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China’s Democratic Future: The Chinese Communist Party in the Next Twenty Years

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Chair: Lord Davidson of Glen Clova

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Lord Davidson:

...that I’ve had occasion to visit over the last couple of years as a minister, and that has been a great privilege. It has also had a benefit, and the benefit is that I have had the advice and guidance from Dr Kerry Brown, who has proved invaluable in guiding me through some of the difficulties that I would inevitably face as a tyro in matters Chinese.

Although this is Chatham House, this evening will not be under the Chatham House rules; it is on the record. We have the advantage of Dr Kerry Brown, who has advised not only me but a number of my colleagues on matters of China, in a way that has proved relentlessly helpful. This evening he is speaking on China’s democratic future. Apparently it is going to cover the next twenty years – I know the saying that a week is a long time in politics, so one might think twenty years is really quite a long time – but apparently Kerry is going to deal with this over the next half-hour, so that should be interesting, at the end of which he will submit himself to questions and answers.

Dr Kerry Brown:

Thanks very much everyone for coming tonight. I really appreciate you all coming here. Thank you very much, Neal, for your kind introduction. I am going to talk for about twenty-five minutes about the future of the Communist Party and issues of political stability in China. I think that should probably be on our minds after the events in Xinjiang, in the northwest of China, in the last two weeks, in which over 160 died. It was entirely unexpected and a kind of reminder of the sorts of instabilities that China currently has and has to wrestle with.

In fact, this week in Shanghai almost 88 years ago, a group of thirteen people met together in a small house near the main square in Shanghai, in a place that today is called New Heaven and Earth (Xin Tiandi). They were from different areas of China and they were basically meeting together for the first time to hold what has gone down in history as the first Congress of the Communist Party. The first time Karl Marx had actually been mentioned in Chinese was in 1891, four years after his death. In fact there had been no sort of movement of urban political force, no real traction for the proletariat (as Marx had defined it) in China. It was largely still a rural-led economy and a country which did not have any industrial infrastructure to support a kind of political force like the Communist Party.

The thirteen were meeting together, representing only fifty-five people who would have called themselves Marxists in China. Indeed the two most
influential – Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu – were not present. One of them was in southern China as a local minister of education and the other was back in Beijing, over a thousand kilometres away. If you go to the house in which the first Congress was held today, along a back street in Shanghai, you will wander into a large marble entry hall with big characters written by previous great leaders of China – Deng Xiaoping and then Jiang Zemin, the previous Party secretary. Go up the stairs and you will come to a small museum in which there are the thirteen photos of the people who had attended this meeting.

It is quite interesting to stand in front of those photos and think of the fates of each of these individuals over the next decades. You can look at at least eight of them and think that they in fact had pretty tragic lives. In fact just going through a list of the people who attended that day, He Shuheng was killed in Shanghai in 1935; Chen Tanqiu was murdered in prison in Xinjiang in 1943; Wen Jimai [phonetic] died at the age of only twenty-seven in mysterious circumstances, only three years later in 1925; Deng Enming was executed by the Nationalists in 1931; Li Da was to die in suspicious circumstances at the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966; Li Hanjun was killed in 1927; Chen Gongbo was executed in 1946 because he was claimed to be a traitor; Zhou Fohai died in prison in 1948.

Of those that survived, Dong Biwu was to become the vice president of China and die peacefully in 1975. Zhang Guotao was to die in Canada, exiled from China, in 1979. Liu Renjing and Bao Huixung [phonetic] were to also die peacefully.

One figure however casts a shadow not only over that meeting – although he played a very minor part in it – but also over the subsequent history of the People’s Republic and the Communist Party. That is, of course, Mao Zedong. They would have not known in 1921, while they were dreaming their dreams, about what lay ahead. It was a pretty terrible history. On one day in 1927, in April during a hot spring, almost a fifth of the Communist operatives – which had grown to over 5,000 then – were slaughtered by the Nationalists (their political opponents) in Shanghai. They called this moment ‘the crossroads of life or death’. They either had to choose to become a political force in the cities or to go to the countryside. They made one really important choice though, which really lingers to today: the Communist Party of China decided to become a state within a state. It also decided to put its force behind violence and to use violence for political means.
In the 1930s, very much under the influence of Mao Zedong, who had pushed the Party into the rural areas around Shanghai, into Yangtze [phonetic] and places like that, there were vicious internal purges which we are only really beginning to learn about today. The Party was to be as vicious on itself as it was to those who tried to oppose it. It went through the Sino-Japanese war, allowing the Nationalists indeed to take most of the brunt of the fighting, but in the 1940s it was to be victorious. In 1949 – a date we will celebrate this year, the sixtieth anniversary – it was to go from being a revolutionary to being an administrator.

In the early decades of Communist rule, under the Party, in 1950 and 1960, it was to attempt with a great deal of Soviet Russian aid and help – something that was forgotten for political reasons after the two countries fell out in the 1960s and 1970s – it was to try to build a centralised economy and also to build a highly centralised political system. The era of Maoism now seems like a very bad kind of utopian dream. In the early 1960s, something else that we are also now learning about, the attempts to build an incredible utopian kind of economy and political system were to result in the deaths of maybe thirty, maybe forty, maybe fifty million people from starvation. It was extraordinary – and this is also something that is clear from the best accounts of this period – that not only were the central authorities aware of the toll and cost of their policies but in fact Mao Zedong did not care. It was, to him at least, a price worth paying for his very pure vision.

This was to culminate in the Cultural Revolution from 1966 onwards – a grotesque political carnival which was to end ten years later, defeated, exhausted, in which in fact we can see in 1976 (when Mao died) that the Party and the people were finally liberated from him. It is an extraordinary thing to think that Mao Zedong, who had been such an incredible influence over the final victory of the Party; who had made it a hard-edged, hard-eyed political force; who had made it indeed able to attain power – was also its greatest persecutor. Since 1979 one sees a process of the Party trying to rebuild itself and trying just to maintain some kind of legitimacy based on its economic performance and very much leaving political reform and political issues on the back burner.

We come therefore to today, to 2009. The Party as it stands today is in many ways extraordinarily effective and successful. It has 78 million members; 20 million people per year apply to join (2 million get in). It has been able to face down almost all opposition. Of course it has issues with its past. In 1944 in fact, only twenty-three years after being established, it issued a resolution trying to understand the pattern of its past and understand what had
happened in its past. This was superseded in 1981 by another resolution trying to explain why the Cultural Revolution had happened and who was at fault for it.

But in 1989, during the demonstrations by the students in Tiananmen and over 250 other Chinese cities, the Party also met another life or death moment. In 1989, as the memoirs of Zhao Ziyang, the Party secretary then, made clear, it faced not just a major threat to its stable rule but also to its understanding by itself of what role it could play. That is a problem that continues to today. In fact 1989 haunts the collective conscience of the Party and its leaders. I think the payback, while it may not be delivered soon, is certainly in the post.

The Communist Party in China therefore is an extraordinary contradiction. It has been extremely successful as an institution and it is in charge of a very powerful economy, the world’s third largest. It is in charge of an economy which has become the world’s sixth biggest outward investor almost overnight. It has become in charge of an economy that is so important that the stability of our economy, the stability of the European economy, maybe even of the global economy, is dependent on Chinese GDP growth. In 1979 the Party made an extraordinary pact in which it decided to put all of its force behind GDP growth. There it has been incredibly successful.

It has also since the 1980s, and since particularly 1998, crushed all opposition. In 1998 the China Democracy Party tried to register in the central province of Anhui, in [indiscernible], but it was not successful. Since that time the Communist Party has destroyed effectively all organised political opposition.

Yet I think we see today the Communist Party is like an island – a strong, well-fortified and extremely powerful island, but an island surrounded by fear. This is not irrational. It has many enemies, enemies outside and – in the dreaded words of the Cultural Revolution, in which the attack was led against the president – ‘enemies within’, the kind of enemies that were blamed last week for the problems in Xinjiang. The kind of enemies that are blamed for the many demonstrations that happened throughout China, in Chinese cities, every week. The kind of enemies that are blamed in the international community for being opposed to the political project which is ongoing by the Communist Party. Fear is not irrational. The Party needs to be afraid; it has much to fear. The question now is: what does its future hold?

I think we can talk at the moment about the kinds of plans it has for the short term. Those are becoming clearer and clearer. At this moment and indeed
until 2012, when the next major Party Congress happens (the 18th) in Beijing, there is going to be a transition to what we call the fifth generation of leaders. These leaders are going to have to deal with an extraordinary menu of problems and challenges as they go into the second decade of the 21st century. As they make a transition from the current leaders under Party Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, they are going to have to do something that the Communist Party has never done before. Firstly, there is no political godfather. There is no all-powerful figure, like Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s, who could literally place a hand on the shoulder of whoever was likely to be the next Party secretary and do the deal. That kind of figure no longer exists. The Party is too fragmented in terms of political capital.

There is no real process for how they are going to get to 2012 with a new group of leaders. There is an idea, there are some vague notions, but it is not going to be a particularly straightforward process.

The two things that the Party has to do are: they must come up with leaders who are legitimate, who are legitimate to the wider constituency in China, the extraordinarily complex society with big differences between wealth levels, social levels, ethnic levels, religious levels, all sorts of different kinds of nucleuses. It must come up with a figure that is able to appeal to all of these people but also they have to come up with a figure who is acceptable within the Party but who is acceptable without any major upset or battle. In 1989 the Party could kill. Now it can’t. It must do things in an orderly way. Any unseemly battle between major figures will be an absolutely devastating blow to its chances of maintaining power.

I think that it is very much within its interests to be able to do this, to undertake this process, to be able to get to 2012 with leaders who are accepted. We have a rough idea, and many people have talked about, the kind of leaders at the moment who are likely to get there. The two figures who we most think about – Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang – represent different sorts of faces of the Communist Party as it stands today. Xi Jinping is very much what we would call an elitist, a princeling, the son of a major leader in the 1980s, a major political ally of Deng Xiaoping while he was undertaking the first real deep charge of his reforms then. So someone who has a kind of strong basis within the Party and powerful networks within it. On the other hand you have someone like the likeliest person to be the premier now, although it is not entirely certain, Li Keqiang – someone from what we call the grassroots. Someone who has a great deal of credibility amongst the workers in the Party, maybe the lower levels. Someone who spent a lot of his career outside the political centre in Beijing. Someone a bit like the current Party secretary,
Hu Jintao, who spent a huge amount of his career in the backwaters of Tibet, Guizhou and Gansu – very remote western provinces in which he was far away from the bright lights of Beijing.

These two figures in fact appeal to a Party which has an extraordinarily complex composition. Though people talk sometimes about there being different factions, groups and interest groups within the Party – like any political party anywhere – it has an extraordinary number of people within it, an extraordinary number of different interest groups. These people will be mandated with dealing with the prosperity of China’s political future, of the People’s Republic of China’s political future, over the next two or three decades. I think for the final ten minutes what I would like to do is talk about the future.

Of course it is always a good thing to predict chaos and disaster. If you are right then you predicted it; if you are wrong and chaos doesn’t happen, it is because of your wise words. I therefore am going to predict – well, I am going to have my cake and eat it – I am going to predict disaster and I am also going to predict a sustainable future.

I think in 2020, as Neal said in his introductory comments, the Party is going to face some huge challenges, almost unimaginable and almost insurmountable. One of these challenges will be the demographics of the People’s Republic as it stands now – the fact that it will be a rapidly aging population with all the kinds of issues of social welfare and stability that that will lead to. It will be, according to one calculation, a population for the first time in history in which two people of working age will be supporting one person over the age of sixty, with – at the moment at least – no particularly vibrant social welfare sector and infrastructure. It will have to build that very quickly.

In 2020 China will also become the world’s biggest user of all forms of energy. At the moment it is the user of most forms of energy apart from oil. It will become still a major user of fossil fuels and probably in 2020 will in fact use more energy than all of the rest of the world put together.

In 2020, around about that time, China will almost certainly become the world’s largest economy. It has been predicted to happen in 2030 but in almost all predictions about China’s economic performance we have been way too late. It is certainly on line to become an immense economic force then.

In 2020 China’s environmental problems will reach a critical tipping point. In the 2020s there will be payback for the extraordinary economic model based
on heavy industrialisation for internal consumption but also for manufacturing, that China has adopted.

Also in 2020, China will have to think very seriously about a radical reform of its political system because – like in Taiwan, amongst the leadership there in the 1980s – it has promised it. In 1985 Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader then, said China would look at a form of democracy – and the words ‘a form of’ are very important – by 2035. Jiang Zemin, the Party Secretary in 1999, said China would democratise by the next fifty years (so he has pushed it into the future another fifteen years). But as the Taiwanese leadership found out, once a promise about something like this has been made, it is very hard to shift.

There are even more pointed reasons why democratisation will be something the party will have to think very seriously about in the 2010s leading up to 2020. Firstly, in 2023 the Party will become the longest-reigning communist party of any country. It will overtake the Communist Party of the USSR, which reigned for 74 years, and the Mexican Revolutionary Party. In 2023 also, the Party will be dealing with a democratic Hong Kong, at least if the promise has been met to make Hong Kong – a special administrative region now – a functioning democracy with universal suffrage for the chief executive and legislative council positions by 2018. Therefore there will be two symbolic reasons – symbolic but I think very powerful reasons – why the issue of the D word will be coming to haunt Chinese leaders more and more in the next fifteen years.

Of course the debate about democratisation in China is often confused and muddied by this issue of trying to impose an inappropriate democratic, Western, liberal model. I think most accept now that such a model is very unlikely to work, for historic reasons, maybe for cultural reasons, maybe even for purely political reasons. China, because of its extraordinary, almost continental size; the continental complexity of its different constituent populations; the fact that it is an extraordinarily unique model in some ways – will have to therefore have a model of political governance that is unique to itself. It will, as leaders frequently say now, be a Chinese-style democracy. But I think it will be noticeably different to the one we have now.

It means therefore that in the next sixteen years – because I think the decision will finally be made in 2025 and that is when the reforms will really happen – in that time China will politically have to do the same kind of intense, energetic and extraordinarily focused effort that it has put into its economy. But it will have to do it even more quickly. It has left it until very late
in the day to start struggling with these issues. It has very little time left really
to deliver this kind of political reform.

It could have two extremely different outcomes. If all goes well, if there are no
major challenges and problems – and that is a massive if, as events in the
last two or three weeks have proved – China will indeed in about 2025 have a
model which we would say is more participatory, which involves more of its
population, which has more legitimacy and which looks toward actually
allowing different kinds of parties to operate. If all goes well.

If all does not go well then we have a problem, not just in China but in the rest
of the world. We look therefore at the real possibility of a kind of
fragmentation, something that has haunted the body politic of Chinese history
for many centuries, something that would be deeply destabilising. We may
well have a highly decentralised, highly unstable and highly fractious,
continental-sized entity with different provinces – of which there are 31 – and
autonomous regions literally fighting against each other (not physically but in
terms of economic and other benefits). This would be an extremely
unwelcome political actor on the international stage.

We also have the problem that as democracy or democratisation (whatever
we wish to call it) – as these more transparent, open, participatory systems
appeal to populations in China, we may well be dealing with a government
which becomes increasingly nationalistic. That is a problem on its own – a
nationalistic China, a China which is more aggressive with the rest of the
world, is going to pose very unique problems. We therefore may well end up
with a government with a democratic mandate – or a kind of democratic
mandate – but which is even more difficult to deal with than the Communist
Party as it stands today.

These are the reasons why I think – and you can find me in sixteen years’
time if I am still around and I’ll put my neck on the line now – and say that I
think that in 2025 China will have become a kind of a democracy. Probably in
September. About the 25th, a week before the October holidays. The holidays
will not change.

Beyond 2025 it is quite hard to see what will happen. One thing we can be
reflecting about is that all of the predictions really that I have known since
dealing with China in the last twenty years, in some ways those that were
made with great conviction and fervour in the past about China’s economic
development – in many ways they happened far quicker than we expected. I
am genuinely amazed at the complacency and the sort of lack of really trying
to address the issue of China’s political future. It is certainly something that
people in China – either at universities or think tanks or even in the
government – are not complacent about. It creates a great deal of anxiety.

I think therefore that as we stand in 2009 looking into the future and seeing
what might happen to the Communist Party, we have to think two things. The
first is that we do have to respect the extraordinary things that the Communist
Party has achieved. It has been a remarkable and very tough political actor.
But the problem now is that it needs to lose some of its toughness and gain
people’s love. It is difficult to see how easy that is going to be.

The second thing we need to reflect on outside of China is that in many ways
the international community’s interests probably are for the Communist Party
to continue as long as possible. That is an extraordinary thing in its own right
for a political movement that started on a hot July afternoon in 1921 with only
thirteen people who had no chance of affecting the direction of their country; a
party that was nearly annihilated after the most vicious purges, both by
outsiders and itself in the 1920s, in 1927; a party that was pushed into
guerrilla-like, dishonourable, disreputable activities in the 1930s and which
was nearly annihilated in the dark winter of 1948, when the Nationalists had
probably their last real chance of killing what the leader of the Nationalists
called ‘a disease of the heart, not of the skin’ – that is how he described
communism.

It is an extraordinary thing for a party which was to preside over the economic
cannibalism of the early 1960s, when the great famines happened; and a
party which was to see its own elite leaders stand and be humiliated onstage
in front of their own people during vicious struggle sessions in 1967-68; a
party which was willing to send tanks in to mow down its own students in
1989, but which now goes around the world with its elite leaders dressed in
suits presenting themselves as the acceptable face of socialist capitalism,
with all the glorious paradoxes that leads to.

Therefore I think in 2009 whatever we can say about the Communist Party of
China, I don’t think we really can be entirely confident that it will just
disappear without a whimper. We are, very ironically, all supporters of that
group that met in that room in Shanghai in 1921. Thank you.