalty to the current ruling group. The CCP has solved these problems by becoming the party that distributes rents to various societal groups. Consequently, since the 1990s the major source of economic growth in China has shifted from rural entrepreneurship to state capitalism, even though there has been continuous growth of private capitalism in urban areas.<sup>11</sup>

The CCP has ensured benefits through the cooptation strategy based on the SOE system, so that it will be significantly more rewarding to stay within the vested interests of the collusive rent-seeking scheme that thrives under state capitalism. Those who benefit from the system do not want to see the SOE reform that would diminish the benefit of the revolving door built between the CCP and SOEs.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, those who have strong patron-client ties to the CCP bureaucrats do not demand democratization but support the current one-party rule.<sup>13</sup> Since the

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<sup>10</sup> Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson, *Allies of the State: China's Private Entrepreneurs and Democratic Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism Without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Chen and Dickson, *Allies of the State*.

<sup>13</sup> Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-Society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

1990s the CCP has used the state capitalist system as a means to maintain elite and popular support for one-party rule by distributing economic rents. The struggle for power over distributing these economic rents became especially severe after Deng's death in 1997, when China lost its last charismatic leader who participated in the Communist Revolution. Such a severe intra-party struggle for power over distributing rents among the collective leadership was a necessary consequence of maintaining one-party rule while advancing a market-oriented economy. In fact, Geddes, et al. show that paying party members, distributing resources, and providing benefits create "widespread vested interests in the party's persistence" (p. 135). Citizens prefer receiving benefits provided by the party, and elites prefer to stay on the inside rather than losing the vested interests rooted in one-party rule.

Another potential cause of defection is that events lead members of the party to believe that the regime may fall. This cause disproportionately hurts personalist dictatorships, in which members' targeting the leader for their blame and dissatisfaction is more likely to cause the regime to topple as a whole. Geddes, et al. find that regime breakdown is less likely during the lifetimes of dictators with concentrated power but more likely after their death or ousting which undermines regime longevity (chapter 8). Contrary to personalist dictatorships, party-based dictatorships are less likely to be destabilized by economic crisis and more likely to manage succession without regime collapse (pp. 190–206). Thus, they are less likely to inspire beliefs of regime failure, and hence the regime is more likely to survive beyond the death or removal of the dictator. This observation is supported by cases of the demises of aged dictators such as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya during the Arab Spring of 2011. In both cases, the overthrow of the personalist dictator ushered the regime's collapse. Despite their oppressive



regimes that had tightly gripped control over its people for many decades, the personalized dictatorships failed to survive beyond the dictator's life span.

China seems to have perfected the institutionalization of the political system required to maintain its authoritarian regime. According to Geddes, et al., party institutions would make it easier to organize “policy implementation, monitoring both officials and society, and information gathering as well as the organization of winning votes and other displays of support that deter overt opposition” (p. 132) from civilians, military leaders, and inner-party officials. Through institutionalized, organized, peaceful transfers of power, the CCP is guaranteed to outlast any single leader. However, President Xi Jinping's recent move of lifting term limits for president and vice president could make Xi stronger at the expense of the party and turn China away from a party-based dictatorship toward a personalist one. Mary Gallagher wrote in her *New York Times* op-ed: “Mr. Xi's indefinite term threatens the return to one-man rule, at the cost of one-party rule.”<sup>14</sup> Geddes, et al. find that “personalization of party-based rule decreases its durability” because of “the difficulty of maintaining personalized rule after the death of the individual who has concentrated vast powers in his own hands even in party-based regimes” (p. 198). Institutionalization of one-party rule is wisdom to sustain the authoritarian regime beyond the dictator's life span. Now that Xi has lifted his term limit, China's authoritarian regime may experience an erosion of the institutional framework that has made it resilient.

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Gallagher, “Does a Stronger Xi Mean a Weaker Chinese Communist Party?” *New York Times*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/opinion/xi-jinping-china.html>.

## The Chinese Communist Party as a Provider of Public Goods

Many political economists argue that simply relying on the repressive apparatus to collect taxes is inefficient.<sup>15</sup> Thus, rulers must “provide reassurance that they will deliver...promised goods and services.”<sup>16</sup> Economic development may function as such reassurance while also preventing demands for democratization. That is why even authoritarian rulers have an incentive to provide public goods and develop the economy, so that they can collect taxes more efficiently and secure the capacity to keep providing public goods. Moreover, if rulers cannot provide reassurance on the basis of economic development, they need some mechanism involving democratic institutions to compensate for the lack of reassurance. In short, authoritarian rulers’ professed desire to maintain the regime would give them a certain incentive to provide public goods to ordinary people.

The CCP has at least some incentive to provide “public benefits like essential infrastructure, education, and health care...to ensure that labor is productive enough to pay taxes to line the pockets of rulers and their essential supporters.”<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, public goods were undersupplied during the Maoist period, and the Chinese government has been a good public goods provider only for the recent four decades since Deng turned China from Mao’s personalist dictatorship toward a party-based one. To explain why the CCP has become a provider of public goods, we should note that China’s authoritarian regime has provided public goods as the CCP’s survival strategy, not for benevolence to people. Dickson (chapter 4) suggests that during the Jiang administration in the 1990s policy priorities shifted to improving incomes and living standards. Dramatic growth in

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Margaret Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue*, p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator’s Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), p. 107.

public goods spending resulted due to these shifting priorities. Then, during the Hu Jintao administration in the 2000s, the CCP began to emphasize the importance of narrowing the gap between the rich and poor with the slogan of “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*), making the distribution of public goods and general welfare a pillar of the regime’s legitimacy. This prioritization of the provision of public goods continued during the Xi administration. Xi, upon becoming general secretary in 2012, stated that the Chinese people should “expect better education, more stable work, more satisfying incomes, more reliable social insurance, a higher standard of health services, more comfortable homes, a more beautiful environment” (Dickson, p. 207).<sup>18</sup>

In short, China’s authoritarian regime has an incentive to provide public goods for industrialization and tax collection. However, it is impossible to satisfy everyone’s interest, and hence it still faces issues with unequal distribution of said resources depending on local conditions. Under the given conditions, the CCP has used patron-client relationships between businesses and bureaucrats in various departments of municipal governments that manage SOEs.<sup>19</sup> By competing in offering businesses government funding and tax breaks, local bureaucrats have been able to attain political achievements under a personnel management mechanism called the cadre evaluation system and hence consolidate patron-client relationships with businesses.<sup>20</sup> As a result,

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<sup>18</sup> Dickson’s book, published in 2016, does not cover most of the Xi administration’s period. However, the findings in his most recent book shows that his argument that the resilience of China’s one-party rule rests on its provision of public goods still holds during the Xi administration. See Bruce J. Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Ling Chen, *Manipulating Globalization: The Influence of Bureaucrats on Business in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> During the post-Mao period when one-party rule has been institutionalized, the central government has maintained, if not strengthened, its control over local governments through the cadre responsibility system, not only using the authority to appoint local leaders but also promoting successful leaders and rotating them between different positions within the country. See, for example, Maria Edin, “State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective,” *China Quarterly* 173 (2003): 35–52. On more recent discussion about the cadre responsibility system, see Pierre Landry, Xiaobo Lü, and Haiyan Duan, “Does

many of these firms, which found their own bureaucratic patrons, are not motivated to upgrade and raise their productivity, and are instead competing in a “race to the bottom” for predatory pricing. Moreover, confronting the reality that China has less secured property rights protection, as do other authoritarian countries, private entrepreneurs have a strong incentive to form collusive relationships with local bureaucrats to protect their wealth against state predation.<sup>21</sup>

Although public goods are provided through local governments, China’s authoritarian regime has successfully shifted blame toward the local governments when there is dissatisfaction, creating what Dickson calls the “local legitimacy deficit” (pp. 215–22). This deficit is reflected in the “significant differences in levels of support and trust for central Party and government institutions and their local counterparts” (p. 214). Dickson’s survey research shows that the regime deliberately defines “democracy” in a way to be conflated to the provision of public goods, that people accept the definition, and that the regime’s apparent provision of public goods has become a source of support for the regime, but only for the central government (chapter 6). By contrast, in the central-local governmental relationship in China local officials are blamed when public goods are not provided. For example, the central government uses local governments as a target of blame when public goods are not provided in agricultural areas due to the local fiscal crises, even though the problems have been created by the central government.<sup>22</sup> In sum, levels of support for the regime are surprisingly high as central leaders deflect popular outrage away from themselves and toward local officials.

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Performance Matter? Evaluating Political Selection Along the Chinese Administrative Ladder,” *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 8 (2018): 1074–105.

<sup>21</sup> Yue Hou, *The Private Sector in Public Office: Selective Property Rights in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Hiroki Takeuchi, *Tax Reform in Rural China: Revenue, Resistance, and Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Considering that China is a party-based dictatorship, according to Dickson, it is easy to explain why this blame-shifting strategy is successful. First, it is easier for the public to observe and evaluate what local officials do as opposed to the more shielded and detached workings of the central government. This is why “most people have high trust in an ‘imaginary state’ they never personally encounter but have lower trust in the ‘real state’ they have direct experience with at the local level” (p. 217). Second, the CCP is able to dodge public disapproval through censorship of the media. Dickson notes that “central leaders are generally shielded from bad publicity in the media” (pp. 217–8). For example, local officials were targeted in Xi’s fierce anti-corruption campaign, which has been considered one of his signature reform policies. Not surprisingly, the anti-corruption campaign was politically motivated and Xi used it to reassert his control over the party.<sup>23</sup> In addition to ousting opposition in the power struggle of the CCP’s central elite politics, it heavily targeted vulnerable local officials. Local officials (county or below) were criticized or exposed for corruption, malfeasance, or illegal activities on the Internet and in media outlets, while criticism of central leaders was heavily censored. Dickson concludes: “This is by design: Central leaders prefer to focus popular outrage against local levels while deflecting it from themselves” (p. 218).

The blame-shifting strategy has worked for the CCP to maintain one-party rule in the context of patron-client networks in China’s central-local governmental relationship, but it has not taken place without consequences. For example, when implementing the anti-corruption campaign Xi has promoted coercion by defining corruption ambiguously. In reality, however, before the campaign was implemented many local governments had faced fiscal crises during which they were unable to sustain daily operations by following the official fiscal rules and hence had to

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<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), chapter 2.

misappropriate subsidies and transfers in order to get basic operational expenses.<sup>24</sup> As a result, local officials were afraid that they could be the next target of the campaign, which discouraged officials from undertaking new projects or providing public goods for fear of punishment. Superficially the failure to provide public goods is a local government's fault, but in reality it is rooted in the central government's policy. Hearing the positive rhetoric from the central government, people blame local officials for poorly *executing* the initiatives even when these initiatives are often unfunded or discontinued behind closed doors. As a result, China's authoritarian regime remains successful in sustaining its legitimacy by shifting blame from the central leaders to local officials.

Moreover, China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic shows the importance of local governance, and not surprisingly Xi has used it as another opportunity to shift blame toward local governments. When assessing China's response to the pandemic, Xi has tactically compared China with foreign countries, especially with the United States and other Western countries. Indeed, China's measures against the pandemic are much more successful than most of the foreign countries in the world. The number of deaths per the one-million population (as of July 9, 2021) is 3 in China while it is 1,869 in the United States, 1,881 in the United Kingdom, and 1,091 in Germany.<sup>25</sup> If one compares China's number with other Asian countries, China's performance is

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<sup>24</sup> On local governments' malfunctioning, see An Chen, *The Transformation of Governance in Rural China: Market, Finance, and Political Authority* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Lynette Ong, *Prosper or Perish: The Political Economy of Credit and Fiscal Systems in Rural China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Takeuchi, *Tax Reform in Rural China*. For more positive tones of local governments' roles on Chinese economic development, see Yuen Yuen Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016). On corruption of local governments, see Yuen Yuen Ang, *China's Gilded Age: The Paradox of Economic Boom and Vast Corruption* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> The numbers regarding the COVID-19 pandemic are taken from the following website: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>. We use the number of deaths per the one-million population as a proxy to success or failure in measures against the pandemic because any country's goal is surviving this crisis with as few deaths as possible. Moreover, other numbers are

not as good as Vietnam (1) but better than Japan (118), South Korea (40), Taiwan (31), or Singapore (6). However, if comparing numbers chronologically, one will find that most of the coronavirus deaths in China occurred before the end of February 2020.<sup>26</sup> In short, China's response to the pandemic can be evaluated as successful, but it would have been more successful if China did a better job with its initial response to the outbreak.

China's initial failure in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak was a consequence of the CCP's blame-shifting strategy. Giving a systematic analysis of the central-local governmental relationship in rural China, Hiroki Takeuchi argues that competent, empowered, and responsive local leaders are the key to good governance in China's authoritarian system.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, throughout the anti-corruption campaign and other central policies, the Xi administration has undermined local authorities' popular legitimacy and administrative capacity by blaming the local governments, causing local officials to be fearful of punishment, and paralyzing them from performing routine tasks. At the beginning of the pandemic, local leaders of Hubei Province and the city of Wuhan tried to dwarf the problem and hide the outbreak. The central government's initial response to the crisis was delayed because local governments did not report the truth to the central government. When the central government imposed a blockade on Wuhan and other cities, the virus had already spread nationwide—and probably worldwide. Xi blamed the delayed initial response on local leaders, but it occurred because he had shifted the blame onto local officials at the cost of administrative capacity of local governments. In other words, the anti-corruption campaign contributed to the delay in Wuhan when the epidemic began in late 2019. With the

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not as reliable as deaths per the one-million population. For example, the number of total cases per the one-million population would be lower if the nation tests fewer people, and hence it is not a good proxy to success in response to the pandemic.

<sup>26</sup> See <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/china/>.

<sup>27</sup> Takeuchi, *Tax Reform in Rural China*.

upward accountability under the cadre responsibility system, local officials had strong incentives to conceal bad news, which caused the regime to fail at effectively responding to the outbreak.<sup>28</sup> While China's authoritarian regime has survived the COVID-19 crisis, seemingly gaining popular support and confidence in the government, it is not because of the authoritarian system but despite it.

### **Adaptation to Globalization by China's Party Dictatorship**

We argue that China's authoritarian regime is resilient not in spite of, but because of globalization. The CCP has adapted to global circumstances by responding to both internal and external challenges such as industrial overcapacity, failing SOEs, the membership of the World Trade Organization, and the emergence of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. To explain how China has responded to these challenges by a number of adaptive measures, Ye conceptualizes the "state-mobilized globalization" (SMG) framework, where foreign policy making and implementation is a product of complex collective strategic interactions by *domestic* actors such as economic bureaucracies, state capital (i.e., SOEs and state-affiliated institutions), and local governments. In other words, the Chinese foreign policy is not a cohesive strategy by the central government or the state's leader, but it is the result of collective decision making by various actors who calculate and try to maximize their own interests—instead of national interests. Ye argues that the actual policy implementation is fragmented because each actor of Chinese bureaucracies and key interest groups self-interprets and reinterprets the central strategy to seek their own interests. Using the SMG framework, she suggests that "given fragmented interests and ideas [of domestic actors], a policy

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<sup>28</sup> For comprehensive analysis on China's response to the pandemic focusing on the central-local governmental relationship, see Yanzhong Huang, "The Myth of Authoritarian Superiority: China's Response to Covid-19 Revisited," *China Leadership Monitor* 68 (Summer 2021), <https://www.prcleader.org/yanzhong-huang>.



response...is often framed in politically ambitious terms so that it could mobilize broader *coalitions* against specific oppositions” (p. 11, italics added). Coalitions are made using existing patron-client networks under institutionalized one-party rule. Ye calls this fragmented policy making “top-down political mobilization and bottom-up market implementation” (p. 27). This finding corresponds to the argument of Geddes, et al. that party-based dictatorships have an advantage of “extensive patron-client networks...between central party leadership, local party leaders and people living in different areas [needed] in order to survive while out of power and, often, subject to repression” (p. 187).

The influence of this domestic political strategy on foreign policy making is evident in the three national programs that Ye discusses: the Western Development Program (WDP), the China Goes Global (CGG), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The WDP was a domestic policy but had foreign policy implications. Although its official goal was developing China’s less developed western inland provinces, subnational actors took it as the central government’s pro-globalization signal to attract multinational corporations to their localities. The CGG was a policy promoting China’s outbound investment. However, its ambiguous rhetoric was interpreted by local governments to enhance *inbound* investment. The BRI has emerged as the most important Chinese foreign policy for the last few years. Although foreign observers have become concerned with the nationalist nature of its officially announced strategy, Xi’s cohesive nationalist messages of the BRI have masked the bureaucratic fragmentation that characterizes the policy’s actual implementation. In reality, the BRI was interpreted to carry out *local* industrial planning, expand SOE commerce, and strengthen private companies’ inbound and outbound investment (Ye, p. 35). Moreover, because local governments pursue their own interests, the BRI has been used to help finance local projects *inside* China although it is a policy to promote outbound investment. Overall,

Ye's interpretation of these three programs suggests that "ambitious and ambiguous strategies have mobilized local state entities and corporations into action while permitting local actors to reinterpret and deviate from the national guidelines" (p. 151). And we should note that the fragmented nature of policy implementation is a consequence of the CCP's strategy of making foreign policy serve for the regime's principal goal of maintaining one-party rule.

The "inside out" nature of Chinese foreign policy has particularly important implications for policy debates over whether China's rise is a threat for the United States and other countries. Misperception of a country's capability and intention is dangerous because it may have a similar effect to what international relations theory defines as the security dilemma, which arises when efforts that countries make to defend themselves lead other countries to feel less secure and to fear that they will be attacked. An authoritarian country's policy making and implementation is opaque, and China's authoritarian system is no exception. Geddes et al. and other large-N studies in comparative authoritarianism find that authoritarian leaders tend to cause warlike behavior because they can monopolize decision making authority in their domestic politics.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the security dilemma is more likely to occur in the international relationship that includes an authoritarian state. If foreign countries take China's seemingly cohesive nationalist strategy as a sign of its aggressive expansionist intention, instead of a product of adaptive measures of the inside-out foreign policy making strategy, the result will be a spiral of fear and insecurity that may escalate tension.

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<sup>29</sup> In the meantime, Jessica Weeks finds that not all the dictatorships are more belligerent than democracies because some dictators are constrained by the preferences of the domestic audiences, and that as a result the differences in the conflict behavior of distinct kinds of dictatorships are as great as those between democracies and dictatorships. In fact, party-based dictatorships tend to be less belligerent than military or personalist dictatorships because they are more likely to face domestic accountability and hence have incentives to behave like democracies when it comes to questions of war and peace. See Jessica Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

## Strategic Use of Technology

The CCP has taken adaptive measures in response to the trend of technological advancements, masterfully utilizing technology to strengthen the regime's resilience through the censorship of information. The suppression under the name of cyber security takes place on multiple technological platforms including the Internet, national news outlets and media, and social media. A prime example of the tight control over what is published and available to the public is the party's official newspaper *People's Daily*, which publishes news that is in line with the Party's views and does not publish information that might threaten its stability. All broadcasts and print media in modern China falls under the jurisdiction of the CCP's Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Propaganda as it is all state-owned (Dickson, p. 61). Journalists, editors, and reporters that stray from the party line can be suspended, fired, or even imprisoned. Local governments are also subject to these punishments. While commercial media outlets are more independent, even they report information that is in line with the Propaganda Department's directives, meaning that they "do not provide an independent perspective on current events, but merely convey the official line through a more credible channel" (Dickson p. 63) as people are less likely to suspect that the information is influenced by the central government. In other words, as Daniela Stockmann argues, the commercial media has actually raised the credibility of the existing official media, made it easier for the CCP to control and govern information flow, and hence strengthened the authoritarian regime. Thus, Stockmann contends that the commercial media does "not produce greater pluralism of political voices in media"<sup>30</sup> but instead "promotes media credibility across different forms of authoritarian rule."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The CCP also extends its grip past news outlets. It tries to censor potentially destabilizing or triggering information about local, national, and international events on social media and political blogs while also limiting the ability for their citizens to speak out on those platforms. In addition, China's authoritarian regime offers Baidu, Renren, and Sina Weibo to replace Google, Facebook, and Twitter. According to Dickson (chapter 2), the regime also blocks access to foreign media, websites of foreign universities, and sites and search terms containing information about political, legal, and human rights issues, as well as pornography. It even mobilizes on incumbent and retired party members to report inappropriate content on assigned sites and pays individuals to post positive comments about the regime's policies. Even further, it creates fake accounts to prop up China's good publicity and flood negativity towards the accounts that speak poorly about the regime. In short, as Elizabeth Economy summarizes, the CCP has made a proactive use of information technology "to move beyond sounding warning bells, deleting posts, and passing regulations...[and] to seek to ensure that Internet content more actively served the interests of the Communist Party."<sup>32</sup>

From the comparative perspective, the CCP's censorship and infiltration of the media and Internet delves much deeper than propaganda seen in typical authoritarian regimes (Dickson, chapter 7). It works on two fronts: censoring information that might be harmful to the regime while also promoting the spread of information that reinforces its influence and approval. It is imperative for China to maintain this degree of censorship, especially considering the rise of technology and social media platforms used by civilians. Failing to do so could result in a situation comparable to the Arab Spring in the Middle East, in which authoritarian governments attempted to use technology to block sites, interrupt social media communication, and even shut off the

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<sup>32</sup> Economy, *The Third Revolution*, p. 71.

Internet completely to quash uprisings and protests against their regimes. These tactics failed during the Arab Spring because they were too little and too late. By contrast, the CCP has made a more proactive use of technology since observing “the ‘domino effect’ that had occurred via the Internet during the Arab Spring.”<sup>33</sup> China’s control over modern technology functions so well because it maintains prolonged censorship to prevent any dissent from becoming a widespread sentiment in the first place. It effectively monitors multiple media and information outlets for ideas of democracy, human rights, public opinion, and other threatening notions to cover all avenues for public disapproval of the regime.

Interestingly, Dickson finds that many Chinese do not *care* that their avenues of information are censored. He finds that most people reported that they never encountered blocked web pages, inability to post certain words, or having their accounts canceled on Internet social media. For those that had, 48.6 percent responded that “it doesn’t matter,” indicating that they had resigned to it, they could not do anything to change it, or they did not feel affected by it (p. 71). Censorship is most typically met with resignation, and it is very unlikely that it is met with frustration or outrage. This is likely because most Internet users in China are not political dissidents. Rather, most users are just browsing the news, streaming shows and movies, chatting, and doing other politically insensitive activities on the web that would not face governmental restrictions.

Even outside the Internet and media, the CCP effectively roots out major threats to the regime’s resilience and maintains control with an invisible, yet heavy hand. Through mass surveillance technology and the new social credit and identity system, China’s central government uses technology to combat internal threats and keep a close eye on its citizens and local

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

governments. In other words, the CCP's proactive use of technology has made its repression and blame-shifting strategies work better for the regime's survival. No other authoritarian regime has achieved the breadth and depth of China's surveillance technology, and it is a key reason in ensuring the survival of the party-based dictatorship.

## **The Future of China**

We have argued that China's authoritarian regime remains resilient because it has institutionalized one-party rule by taking advantage of patron-client networks established in the party-based dictatorship and taken various adaptive measures to economic globalization and technological advancements. However, Xi's concentration and personalization of power has threatened China's long-standing party-based dictatorship.<sup>34</sup> The regime's resilience could be threatened by two points of vulnerability that the regime faces, one economic and the other political.

The economic aspect originates from the constant need to balance economic efficiency and political control. Overall, the productivity of SOEs is lower than that of private firms, but Xi seems to give a priority to political control over economic efficiency.<sup>35</sup> Xi originally advocated greater market reform to diminish the role of SOEs when his administration started in 2013. Having observed that China had achieved rapid economic growth since 1978 primarily because of private firms he had a good reason to expand the private sector and shrink the state's role in the economy, although SOEs still played major roles in the Chinese state capitalist economic system.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On the empirical support of this argument, see Economy, *The Third Revolution*; George Magnus, *Red Flags: Why Xi's China Is in Jeopardy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Carl Minzner, *End of an Era: How China's Authoritarian Revival Is Undermining Its Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas R. Lardy, *The State Strikes Back: The End of Economic Reform in China?* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas R. Lardy, *Markets over Mao: The Rise of Private Business in China* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2014).

However, his SOE reform has made little progress and instead intensified the role of the CCP in the decision-making of SOEs.<sup>37</sup> Following Xi's deviation from the SOE reform, Nicholas Lardy, who contended in 2014 that markets had driven China's economic growth, now argues that resurgent state dominance has begun to diminish the vital role of the market and private firms in the Chinese economy.<sup>38</sup> Vested interests and the need for the CCP to maintain control over economic activity keeps the SOE reform at a standstill.<sup>39</sup> The SOE reform would undermine the vested interests based on the party's patron-client networks such as the revolving door built between the CCP and SOEs. Indeed, Ye shows that SOEs play a central role in China's industrial policy both at home and abroad such as in the BRI, and as a result that companies have a symbiotic relationship with the state where "the state relies on SOEs to carry out its developmental program while the companies leverage the state to expand their business interests" (p. 179).

The stagnation of SOE reform is dangerous for the stability of the regime considering that the cause of many autocratic demises is reform stagnation and subsequent economic stagnation. This was what originally sparked the Arab Spring.<sup>40</sup> Now that the Chinese economy is expected to hit the lowest growth since 1976 in 2020 due to the pandemic, the Chinese government can afford no further delay in its SOE reform. The Chinese economy had already slowed down before the pandemic as SOE reform has stalled under the Xi administration. If the CCP hopes to maintain economic growth, it will have to surrender some aspects of party control over the economy, which

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<sup>37</sup> Economy, *The Third Revolution*, chapter 4.

<sup>38</sup> Lardy, *Markets over Mao*; Lardy, *The State Strikes Back*.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Wendy Leutert shows that there are at least three obstacles facing the SOE reform: difficulty to determine the timing and method of reform, mismatched executive incentives, and the complexity of intra-firm obstacles. See Wendy Leutert, "Challenges Ahead in China's Reform of State-Owned Enterprises," *Asia Policy* 21 (2016): 83–99.

<sup>40</sup> For example, the article written by an author who uses a suggestive assumed name "Cassandra" once pointed out the stagnation of structural economic reforms as a source of political crisis for the authoritarian regime in Mubarak's Egypt. See Cassandra, "The Impending Crisis in Egypt," *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 1 (1995), 9–27.

may undermine the vested interests based on the patron-client networks rooted in the party-based dictatorship. However, the SOE reform is now needed to increase productivity and achieve sustainable economic growth. If it fails to do so by continuing on its current path of reform stagnation, it risks economic decline as the root of the regime's downfall.

The political aspect stems from Xi's consolidation of personal power at the cost of the regime's institutional resilience. Prior to Xi the leader's power base was derived from the party institution, and hence Xi's power is based on the CCP's power. This system, created after the Maoist period, was intended to avoid personalization of power, which could initiate regime collapse as it did in Indonesia under Suharto and in Paraguay under Alfredo Stroessner. The institutionalization of one-party rule in China's authoritarian regime was achieved through term limits, a required retirement age, devolution of power, and other measures. Xi's move to lift the term limits on the presidency and divert from peaceful resignations of previous leaders (i.e., Jiang and Hu) has undermined the institutional base that gives the CCP its power and legitimacy. While his personalization of power may have short term gains, it has long term implications that create cracks in the foundation of China's authoritarian rule. In the short term, Xi has concentrated power in his own hands, which allows him to reduce conflict with his own inner circle during his own reign and lifetime. This personalization strategy may be sustainable for a while during his own term, but in the long run there is a clear pattern of party-based dictatorships being more resilient than personalist dictatorships. As Geddes et al. state, "party constraints on dictators are precisely the things a dictator intent on concentrating power in his own hands wants to change" (p. 192). Party-based dictatorships function on norms and institutions to manage succession without crisis, but with Xi's personalization China's authoritarian regime is more vulnerable to splinters in the party, power vacuums, and eventual breakdown as other personalist dictatorships suffered.



Finally, Xi's personalization of power has alarming implications on international relations. The institutionalization of one-party rule has calmed down the internal struggle for power in domestic politics. However, the personalization of dictatorship may activate such a power struggle and allow nationalist hardliners to rise in foreign policy making. The Chinese leadership is divided into reformist internationalists and nationalist hardliners.<sup>41</sup> They both agree that maintaining one-party rule is the utmost goal but have exactly opposite views on how to achieve the goal.<sup>42</sup> While reformist internationalists argue for international cooperation so that China could benefit from the global economy and achieve sustainable economic growth, nationalist hardliners argue that China should project its power even if it causes friction in international relations.

China seemingly has ambitions to become a political leader in the international arena. Many have seen China's rise as a threat to U.S. leadership in Asia and beyond. Whether China's rise is a threat or not depends on China's intention, which depends on the outcome of the power struggle in the authoritarian context of its domestic politics. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a "weak China" is not good news for the world because China is already strong enough to destabilize the Asia-Pacific region and influence economic and political affairs worldwide.<sup>43</sup> When China's authoritarian regime is resilient and its leader is confident in its domestic governance, we do not have to view China's rise as a threat. However, when the regime is more vulnerable, we need to be concerned that China will take a more hardliner stance in its foreign policy.

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<sup>41</sup> Hiroki Takeuchi, "Domestic Politics of Chinese Foreign Policy: Where Will Xi Jinping Bring China?", *Asian Security* 15, no. 2 (May 2019): 205–13.

<sup>42</sup> Hiroki Takeuchi, "Trade, Security, and Authoritarianism: Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy Making in China," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 9, no. 2 (2020): 202–25.

<sup>43</sup> On this point, see Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).