

Should We Try to Predict Transitions to Democracy?: Lessons for China

by Bruce Gilley

INTRODUCTION

It has been 20 years since the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington predicted that “the limits of democratic development in the world may well have been reached.”¹ That forecast, substantiated by a survey of the evidence as it existed in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, was famously wrong. In particular, Huntington’s prediction that the possibility of democratic change in Eastern Europe was “virtually nil” was disproved within a few years. Between 1984, when he wrote, and 2003, Freedom House reckons that the proportion of the world’s states that are electoral democracies rose from 41 to 61 percent, while the proportion of the world’s population living under “free” or “partly free” conditions rose from 56 to 65 percent.² In terms both of polities and of people, democracy’s limits had clearly not been reached.

So, was Huntington’s exercise in prediction a waste of time? Not at all. Huntington performed a signal service to the scholarly and policy-making community despite being largely wrong (except perhaps with respect to the Middle East). He highlighted an important issue concerning the global political future and discussed the factors that remain central to the study of democratization. A retrospective look at the literature on regime change prior to the Third Wave of democratization³ suggests that it was the failure to think seriously about macro-level political change in authoritarian states, not the failure to predict accurately, that was the main shortcoming of research in the 1970s.

Today, we confront the same issue with respect to many authoritarian states, the most important of which may be China. With 1.3 billion people, China represents about 60 percent of the world’s “unfree” (neither “free” nor “partly free”) people.⁴ Were it to democratize, it would represent the equivalent of a democratization wave by itself, and would almost certainly create more favorable conditions for an actual wave involving other Asian dictatorships like North Korea, Vietnam, and Burma. In a recent book, *China’s Democratic Future*,⁵ I made some bold predictions about the

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possibility of a democratic transition in China before 2020. Yet with a few notable exceptions, the world's scholarly community has not engaged in any serious thinking about the political changes that are almost certain to occur in China over the coming few decades. Most scholarly energies today are devoted to the study of China's transition from a command to a market economy and from an ideological to a technocratic dictatorship. One historian, reviewing *China's Democratic Future*, called on Sinologists "to eschew prognostication and focus on understanding China's complicated present." The reason given: "Knowing for sure where China is heading is impossible."⁶

In the sections to follow I will critique this appeal to "eschew prognostication" as both logically flawed and professionally irresponsible. Predictions about China's political future are not only logically implicit in most of the studies of the "complicated present" of China, but also a fulfillment of the mission of social scientists. Without them, we find ourselves in a muddle of thought and a muddle of policy. Second, I will argue that in the case of China, a prediction of an elite-led and fairly rapid transition to an electoral democracy is the most reasonable forecast. Nonetheless, and to complete the point, this prediction not only leaves open many important questions about the nature of democratic transition and consolidation in China, but will remain useful even if wrong. By orienting scholars and policy-makers towards the critical issues of the future, prediction serves to concentrate minds admirably. The gravest danger is no prediction at all.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Most of the literature on prediction in the social sciences concerns *how* to predict social phenomena rather than *whether* to predict them. But in the 1960s and 1970s, the very notion of prediction came in to question. Since then, in some circles, prediction has come to be seen as fundamentally impossible or undesirable for a number of reasons.

One set of reasons relates to the degree of difficulty. Social life is said to be too much of an "open system" in which key causal variables continually change, whereas in natural life we can be pretty sure we have identified the key variables. The political world looks more like ever-changing clouds than rule-governed clocks.⁷ Alternately, even if it is a fixed system, the sheer number of random effects is so great as to make all predictions subject to large errors. These margins of error are said to be especially large in the case of large-scale and radical changes, such as democratization.⁸ Even accurate probabilistic models are drowned in a sea of uncertainty. The combination of faulty causal inference and random effects means that all predictions always end up being wrong. Any prediction of, say, democratization, would come with a bright red label that says: "Warning: While minimal democracy is most likely, actual outcomes may vary between tyranny or liberal democracy."

Another group of reasons concerns meaning. If social terms could only be understood through interpretation of their *local* meaning, then prediction using cross-cultural terms like “democracy” is too blunt to be of any use. “We cannot achieve the degree of fine exactitude of a science based on brute data,” wrote one philosopher of meaning.⁹ Indeed, even if by sheer coincidence, a given term has the same meaning across all cultures today, its meaning will alter in the future in ways that we cannot predict. Predicting “democracy” in the future is useless since the meaning of democracy is sure to alter significantly.¹⁰ “Human science is largely *ex post* understanding. . . . Hard prediction before just makes one a laughingstock.”¹¹

We can accept the cautions of these insights without necessarily accepting their injunctions against the prediction of large-scale political change. An awareness of the difficulties of accurate prediction is certainly important, especially when wrongful policy decisions have fatal consequences. In *China’s Democratic Future*, I was explicit about these uncertainty levels.¹² However, it is the comparison of the moral costs of inaccurate prediction with the moral and other costs of failing to predict at all that should decide whether prediction is worthwhile in spite of uncertainty. In almost every case, the latter are far heavier than the former. Indeed, the whole “risk industry” of consultants, insurance companies, and forward markets exists precisely because it is almost always better to predict something than to predict nothing at all.¹³

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As to meanings, it is also true that the word democracy today implies a different (higher) standard than it did in the past. As Larry Diamond has noted, the higher standards, as well as the greater information available about abuses in the most distant lands, means that many regimes once called democracies—PRI-ruled Mexico, apartheid South Africa, and today’s Singapore—no longer qualify as even minimal democracies.¹⁴ Yet the relevant question is whether meanings continue to hold *enough* similarity to be useful for the purposes of policy-making. In this respect, the answer is certainly, yes. Democracy’s core facet—the equality of persons in choosing leaders through free and fair elections—has not changed. The new meaning is just more robust than before. Some databases have been created that capture the changing meanings of democracy over time.¹⁵ Yet even taking into account those changed meanings, predictions in the past of “more democracy” would have been accurate, even if their magnitude was overstated. As long as meanings change in accordance with the principles at stake—in this case the fair selection of executives to government—prediction remains possible. It is only when concepts become totally “reconstructed” that prediction is futile. Yet on most topics that people spend time predicting in political science, this is not the case.

It is a key purpose of academic research to make accurate descriptive and causal inferences that will help citizens and groups to make better decisions in the future. Implicit in this is the idea the knowledge gained today has some validity in the future, that the social world is not mere chaos leaping from one node of path dependence to another, nor is it mere entertainment or irony. Properly done, social inference holds true in different contexts—temporal and spatial. Indeed, even historians, who seem most averse to the future, need to “predict.” In order to accurately describe what causal influences were most important in the unfolding of a historical event, a historian needs to “predict” that a different outcome would have resulted in their absence. The validity of any historical inference rests on prediction. Prediction, then, is not merely for policy-junkies but for every intellectual who takes their role seriously.

It is a venerable philosophical point that prediction of a future is inherent in the very word “present.” A more prosaic version of that tenet is that every policy decision taken today relies on implicit assumptions about what will happen in the future. The more those assumptions are made explicit and are justified, the more prepared the actors will be for the future. Futurology is inherent in human action, and the more rigorous we are with predictions the better. As John Gerring notes, “We have no choice but to prognosticate.”¹⁶

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Of course, it is entirely reasonable to predict no changes. A forecast of constitutional development in Sweden today, for example, would likely include no change in its basic democratic and liberal structure based on obvious empirical evidence of things like legitimacy, consensus, and social values. But predictions of no change are often based on a methodology that “eschews prognostication” as a matter of principle. The positivist legacy in social sciences is to have created schools of thought based on static rather than dynamic analysis of states and societies. Huntington was an early critic of so-called “structural-functional” theories of political development because they were based on an assumption of “no change.”¹⁷ David Beetham lodged a similar critique of classical theories of legitimacy.¹⁸ Countries undergoing rapid socio-economic change and political ferment are particularly in need of theories based on change. Otherwise, we may find that we have been studying the wrong things.

THE RECORD OF PREDICTION

Even if theory says we should, or must, predict, the actual record of those who have predicted regime transitions in particular might give us pause. The history of

political thought is littered with famous examples of inaccurate predictions of regime changes. Karl Marx's prediction of a replacement of bourgeois regimes in Europe by communist ones in the revolutions of 1848 was badly wrong. So too were American fears that communist victory in Vietnam would lead to a rise of communist regimes across Southeast Asia. As for predictions of democratic transition, the heady forecasts of democratic development in newly-independent states like Tanzania and Malaysia after World War II show how wrong predictions can be. Famous predictions of collapse of the North Korean regime have been, to say the least, premature.¹⁹

Still, it seems collective memory is strongest with respect to inaccurate predictions. For there are just as many examples of accurate predictions of change—from the many writers who foresaw the collapse of the Soviet Union to the modernization theorists' predictions of political change in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

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In addition, collective memory has also erased many of the wrongful predictions of political regression or stasis. Since independence in 1947, for example, India has been the object of a steady stream of predictions of democratic failure, all of which have been false. Those who predicted a continuation of authoritarian rule in places like Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, Brazil, and Yugoslavia were badly wrong—fooled by events. To express pessimism about prospects for democracy or democratization has long been seen as a reflection of the conventional wisdom within the academy, not subject to the normal rules of validation. The host of gloomy assessments of new democracies that arose in the 1990s was only the latest example of scholars making wrong predictions that were nonetheless remembered as valuable because of their “admirable cynicism.” The same might be said of predictions of doom for Latin America, which despite the unremittingly negative views of its Marxist-oriented area specialists has enjoyed steadily rising living standards and expanding democracy for the last quarter century.

As a general statement, predictions of democratization have been one of the best bets about regime change that one could have made in the past century, notwithstanding periods of retreat. They have tended to outperform predictions of democratic retreat or failure. Still, even the wrongful predictions have served a useful role in stimulating debate about the future.

These two points are evident in a retrospective look at the democratization of the republics in the former Soviet Union. In the study of these places in the 1960s and 1970s, we can see these same dichotomies—those predicting the future and those which do not; and, among the former, those predicting some form of democratization and those predicting something else, usually a post-communist neo-authoritarianism.

The non-prediction point of view was summed up by the authors of one widely used textbook titled *How the Soviet Union is Governed*, which offered the opinion in its 1979 edition that little was likely to change in the Soviet Union given entrenched conservative forces in society and the state. The authors curiously supported this prediction but they retreated to a position of “eschewing prognostication” suggesting that their methods were driving their conclusions:

The job of the scholar is not to predict but to understand. To be sure, understanding should be an aid to prediction, but the future still depends on such a complex interaction of accidents of personality, of the health of leaders, of unexpected crises, of responses to them that inevitably must be made... Ultimately it may be little more than chance that makes one prediction come true and another fail... The Soviet future should not be looked upon simply as something to predict; it should also be seen as the source for additional data for our understanding of the Soviet system and the processes of political development.²⁰

Indeed, even a decade after the fact, many Sovietologists continue to defend those in the field who rejected attempts to predict the future. “No serious conception of the scholarly enterprise should include (much less give pride of place to) crystal ball gazing,” wrote one scholar in reviewing a book that condemned the failure to predict the demise of the USSR.²¹ As I argued above, this position, in addition to being logically inconsistent with the very notion of inference, is a terrible abandonment of the scholarly mission. To continue to insist, more than a decade since global politics was transformed by the end of the Cold War, that scholars had no business trying to foresee such changes seems irresponsible in the extreme.

It is important to note where this failure took place. It is unfair to pin all the blame on the “cold warriors” of Sovietology who perceived only an unstintingly conservative culture and system in the Soviet Union.²² The other group who failed to predict systemic change was filled with those who saw a responsive, legitimate, and effective system that was beyond the grasp of “Western” theories. Huntington, despite his profession for dynamic theories, argued for no changes in the Soviet Union in his 1968 book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, seeing it as a highly legitimate and responsive regime.²³ Both cold warriors and system theorists relied too heavily on structural-functional theories to understand the “complex reality” of the Soviet system rather than asking questions about its evolutionary future. Both were mired in static analysis, and not a little Orientalism.

Whatever the likely future, it should have been clear that a prediction of “no change” was the least plausible one given economic industrialization and rising political dissent in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The common problem of cold warriors and Orientalists alike was to assume a method of analysis that by rejecting prediction led only to a prediction of no change.

Among those who did predict changes, many saw some form of liberalization. In 1970, Andrei Amalrik answered in the negative to his book's title *Will The Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?*²⁴ In 1976, Emmanuel Todd predicted Soviet failure because the political system could not deal with demographic and economic problems.²⁵ Alexander Eckstein saw a similar fate for all communist systems.²⁶ Accurate predictions were also made by moral philosophers. In 1968, philosopher Leo Strauss argued that a one-party state that denied basic freedoms would be deemed a great moral bad by citizens whatever its orderliness, and predicted the Soviet Union's demise as a result.²⁷

By 1984, signs of change were everywhere. Princeton historian Stephen Cohen ventured that despite deep-seated conservatism "signs that...a consensus for change may be forming...have already appeared".²⁸ By that time, the evidence of change throughout the communist bloc was too pervasive to be ignored. The entire Sovietology community, which had ignored the possibility of massive systemic change, merely set a new course on the "complex reality" of this historical turn. But by then, the American electorate had already put into power a Reagan administration which, given conventional wisdom of no changes to come, had ramped up a dangerous arms race between the two superpowers. A better understanding of the future might have averted this costly enterprise.

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Prediction of regime changes, then, has been accurate in some cases and inaccurate in others. Like all inferences made in the social sciences, some have been right and some have been wrong. But in all cases, scholars who choose to predict have been forced to line up what they believe are the factors relevant to regime change and then inferred a prediction. Many have been wrong. But in doing so, they have concentrated minds, allowing policy-makers to be open to the potential sources and direction of change. What sets such efforts apart is not that they predicted correctly, but that they predicted at all. Those who have "eschewed prognostication" have implicitly endorsed some form of continuation of business as usual, or else have been so overwhelmed by a sea of data to have been hamstrung in making any inferences at all, descriptive, causal, or predictive.

The costs of inaccurate prediction are to be ready for the wrong changes. The costs of a failure to predict are to be not ready for change at all. At least in the former case, there is a possibility of accurate prediction and preparedness for the right changes. Even where one is prepared for the wrong outcome—a liberal democracy rather than a form of electoral authoritarianism as in Putin's Russia, for example—many of the same policies will be applicable, support for the rule of law and media, for example. In the latter case, policymakers are doomed from the start.

Not predicting means they are prepared for nothing, as was often the case in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. All their policies are oriented towards the present system. They can merely open the morning newspapers with trepidation, hoping that whatever changes might occur will be long after their superannuation. The populations affected will lack any hope of being rescued from timely and far-sighted interventions if the changes go awry. For scholars to abet this paralysis seems to be a terrible forfeiture of the academic mission.

CHINA: WHETHER TO PREDICT

It is one of those treasured old chestnuts in the field of China studies that predictions of change in the Middle Kingdom are always wrong. The inscrutable Orient may have fallen on scrutable times in much of the rest of Asia, but China remains untouched, its mysteries complete.

There is no end to the examples of failed predictions about politics of contemporary China, especially with respect to party collapse after Tiananmen,²⁹ or political and social collapse after Deng.³⁰ But, as with other examples of prediction in the social sciences, this belief in wrongfulness is empirically selective. Many predictions have been made about China that have come all too true. In the twilight of the Cultural Revolution, Lieberthal predicted a re-institutionalization of the Party's structures, the dominant theme of the next quarter century.³¹ Munro and Bernstein were writing their bestselling prediction of American military conflict with China over Taiwan when PLA missile tests against Taiwan led to the biggest American naval movement since Vietnam.³² Economists said China's growth would destabilize world grain markets:³³ it is happening today.

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Moreover, the idea of wrongful prediction is also selective in its choice of inferences. Historical inferences about China have proven just as prone to error as predictive ones, although most never are exposed to the same publicity as the unfolding of future events. Shirk argued that economic reforms were a result of central elites seeking support from the selectorate.³⁴ Dali Yang quietly demolished this thesis.³⁵ Arguments by historians that attributed ideational motivations to 19th-century peasant rebels were undermined by evidence that material considerations better explained observed outcomes.³⁶

Everyone agrees that China is in the throes of great social and economic changes—the metaphors know no bounds. Yet if the silence of many scholars on China's political future is to be interpreted at face value, many also believe that none of this will make any difference. Either nothing will change politically, or we will see a long and slow evolution towards a...a something.³⁷ Scholars explicitly “eschew prognostication” in the case of China for the very reasons why they should be engaged in it with intensity: too much is changing.

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If the arguments offered above are valid, then this shortage of predictions about China is not only unnecessary, but also dangerous. Of course, the uncertainty of China's future may indeed be greater than elsewhere. But this needs to be proven and it is by no means obvious. Large, populous developing countries with clear structural changes may actually be more easily subject to prediction than smaller ones where elites can manipulate outcomes more easily. More important, it is precisely in confronting the substantive issues relevant to the future that the scholarly community provides a useful service, even if differences arise about predictions of future stability or foreign policy. Critics of prognostication in Sinology shirk a core duty of scholars.

Lieberthal, for example, in his 1995 book *Governing China* finds a China where society has become “a potential source of major instability,” where the regime's legitimacy strategy is “based on a flawed premise” of economic growth satiating political demands, and where the future country will be “more open, decentralized, corrupt, regionally and socially diverse, militarily strong, and socially tempestuous.”³⁸ Nonetheless, he concludes that the system will persist with only minor changes.

This whole issue came to a head in an exchange of letters in *Commentary Magazine* in 2003. At issue was an article by University of Pennsylvania professor Arthur Waldron called “The China Sickness,” which predicted regime change and all its destabilizing implications as the most likely outcome for China.³⁹ A dozen critics, all credentialed Sinologists, including Lieberthal, took him to task for his bleak predictions.⁴⁰ China, they said, was in a state of “relative stability” despite its systemic weaknesses.

It is not that a position of “no change” or even “evolution into a new unknown form” cannot be defended. Indeed, it would be a great tragedy if we did not have an open mind to the possibilities of trajectories hitherto unknown. But if this is the position, it has to be defended against other, arguably more historically grounded, predictions such as those of Waldron. Instead, the critics attacked his predictions merely for being predictions. They did not offer reasons for thinking that other predictions were more likely. As Waldron noted in response, the correspondents accepted most of his premises while simultaneously recusing themselves from thinking about the implications.

They even grant my point about regime change, wearily stipulating that “most serious scholars, businessmen, and government officials believe that the Communist party will eventually be compelled to share or even relinquish power.” But if regime change is likely, as “most serious scholars” allow, or even possible, then surely experts like the twelve, not to mention the rest of us, should be actively thinking about the when, the how, and the why. China is an immense country, and regime change there would be an event comparable in significance to the collapse of the USSR and the end of Communism in the West. Yet [none of the critics]...has anything at all to say about this possibility, its modalities, or its implications. All of them...are China specialists. What do they spend their time thinking about, if not this biggest of all the big questions?⁴¹

The need to predict is acute in the case of China and there are good reasons for thinking that a prediction of no change is the least plausible. As in the Soviet case, such predictions appear to be grounded more in methodological than substantive reasoning. Such inaction risks leaving the world unprepared for momentous change in China.

CHINA: WHAT TO PREDICT

Even if they do foresee changes, many scholars prefer to cover all the bases with long lists of alternative “scenarios.”⁴² There is nothing wrong with this per se, except that it is like taking the scholarly version of the Fifth. Prediction requires making choices about what factors matter most and what their causal consequences will most likely be. There is nothing that concentrates the mind as well as having to defend a claim about which scenario is most likely and why.

Among those making unambiguous predictions about China’s future, we can discern four broad groups: no change, neo-authoritarianism, chaos, and democracy. These schools are a natural outgrowth of the two ways of viewing the role of the state in China today. If political permanence is a result of the state containing social pressures, then it implies a sharp, chaotic state collapse if those pressures were to run over but a continuation of present trends if they do not. If it is a result of the state responding successfully to social pressures, then it implies a comparatively smooth evolution towards a modernized authoritarian regime. If the state is simultaneously responding yet also repressing, we may see an evolution towards democracy.

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The “no change” school can be a serious predictive school rather than a mere default of those who eschew prognostication. It echoes the same view as in the Soviet case. This “cold warrior” view was dominant following the Tiananmen crackdown of 1989, and bases its claim largely on evidence of a strong, repressive state that is simply crushing society. Under this view, China is fated to such a conservative system.⁴³ This prediction has the intuitive appeal of “linearity,” that is more of the same. But it is often hard to square with the premises of its own analysis, which spies great underlying socio-economic transformations.

Despite its failure in South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia, some form of Asian neo-fascism continues to be seen by many scholars as a stable regime type for China’s future.⁴⁴ In this scenario, the CCP continues to shed its communist pretensions and emerges as an authoritarian regime that co-opts most of the population with rapid development and national greatness. These predictions imply forward-looking planning for an aggressive nationalist regime, security challenges in Asia, and human rights pressures mainly from the outside.⁴⁵ The virtues of this theory are its accuracy so far: since 1989, despite predictions of CCP collapse, the CCP has moved towards this model with significant changes like welcoming capitalists into the party, selling off many public enterprises, repressing worker and peasant movements, encouraging a new ethnocentric nationalism, and even planning a Berlin-style Olympic Games for Beijing in 2008.

Chaos theorists are a wider church and include those who write about a crisis of governability,⁴⁶ a collapse of the state,⁴⁷ and an involution of the party.⁴⁸ This school can also claim some accuracy with post-1989 events, although it is forever living on evidence of increased risks of collapse rather than actual collapse. These predictions imply a forward-looking plan for crisis management to respond to mass emigration, diseases, financial contagion, civil war, and external aggression.

Democracy theorists combine the above into an alternative view, namely the rise of an effective post-communist state, but one that is democratic because of the problems of governance and state crisis.⁴⁹ Among the three, this school arguably has the least to show for the post-1989 period, aside from some scattershot renegade elections at the township and county levels, as well as changes to make human rights, the rule of law, and legislative oversight more institutionalized within the state. These predictions suggest for the US a forward-looking policy of engagement with, and support for, the domestic civil society and democratic institutions that will help consolidate a new system, and should ease external pressures and security containment in favor of a more inclusive and non-threat-based relationship with China.

All four predictive efforts serve a useful purpose in helping both people and policy-makers to prepare for change and mitigate its negative potentials. When Pan Wei's article on a neo-authoritarian future was presented and debated in a prominent journal of China studies, it served as a rare opportunity for this scenario to be debated in a sober and scholarly forum. Gordon Chang's book on collapse provided reviewers with a real chance to grapple with issues of instability in China. Authorial egocentrism leads me to believe that my own book has rekindled the debate on democracy that had waned as the post-Tiananmen period lengthened.⁵⁰

As mentioned, the policy advice of the three schools that turn out to be wrong (assuming the outcome is among the four) will be useful, nonetheless. If China descends into African-style ungovernability, for example, the security preparedness of authoritarianism will be useful, as will the domestic institutions intended to aid democracy. Nonetheless, the potential overlaps of policy preparedness are not perfect and might be small consolation in the event. We simply need to try to make the right prediction in order to ensure the best outcome for all concerned.

Given that any democratic transition is sure to be a tense and hurried affair, this absence of serious thinking about the democratic future of China risks leading to worse outcomes since it will be implausible to simply develop this policy research overnight. It is here that the world's policy community could make a substantial contribution.

In my own book, I developed the arguments for why a democratic future for China seems the most likely outcome. To a large extent, this argument relies less on detailed parsing of data from China as on global trends in regime types as income levels grow and the idea of democracy becomes a universal value. The burden of proof in light of these trends should more appropriately be on those who would argue that China will *not* become a democracy. Even so, the argument for a democratic future in China can be well-substantiated by an analysis of present trends in the country—economic, social, and political. These arguments take up the bulk of the material in the book, most of them relying on arguments about these trends being made in China itself by liberal-minded scholars, officials, and activists.

Of course, each of the four broad predictive outcomes includes a number of quite different versions, and the democracy school is no different. To say that China will become a democracy is perhaps to say not much in our era. Some scholars predict a democracy in China that is a vague mixture of communal utopia and social welfare.⁵¹ Others foresee a strong presidential system. My own prediction is of a fairly recognizable system with a weak president and a strong legislature based on the existing National Peoples Congress.

If the democracy prediction is right, then its disfavor among current predictive efforts is dangerous. For democracy will require a lot of thinking beforehand about alternative choices for institutional design. The issues are many: constitutions, emergency powers, legislative structure, electoral laws, secession, federalism, presidential powers, and more. Beyond that, every democratic transition faces massive socio-economic challenges such as historical justice, economic liberalization, and ethnic and regional fragmentation — all of which will require well thought out responses. Given that any democratic transition is sure to be a tense and hurried affair, this absence of serious thinking about the democratic future of China risks leading to worse outcomes since it will be implausible to simply develop this policy research overnight. It is here that the world's policy community could make a substantial contribution.

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US POLICY

It would be unfair to say that the US government is not thinking about China's future. CIA and Pentagon conferences have been held on the issue. Everyone from presidents Clinton and Carter to vice-presidents Cheney and Gore have gone to China in the last two decades and commented on the seeming inevitability of democratizing reforms. Yet a commitment to democracy by US leaders wavers for two reasons, neither of them always acceptable. One is that contemporary issues need to be resolved, which requires a certain amount of intercourse with the regime "as it is." The problem is that such issues—counter-terrorism, business ties, and strategic peace—can often be abused well beyond any plausible consideration of their moral value to a better China. The other reason is uncertainty about the future. There is also a significant part of the policy community that views neo-authoritarianism or collapse as more likely future outcomes. As a result, policy planning tends to be hedged by simultaneous policy planning for these two outcomes. While there is some overlap, this means a sub-optimal emphasis on democratic planning.

While the rhetorical commitment to democratic advance of the 2000 to 2004 Bush administration was welcome, the administration's policies did much to undermine that goal. In the case of China, the administration shelved concerns about political freedoms in favor of an alliance with Beijing on fighting terrorism. This was ironic since terrorism is most closely associated with a lack of civil liberties and democracy worldwide. Along with Europe, the US also continued to be lured away from hard-nosed democracy promotion and planning by expanding business opportunities in China. If Bush were true to his rhetoric, then it would seem China is the best place to start.

*No longer should we think tyranny is benign because it is temporarily convenient. Tyranny is never benign to its victims, and our great democracies should oppose tyranny wherever it is found.*⁵²

If we take democracy as the most likely outcome, then several items need to change in US policy towards China. One is a return to the monitoring of abuses and more importantly pressuring American allies to support it. The US returned to tabling a motion to condemn human rights abuses in China at the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in 2004 after a two-year hiatus that was nonetheless defeated by abstentions by US allies Mexico and South Korea and opposition votes by democratic countries like Brazil, India, and South Africa. Second is a more forthright democratic diplomacy. Bush apparently did not even raise democracy or human rights while entertaining Jiang Zemin on his ranch in 2002. Third, general developmental assistance to China should be tied to human rights improvements, while specific democracy assistance should be targeted towards undermining rather than shoring up the institutions of power in China. What is needed is the support of NGOs, independent scholars, reform-minded non-party legislators, the free press, and even overseas dissident groups. Instead, much effort today goes into training for judges, military officers, party ideologues, and provincial leaders—which comes closer to being “autocracy assistance” than “democracy assistance.” While the integrity of state structures will be important in the transition to democracy, the first order of business is to encourage the existing forces for change.

CONCLUSION

Prediction of democratic change in authoritarian regimes is both professionally respectable as well as empirically robust for the political scientist. Given rapidly changing socio-economic conditions in China, a failure to engage in the difficult business of prediction is irresponsible and illogical. While predictions of no change can be made, they seem the least plausible. More plausible scenarios are those which see some fundamental restructuring of state-society relations in the country. Whatever the result, a vigorous debate on the likely paths and appropriate policy responses is crucial today. While we may hope for a democratic China, we should above all be prepared for a different China.

Notes

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¹ Samuel Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?” *Political Science Quarterly*, 99, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 218.

² Freedom House, *Freedom in the World: 2004, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, (Rowman and Littlefield, Inc, 2004), www.freedomhouse.org.

³ "A Wave of Democratization is a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specific period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period of time. A wave also usually involves liberalization or partial democratization in political systems that do not become fully democratic." Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1991), 15. Huntington defines the third wave as occurring between 1974 and 1990. Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 5.

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